

GRIEF AND LOSS

The experience of grief is common to all humans. It begins from the time we are born, because from that time onwards we are also dying: we are losing what we have. This sense of loss begins with the infant being weaned from the mother and continues through childhood in a variety of experiences. Some adults recall their most significant loss as a favourite childhood toy. Some people lose their close relatives while they are young, others escape this type of loss. Some lose valued talents or abilities through misfortune or they lose precious possessions. Others lose their security, their self-confidence or their best friend. Losing is a part of living! It is an experience that everyone knows something about.

It is worth trying to recall your major experiences of loss. What was your first experience of losing? What has been the most precious 'thing' you have lost? What loss has 'cost' you the most? What would you like most to get back? Is there anything that you are glad you lost? Would you say that losing is always a 'loss'? Have you ever gained anything from losing? If losing is an integral part of living we need to reflect on what losing can teach us. Perhaps gaining, not losing, holding on, instead of letting go, and dying rather than living are not the ultimate values. The fact is that one day we will lose everything. The way we learn to 'let go', or to lose, will help us.

There is one force more powerful than the fear of losing: and that is **love**. Love teaches us to go outside of ourselves. the saddest loss is to lose those we love most deeply. It has happened to many of us already - and it will happen again. In coming to terms with loss we find a sense of freedom. The song 'Me and Bobby McGee' describes freedom as 'just another word for nothing left to lose'. Inner freedom comes from learning to 'give over'.

The way we learn to give or to let go, is the way we learn to see losing, not as a threat, but as gain. In contrast, when we seek to accumulate or win, we seem so often to lose. We can lose such things as inner peace, freedom from worry and sometimes even friends. It is worth trying to remember when you last gave away something of importance to you. Life calls us to give, to share. Holding on, to people or to possessions becomes a bind. Letting go, on the other hand, is freeing. We need to practise 'letting go', so that it affects and challenges our values.

We have to not only let go of things, but we must also let go of our past. The past does not have to chain us. We have to let go of our anger at those who hurt us, let go of our unfulfilled dreams and let go of our failures and disappointments. We cannot achieve all that we would have hoped, and it is necessary to let go of the emotions that hold us back: vengeance, guilt, fear, jealousy and possessiveness and false ambition. Above all, we have to admit that we are not in control. In letting go, we hand over to God, and recognise that God is in control. Only when we live our faith in this way, can we be free. If we do not believe God is in control, then we try to be in control, and we become afraid of letting go. We become afraid of allowing others to have any power over us.

When Pilate pointed out his power over Jesus, the meek reply was 'You wouldn't have power over me, if it was not given from above' (by God). Jesus did not try to argue the truth of this external power. Jesus had the inner power and freedom to 'let go', because he had complete trust in God. Through this inner power he was able to believe that Pilate's power over him was meaningless.

In learning to cope with grief there is a great deal to be gained from the research of Dr Elizabeth Kubler Ross. Her work has been concerned principally with the dying, but her model of how people cope with death and dying can be applied to all forms of grief, particularly the hurt involved in marriage breakdown, job loss and other serious losses. Her model describes five stages that normally a person goes through in coping with grief. The stages are usually progressive, but in some cases one or more stages might be skipped or repeated. Not only is the person directly involved with the grief likely to undergo this process, but also relatives or close friends can go through the same process.

The stages are: DENIAL, ANGER, BARGAINING, DEPRESSION, ACCEPTANCE
The usual first reaction to a grief situation is DENIAL or SHOCK. This is the expression of a feeling of disbelief. The person is keen to avoid the pain of the reality of the situation. 'Not me'; 'It's not true' are common reactions. Patients on being told by a doctor that they have a terminal disease have been known to react by telling relatives that 'they've probably got the files mixed up with someone else'. This reaction denies the real situation. Our body has a way of dealing with extreme shock. It does this sometimes by blocking out trauma. People often report that despite a doctor explaining a serious diagnosis, they remember little after the shock of the first words. This is why it is wise to have a companion when visiting the doctor over an important diagnosis.

The second stage and reaction is usually one of ANGER. This happens when the reality of the situation is admitted. Note that this does not mean accepted. The response of 'Not me' becomes 'Why me'. This anger can be directed towards anyone, e.g. the doctor, a friend, relative or God. This angry reaction may produce unpleasant behaviour. The inner feeling is something like 'I'm hurting or I'm afraid, and I don't want this to happen to me'. The honest expression of these feelings of anger can be productive, and relatives and friends need to be understanding and accepting of anger outbursts. Often because of embarrassment a well meaning relative can try to prevent anger outbursts, but the feelings are there, and are best dealt with by being expressed.

The third stage is called BARGAINING. This stage is marked by the person attempting to 'make a deal' as a last effort to avoid the worst situation. This 'deal' can be made with God: "I promise I'll go to church if I get better", with a doctor: 'I'll give up alcohol', or relatives: 'We'll have a holiday together'. This is a way of holding on. By the time a person has reached this stage he or she is often weakened by poor sleep and poor dieting. As a form of escape the thought of needing pills can easily come to mind.

The fourth stage is DEPRESSION. This is the feeling that comes from reality settling in. A person can become moody and withdrawn. Panic and guilt are feelings that often result at this stage. A person can feel regretful for past mistakes and for the closing options which restrict what will be achieved. It is vital that these feelings be allowed to be expressed. Loving acceptance and reassurance are needed to deal with these feelings. It can be destructive to make judgments, be impatient, insensitive or uncaring when listening to a [person at this stage. Our own discomfort can sometime be projected on to the person who is grieving. Listening is needed and bystanders need to retire their lectures, advice and cliches.

A depressed person does not want to hear some well meaning person say: 'What you need to do is.....' Often in the case of a recent death, a well wisher can say something like 'Oh well, she's with God now'.

This may help the person saying it cope, but for the true griever it is unhelpful. If we don't know what to say, it's best either to say 'I don't know what to say', or to say nothing!

Often and unfortunately, people will not visit people following the death of their spouse or child, because they are unsure or uncomfortable about what to say. Since advice is never a good idea at such a stage, and allowing the person to tell (or retell) their story is very helpful for them, it isn't important to prepare what you're going to say. Just "leave your head on the gate and go in with your heart".

The final stage is the stage of ACCEPTANCE. This is not 'giving up', but rather 'giving in' or 'letting go'. A person at this stage can live with the facts. Bitterness is left aside and the person feels at peace. In this stage the person goes back to living, even if it means 'living until I die'. An accepting person can reach out to others and create a sense of calm and acceptance in others. A dying mother, for example, can be more concerned about the ones she leaves behind than about herself. Her attitude can free her family to accept what must be: that they can go on living without her. In this way, her 'letting go' is a true gift.

In highlighting these stages we need to remember that allowing people to express their feelings at a particular stage is a big help in their coming to deal with grief and assisting the process that leads to acceptance. Those assisting need to avoid projecting their discomfort onto the person. The 'patient' needs to set the pace, and those around, if they understand and care, will 'be with' rather than give advice or become lecturers.

Healing takes time. Sometimes it takes a long time, and because waiting does not fit into our 'instant' world, we can become impatient when a person struggles with their grief. The poem 'Love and Sorrow' by Kahlil Gibran ('The Prophet') has some rich insights, such as "*The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain*".

Because death comes in such a variety of ways, sometimes tragic, sometimes cruel, it is important to appreciate that there is no perfect script for dying. There will be a sense of mystery and pain at times because of the circumstances of the death of our loved ones. There may be frustration and pain because it might seem death could have been avoided or delayed. Even the gospels' description of Jesus' death present this very differently.

The four gospel portraits of Jesus' death are quite different. Mark's portrayal is of a violent and cruel death. Jesus has no dignity or control. He is deserted and he dies "with a loud scream". Matthew's portrayal is of open grief, yet Jesus has full confidence. He "yields his spirit". In Luke, Jesus is confident and compassionate and he freely "gives up his spirit". In John, Jesus is in control. He needs no Simon to carry the cross. He bows his head and says: it is finished".

Gethsemane is a valuable learning scene for any of us. For Jesus this was a quiet and familiar place. He is surrounded and supported by his friends. His prayer is one of 'letting go'. Only John's gospel has Jesus say "no one takes my life from me, I give it up of my own free spirit", yet this is clearly, the truth concerning Jesus' death. Gethsemane was his place of trial where he faced the important questions, and as a result of his prayer, he was able to pray "not my will, but yours be done".

We cannot over-emphasise the importance of prayer, and particularly of lament, which is open and honest grief. We can see lament beautifully expressed in Psalm 22. It is a way of openly admitting what we are losing, and only then can we fully decide to 'give over'. There are lessons to be learned from nature about grief, loss and death. The winter trees shed leaves that allow the rebirth of spring. The caterpillar enters the dark cocoon and undergoes total transformation. This is the call of death and new life. It is the story of our everyday lives and it affords us the gift of hope and love that we can give to one another in our darkest times.

When any of us reflect on the scene of the cross, it is true that many times in our lives we are like those standing around the cross. We watch and witness the suffering and we are bystanders in the pain. At the centre may be a loved one or friend, and we join with others in silent vigil; often feeling helpless.

At other times we carry the cross with and for others. In such times, we truly share the journey to Calvary. At other times like Simon of Cyrene, this is forced on us. Never more so, than when a beloved suffers pain or when tragedy strikes someone dear to us. Sometimes we move from standing around the cross to becoming Simons (with others) and even to identifying with Jesus on the cross. We stand empty handed in the face of suffering.

Our belief is that there is (transformed) life beyond death. The caterpillar cannot become a butterfly without entering the dark and empty cocoon. But that darkness is not the end. Life seeks life. Our grief is an expression of the pain as we wait for that completion, and it is a vital gift we can give, if we can support others in this very difficult journey. Within our PFG's, we can do this for each other, in a true family spirit.

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