

The Voice of Grief

The Winter Solstice coupled with the beginning of a new year always makes me feel nostalgic and retrospective. Maybe it is the mental scrap booking of my life or cold air that hangs about but I always feel called to take a deeper look into the depths of my own soul. As I ponder a year in its passing and set my gaze forward to a new annum my heart fondly remembers all the ways I was able to connect with others and share many good moments in community and fellowship.

I am also readily aware of the ways in which life did not meet my needs. I recall being wounded in relationships and hurt from expectations that remained unmet. This doleful feeling is always unsettling and my normal reaction is to simply get away from experiencing grief of any kind. I am highly aware that I do not enjoy grief and if given the option, I will repress, run and shield myself from ever fully experiencing such difficult emotions. Left to my own devices I do not grieve well.

The problem with my self-protective posture is that in the long run, fleeing from these feelings does more harm than good. When I retreat from grief rather than embracing it in the present it does not simply go away but lingers in the depth of my soul. Not dealing with grief as it arises is not like tossing my own personal garbage to the curb but more like hiding it under the couch. Sooner or later, it will begin to stink and I will have paid a far deeper emotional price than dealing with the sorrow in the here and now.

What does grieving offer us? After all, it does not sound particularly fun or inviting to proactively engage life's difficulties and less desirable moments. Why would any rational person want to flirt with sadness rather than let sleeping dogs lie? What is the benefit of taking the pilgrimage toward lamentation?

Taking the Road of Grieving

One author that I find imaginative and veracious is Cormac McCarthy. His writing style seems unique in that the protagonist is usually embattled in dealing with the grieving. A few years ago I devoured his novel titled *The Road*, which after reading, left me a changed man. It is a post-apocalyptic narrative in which the world itself has been scorched and tarnished to the point that little life remains and even less hope for the humanity fated to inhabit the bleak backdrop of the denude terrain.

The emotion that is continuously conveyed in this hauntingly grey tale is grief. Grief of a land that has been lost, grief of the wretched populace who are seeking to piece together life in an empty and broken world, grief of a father in hunger pangs and the never-ending struggle for survival wandering the wastelands with the unremitting lingering of death and grief of a child whose innocence is set against such expansive depravity.

McCarthy's tale conveys that even in the midst of grief, bonds can be formed, beauty can be sought after, relationships can be fostered and hope can appear. Upon reading one finds that grief's visitation does not necessarily lead to misery but is rather an appropriate response to the pain and depravity that exists in the external landscape and our internal worlds. Because real life is never experienced without broken relationships

and the ache of dashed dreams, grieving provides a needed outlet for the reality of our complex emotions and relational experiences.

Many of us, if we were to look deeper underneath the surface would find some grieving that is in need to be let out and embraced. Life often wounds us. At times this wound is much too difficult to feel in the moment because if we were to truly feel the weight of the issue, it would be overwhelming and far too difficult to navigate. Rather than feeling in the moment we learn to ignore, self medicate and repress. Instead of embracing our less desirable emotions we learn to turn them off and lock them out.

We cannot move forward on the path of healing and maturation without first taking the step of grieving. If we never fully unpack the truth of what we have been through and look at all the ways it continues to shape us, we cannot honestly love and engage our families, communities or ourselves. Until we lament and emotionally address the ways our needs have gone unmet and our desires for connection have been frustrated, we will be stalled on the path toward personal and spiritual growth.

The Visitation of Mr. Sadness

What if we could live in a way where our sadness and grief had a voice that was able to commune with us freely as other emotions? Could we begin to foster lament and learn what unique insight it might have for our lives?

A good friend recently shared with me his coming to terms with his own grieving process. His exercise of honoring the shadowy parts of his own soul called for an unmuzzling of his grief and giving it back its voice.

He described imagining his suppressed lament as a mysterious stranger who would often come to pay him a visit, yet upon arrival would find his door under lock and key. This pilgrim he named Mr. Sadness, would seek visitation bearing wounds and emotions that were too unsafe to gain entrance. My friend was worried that giving Mr. Sadness access would mean his stay would be longer than he could handle and this unwanted guest might just move in for good.

Risking taking on a troublesome roommate, he let Mr. Sadness inside to speak his peace. Upon doing so, he realized that letting his sad parts speak did not overwhelm and consume him, but rather gave him freedom to feel and awareness concerning the deeper parts of his soul. Once invited to speak, Mr. Sadness did indeed have hard things to communicate. But upon lending his grief an ear and listening to his sorrow, his unwanted guest became a sage friend with valuable insight worth consideration.

The fears my friend had of his grief overcoming him and overstaying his welcome were also proved untrue. Once Mr. Sadness was free to come, visit and offer his words of wisdom, he was also free to leave. When he embraced his own grief and gave it a voice, Mr. Sadness departed and he said goodbye for a time to a new, old friend. When you are free to grieve, you are then free not to grieve.

Good Grief

Finding healthy ways to unpack our grief can be both important and meaningful to our spiritual and emotional maturation. Like my friend creating space for Mr. Sadness, we must find ways to give our deeper and darker parts a voice.

That might look like personifying one's own lament and inviting him in to a deeper dialogue. It could mean we entreat safe friends to converse concerning the more melancholy parts of ourselves. Many find respite openly praying and disclosing their

inner struggles and disappointments with God. Others find help setting aside a few minutes each day to simply ask the question, "What am I doing with my sadness?" or, "How might I live honestly and openly with my grieving in this moment?"

When we slowly make a place in our lives for the reality of our grieving process, we find that life is not instantly carefree and untroubled. Embracing the process of grieving is not a quick fix to get back to neutral or a means to euphoria, but rather a way to live openly in our communities and honestly with ourselves.

As we embark on the path of living in such a holistic and genuine manner we will find joy in the simplicity of our present existence. We can begin to see our melancholy parts as sage messengers who have counsel to offer us along our journey. The encumbrance of our heavily cloaked emotions just might be made lighter. We have hope to live an unburdened life with a full range of emotions at our disposal and can fully experience joy, sorrow, contentment, frustration, fulfillment and even a visit from our old friend grief.

- D. Jeremiah Simmons