Herbert Anderson

Moments of Loss, Seasons of Grief

The work of grieving happens between remembering and hoping, between building a treasured memory and anticipating a new future. Grief often gets stuck when mourners are unable to explore those wounds that hurt the most . . . In order to find hope again that will heal hearts broken by tragic loss, we need to fashion a cherishable memory, practice ritual lament, and discover the promise of God that transcends death.

Human beings are relational creatures, attaching ourselves to people and things that are, at the same time, finite. This combination of attachment and finitude is the occasion for grief. Finitude is a shorthand way of speaking about the limitedness of everything. The fundamental human dilemma is that we are limited creatures who know that we will die. The fundamental human longing is that we might keep the unity we had before birth forever. Only God is forever. *Finitude and death are part of the creation that* God *declared good.* But when our job, primary relationship, or vacation is pleasurable, we like to think it will never end. Therefore, it is not surprising that we struggle with being finite creatures. When death occurs prematurely or when we are confronted with unexpected and inconvenient limits, it is difficult to acknowledge that finitude is generally a good thing. Even if we believe death is part of God's plan, we will rage at death when it is experienced as a thief that robs us of people we love. Jesus' acceptance of his death teaches us how to grieve loss, embrace others in our sorrow, and then accept God's love as the guarantor that death is not the final ending.

"Attachment" describes the inclination of all humans to form strong bonds of affection with people and things. Some people seek to limit their attachments because it is too painful to lose what they love. Some kinds of Christian spirituality support the conviction that we should limit our attachments because "this world is not our home." If, however, we limit our attachments in

order to diminish our grief, we also may end up fleeing from the fullness of life to avoid the pain of loss. On the other side, there are people who seek to avoid grief by holding on to everything they love or value. Their lives are often diminished by the desire to preserve predictable life patterns and relationships or are immobilized by accumulated clutter and treasured relics. The human task is to love, knowing that we will eventually lose what we love. *Grief is an inevitable dimension of living because loss is an inescapable part of human life in its fullness. In loving, grieving begins.*

Understanding the pervasiveness of loss gives us opportunities for learning how to grieve and prepare for death from the beginning of life. In the process of writing the book *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs*, Kenneth Mitchell and I gathered more than a thousand vignettes about loss unrelated to the death of a person. From those stories, we developed a typology of loss that included the loss of material, the loss of role, the loss of physical functions, and the loss of dreams, as well as the loss of a beloved person. Our intent was to make loss a common dimension of living and to legitimate grief for losses other than death. *Understood this way, the human journey is an ongoing struggle with the perpetually perishing in life.* Therefore, the pains of grief are an inevitable part of finite living. The belief that suffering is a consequence of loving fully and living faithfully is embodied most clearly for me in the Christian symbol of the cross. If we hold on to life, we lose it: we find life by letting it go. Learning how to grieve is prelude to embracing this paradox at the center of Christian spirituality.

Because we are finite creatures, we are vulnerable to suffering as well as to death. The courage to affirm and accept suffering as an element of finitude, in spite of the pain that accompanies it, is one mark of Christian spirituality. That is, of course, easier said than done. If we are intent on avoiding pain or discomfort, then finitude is always a problem and death is a permanent enemy. Living through grief takes courage because we are invited to bear the pain and intense sadness that accompanies significant loss. *The great danger is that we will flee from life and the risks of loving in order to avoid sorrow and grief.*

Listening to grieving people has challenged me to reexamine some of my core theological convictions. I had to rethink one of my favorite images of sin—*incurvatus in se* (turned in on oneself)—because, by definition, people who grieve are self-centered. *Grief is selfish. If selfishness is sin, then is grief sinful?* Grieving persons are preoccupied with their own loss, emotions, and survival. This response is necessary and appropriate. Grieving people are even possessive of their grief, especially when well-meaning friends and relatives want to take the pain from them prematurely. When we have lost someone or something we love, the grief we feel may be all we have left. Honoring the necessary selfishness of grief will make it possible for people to hold on to their grief, the closest connection they have to the lost person, until it is time to let go of the grief and hold on to a memory. When my mother died, I did not want to hear about others whose mothers had died. *My* mother had died. Efforts to diminish selfishness by generalizing very particular grief are not only theologically indefensible, but also psychologically hurtful.

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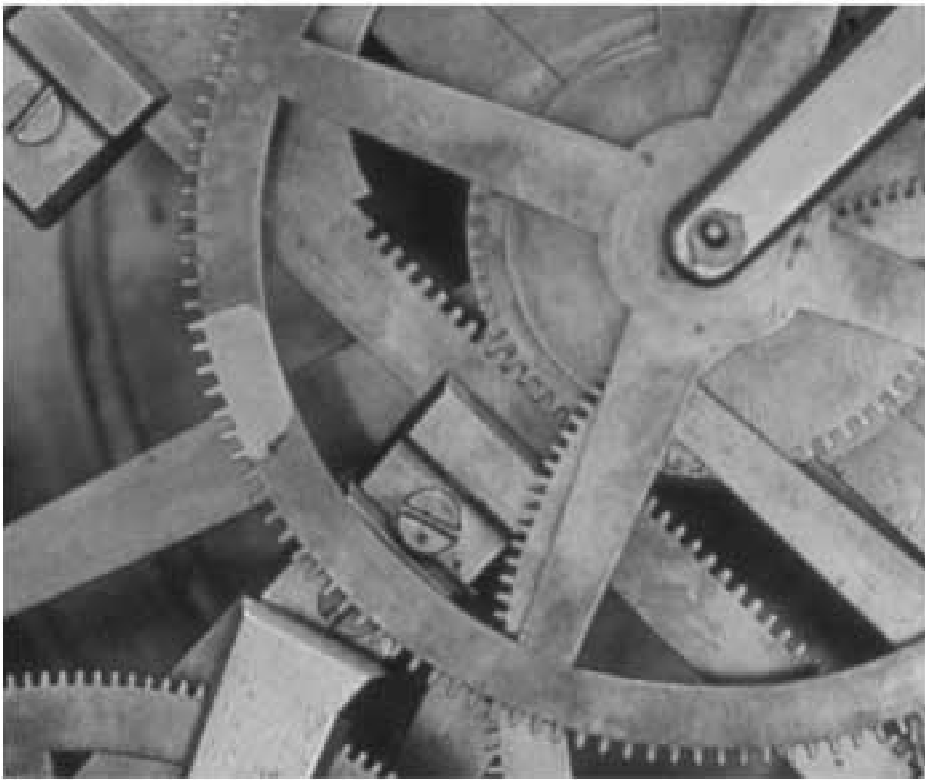
Grief is immoderate or excessive. Efforts to moderate grief, even for religious reasons, usually have negative consequences. Because if excess of grief is often disturbing, especially for people who have worked hard to be in control of their destiny, those who care for the bereaved need to be accepting of the excessive, irrational character of grief. People also grieve differently because of ethnic traditions. An Italian wake is more excessive than a Norwegian Lutheran funeral. Some people fear the excessiveness of grief because they do not want to be out of control. The cultural pluralism in the United States presents us with a new challenge to honor radically different views of death and diverse modes of grieving.

Our presence with those who mourn mirrors God's presence. If we isolate mourners, we intensify their personal impoverishment. In order to live with the pain of emptiness, grieving people need friends and caregivers who will stay close by but not try to fill the emptiness until healing covers it with enough scars to enable a person to hope again.

The *unpredictability of grief* is more psychologically unsettling than theologically challenging. It is unsettling because we cannot always anticipate when or where we will be surprised by tears or unexpected sadness. I was reminded of the unpredictability of grief years after my father's death. My wife and I celebrated our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary by going to a performance of *Les Miserables* in the elegant Chicago Theater. At the conclusion of the musical when the father, Jean Valjean, sings a blessing to his daughter, Cossette, and her lover, Mario, I began to sob uncontrollably. It did not take me long to connect my tears with hearing my father's voice for the first time in four years when we played a tape of our wedding at breakfast that morning. I was crying for my father. But even more, I was crying for a blessing I had never received. It was still a deep hole in my life. We may grieve at unexpected times and in surprising places. This unpredictability adds to the complexity of grief because we cannot always be sure that what we think we are grieving for is actually what we are grieving about.

Recent experiences of violent death



have made us aware that how people grieve is determined not only by the intensity and complexity of the relationship to the lost person or object *but also by the way the person died.* All death evokes a sense of helplessness. A violent death intensifies the feeling of being helpless. Even if we understand death as part of life and believe that death, however it occurs, cannot separate us from God, our ordered view of the world is shattered when someone dies a violent death. Healing the grief of violent death must include rehearsing the painful memory of the death in order to fashion a new, restorative narrative. When death is violent, we are also reminded in painful ways that we do not have life as a possession. If we believe that life is something we possess, then any death is a destructive rupture, a blow to faith, a thief in the night. Violent death challenges our presumptions of invulnerability and undermines our effort to possess life or control our destiny. The work of grieving happens between remembering and hoping, between building a treasured memory and anticipating a new future. Grief often gets stuck when mourners are unable to explore those wounds that hurt the most. In order to find hope again that will heal hearts broken by tragic loss, we need to fashion a cherishable memory, practice ritual lament, and discover the promise of God that transcends death.

People need hope in order to grieve. Sometimes they may need to borrow hope for a while from a friend. The bereaved may also find hope in story and song, in the gentle touch of those who listen to our pain, in the empathic words that confirm our grief and validate our grieving. When we overlook the pains of grief or offer premature assurance that everything will be all right, the griever is not validated and hopes are dashed. When we grieve, someone has to hear our words and respond in a way that confirms the story we need to tell and the feelings we want to express. In this sense, hope is not something we possess, but something we discover in the empathic listening of friends and family. Finding hope again after suffering a tragic loss is an experience of mutuality rather than a solitary process. It comes from "hoping *with*" someone more than "hoping *for*" something. The mutuality of consolation transforms the dread of abandonment and the terror of isolation into communities of hope. Whenever we decide not to speak the truth to dying people so they "do not lose hope," we in fact diminish hope by limiting their possibility of "hoping with" those they love. It is that same kind of mutuality that helps those who grieve hope again as they fashion a cherishable memory.

We learn to hope again through *ritual lamentation*. We live in a time in which it is easy to become apathetic because we feel so powerless in the face of so much irrational suffering. When we say "nothing matters," we shut ourselves off from the world's suffering, or from our own, and "die" before we are dead. Because apathy is such a tempting alternative, learning how to grieve and lament is a necessary prelude to living today. We are not powerless in the face of suffering. We can lament. The recovery of the biblical tradition of lament is a necessary counter to the temptation of apathy and a resource for expressing the anguish of grief. The prophet Jeremiah urges the mourning women to raise a dirge and teach it to their daughters and neighbors (Jeremiah 9:20). Authentic rituals provide the occasion, the language, and the gestures that help people encounter realities and truths that most of us would otherwise avoid. Lament transforms mute pain into a story that can be shared. The *recovery of rituals of lament* that provide an environment in which the deepest pains of grief can find expression build supportive communities for those who are suffering.

The human need for continuity is powerful. In 1972, Krister Stendahl gave a Nobel Lecture at that same college, entitled "Immortality of the Soul Is Too Much and Too Little." It is too much, Stendahl argued, because it promises more than we can know for certain about the mysteries of life with God after death. It is too little because it presumes that the life and death of Christ was for my individual salvation. Stendahl's argument presumes a communal view of humanity and encourages us to understand that the resurrection of Christ is an affirmation of God, rather than a testimony to the indestructibility of the human soul. The hope of the resurrection story is that God's love is stronger than death. When we die, I believe, we are kept in the love of God. That is enough for me to know. It is, I believe, all I can know. The rest is mystery. ❑

Herbert Anderson is a pastor and author of several books, including *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs*. This article is excerpted and reprinted with permission from *Reflections on Grief and Spiritual Growth,* edited by Andrew Weaver and Howard Stone (Abingdon Press, 2005.) **See p. 19 to order.**