

Grief and the Consolation of Intimacy

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**Reading One:** From the writings of Zhuangzi, a Daoist writer from about 300 BC.

Once a man receives this fixed bodily form, he clings to it, fearing the end. Sometimes clashing with things, sometimes bending with them, he runs his course like a galloping steed, and nothing can stop him. Is he not pathetic? Sweating and laboring to the end of his days, utterly exhausting himself and never knowing where to look for rest—can you help pitying him? “I’m not dead yet!” he cries, but what good is that? His body decays, his mind follows, can you deny that life is a great sorrow? Human life has always been a muddle like this.

*And how could I be the only muddled one, and others not also be muddled?*<sup>i</sup>

**Reading two:** an anecdote about a 20<sup>th</sup> century South Asian monk:

Achaan Chah Subato was asked how he could be happy in this world of impermanence where we cannot protect those we love from harm, illness and death. He pointed to a beautiful glass, holding water, glistening in the sun: “One day an elbow or a strong wind certainly will knock it over. It is already broken, as good as broken, so there is nothing to lose, nothing to fear. We are free to enjoy it.”<sup>ii</sup>

Grief is the *process of adjusting to unwanted change* . . . and so . . . we bear, every day, unrecognized micro-griefs. Call it stress . . . we just feel like a massage or we think we need a drink. And so loss and fear of loss shape our feelings, thoughts, and behavior all the time, usually in subtle ways. But not always so subtle; deep grief is a season in hell.

Valerie Stephens was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2004 and with extensive metastatic disease in 2012. She died in November 2013. We had been married 28.5 years, with two young adult children. We've all lost people we really care about . . . by our age we've an idea what we will pull from the closet for the next funeral. It cuts especially deep with the death of someone *whom we have set as our foundation*.

Now we lose *ourselves* along with the beloved. We die into another hidden world, a world coiled up tight inside the ordinary life-space of supermarkets and highways—a world through which we stumble, *for a while*, blind and raw. Such grief-trauma is commonplace, all around us here in town every day. We've each taken our turn in horror. Only a few will wonder what I mean—and they will come to know. We are *all* post-traumatic, pre-traumatic, or—most often—both.<sup>iii</sup>

Yet from within grief-world our private pain feels like a singularity; as though with no bones, we collapse inward, cut off from the insensible inhabitants of the oblivious world. In my case, I felt for a time as though I were undergoing something extremely strange, like a secret LSD experiment. I was alienated from everyone who seemed not to have been, or could not acknowledge being, in this world of utter loss.

Deep grief *presents* as extraordinary in this way. Little mentioned in society . . . it is proper to hide the full measure of the pain we bear. “Really, now” inner voices declaim: “Can’t we talk about something more pleasant over dinner? Can’t we talk about something more uplifting in our UU service?” When we fail to don the mask, we invite—

as I do now—being regarded as gloomy and self-involved. We hear about others’ losses, but our psychic immune system spares us the most graphic details. And so the universality of grief-pain is a National Secret. I never heard about *this* fact of life in high school Health class. It’s a secret guarded not by the government, but kept by all of us from one another—in diversionary chat about shopping, sports, the price of gas, and our favorite topic: *the misdeeds of other people*.<sup>iv</sup>

Early in morning of November 19, 2012 Valerie stopped breathing. Hospice staff helped me clean and dress her . . . or to dress her body . . . or to dress *the* body. They helped me to dress the body that had so vividly seemed *to be* Valerie. Now it was her/not her. It was dead Valerie. Gabe and Becca and I stayed close, touching her, or it, as the body got very cold.

In the early months after, I felt as though I had a bad flu. I had whole body aches—and sudden spells of violent shivering. This shivering was weird and baffling, until I found in grief literature that this is a normal thing that can happen.<sup>v</sup> I had a hollow feeling in my gut, something that somehow begged to be eased in a really deep sigh. Yet sighing gave no relief. And I’ve had a few concussions, so I know: My head really felt as though I had a moderate concussion. At first, I could concentrate only just well enough to read two or maybe three sentences at a time. I dashed around manic, constantly forgetting what I was trying to do. There are an astonishing number of things that need to be done when someone dies. Mostly these “death duties” are actual responsibilities. But the frantic busy-ness is a tempting defense against pain.<sup>vi</sup>

**Grief flows.** When caring for yourself or another in the midst of grief, *the first thing to do is to forget what we read back in the day*; then just keep on forgetting supposed solutions and religious notions until you are just here, with no ideas or rules about what is

supposed to be happening. There are no neat stages. People can laugh in grief, or have fun bowling. Grief can run like surf and tides, ebbing away and then surging. I wrote:

After a lull, waves  
 Rush up and whiten the shore—  
 Where has my friend gone?

I pulled off my wedding ring right after the memorial service. Someone noticed and I said, “I can’t be married to a ghost.” But I *was* haunted. Two months later I felt better, but a wave hit and I wrote:

Ring finger bone ache:  
 Not thinking dead or alive,  
 Just calling for you.

In those early months I often felt numb disinterest toward most of what we take to constitute “living.” And the ordinary sense (or illusion) of my self as a “real person” did not operate.

Lit stark by death, our pastimes are unmasked as futile. It seems absurd to fret about the weather or the something-or-other bowl or the state of the stock market. How in the world, I thought, was everyone managing to conspire in this charade; how does anyone manage to care? Or is this all pretense? I sought hints that deep down they knew: the short, strained silence after the show or the joke or the game. There is a clue in our aversion to silence . . . . [silence]

Rather than consider how best to make our short lives meaningful and fulfilling, often the best we can manage is distraction. We fritter away precious hours . . . like kids playing on RR tracks, eyes on our game, a dark worry shut up in our gut.

At first, I slept three hours each night. I really saw everyone around me as corpses-to-be. We would rather not see it this way, but in fact humans are of two types: the dead and the soon-to-be-dead. I saw the contours of the skulls beneath the skin.

But my concentration slowly improved so that I could read a paragraph or a page at a time. The strange shivering abated. I learned to manage the insomnia. And—for better or worse—an incoherent stream of mental events coagulated into a sense of being *a person*. Just as with an adolescent identity crises, I was shaky about who this person was. But one thing was clear: He had inherited sole parental responsibility for two young adults who had just lost their mother. And it was painful to know they had been worrying about their father.

As a young man, before I met Valerie, I suffered the loss to brain cancer of another long-time partner. My graduate studies stalled and I botched one of my first teaching jobs. I felt eviscerated. I experienced myself as hollow, like an abandoned shell, in the constant presence of her palpable absence—an absence to which others were oblivious. Months later, I dreamt of a tree that had been cut into deeply but not cut down. The tree grew, year after year, and there was always a scar. But the scar's shape and size kept changing as the tree grew. Eventually, the scar was so integral to the tree that you could not recognize it as having been a wound. This dream was clear: Like it or not, I would never stop being the person who loved and lost this friend. I was free to see what that person could now become.

Mistaken loyalty complicates grief: the fear of losing the person *yet again* by no longer being the one who holds her memory at one's core. After a talk I gave on grief last summer, a troubled woman came up to me. Her husband died four years ago. She goes out dancing, but when she touches a man she just thinks of her husband. She freezes up—

—and starts her grief over again. I also met a young woman whose mother died when she was a young adolescent. Her emotional development stalled because *she did not want to grow past the age when she and her mom were together.*

But here it is: Like my dream-tree, we aren't in danger of losing our personal past. What has happened will always *have happened*; it cannot be un-done, it cannot un-happen. Derek Parfit writes,

When someone I loved died I found it helpful to remind myself that this person was not less real because she wasn't real right now, just as people in New Zealand aren't less real because they aren't real right here.<sup>vii</sup>

This sounds strange, but it's good philosophy. Martin Luther King—having lived—will always *have been*, and his having been is a crucial constituent of the world now, and now, and now, the world as it appears in each new instant.<sup>viii</sup> He is not and nor can he ever become fictional. The same is true, locally, of Valerie. Her *having-been* is ineradicable. *Utter* loss is impossible; we don't need to exacerbate the pain by seizing up in a panic that it has become as though she never were. Sadly, her life is gone, yet—like some of you—I am *inescapably* related to her. And our loved ones have loved us; they have wished well for us. *We honor them by being kind to ourselves.*

When we grieve and survive, some part of us really *gets* how things keep changing. Recent large-scale research shows that when older folks lose a spouse, almost 2/3 feel substantially better in five to seven months. Ninety percent are free of deep grief within 18 months.<sup>ix</sup> Of course, it is not a matter of “getting over” anything. We accustom ourselves to a new normal in which our partner's life *and death* will always be integral to who we are.

One can fall, as I did, into a hell-like state of being. But the pain is subtly changing—even when it seems not to be. And the choices we make, moment to moment,

make a difference in *how* things change. If we identify with loss, thinking, “**I** am and I **MUST BE** the one who remembers and dwells in pain,” “I am **THE ONE** who lost my wife,” then the pain cycles around again, like picking a scab or drinking to numb depression.

Identifying with pain is one extreme; suppressing it the other. My practice is to watch whatever arises and passes away in experience. But watching my mind as I sat by Valerie’s cooling body was like staring at the sun. We just do what we can do to turn toward reality, being kind to ourselves, yet feeling out when a bit more might be possible. *Pushing pain down does not help.* Lots of folks have religions, or personal philosophies, or family cultures that demand they stuff it down and suck it up. “**THOU SHALL NOT FEEL BAD.** Only losers are sad. It is just so selfish and so inconsiderate of you to be miserable.” So then, when grief hits like a bulldozer, you not only feel horrible but you *feel really horrible about yourself for feeling so horrible*, and then maybe even more horrible about that. Pain is natural after a loss. Sometimes, even regret. When we have hurt others, or missed a great chance to be kind, sincere regret is healthy. Pain and regret prove to us that we are human. But still: they are mental states that arise and pass. Notice regret, determine to do better, and just let it go. All that ever remains is the ongoing unfolding of this amazing world.

Daoist philosopher Zhuangzi sees it this way:

You hide your boat in a ravine and you tell yourself that it will be safe. But in the middle of the night a strong man shoulders it and carries it off and you wonder why this has happened. You think you do right to hide little things in big ones, yet they always get away from you. But if you were *to hide the world in the world*, so that nothing could get away, this would be the final reality of things.

Of course, we identify *not* with the whole world, but with a particularly precious boat, a child or spouse or parent, and we cradle it in the ravine of our hearts, in what we imagine will be safety. But there come irresistible circumstances—cancer or a tsunami or a disturbed person with a gun. The cradle breaks, the baby falls. Our hearts are wrecked.

And it is then . . . when things are worst . . . that we may find some consolation in really seeing that ***it is never just us***. Last June—I started talking openly about grief, and many people responded by sharing their sorrows. Stories of childhood rape and terrible loss burned every shred of my self-pity. Last week, right here, we heard six or seven cancer diagnoses in one morning. Hell is to collapse in on ourselves, but it is a delusion. In fact, there’s one left out of this party, no one watching safely from the sideline. Everyone is just like this; everyone falls into this muddle. We are all bereft, or very soon-to-be-bereft, stripped of what we take to be the foundation and core of ourselves. We strain not to face this, but when it does hit home, *we may unexpectedly find ourselves with the deep consolation of an intimate kinship*.<sup>x</sup>

I promise you that these are not just words. Thoreau was concise: “Not till we are lost, not till we have lost the world, do we begin to find ourselves, and realize *where we are* and the infinite extent of our relations.” Susan Bauer-Wu boiled it down further: “Cancer patients are not a special class of people. They’re us.”<sup>xi</sup>

We never have, but only imagine, a rock-bottom foundation in our bodies or minds or even in our most precious relationships. We are empty and open and clear and spacious all the way down. We are utterly free of anything frozen and hard, such as an eternal soul. Our openness liberates us to act in intimacy with the world, which is itself empty and clear, natural and free of divine overlords.

So: How is this intimacy expressed when someone breaks her neck, or loses a limb, or is dying? Or loses their partner? I suggest: first form a genuine intention to help; don't miss this chance to be kind. See if you can say something heart-felt in a card, or an e-mail, or face-to-face. You don't know what to say, or fear you will say something wrong, but do the best you can. About 95% of the condolences I got seemed to give me no comfort at all. But collectively, over time, they kept me connected to community. And imagine how much worse it would be if no one even made the gesture.

We are all busy, which means: *stressed*. But, in my personal judgment, asking a grieving person how they are doing when you randomly bump into them in the Meijer soup aisle does not quite count as a helpful gesture. I think many people said to me, "How are you?" in passing so they could check it off a mental list. I was a good person today—I asked the sad widower how he is doing. And what am I supposed to say? I can't help but wonder: How interested are you? You seem to be asking because you accidentally met me in the soup aisle, or I sat next to you at UU, or you unfortunately crossed my path at CMU. When someone dies, family survivors radiate death pollution. They are a contagion for a while because to face them is to face the unthinkable. They bring unpleasant topics to mind, or even to the conversation, such as: how we might just as well have lost our partner, or how we could just as well had to die and leave our kids behind. Certain people whom I found great company in good weather suddenly vanished.

If the relationship allows, create a space where a grieving person can share feelings, or tell and re-tell the story, or just be with you in silence. It might feel right to say: "I can't imagine what you are going through. I have had grief in my life and it was like such and such, but I am really wondering what this could be like for you?"

A competent listener gives *full and open attention*, which is to human hearts what light and water are to the wounded tree. But such attention is very hard to give. Not deflecting back to yourself or to something *so similar* that happened to your grandmother, not over-eagerly volunteering solutions or supposed “expertise” that you got from Dr. Kubler-Ross or the New York Times or Dr. Newland. Any kind of self-designated expert—minister, nurse, professor, local mystic—these people can be the worst. They can’t be nakedly present and spontaneously responsive because, as experts, they already know. You are in such and such stage, and as such blah blah blah. They know what you feel and what you really need to do and what will happen next—and they will officiously advise you without invitation.

This happened to me and to Valerie. Valerie was instructed to be grateful that she was not dying on the streets of India. She was quite firmly instructed to attend UU services. And several folks visited to chat without asking her how she was feeling or what she was going through. Such maneuvers allow us to check off the “care for the sick” box on our good deed card—with the bother of actual empathy.

In my case, I was advised right at Valerie’s memorial service that I just needed to get out there and *live* because “life is for the living.” And other people—seeing me as a Buddhist teacher—were disappointed that I was distressed at all by my wife’s illness and death. Newland has been teaching for years that everything is impermanent. What did he expect? These people were all so sincere and well intentioned. No one meant harm. Each was struggling in her own way with the great matter of life and death. And with Valerie safely beyond all pain, I forgave them.

The traumatized are often more able to talk with those whom they identify as having had a similar loss. Combat vets can’t explain the inexplicable to the rest of us. I felt best

talking to Grayson, whose wife died four years ago of brain cancer. We could just laugh about our common problems, such as what to do with all that Tupperware. And so, since each grief and sorrow is different, we can't each be the very best person to help . . . but maybe we know of someone who is.

Hearing about grief experiences that were as bad or worse than mine was helpful in the beginning because it stopped my fear about my bizarre mental states. And hearing about others' grief and trauma was helpful later because it dissolved my self-pity and hellish alienation. Seeing others' pain, and feeling that we just might be able to ease it in some way—this is, I think, the best therapy for our wounds. Some of Valerie's last visitors came, without even realizing it, to get off-the-books therapy from the dying woman—and she helped them, and this helped her.

For 13 months Valerie and I travelled to Ann Arbor every two weeks for treatment; there we were surrounded for many hours by cancer patients. This woman is here with her young children and has just gotten a grave diagnosis. This older woman has been sick for 10 years—and she is here in cancer-land with no family support. Sun streams into a wide bay where the sick lie companionably side by side, getting infused with toxic dope. Everyone is coping without any pretense that things are fine. We're all broken and we all know it; no one is alone. This is the consolation of intimacy.

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- <sup>i</sup> From Burton Watson's *Complete Works of Zhuangzi*, page 9. Emphasis added.
- <sup>ii</sup> Paraphrase from the sermon "Already Broken" by Reverend James Ishmael Ford.
- <sup>iii</sup> The notion of "pre-traumatic" derives from Mark Epstein's "The Trauma of Being Alive" in *The New York Times Sunday Review*, August 3, 2013.
- <sup>iv</sup> As per Roz Chast's memoir, *Can't we talk about something more pleasant?* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2014).
- <sup>v</sup> Joyce Carol Oates' *A Widow's Story* mentions shivering in grief many times, 143ff.
- <sup>vi</sup> *A Widow's Story* uses the phrase "death duties." Joan Halifax's *Being with Dying* describes how postmortem busy-ness can prevent one from feeling one's feelings.
- <sup>vii</sup> This is part of a note he sent to Joyce Carol Oates after her husband's death. It appears as an epigraph at the front of *A Widow's Story*.
- <sup>viii</sup> For a technical explication of how this works in Madhyamaka philosophy, see Dan Cozort's *Unique Tenets Middle Way Consequence School* (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1998) 181-229. For a philosophical discussion of Tibetan debates about this, see "How Does Merely Conventional Karma Work?" in the Cowherds' *Moonpaths* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
- <sup>ix</sup> According to the Changing Lives of Older Couples study (of 1000 couples at University of Michigan) as explained by Ruth Konigsberg in "Grief, Unedited" in *New York Times*, February 14, 2011.
- <sup>x</sup> These sentences emerged from translating more and more freely verses 63 and 73 from *Essay on the Mind of Awakening (bodhicittavivarana)*, a text attributed to Nagarjuna, until what emerged is no longer a translation. See a full translation at <http://www.tibetanclassics.org/html-assets/Awakening%20Mind%20Commentary.pdf>. The notion that connection to the welfare of others is a result of meditation on emptiness (lack of foundational core) in the works of Haribhadra and Nagarjuna is discussed by the Dalai Lama in *From Here to Enlightenment* (Boston: Snow Lion, 2012) 31 and 35-36.
- <sup>xi</sup> Thoreau's *Walden*, 111 in the Dover unabridged edition; Mineola, NY: 1995 and Susan Bauer-Wu at [http://www.mindful.org/in-body-and-mind/health-and-healing/the-kindest-thing-you-can-do](http://www.mindful.org/in-body-and-mind/health-and-healing/the kindest-thing-you-can-do)