

COVID GRIEF
AND THE GRIEF OF OUR TIMES

Stephen Harrod Buhner

Coming to trust the darkness takes time and often involves many visits to this land. Our arrival here is rarely a chosen thing. We are thrown into the darkness or are carried there on the back of a blue mood. What we make of this visit is up to us. Recalling that the darkness is also a dwelling place of the sacred allows us to find value in the descent. In this place of lightlessness, we develop a second sight. - Francis Weller

You grow your wings on the way down. - Robert Bly

Those who recover from bereavement do not return to being the same people that they had been. . . . Nor do they forget the past and start a new life. Rather, they recognize that change has taken place, accept it, and examine how their basic assumptions about themselves and their world must be changed and go on from there. Each of these steps require courage, effort, and time. Three distinct steps in recovery are: first, that the loss be accepted intellectually; second, that the loss be accepted emotionally; and third, that the individual's model of self and outer world change to match the new reality. - Colin Parkes

During the years that I taught workshops and classes, I found that for my work to be genuine I had to begin each time with what I called “the one true thing.” “The one true thing” is what is most true and real for me at this exact moment in time. And this is a constantly changing truth; we are not the same person today that we were yesterday, we will not be the same person tomorrow that we are today.

It took me a long time to learn how to teach, it’s a skill like any other but one I had to figure out as I went along. I never found much useful information on how to do it (despite all those books and videos about it). So, I learned by doing, failing mostly, but then examining my failures to figure out why. I spent a lot of time watching those who were *very* good at it (though, truthfully, there are not very many of them). The crucial first step, I finally figured out, is speaking from the heart rather than the head. But, importantly, it can’t be left at that, the next so very important step is learning how to do so with great elegance. That is when it becomes art. And it takes years to learn . . . and a huge amount of real life doing of it. This is something that very few people in our rationalist culture understand, for we have put our faith in mind and not in heart.

Thus, no matter how competently a talk is put together, doing so from the head renders it soulless. The words, and the speaker’s presence, all too often remains wooden, lifeless, dead despite any psychological or social animation they put into it. It is only because we have been trained to no longer pay attention to how it feels to the heart of us that so many do not notice that there is no frisson to it. No *duende*. That is, no goose bump response. The moment when we feel something touch the deeps of us, stirring our soul to rise out of its sleep and look through these eyes at the world, once again, in wonder.

Disturbingly, in those early days before I figured all these things out, I found that every time I spoke from my head I always felt afterwards that there some strange failure in it. I felt as if I had betrayed an essential part of myself, the soul of me, the heart of me, and, for sure, the Green for whom I was speaking. I had forgotten, too, that Earth is always in the audience, listening and taking note of everything that everyone of us say and do.

And so, stumblingly, I began to speak from my heart, from the place inside, where the most essential me lives. I gave up wearing a social garment, the one constructed by my mind, and began allowing the one my soul naturally wears to be seen. And as I contemplated this more deeply, I realized that every time I clothed myself in a garment constructed by my mind there was something I did not want to say out loud or reveal to the exterior eye. There was a secret I was terrified to speak. And when I concealed that secret a essential part of me was in hiding. In consequence, I was not intimate with the people who had come to hear me speak. And intimacy, as most of us discover in time, always involves vulnerability. It is an opening of the heart to others, a giving up of the concealed self. It's an act of trust. And so, I began to say the secret out loud (whatever it was on that particular day), the one true thing that needed to be revealed in words so that I would be intimate, unconcealed, genuine.

When the genuine, the real, the unconcealed self is brought into the room, words can take on a luminosity and meaning they cannot otherwise have. Somehow that intimacy gets into the words, into the sentences, into the silences between the words, and then, in some magical way, into the people who hear them. It is then that speech has something to say to the soul. It is then the words touch the heart in a way that speaking from the head ever can.

So . . . the one true thing today is that I am dying.

All of us are dying of course but I don't mean it the way people usually do, that one of these days death is inevitable. I mean that it is very close to me now, that not only is the notice in the mail, it has actually been delivered. That is what I am talking about when I say that I am dying. That my notice has arrived and there is nothing I can do about it.

And that is what I will talk about today – but not just my dying and what I am learning as I do, but what happens to each of us as those around us are dying and after they are dead. For we are in the territory of grief now. It is a territory that all of us will live in now, no matter how long it is that we do, because the way Earth has been for so many thousands of years is ending. A way of being that our species has known for so very long is dying. And it is not going to come back.

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About thirty years ago I was sitting around a table, eating lunch with some friends. Two of the guys with me were also remodeling carpenters (as I have been all my life, for one reason or another). We thought we were pretty tough and it is true that the work we did often demanded both strength and courage. There was the crawling into tiny, claustrophobic spaces, far under massive buildings, only an inch of space above our faces. We worked with dangerous machinery, hung from high storied buildings repairing fascia or laying roofs. And every so often, as has always been true for people who do the work we did, we'd seen terrible things. Somehow that day we got on the topic and began sharing some of those stories.

The women sitting with us didn't say a thing. But the more we talked the more they took on a state of being I'd never encountered before. A calmness grew in them, a strength, a

settledness if that makes any sense. We had overlooked the fact that they were nurses, one in ICU, another in ER, and my friend Sue in OR. When we'd finished they began sharing their own stories; they wiped the floor with us. Within a few minutes our faces were white, we'd quit breathing, and looked like little kids who'd suddenly found themselves out of their depths. When they'd finished, the women shared a look between themselves, and . . . smiled.

Years later Sue told me a story that has never left me. She was in OR, a boy of ten or twelve on the table. He went into cardiac arrest, the team tried to save him but they could not. Eventually, the doctor called it. The monitors were turned off, the team finished what they were doing, then slowly filed out of the room. But Sue stayed there, silent and still by the side of the boy, her hands resting lightly on his arm. Before long a nursing supervisor came in and told Sue to leave and get on with her work. Without turning Sue said, "I just need a minute."

The supervisor was offended by this and insisted forcefully. Finally Sue turned to her, looked her in the eye and said, "A little while ago I was holding this boy's beating heart in my hands. I felt it stop. I need to stand here a minute and talk to him and tell him goodbye and that we did all we could. He deserves that. I deserve that. I need to do this before I go on."

Well the supervisor didn't take well to that at all. Later she wrote Sue up for insubordination. Nevertheless, Sue took the time to say everything *she* needed to say to the boy who lay there, still, on the table. More, she said everything that *the boy* deserved to have said to him. We are not just pieces of meat when we die; there is more to this life – and to us – than what rationalists and their acolytes believe.

I think about that story from time to time. There are many others like it that live inside me, that will always live inside me. For it says something about our medical system, the way it

always chooses mind (and money) over heart. As Timothy Snyder recently put it, the American medical industry is not a system of healing which involves some wealth transfer, it's a system of wealth transfer that sometimes involves healing. We've lost something essential to our humanness as a result.

The interior world has been abandoned for the outward. Our hearts have been trained to sleep, our minds to distrust feelings, to distrust the touch of one human heart upon another, to distrust the touch of the world upon our senses, to distrust our feeling responses to that touch. Because of this we have lost, not only in our medical system, but as a nation, the understanding that grief is part of our human journey. Sooner or later, each and every one of us will travel into grief, that is just the way it is. If we love, grief will always come to us sooner or later.

Nick Cave says it this way . . .

It seems to me, that if we love, we grieve. That's the deal. That's the pact. Grief and love are forever intertwined. Grief is the terrible reminder of the depths of our love and, like love, grief is non-negotiable. There is a vastness of grief that overwhelms our minuscule selves. We are tiny, trembling clusters of atoms subsumed within grief's awesome presence. It occupies the core of our being and extends through our fingers to the limits of the universe. Within that whirling gyre all manner of madnesses exist; ghosts and spirits and dream visitations, and everything else that we, in our anguish, will into existence. These are precious gifts that are as valid and as real as we need them to be. They are the spirit guides that lead us out of the darkness.

Part of every physician's duty is to journey into grief with us – and with our families after we are gone. This is true of every kind of physician there is, even nurses, even herbalists, even ecologists, even those of us who love our children.

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I live now, as all who are dying do, with one foot in the land of the dead and one in the land of the living. I no longer, as I once did, live in forward time. There is no longer for me, *any* forward time at all, there is only now and the final tasks that lay before me to be complete in this life. Integral to that is me fully inhabiting my dying (just as for most of my life, I fully inhabited my living). And so I sit at its feet, allowing it to teach me what I need to learn now in this last stage of my life. For death is, and always has been one of the great powers of Earth and Universe; it has been around a lot longer than we have. It is neither an ending nor our enemy. It is one of the greatest teachers any of us will ever have.

The irony does not escape me that to write the final two books I am writing, I had to be dying before I could. I could not speak so eloquently and deeply of Earth Grief were I not dying, nor could I understand as deeply as I need to, the grief that so many now feel because of the covid deaths of their loved ones.

There are millions who have lost someone close to them. They are struggling with the grief that always comes with such a loss. But they do so now in the midst of a pandemic. And that changes things. So, I thought I would talk for awhile about the territory in which we who are dying and those who have lost the beloved dwell.

The Grief of the Dying and the Grief of the Ones Who Remain

Years ago I came across an article by the writer Alan Bradley; he, amazingly enough, began to write fiction when he turned 70 (an example to anyone who thinks they are too old to begin). He said he'd been working on a story one day and a little girl (her name, by the way, is Flavia de Luce) plopped herself down on a stone wall in the middle of the story, began swinging her leg, and refused to go away. She was so insistent (and so endearing) that he abandoned the story he'd been writing and began to spend every day with her. Soon her story turned into *The Sweetness at the Bottom of the Pie*; it's one of the great books of our time (and so is the series in which she lives).

I'd never had such a thing happen to me (though I had heard about it of course). But a year ago, in the midst of working on my book *Becoming Vegetalista*, another book sat on a wall and began swinging its leg and refusing to go away. It kept insisting I write it now and no more procrastinating. And so that is what I've been doing the past year, writing *Earth Grief: The Journey into and Through Ecological Loss*. Unbeknownst to me the book would also give a voice to what I was finding on my descent into the territory of my dying.

Once committed, I began gathering (the pile is so very tall now) books and articles on Earth Grief and the emotional impact of ecological loss. But as I read through them, it soon became clear that all those books and journal papers and media articles had very little to say about Earth grief or ecological loss. For the writers talked about it as if it were over there someplace, outside them, as if they could stand back and talk about it dispassionately. As if they, themselves did not feel it. And of course this is the way it had to be for them, for within the rational world, far too many people believe that feelings have no place. They believe that loving

Earth, the Green, our kindred species with which we share this planet has no place in science – and regrettably, too many physicians believe it has no place in a hospital or in their practices either.

One of the deep-seated, and very dangerous, problems we face is the tendency for rationalists (of whatever sort) to leave out love – and the empathy and caring that comes with it. And a science without love and empathy, a technology without love and empathy, a way of thinking and being without love and empathy . . . well, we see the results of that around us every day of our lives.

Tellingly, authors of many of the better research papers and academic books I have read feel a need to apologize for having feelings about what they are studying and for what they see – and feel – happening around them. They have internalized rationalist shaming about their feelings of love and caring for life forms external to themselves, about the grief they feel when the trees they study, and love, are cut down. When they touch upon those feelings in their writing or in their public speaking they experience an almost immediate, internal, ingrained denigration of their emotional responses. And so, nearly all of them believe they must pretend to have no feelings at all, as if somehow this will make their work more legitimate. Phyllis Windle, in her remarkable article “The ecology of grief,” describes it like this . . .

I suspect that ecologists, like other scientists, are prone to inhibiting the pain of grief. We are solidly attached to the life of the mind and, of the several steps experts consider essential to recovery, only the first is intellectual.

I speak from experience. I am tempted to dismiss my feelings for dogwoods

*as irrational, inappropriate, anthropomorphic. My arguments go like this:
another tree will take the dogwoods' place; death is part of productivity, too;
evolution removes as well as adds species. . . . [But] premature reassurance and
pressure to accept a loss just short-circuit the grieving and recovery process. . . .*

*We have almost no social support for expressing this grief. . . . Honest
conversations about grief that come quite naturally at a bedside are far more
difficult at a lab bench or conference table. Thus, it is harder for me to speak
freely about my grief for dogwoods with ecological colleagues than with fellow
chaplains.*

She's identified something crucial to the problems of our time. It is, in fact, integral to the emergence of those problems. More plainly, it's one of the main causes of the problems we face. It's the insistence among scientists (and the schools and teachers who train them) that natural human feelings of caring and grief have no place in their world nor in any legitimate understanding of the natural world itself, that they do not belong in the practice of science. And regrettably, in its desire for medicine to have a scientific basis, the medical world has followed this path as well. Those who refuse to obey and insist on feeling anyway are . . . insubordinate.

In consequence, far too many of us, those of us who are dying and those who have lost loved ones, enter the territory of grief in the midst of people who are denying what is most human in us . . . and in themselves. And that is why so little of what I found touched upon what it is truly like for those of us who grieve.

So, to begin with, here is what true grief *feels* like when it touches you, when it fills the

words that someone writes. It is the real and genuine brought naked and unconcealed into language. And it is this feeling *and only this feeling* that marks the land of grief in which all of us come to live sooner or later. People's words may differ, their descriptions of the terrain vary, but true grief always carries this particular feeling with it. We must be able to recognize it, be able to receive it, be able to respond to what is being asked of us if we are to work with the grief that so many people are struggling with – if we are to help those who come to us in their suffering.

These words come from various sections of the book *Time Lived Without Its Flow* by Denise Riley, which is itself abstracted from the journals she wrote after the death of her son Jake . . .

In these first few days I see how rapidly the surface of the world, like a sheet of water that's briefly agitated, will close again silently and smoothly over a death. His, everyone's, mine. I see, as if I am myself dead.

Apparently almost half a year has gone by since J disappeared, and it could be five minutes or half a century, I don't know which. There is so very little movement. At first I had to lie down flat for an hour each afternoon, because of feeling crushed as if by a leaden sheet, but by now I don't need to lie down. This slight physical change is my only intimation of time.

[I have] a strong impression that I've been torn off, brittle as any dry autumn leaf, liable to be blown onto the tracks in the underground station, or to crumble

as someone brushes by me in this public world where people rush about loudly, with their astonishing confidence. Each one of them a candidate for sudden death, and so helplessly vulnerable.

Wandering around in an empty plain, as if an enormous drained landscape lying behind your eyes had turned itself outward. Or you find yourself camped on a threshold between inside and out. The slight contact of your senses with the outer world, your interior only thinly separated from it, like a membrane resonating on a verge between silence and noise. If it were to tear through, there's so little behind your skin that you would fall out towards that side of sheer exteriority. Far from taking refuge deeply inside yourself, there is no longer any inside, and you have become only outward. As a friend, who'd survived the suicide of the person closest to her, says: "I was my two eyes set burning in my skull. Behind them was only vacancy."

This state is physically raw, and has nothing whatever to do with thinking sad thoughts or with "mourning." It thuds into you. Inexorable carnal knowledge.

Now I've no sense of any onward temporal opening, but stay lodged in the present, wandering over some vast saucer-like incline of land, some dreary wide plain like the banks of the river Lethe, I suppose. His sudden death has dropped like a guillotine blade to slice through my old expectation that my days would

stream onwards into my coming life.

That is what *grief* feels like. It is the territory I am speaking of here. It is the context of our times. For the human species is now entering the time of our grieving and it will be our companion for a very long time to come.

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Before I get too deeply into all this. I want to mention something I have never heard anyone talk about before. That is, the similarity between those who are dying and those who live on after their beloved has died. (Just a note here however: there's a difference in survivors, between those who have had time to grieve with their loved ones as they are dying and those whose beloved dies unexpectedly, with no warning. For the second group of people there is no transition time, no slow getting used to it time. The life that was being lived is cut away with no warning and the shock is much greater. The grief is generally deeper and harder to reconcile. Nevertheless, the processes involved are the same.)

To get an idea of the impact that my dying has inside me, I will start with a story. It's one that was told by Henry David Thoreau long ago.

Everyone has heard the story which has gone the rounds of New England, of a strong and beautiful bug which came out of the day leaf of an old table of apple-tree wood, which had stood in a farmer's kitchen for sixty years, first in

Connecticut, and afterwards in Massachusetts, – from an egg deposited in the living tree many years earlier still, as appeared by counting the annual layers beyond it; which was heard gnawing out for several weeks, hatched perchance by the heat of an urn.

Thoreau goes on to liken that to each individual human life. There is something in us that comes in with us when we are born. Far too often it is buried under the woodenness of social life and its expectations. As Thoreau puts it, “Who knows what beautiful and winged life, whose egg has been buried for ages under many concentric layers of woodenness in the dead dry life of society” exists in each of us? Later in life, perhaps some warmth touches us and awakens us from our sleep. That deep buried part begins gnawing at the woodenness which surrounds it, making a sound that family and neighbors can hear for miles. And one day, perhaps years into the process, a new self comes into being, one which looks and acts very differently than the one people saw before. This was true for me, and I think it true for many people.

This internal reclamation of the self, this decolonization of the soul, cannot be accomplished without coming to know the complexity of ourselves. That is something that only occurs from the exploration of our interior world. What most of us soon discover is that we are not a single personality but multiple; there are many selves living inside us. Everyone knows this, even if few speak of it out loud. The part of us that works in the world is not the part of us that makes love with our beloved (well, not usually). The part that loves rough humor is not the part that writes books (well, not usually). The part that spends time with my beloved is not the part that talks to the people at the bank. As well, there are many ages to these parts of the self. That is

why it is so common for young men damaged in war to call for their mothers as they lay on the battlefield. Another part rises to the surface and begins to call out for succor. The little child we were is always there inside us whether we wish it so or not.

In the process of our awakening, we must become friends with each and every one of these parts of us. This means coming to love our multi-personality selves just the way we do our children or our beloved. Becoming in the process our own best friend and companion. And of course an important part for me is this body which has been a friend to me for so very long. As with the other parts of my self, it too has its own personality.

When we become friends with our self, make amends for the years of our abandonment of our self, we can then engage in the holy act of breaking bread with our selves every day of our lives. But always, a part of this is the agreement to be responsible to our many selves, to nurture and caretake them, to not abandon them. It is essential to our integrity (the definition of which is “to become whole and undivided). And there is a joy and happiness in being our own best friend that can be found in no other way.

When we (or a loved one) are given a terminal diagnosis a difficult truth is revealed. We cannot save those we love from death, from illness, or from suffering. So when I received a terminal diagnosis the shock ran through my entire system. All my many parts felt I had let them down. I had not kept them safe, not done my job of care-taking. Those who are losing a loved one feel this way as well; it is part of the price that love demands. (If only we had done more, only seen more, only stepped in sooner . . .)

As my faculties decay, one by one by one, parts of me become less functional – just as my body becomes less functional. Qualities of mind and heart I had long taken for granted began to

fail. I, too, like this land, am losing parts of myself. Far too often I am reminded of that old PETA commercial. There is a photograph of a monkey, all kinds of wires and tubes hooked into him. He is strapped to a bed and the caption reads, “Imagine donating your body to science . . . with you still inside it.” More accurately, I have donated my body to dying, with myself still inside it.

This is how it feels, every day of my life. I am losing the beloved that lives within me. This process I am going through is the same as the one my loved ones are going through as I die. It is just that they will have to find a way to go on after I am gone, to find a new life without me in it. I will be involved in other things.

Our own personal dying, the dying of our loved ones, the death of our loved ones, the dying of this Earth climate our species has known for so long, and of the civilization that rests upon it . . . they all have similar impacts on those of us who experience them. So, I will talk about the journey and what is found there and as I do, I will use all those many pronouns interchangeably: I, we, you, they, us.

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Over the course of my life, I developed, as we all do, the skills of living. I learned to live in forward time. Unlike the old and the terminally ill (who have been forced by circumstance to give up such an orientation), I lived always with one foot in the future. I made plans for this and that and the other thing, each plan pointing to some future way of being which existed out there somewhere in front of me. And as I lived and grew, I learned to adapt to the problems that arose,

those that affected my forward-focused life. As everyone does, I found work-arounds, innovations that allowed my goals to be met whatever they might have been. I developed a “repertoire of problem solutions.” The more experience I had of life, and the more encounters I had with novel problems, the more expansive my repertoire became.

Eventually most people settle into a more mature, structured life, one in which novel circumstances rarely occur. Their repertoire is usually sufficient then to deal with whatever problems they might encounter.

But with a terminal diagnosis or the death of a loved one – when I, or anyone, is told that the cancer or the heart disease or the lung infection is untreatable (as I have been so told) – that I/we/they are dying – the future is no longer an opening into endless possibilities. We are faced with *ending*. It may come in six months or in two years, perhaps in four if we are lucky. We face the most novel problem there is and suddenly we find that our repertoire of problem solutions is useless.

Nevertheless, each and every one of us (as I have done the past few years) reaches into our bag of this and that and the other thing and brings out the solutions that have worked for us in the past, one by one by one. We force them into service, hoping they will effectively deal with this new circumstance. But they fail, each and every one, as they inevitably must. And I found that this is a terrifying thing, to know that there is nothing I can do to stop what is coming. That nothing I have learned is of use to me now. There is a helplessness to it that is terrible to bear and a terrible, terrible sense of a coming darkness that I cannot escape.

All of us fight against the coming of the darkness – it is in all of life to do so – but as the days and weeks and months or perhaps years go by, the truth slowly sinks in. I am dying – our

beloved is dying, the life I/we once knew is ending. I no longer have a future the way I so recently did, I no longer exist in forward time. Soon there will be a world without me in it. The life I have been living is over.

At that point, a unique shift occurs, daily relationship then is no longer with our living, but with dying, with the ending of ourselves, the life we have led up to this moment in time, with everything we have known. And so the entire structure of the life being lived changes. Forward time ceases. We are somewhere else now. In a different kind of time. One that is not often talked about. For it is a place that those in the west fear perhaps more than anything else.

Everyone faced with a terminal diagnosis (either for themselves or their loved ones) usually responds in a predictable number of ways. (There has been a lot written about this and I am sure you have heard or read some of it.) At their core, each and every one of those ways is an attempt to reassert control, to find a solution so that people can continue on with life as it was. Nevertheless, sooner or later the fact that we or our loved ones are terminal has to be faced and accepted. It is an integral-to-this-world ecological limit; there is no escape despite all the I-can-lower-my-body-temperature and live to be 150 techno-utopianism that is published in the media every day of our lives. Death is built into the system, and it is built into the system for a reason. Sooner or later it comes for every one of us and despite our responses, sooner or later we will be forced to accept its inevitability. At the moment we do accept it an important alteration occurs in our personal relation to life, to ourselves, to the world, to everything that is.

Much has been written about the “stages” of dying. I began studying that territory in my early twenties and I had some very good teachers in people such as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Stephanie Simonton, for instance. I know much about denial, about all the ways that people have

of hiding from their dying – and I have struggled in that territory myself. But what interests me most is the territory that those who come to terms with a terminal diagnosis or the death of a loved one find. It's a unique state of being and it possesses certain capacities of perception and relationship to self and the world that are crucial for us now. Our species is in need of what can be found there simply because of what we collectively face – both in terms of the ecological challenges that surround us and the pandemic in the midst of which we now live.

I am going to talk about this at some length. It is the journey I have been on and it is the journey that people who have lost loved ones are on, whether they wish to be or not. Perhaps some of what I have found can help those who are traveling the path yet.

First of all – *and to be very clear about this* – the state of mind and being that is eventually found as one integrates and comes to terms with the dying and the loss does not come in a single moment of sudden insight as people so often like to think. Rather, it emerges out of a *process*. (Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was adamant about this and continually insisted to any who would listen that it is *not* linear.) There is *movement* from one state of being into another. (And this movement is more like living inside a tornado than one step after another.) It comes slowly, each of the learnings are hard won. There's a lot of going back to earlier states, then continuing on, then going back. *Things have to be reworked . . . over and over again*. The process seems obsessive to the outside observer, as if nothing is happening. But a great deal is happening. And the obsessive replaying it integral to the resolution that is being sought.

At the moment of diagnosis the diagnosed and their loved ones are still immersed in forward time – and, importantly, within all the *unconscious* assumptions and beliefs that are part of that way of being. Then we slowly move, one difficult step after another, out of that habituated

way of being into another. We move into ending, into the territory of dying. And of course one of the first things we find, after all the denial and anger and blame is done (after the terrible fear has finally been faced and come to terms with), is grief.

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Grief has the same relation to sadness that a typhoon has to a gentle spring rain. Grief tears apart the world one has known. Its powerful winds careen through the self like a tornado, shaking it to pieces. The wild thing that true, deep grief is, cannot be tamed by touch or walled off by words. We become experiencers of grief, expeditionaries of ending, explorers of loss, engaged witnesses who must— if we are to travel through the territory and find the other side — let grief have its way with us. And grief . . . it is pervasive and insistent and relentless. When it finds us, it enters every part of the self, every aspect of our lives. It fills up the senses. The life that existed before, carefully built throughout the years, shatters into a thousand sharp fragments. We then live in the ruins that loss has made of us, and we grieve. Every day, we grieve.

Grief travels with the dying — and with the families of the dying and the dead, every step of the way. It is the constant companion of endings. Grief comes not only to the dying but *importantly* to everyone that loses someone or who loses anything that has been woven into the deepest parts of the self, into the structure of life. A *reality* that one has taken for granted, that is believed to be as immutable as stone, is ending — or worse, has ended. And that loss, it *changes* things. It alters the relationship to life that anyone and everyone has had up until the moment that the loss occurred. It alters mental functioning, it alters personal identity at the deepest levels of

the self. It alters everything.

As Colin Parkes so eloquently puts it, such a loss . . .

. . . invalidates a multitude of assumptions about the world that, up to that time, have been taken for granted. These affect almost every area of mental functioning – habits of thought which have been built up over many years of interaction, plans and routines that involve the [thing or person lost], hopes or wishes that can no longer be realized. Sooner or later every chain of thought seems to lead to a blank wall; [what has been lost] is everywhere and nowhere. . . . Life seems to have lost all meaning.

Each of us is born into a scenario, into a way of life that, as we grow, we adapt to. At the deepest level of that scenario, foundational to it, is Earth itself and the climate it has had for so very long. Built on top of that foundation are the cultures and nations and the times we live in. (And while these seem a foundational reality, they are not, they are *virtual* – as most human beings are now beginning to learn.) Most immediate to us in the scenario in which we are embedded are those we love and who love us and of course our bodies and the life we have crafted as we live.

An important truth is that over time we create what Parkes calls “an internal assumptive world” or what the environmental writer and activist Val Plumwood described as our “frameworks of subjectivity” – a structure that sustains the “concept of a continuing narrative self” and which helps “sustain action and purpose” in life.

This internal assumptive world is something we build over time, a model of the world that

we create and carry inside ourselves. As Parkes comments, “We rely on the accuracy of these assumptions to maintain our orientation in the world and to control our lives.” Relying on these assumptions becomes a deeply ingrained habit, an automatic process we never think about. Of course, since this is a model of the world and not the world itself, discrepancies are inevitable and so we are forced to adjust the model throughout our lives. Normally, this is fairly easy. It is only when very deep, very-early-formed assumptions are affected that serious problems occur, for the deeper the assumptions are the more they are tied into primal survival drives and essential self identity. It is very difficult to have deep assumptions confronted – by circumstance or by others.

But with terminal events, many, sometimes most, assumptions become obsolete, for the old world is gone and *is not coming back*. For those who are dying the entire assumptive world, which is almost entirely predicated on forward time, begins to collapse. For those who live on after the death of the beloved, most if not all of that assumptive world collapses as well.

(The regrettable thing is that very few physicians or herbalists or healers of any sort understand this. Nor do nearly all writers of grief, whether academic or media. Most people see it from a perspective that is immersed in forward time and unless you can let go of that perspective, you cannot really help for you will just try to “buck” people up, either today or tomorrow or in three months, trying to get them to once again join you in forward time. And forward time is so integral to you that you don’t even know what it is until you lose it.)

What few people understand is that sooner or later, each and every one of us will have to deal with the collapse of our internal assumptive reality, in whole or in part. (And not just when we are dying.) Because of the structure of our culture, its denial of aging and death, of

terminality, this is often far more difficult than it was for our ancestors, even a century ago.

The scenario in which we are inextricably embedded, in all its complexity (both the foundational and the virtual), is interwoven with our internal assumptive world at a level far deeper than consciousness or rational thought. We began absorbing it into us at birth. This interwoven gestalt is what we call or think of as “reality.” Like the moon and the rain it just is; it’s rarely questioned. We have adapted to it every day of our lives – all of us have had to do so simply in order to survive. Our personal identity is heavily dependent upon it. And because it is interwoven into our, earliest pre-verbal beginnings, it resides within us at a level far deeper than conscious thought. It is embedded in us at a level far deeper than our rational minds can go.

When the internal assumptive world falls apart our sense of self destabilizes; sometimes it’s lost entirely. It is for most people a terrifying experience, for we lose internal structures that most people do not know they have. And that loss occurs very deep in the self. The conscious mind feels what is happening but nearly always is unable to explain it. We become existentially adrift. We lose our feeling of being surrounded by, embedded within, a stable reality upon which we can depend. We lose our moorings.

A very simple analogy (to get an idea of what it is like) is that we become like a person who in adult life loses a leg. But until that moment of loss, our sense of self has been oriented around a deeply integrated, far-deeper-than-rational-thought, assumption of two legs. This is why every day, often for years afterwards, we sit up in bed in the morning, step to the floor, and find that the support we unconsciously expect is no longer there. And so, we fall. Over and over again, day after day after day. And every time we fall the new reality *forces* itself upon us. Our old assumptive world, the one so deeply integrated into our sense of identity fails to hold true

every time we fall. And in shock we are forced to face, over and over again, our loss, the new reality, the new world in which we live.

Every time we stand, expecting to be supported on that leg and are not, the fabric of our assumptive world literally tears apart or as Parkes puts it, “There is a rent in the fabric of reality.” (Val Plumwood has described that tearing experience so very accurately in her writings.) And that is not an easy thing to experience. For the deepest parts of us *believe* in the old identity; it’s foundational, it just *is*. And there are other parts of the self as well (again, we are not single consciousnesses but multiple personalities existing in a precarious balance throughout our lives). Many of those other parts of the self refuse to accept what is happening, they keep wishing the old world, and identity, back into being. This is just how we, as people, are.

So we fall and experience a rent in the fabric of our reality, are forced to work with the meaning of what is happening every day of our lives. And it takes time. It takes time for personal identity to change, to alter itself at the deep, nonrational levels in the core of us. The internal assumptive world can only remake itself slowly. It will only slowly alter its shape so we can live inside a different identity, one that automatically includes “I have only one leg.”

Nevertheless, the real world, the immutable reality that is foundational, not virtual, the one that exists beyond our internal assumptive world, keeps forcing itself upon us until, kicking and screaming (though now with only one leg), we finally acquiesce and accept that the life we had so long lived is over and that *this* one-leggedness is the new life in which we will now forever live. (And to be clear, the more closely *two legs* is connected to self identity, say if we are an Olympic athlete, perhaps a runner, the harder it is to come to terms with the loss, the more existentially bereft we will be.) At *acceptance* we are no longer the person we were, we no longer

keep wishing the old world into being, we no longer grieve the loss so keenly. (And we are not bitter, not angry, no longer blaming, no longer living in “if I had only” or “If they had only” – these disappear when true acceptance occurs. We are someone else now. Our entire orientation and relationship to life and self and culture has shifted.)

That is what it is like with something as life changing but as simplistic as losing a leg. When we lose a beloved child or spouse (or are told that we ourselves are dying soon) the same sort of thing happens but is often far more debilitating in its impacts, much worse than the loss of a leg. It’s just a bit harder to see because there is not a leg to point to. Simple physical reductionism doesn’t work. Something far more invisible to the eye and the reductive mind is in play.

Those we love and who love us are woven throughout our sense of self, into our thoughts, our plans, our days, our hopes, our futures. They are the source of the deepest intimacy we will ever know, the ones who companion us and who we have come to trust with our most vulnerable self, the part or parts of us that no one else is ever allowed to see. A million times a day we reach out with some invisible part of us and touch the living reality of them, just as they do us. And that touching, that companionship, that trust in an outside someone who loves and believes in us, is intricately interwoven into our sense of self and our relation to the world around us. They are an existential leg that we stand upon, that supports us, that we rely on at the very deepest levels of our being. When they are taken from us *that support is lost*. We reach out with invisible legs and find nothing to stand upon at all. And we fall. Over and over again. We have lost the ground of being around and upon which we have interwoven our self and life. And that loss brings with it a terrible alteration of our internal assumptive world. As Parkes observes . . .

We can only recognize the world that we meet and behave appropriately within because we have formed models to interpret our perceptions and guide our behaviors. We recognize chairs, tables, doors, and windows because our internal world contains memories of all these things on the basis of which we make reliable assumptions about them. We walk through doors with confidence because we have learned at the deepest levels of our mental processes that doors set off one region of solid footing from another region of solid footing. . . . it is unlikely that we shall meet a door that looks like any other door but leads into an elevator shaft or empty space where a now-demolished floor once existed. [But after this kind of loss we continually encounter] empty space where security once was.

After the loss (of our beloved or of our ability to live in forward time because of our), every moment, every breath, every thought finds us stepping through a door expecting to find solid ground. Instead all we find is an empty elevator shaft. Every morning we wake up and unconsciously stand, expecting solidity, but it is no longer there. We fall and the fall is endless. There *literally* is a “rent in the fabric of reality” and we feel it every moment of our daily life. The old world that we relied on for so long is gone and that reality, that world, will *never* return. We have not just lost a leg, we have lost the kind of companionship that is very hard to find in this life. We have lost an integral aspect of our identity, a mirror which has told us for decades who and what we are. At its loss, for the first time maybe, we are incredibly, deeply, terribly, alone. Existentially bereft.

In that moment, we find that the sense of self which has come from innumerable

intangible structures which have resided within us, and were in fact a psychological/spiritual skeletal structure holding us up and giving us our shape, is gone. Afterwards, we look outward into the world and see, as we always have, that yes that is a chair, that is a door, that is food, that is the outside world, that is the sun and green grass and children running in the field. But there is no longer a personal connection to those realities, they have become only intellectual facts. The *meaning* of them is gone. And that takes us into a very particular and peculiar world, one that can only be found/experienced when foundational assumptive structures are lost. Again, as Denise Riley describes it . . .

Wandering around in an empty plain, as if an enormous drained landscape lying behind your eyes had turned itself outward. Or you find yourself camped on a threshold between inside and out. The slight contact of your senses with the outer world, your interior only thinly separated from it, like a membrane resonating on a verge between silence and noise. If it were to tear through, there's so little behind your skin that you would fall out towards that side of sheer exteriority. Far from taking refuge deeply inside yourself, there is no longer any inside, and you have become only outward. As a friend, who'd survived the suicide of the person closest to her, says: "I was my two eyes set burning in my skull. Behind them was only vacancy."

The former, comfortable, reliable world and the sense of self, of personal identity, that emerged out of it, is gone. And far too often, people are so terrified of this *feeling* of non-meaning that

they flee to their physicians or their psychiatrists and are given medications so they won't have to face that terrible emptiness, face what is now the only reality that exists inside them.

I know the terror of that place for I have been there many times (this is in fact a territory that the *vegetalista* must enter to become what the Green is demanding they become – and they will have to do so many times). I have found, over the years of my life, that the only true solution to the terror of that place is to one day decide not to flee it, but to turn the face toward it, to enter it, to descend and discover what it is trying to teach. I speak from personal experience when I say that doing so is terrifying, especially for people who have never done it before. (The first time is always the hardest.) That our culture has so little understanding of what that state actually is, that our healers are so terrified of it as well, makes the descent all the more difficult. (One of the things I have so admired about Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was her bravery in going into that world herself so she could understand the territory that her patients were living within.)

The feeling of non-meaning it is important to understand, is only a feeling. And the fear, the terror, that is only a feeling as well. It is possible to become accustomed to them. The truth is that you are just unmoored, it will end, and there is indeed another shore. (And no, I did not believe it the first time I descended into that world either.)

Those who have lost their loved ones are clear about how it feels to them once they have. They speak of it perhaps less eloquently than Riley does but it is no less heart-rending: “My husband’s in me, right through and through” and now “I feel as if half of myself is missing” and there is “a great emptiness” inside me.

The loved one is flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone, they are my breath, my heart,

my reason for being, my everything, they are woven deep within and throughout me, entangled in my very being. And now they are gone . . . and . . . I am gone.

The loss of the beloved forces, perhaps for the first time in a person's life, a grappling with fundamental questions of identity, of who we are, what we are, even the purpose of our individual life.

Long ago, Viktor Frankl spoke of this sudden casting of the self into loss of meaning. My memories have altered his words over the years that I have remembered them. Here is the shape they take inside me now . . .

There comes a time in every person's life when, in distress, we leave the house, and in darkness walk to the top of a small rise, look up at the stars, and say, "god, what is the purpose of my life?" We do so without realizing that we are not the questioner but the questioned.

Whether we wish it or no, significant loss shatters the old internal assumptive world. We look out at the world and nothing is as it was. There was a mountain, now there is no mountain, only the intellectual fact of mountain which is something else entirely. And so we are asked a question – though at the time what is more accurate to the experience is that we feel that a question is being *forced* upon us. And though it is a single question, it has many parts: *Who am I? What am I? What do I do with my life now? Where do I go from here? What is the purpose of my life? What is the meaning of life, of my life?* This is *in reality* the most important question we will ever

be asked. How that question is answered determines the shape of the life we live afterwards – for all of us live two lives, the one we learn with and the one we live with after.

With deep loss, we are forced to rebuild our self identity from our pre-verbal foundations upward. People living outside us, who are not *in* the loss we are experiencing, can't easily understand it. Culturally, in america, there is a certain period of mourning that is considered "enough." But, as is so often true here there is a disconnect between what is actually true and what is believed to be true.

What is *really* true is that grieving takes time, a lot of it. *And* it's a slow process. There are, roughly, three aspects to the journey. The easiest part of that process (easy only in comparison with the other two) is accepting the loss intellectually. It's the simplest aspect of the new reality, a person was here, now they are not. We can literally see the absence. We wake up in the morning, turn over to touch our beloved, and they are gone. We wake up in the internal assumptive world we have always known (it has been with us so long that it asserts itself automatically) and we expect two legs. That habitual world wraps itself around us, it is comfortable, safe, and warm. But every morning that habitual world is confronted with the new reality. We roll over in bed and find only emptiness, only loss. And one way or another, as the days progress, intellectual acceptance is forced on us.

But accepting it emotionally? That is another thing altogether. And the final step: constructing a new life? That comes as time progresses; it's inextricably interwoven with the emotional acceptance of the loss.

"Emotional acceptance of the loss." It sounds rather simple, doesn't it? Most people interpret this as "getting used to it." But there is a great deal more to it than that. It is where

grappling with the question of “who am I?” takes place. And it is a *very long* process. People don’t really understand (until they enter this territory themselves that is) what it means to lose the internal assumptive world.

The internal assumptive world serves certain, very important functions. Three of them are: sense of identity, shortcuts, and safety. Shortcuts mean, we don’t have to, each and every time, analyze the environment in which we find ourselves and craft a solution. We recognize patterns, we implement solutions. And the recognition and implementation happens very quickly once that internal assumptive world is constructed and has matured with experience. It also gives us a feeling of safety. We know how to act almost always in every situation in which we find ourselves. (Most people are not explorers, immersing themselves into new territories that are strange to them. They find their niche and settle into it. Every day, upon waking up, they put on their life again like putting on a pair of comfortable old shoes.) We are surrounded by the known. We feel safe.

And as we move through the world, even though we don’t know we are doing it, we use evolutionarily-developed senses to check for anomalies, disconnects between the assumptive world and the real world. Most of us, over time, find ways to avoid anomalies. (Homeless people, unsafe neighborhoods, the working class, and yes I am being ironic, which comes from the ancient greek word *eironeia* meaning: simulated ignorance.) We find our bubble and stay in it. (*Everyone does this* and no there are no exceptions, there’s just different kinds of bubbles.) And while what each of us finds disturbing to our internal assumptive world differs, all of us find ways to avoid disturbing it.

When the internal assumptive world collapses we lose the sense of meaning that we have

had. But, as well, the world no longer feels safe. Suddenly we are in a world that is strange to us, one for which we have developed no skills, in which we have no experience. It's unsettling in the deepest sense of that word. As Parkes puts it, the bond with the beloved created . . .

. . . feelings of being somehow secure, augmented, extended, or completed by another which make it possible, when the marital partner is present or at least accessible, to be comfortable, relaxed, and so able to give attention to other matters. [The] loss of an attachment figure . . . means loss of a critical security-fostering figure. It brings about a sense of being alone, beleaguered, vulnerable. . . . [T]hose who are confronted with a sudden disaster tend to turn for help to the people to whom they are attached. But [with the loss of a loved one] the person to whom the individual would normally turn is the very person who has been lost. And so the anxiety continues unabated. . . . Faced with awareness of a sudden massive gap between the world that is and the world as it should be, and with the sudden loss of the security-fostering figure, [those experiencing the loss are] required to deal with a truly overwhelming threat.

The feeling of safety that most of us live with is suddenly lost. With this comes “great restlessness, difficulty in concentration, difficulty sleeping, anxiety, and tension . . . intense sorrow, painful memory, hopeless pining for the lost figure.” And of course, depression. All these feelings and states are a natural response to the fundamental disruption of the world which we have constructed from our bond and which had become for us an unquestioning reality.

When the *meaning* of things is lost, there is *always* the loss of our formerly unquestioned internal sense of safety. We become uncertain. Assertive action is inhibited. We no longer know how to move through the world; we have lost trust in the stability of life. It is no longer dependable. For many people the loss of trust is so extreme that anything more complex than sitting in the intellectually-recognized chair in front of them is very difficult. With every movement they make (no matter what it is), they find only an elevator shaft. So, many people withdraw into themselves and if they can, stop doing much at all . . . at least to an outward observer.

But in the internal world a great deal is going on. Everyone, no matter who or what they are, replays, over and over again, the events of the loss itself and the feelings that go with it. And there is a reason for this, an important one. As Parkes says . . .

The process is difficult, time-consuming, and painful. It seems that emotional acceptance can be achieved only as a consequence of fine-grained, almost filigree work with memory. It requires what appears to an observer to be a kind of obsessive review in which the widow or widower goes over and over the same thoughts and memories. [However] If the process is going well, they are not quite the same thoughts and memories, there is movement – perhaps slow – from one emphasis to another, from one focus to another.

Grief *demand*s an obsessive review of past events, over and over and over, always to the point where friends and family just want to scream, “Get over it goddammit!” What outside observers

don't understand is that this obsessive review is essential to both emotional acceptance and the rebuilding of the self, which of necessity occurs one incredibly slow step at a time.

And it is also a struggle to come to terms with the shame and guilt that always comes with the death of a loved one. When a loved one dies it is common to feel that we have in some way been at fault, that we have contributed in some way, even if we have not. We were not aware enough, we didn't cherish them enough, we didn't insist enough that the doctors look deeper. It is perhaps the sense of not paying attention that is hardest to bear. For the inevitable belief is if we had been paying attention things might have been different. And as well, not only were we not paying attention, we were off in our own little world having fun, worrying about inconsequential things, while the one we loved was getting sick. We didn't even notice. Rightly or wrongly, there is a feeling of being at the core a selfish, unthinking, blind, and shameful person. And too, we begin to remember all the times we were unkind, when we weren't attentive enough, start thinking of all the things we should have said but did not. And on and on and on. Some people call this "survivor's guilt" but I find that too facile. In truth it is an essential part of the reordering of our internal world and our relation to the outward.

Everything has to be replayed, over and over again. Part of what is being analyzed, despite its seeming to be merely an obsessive replaying of pain, is the degree of personal responsibility for what has happened. And again, while the replay appears to be identical every time, it isn't. There

are very subtle, tiny shifts, what Parkes describes as “fine-grained, almost filigree work with memory.” (What a beautiful line that is.)

Oswald Patton said that after the sudden death of his wife he still had his daughter to care for so he had to get up every day and do the work of being a father whether he wanted to or not. He found, over time, that doing the laundry, washing the dishes, vacuuming the floors, odd as it might sound, was integral to the rebuilding of himself. Somehow, as he did those mindless chores while obsessively thinking of his wife, his soul-shattering loss, his failures to see, his emptiness, his internal world was being rebuilt in a new form. And deep within his insight is an odd yet important truth, doing the laundry is somehow doing the laundry inside our self. Vacuuming the floor is somehow clearing our interior of accumulated dust. Making food for our child is learning to engage in the sacred act of breaking bread with our self, this new self who is coming into being now.

The review process lasts as long as it lasts. (As my grandmother once put it, “My mind just wasn’t right for five years” after he died.) Irrespective of what the outside world thinks (and this includes psychotherapists of all persuasions) rebuilding the self takes time and patience and the slow work of years. As time progresses, there is always increasing insistence by outside observers that the review process be terminated – always earlier than it needs to be. This can also come from psychotherapists who should know better. (Long lasting grief, more than six months or so, is often considered to be pathological as so many other internal states now are.) There will

be increasing pressure on the grieving person to take pharmaceuticals to short-circuit the grieving process or to “buck up” or to “get over it” or to “get out and do something,” or to “spend time with friends.” As Parkes comments . . .

The repeated review by which emotional acceptance is obtained can be painful to friends and relatives, as well as to the widows and widowers themselves. Friends and relatives may urge that the review be terminated long before the widow or widower has adequately come to terms with the past.

In nearly all instances, this is simply because the outside world is so terribly bad at dealing with pain – of any sort, physical, emotional, or that which comes from soul damage. It is *very* hard to be in the presence of another’s pain month after month after month, year after year after year. If the process is not terminated, then one by one friends and most relatives will step away, go back to their lives, to once more living in forward time. And as Parkes says, “What this can mean is that after a time – often, a rather brief time – the widow or widower is left alone with the work of review.”

Very few people will enter the darkness with you, say nothing, and just witness what is happening – perhaps just hold you when you need to be held. Very few people understand that you are on a journey and that the only thing they can do is companion you in your suffering. Those that do become physicians in the real sense of that word, that is, “those who work to alleviate suffering.” The point is not “cure” which as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has said, is all too often a cover for denial, for fear, for the terrible anxiety that comes when death and severe loss

enters our lives.

Eventually, for those of us who grieve terrible loss, there is what appears to an outside observer as (legitimate) movement, that is, the first careful steps outside the house, the first tentative engagements with the outside world. It is very similar in its nature to a process that Gary Snyder once described about writing poetry. Here is Robert Bly's description of it, from his piece, *Hearing Gary Snyder Read*.

He speaks softly before the student audience, confident that he has much to say, and it is exactly what they need to know. He makes a few remarks about [his poem] Rip Rap to start with. On certain mountainsides in the far west where one might want to build trails, an obsidian rock sheath is found, glassy, impossible for horses' hoofs to get a grip on. So smaller rocks have to be laid on it, but carefully. So he thought that words might be used that way, one slipped under the end of another, laid down on the glassy surface of some insight that one couldn't stand on otherwise.

That's a beautiful metaphor, isn't it? And it perfectly captures what the slow movement back into the outward world feels like. People are still in the place where the meaning of things, the old, pre-verbal, beliefs and assumptions about life, is gone. But out of all that obsessive replaying of things, some progress, however tiny, has been made into emotional acceptance. Into an explanation, however tiny or incomplete, of *WHY*. (This is a question that always must be answered in a way that both the soul and the heart can understand. And it has to be an answer

that makes sense to the four-year-old child that still lives inside us. This means that the normal answers that people give us, which come from the dissociated intellect will never do.) We are forced, always, to grapple with why. And *why* is a question that is very deep indeed.

So, too are the other questions that come: “who am I now?, what am I now?, what is my life going to be now?” And over time, initial answers of one sort or another come. They are always, in the beginning, tiny, wobbly, uncertain. They are suppositional at this point. In aggregate these are the beginnings of the new meaning that the core of the self is seeking. Still, it is tentative, only the beginnings of a trail that can be laid across that slick mountainside. We lay the first rock down, then another on top of it, and then another. We step out into the world, hoping for solidity. But the new trail doesn’t hold. We fall. And the fall down that mountainside of slippery, sharp stones is painful and terrible indeed. So, another retreat into the inward occurs. More obsessive reworking takes place, then another perhaps more stable understanding comes, a more stable meaning is created. Once again a rock is laid down, then another on top of it, and another. Once again we step into the outward. And again we fall. Sometimes it takes years to find the stability that is sought. But all that falling, all that reworking, all that contemplation, all that sitting in non-meaning – we learn from it – painfully, we learn. And as time goes by we build a new self and our new life one piece at a time, one meaning laid down, then another on top, and then another. We rebuild our internal assumptive world.

More than anything, this is an experiential process and we can only find out how stable the meanings are when we lay them down on that slick mountain side and begin to walk upon them. As Parkes says, “[The process] is tenuous, difficult to maintain, and easy to interrupt.” But we learn, and we grow, and the new self gradually comes into being. And when it does, we see

the world in a very different way than we once did. For one thing we know now at the deepest levels of our being that safety does not exist as a permanent state; it can never be foundational to life and trying to make it so is a fool's errand. But more . . .

Grief is now interwoven deeply within us. Existential loss is woven deeply within us. And from this interweaving comes *gravitas*, a centering, an existential stability which to most people is a new thing. It is as if we are a ship and during our long grieving we have constructed a keel that now extends downward into those dark depths where we have lived for so long. And keels do one thing and they do it well, they keep the boat of our life balanced and stable as we move across the surface of the sea. And in this we learn the difference between optimism (which is always concerned with safety) and hope (which is not).

There is a great difference between those two states. Those who are optimistic, that is, those who wish for a return to a state of innocence where there is no pain or conflict or loss of safety, do not possess a keel. The keel that keeps our ship afloat no matter what terrible storms afflict us always extends itself into the darkness of severe loss and grief. And with the creation of that keel, unexpectedly so, there is a kind of faith arises. It's called hope and it's very different than optimism. Hope is faith in life itself. Not in human life, but *life*. All human life, all human creations, end, even our civilizations. But life . . . that is inherent in Universe itself. It is something that continually extends itself upward out of this Earth we love, that we see in the face of the puppy that loves us, hear in the squeal of a child's laughter, feel in the emerging of green sprouts in the spring. Life.

When we begin to move outward into the world again, we feel it once more, that living energy field that we were once immersed in all unknowing. This new heart now feels it again as

if it were the first day of life. We feel the faith that life is. And out of nowhere, unlooked for, we find our smile again. But it is a smile tinged with a sadness that will never leave us, for grief has touched us. Its tears have carved arroyos in the landscape of our face, our body, and our heart. They will never leave us in this lifetime. Those who know how, will see what we now carry in our eyes. For our eyes have become far deeper than they once were, some shadowed pool resides within them now. In that pool are the teachings that can only be found during the weeping that grief demands of us.

I do not enjoy weeping, like many men in america I avoid it as long as I can. And when that dam breaks within me, there comes the kind of racking sobs that are only heard in the breaking of a man's heart. (Women seem to weep more easily here; I don't know why.) I do not like weeping, I do not like grief. Anger, fear, joy . . . all of them are "doing" emotions. They possess inherent action. Grief? That is a "being" emotion. All that can be done with grief is to feel it. Displacing it, turning it into rage or fear, directing it outward . . . that only postpones the inevitable. And it is not a very easy emotion to displace, not like fear into anger. I have learned to not try to do so, but still I do not embrace the weeping. I hold it within me until I can no longer bear the burden of my loss. And then I break.

* * * * *

This process is lonely, and painful, and heart breaking, and always filled with the sound of weeping. We live for a time as if a shroud of mourning has been placed over us. But eventually (although it seems always that eventually will never come) a new stable, however tentative, self

comes into being. The meanings that are then laid down and stepped upon hold the foot, the weight, and our path into the outward. We begin to trust the outward again – and ourselves. We have a stable sense of self again.

I cannot tell you, as no one can, what that new self you find will be like. For each and every one of us that enters that territory are answering the most important question there is, Who am I? And the answer to that question is always unique, individual, and crafted over slow time out of the deepest regions of the self. It comes out of what truly matters to you.

The slow construction of a new life, that is, the decisions about how you will be, what work you will do, how you will approach the world and yourself, occurs concurrently with the emotional coming to terms with the loss. The pain that has been so much a part of life, so much like a broken tooth that the tongue returns to over and over again – or more properly, the heart returning to what has been broken inside, feeling it over and over again – somehow in the process, the sharp edges are worn smooth. They become less sharp and cutting. And now the pain can be carried, just part of the weight that life demands of us. You are in the new life now and you are not the person you were.

For those of my Green tribe, if you continue on as healers on this path. As you age you will encounter the territory of grief more often. It will come to others, it will come to you. It is a territory that must be entered and understood so that you can work with those who come to you with deep understanding and compassion. Those who suffer loss are of no color or creed, no ethnicity or profession, no left or right. They are people who have entered the oldest territory of suffering that the human species knows. Your job is to companion them. I have written this so that those who travel in the landscape of grief might perhaps understand that there are those who

have taken the journey before them. They might then recognize some of the landscape they are encountering, some of the feelings and states of being they find in themselves. I have also written it because far too many healers of whatever sort do not know (or care to know) about this territory of grief. But the times are upon us now, the ones long foretold. Our world is in disarray and even though there will be periods of calm (as between Katrina and Covid-19), ecological disruptions will continue. And they will have within them loss, and the dying, and the grief that always travels with them. Perhaps these things I have written will help you on the journey. I hope so.

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