Grieving as a Spiritual Discipline

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I BREAKFASTED WITH GRIEF THIS MORNING. Then we got ready for work and made the short commute to our hospital. We barely had time to settle into the office when the pager began its disquieting dance. Grief and I were needed in the emergency department (ED).

In the ED, I met with a family and my Grief met theirs. I listened to the concerns of staff, and our Griefs mingled. Then upstairs, to provide support to a returning stroke patient whose familiar Grief has remained strong and open. My Grief, that sturdy gateway into the soul, and I were welcomed into the room. Some time in the early darkness, Grief and I will turn for home and take our rest until we are called again to the service of others.

Grief and I have known each other for a long time. Truth be told, we grew up together, but it has taken most of a lifetime to become friends. In my youth, I kept to the sunny side of the street, seldom looking across life’s highway and into Grief’s shadowed path. We only came face to face at certain tragic intersections.

In time, I began to study Grief, at a distance of course, and with the intention of becoming Grief’s master. I treated Grief like a sickness, something to be endured and eventually overcome, or perhaps resolved, to use the sterile, objective language of the mental health sciences. Grief appreciated my newfound interest, but the distance between us narrowed only slightly. To re-enter my life, Grief still needed to rush in while making a great to-do.

The Jewish sage Koheleth writes in the book of Ecclesiastes: “Wise men are drawn to the house of mourning…”¹ How strangely true this has been for me. As a hospital chaplain, I make my living in a house of mourning. It is here that I have learned to welcome Grief as a friend, a guide, a mentor—and why not? Grief is everywhere. Whenever change is accepted into this world, I see the face of Grief. Whenever change is denied in this world, Grief’s deep eyes dare me to look inside and know the fullness of the truth.

Grief comes to me as a daemon,² a spiritual guide, a companion, who shares my bread of brokenness and cup of loneliness. Grief’s faithfulness is steadfast, befitting a gift of God. Grief has been at my side when dark nights of scarcity have sapped all vision, and Grief has steadied me when the luster of abundance has staggered me with its fierce glare. I am learning to trust Grief’s somber voice as a conduit of wisdom reaching beyond my limited and limiting awareness.

Early in my practice as a chaplain, I found myself feeling overwhelmed by the relentless current of grief flowing through this place. It was sink or swim, so I took Koheleth’s words to heart and chose a small ritual to keep my spirit afloat. I sought to become one with the prevailing current and began inviting Grief into my awareness, asking Grief to join me in my work. As I grew in my comfort with Grief, I was surprised to learn how close we really are. I expected Grief to come and go as some outside intruder, but now I find that Grief lives within me. Grief is a citizen of my psyche, at times ignored, but never ultimately dismissed, an inhabitant of my soul to be cherished and nurtured.
My relationship with Grief is complicated by Grief’s love of masquerade. Once, I saw one of Grief’s faces very clearly and thought, now I know Grief! But Grief never tires of creating new forms and keeps showing up with wildly different looks. Some faces are frightening, some alluring. Grief can be sickly or mad, bold as lightning or subtle as dew. Living in such a dynamic relationship requires a great deal of trust, a willing patience and a gentle humor. Grief may come in many guises, but when tenderly encouraged, Grief will always unmask. Like me, Grief longs to be known in all Grief’s complexity.

Talk about complex relationships—I was shocked to discover that Grief is married! I would have never guessed that Grief and Love were so closely bound! Now though, I see their marriage makes perfect sense. They complement each other so divinely that sometimes it’s hard to tell them apart. Amid the drama of living, I suspect they often borrow each other’s masks in order to teach my spirit equanimity.

Informed by the growing intimacy of our relationships, my ritual of invocation has become more integrated. No longer do I invite Grief and Love with unique prayers at separate times. I welcome them together, asking that their united and uniting power heal the fragmented places in my emotional and spiritual worlds so that in turn, I may be a healing presence to others.

When I take the hands of patients and look into their faces, I pray their Griefs and Loves be present in those same faces. When I listen to their stories, I pray for my Grief and Love to listen too and to prompt me when the patients’ voices of Grief and Love appear so that together we may honor their presence. Then I give thanks, for this timely and timeless meeting in which soul friends have met, assured that God is present to our communion.

Sometimes, like this morning over breakfast, the memory of someone whom Grief and I have come to know returns to my awareness. What to do with this unbidden guest? Once, I would have found a diversion, turning toward some important busy work and away from whatever blessings of wisdom the memory might bring. Now I am more hospitable and make a place at the table of my thoughts and dreams for this latest holy guest. Then I ask Grief and Love to join us, and I pray holding this memory and the soul from which it emanates with reverent compassion.

Through Grief, I have been given a great treasure. In learning to be more fully present to Grief, I am learning to be more present to Love. As in all other relationships, I am practicing balance, exercising the pastoral art of drawing close without clinging, being with the reality of Grief in ways that are neither neglectful nor obsessive. I have found it helpful to discern between my relationship with another person’s Grief and my reaction to the intensity of its expression. The touchstone that grounds me in this practice is unconditional Love.

As a hospital chaplain, I am schooled in the clinical practices of grief therapy, and I find these skills of great value in the course of my work. But the exercise of clinical skills is not the fulfillment of my vocation. I am called and trained to serve a greater Love, and to love is to grieve. So I devote myself in service to the daemon of Grief, so that through this increasingly hospitable relationship, I may learn more fully the wisdom of Love.
