

Breathing Through Grief

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In a National Public Radio piece on *Charlotte's Web* that aired in July of this year, listeners heard the author, E. B. White, himself, read the passage that described Charlotte's death. We also heard the producer who helped White record that 1970 reading recount that the first sixteen times White read the part, they had to cut. Why? Because he kept choking up with feeling. Seventeen takes for White to successfully read about the death of a spider that he himself made up!

The degree of our emotional attachment to the object of our loss clearly is more important than whether the person or thing is 'real.' If the attachment is real, the loss is really felt. Fictitious characters on screen and in novels can tear at the heart when they die. What's more, the loss of even inanimate objects can hurt if we've become attached to them. A woman I know would trade in her car for a new one each year, but still tear up as she watched the old one driven away for the last time.

Then there is the mass outpouring of grief when a beloved celebrity or statesman is killed. How is it that tens of millions—hundreds of millions?—of us who never met Princess Diana, Martin Luther King, Jr. or John Kennedy grieved at their premature deaths? They had to have held near-mythological status in the public's psyche, and played roles that we had grown attached to. Their disappearance left us feeling diminished. They were our heroes, even our psychic gods and goddesses. Whether the object of our loss, then, is real or make-believe, near or far, seems to be less determinative of grief than our degree of emotional attachment, even if just to the *image* of the deceased. In fact, we can bring on tears of grief simply by imagining the death of a loved one, as actors know. One of the blackest episodes of my life exploded as I lay in bed at the

age of ten or so, when it suddenly dawned on me that Dad and Mom—yes, even they!—would die someday.

Although grief is always triggered by loss of some kind, the specific nature of either is difficult to predict in any particular case. The man who struggled so with that recording had raised pigs on his farm that he himself regularly slaughtered. When his stepson's little daughter sent him an elaborate card pleading with him to spare one of his pigs, he was amused—but slaughtered it as always.

To what extent does emotional attachment itself reflect the degree to which we identify with the object of loss? When I see him, her, or it as *mine* (or ours), I'm more likely to feel the loss. Anecdotal reports suggest that more people than ever these days lapse into grief at the death of their pets. Such grief may be more acutely felt than that evoked by the loss of human acquaintances. The 2,700 people killed in the collapse of the World Trade Center in 2001 provoked genuine grief in millions of us, whereas far higher single-incident fatalities in other countries leave many of us sympathetic, perhaps, but not truly grieving. In the 9/11 disaster it was 'our' people who perished; though they were not all American citizens, it was on our soil. The astronauts who perished in the explosion of the Challenger were beyond soil altogether, but it was our mission—and undoubtedly our grief more than that of other people's.

No doubt the shocking nature of 9/11 contributed to the 'extreme mental anguish' (the definition of grief offered by *Webster's*) that swept over millions of us. We felt sympathy, or pathos, with all those innocent civilians leveled in that single, terrible day. We felt the emotional devastation that rippled out through their families and friends. But the tsunami that killed an estimated

5,300 people in Thailand didn't have the same emotional impact on most of us. That happened 'there,' not here; it swept away 'them,' not us.

Our national grief after 9/11 arose from not only the loss of so many of our own, but an intangible loss: our sense of special protection. For most of our history we've been bounded—and protected—by two oceans and two friendly countries. Our homeland had never been attacked on such a scale before, and in such a vicious, unexpected way. Gone now was our almost childlike sense of security. Suddenly we were being stalked by a malevolent enemy which had already proven its murderous abilities.

How is grief colored by deaths resulting from intentional killing or negligence? Most of us will never have to endure such anguish through direct experience. But we can imagine it somewhat, having seen all too many TV clips of victims' families venting their fury in the aftermath of the bombing, the shooting, the DWI fatality. It would seem to be easier to rage and blame than to simply suffer the grief. Expressing strong anger can actually feel good; it gives us a sense of being in control at a time when the world may seem in chaos. It is certainly a natural enough reaction to murder or manslaughter. But it will not bring the survivors to terms with their loss.

To fully experience grief is wrenching. So we find ways to draw our attention away from it. With anger the focus is diverted to an 'other.' But other's twin-thought, 'self,' also serves to deflect the mind from the direct experience of grief. Thus, self-pity, a kind of near-enemy of grief, also impedes the grieving process. It's true that financial and other practical concerns often do arise following a major loss and must be worked with. But to dwell in self-pity is to avoid the essential process of grieving—facing the Void.

As common as it may be to lapse into blaming and self-pity in the wake of death, the most usual way to find the mind called away from the full experience of grief is simply by having to manage the immediate arrangements that follow the death of a loved one. These ordinary

demands become especially consuming when the death is unexpected. Suddenly there are family members, friends, and others to notify; an obituary to write and file; arrangements to make for the wake, funeral, and burial or cremation; flights to book; papers to file—and all of this in the first week or two. Just when the grief is most intense—and most accessible—we must handle a blizzard of pressing details. How do these practical demands affect the grieving process?

Many years ago, while *en route* to conduct a sesshin in Sweden, I took a side trip to visit a very dear old friend at his farm in Maine. We'd not seen each other in several years and spent the evening merrily catching up. The next morning he suddenly dropped dead of a heart attack. He had been suffering with advanced diabetes, but his death was a shock to us all. His wife was too distraught (and his children too young) to handle the burial arrangements, so this and other paperwork fell to me. My own grief had to be parked while I spent several hours making phone calls and running errands as well as consoling his family. In fact, this having been my first experience of major loss, I wasn't aware of what was to come. But once these arrangements were all tied up, the anguish of having lost Norris forever swept over me. The floodgates opened and remained open as I sat into the night at his freshly-dug grave, under an apple tree in the field behind his house.

Openness may be the very essence of true grief—its precondition as well as its effect. In grieving we're *at a loss*, literally. Stripped of our armor. And when the death of a loved one comes unexpectedly, it is even more likely to leave us stunned. Facing this void, most of us find ways to a-void. Nature abhors a vacuum, and so in grieving do most of us. Compulsive behaviors serve well to fill the void: overeating, drinking, overworking, shopping, web-surfing and TV viewing. Other survivors evade the terrible ache of loss by grasping at what they take as signs of the loved one's survival beyond death. A man suddenly dies of a heart attack, and a year later his wife, having never truly grieved, is still find-



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ing fresh signs from him in the shape of hearts. Giddily she shows friends the ‘proof’: photos of hearts that have appeared, miraculously, in the most chance places: a blob of candle wax, a bit of scrambled eggs, a mark in the snow. As long as she believes her husband is signaling her, she can avoid the anguish of letting him go.

Experiencing grief fully may present unsettling new perspectives. After her mother’s death, a woman comes to realize that she is also grieving the lost chance of her mother ever becoming the mother she always wanted. Even more, reaching the depths of grief may lead us into questions never before faced, such as ‘Where am I going in life?’ ‘What have I been doing my whole life?’ and ‘What is the point of my life?’ Such questions are charged with the power to open the doors to the cosmos, but without an introspective practice they are more likely to sink beneath awareness again, drowned in the waves of our culture of distraction.

Probably no two people grieve in quite the same way. Since each of us brings our unique history and temperament to the experience of loss, our grief will unfold in its own way and

at its own pace. The full emotional impact of Roshi Kapleau’s death didn’t hit me until we were in the hearse together *en route* to his burial at Chapin Mill. Some survivors hold on to the belongings of their loved ones for years. At the other extreme, only eight hours after my father unexpectedly died, my mother, grief-stricken, went through his closets, removed most of his clothes, and boxed them up to give to charity. Later that morning my sister who lived nearby was found at the back wall of their yard digging out the weeds she had been promising him for months she would tear out. Better late than never. Seeing her swinging the pickaxe over her head, mourning in motion, I was reminded of a scene from koan number 55 in the Blue Cliff Record, ‘Dogo’s “I Won’t Say.”’ The monk Zengen came to enlightenment after his teacher Dogo died, and then one day, carrying a hoe,

... he went to the Lecture Hall and crossed back and forth, from east to west and west to east, as if he were searching for something. Sekiso said, ‘What are you doing?’ Zengen said, ‘I am looking for the relics of our late master.’ A moment later he noted, ‘It is a way of acquiring strength.’



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The grieving process is much like that of birthing, or practice itself: it unfolds in accordance with forces unknowable to us—and largely outside our conscious control. The woman who went on and on finding hearts from her deceased husband was responding to her loss exactly as she needed to. As in Zen practice itself, each of us handles loss the very best we can, given our particular karmic freight at that time.

Although ultimately there is no ‘wrong’ way to grieve, the process can follow either a more or less effective course, as reflected in our ability to absorb the loss, assimilate it, and move on. We weather the storms of grief best by neither clinging to it nor rushing through it. Human beings throughout history have had funerals, memorial services, wakes, and other rituals that give expression to grief and ennoble it. Yet increasingly grief is regarded as a private indignity to be avoided. Funerals are called celebrations, with closure the goal, the sooner the better. Poet Sandra Gilbert observes, ‘Just as we’ve relegated the dying to the social margins (hospitals, nursing homes, hospices), so too we’ve sequestered

death’s twins—grief and mourning—because they all too often constitute unnerving, in some cases indeed embarrassing reminders of the death whose ugly materiality we not only want to hide but also seek to flee.’ Now we have cybermourning, with websites like the popular World Wide Cemetery offering us another way to distance ourselves from the messy work of grieving. But the more we turn away from the raw, real experience of grief, the more we deny life itself. Grieving is just a part of living.

How, then, do we fully *live* our grief? By *being* it, not fleeing it. When confronted by the anguish of loss, however, our flight reflex is so strong, and of so many subtle varieties, that a practice is required to stay with the experience itself, unmediated by thoughts and other diversions. For this, nothing surpasses *zazen*.

It may be daunting to simply sit with our grief, alone with ourselves, unable to dodge the pain. But it could be the very best way to liberate ourselves from the loss—and the suffering. In sitting in pure presence with the grief, we are embodying the Self-nature that is beyond life-and-death.

‘Sitting’ here really means being one with, while refraining from dwelling in, thought-forms. As such, it need not be limited to the zazen posture. But if we know how to do zazen, in this upright posture, limbs drawn together, we stand the best chance of living the grief in complete awareness.

Zazen has been called the very practice of losing. In doing it every day we are steadily losing what is non-essential to our life, that which hinders the free flow of living-dying-grieving-growing. Sesshin, then, offers what may be the ultimate vehicle for healing after loss. Sitting in strict silence with others for ten or more hours a day can work wonders to help us grieve and move beyond the loss cleanly and thoroughly.

Through zazen we can find relief from even the worst calamities. Some years ago I was told of an appalling series of losses suffered by a member of one of our sister centers. Soon after her first sesshin her father was diagnosed with terminal cancer and died within a few weeks. Before dying, though, he told her, ‘My greatest regret in life is not having become a monk.’ She took this personally, as a lament that he’d wasted his life by having children. After he died she went to sesshin again, this time depressed. After sesshin she went abroad on a dream vacation with her husband to get over the loss of her father, but had to return almost immediately because of the sudden death of her brother in a car accident. A few weeks later her husband suddenly left her for another woman. Despondent again, she was beset with a number of debilitating physical problems that took her to a chiropractor—who tried to rape her. Again she went to sesshin. Afterward she was found to have an ovarian tumor (which when operated on was found to be benign). Despite having been battered by this

cascade of misfortunes, she later reported ‘feeling happy for every day of my life and eternally grateful for every moment.’ It’s hard to believe that the sesshins she attended that interspersed those grievous events didn’t help spare her the disastrous toll they might otherwise have taken on her emotional and spiritual well-being.

We never know exactly what life will bring us, except that it is certain to include loss and grief at times. Surely there is no better way of inoculating ourselves against these travails than a daily practice of zazen—the practice of letting go. Milarepa, one of the most illustrious of the Tibetan Buddhist sages, spoke from deep insight when he said:

All worldly pursuits have but one unavoidable and inevitable end, which is sorrow. Acquisitions end in dispersion. Buildings end in destruction. Meetings in separation. Births in death. Knowing this, one should from the very first renounce acquisition and heaping up and building and meeting, and, faithful to an eminent guru, set about realizing the truth which hath no birth or death.

For us who are not monks, this means applying ourselves to the practice of full presence in our daily lives. While sitting we can find this complete in the breath itself: coming, going, in, out—and behind it all, what? Loss, too, comes, then goes, as does grief, usually in waves. It is for us to get out of the way of this timeless rhythm, and in doing so, recognize this as the very nature of things, perfect just as it is.

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