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Losses Along the Way: The Role of Grief in Our Spiritual Journey

VIRGIL FRY

The journey of faith is tenuous and unpredictable, and sometimes along the way we encounter painful losses. When we experience loss, something dies. When we categorize loss and its accompanying grief, we think in terms of death. And so we should. For the economy of growth is totally dependent upon the debit of something dying. Decaying matter forms the nurture for new life, new beings. For the phoenix to rise from the ashes, a fire must first consume that which is.

“AND ABRAM JOURNEYED ON BY STAGES TOWARD THE NEGEB.” (GEN 12:9)

When we're asked to move on spiritually, we experience intense pain in letting go—particularly letting go of precious treasures. We are, by created order, a people who identify ourselves by those things, those people, and those places that mark our journey. Abram and Sarai began their new journey with no road map. They exchanged the security of the known for the promised unknown. As they “journeyed on by stages,” the road was filled with scary, painful detours, and the end was not always in sight. Most certainly, they experienced a level of grief in letting go of their tangible, secure lifestyle in Ur for a nebulous, far-in-the-distance promise.

Leaving precious cargo behind may be one of the best symbols of faithfulness. At times, we are forced to give up things, roles, or people. Destruction breaks through as an unwelcome intruder, forcing us to face loss. At other times, we choose to let go of some unhealthy items or relationships that weigh us down as we engage in spiritual and emotional housecleaning. Yet memories of that which was discarded remain, retained within our psyches.

The emotional issue associated with loss is this: it hurts to give up precious cargo. We struggle mightily to process the reality of a loss when it occurs. We vacillate through stages of denial, anger, bargaining, disappointment, and guilt. We cry, withdraw, pray, erupt, question, regroup, cling, and grieve. We seek to return to anything that seems like “normal living,” and wonder if our lives will ever approach normalcy again.

The experience of losing, whether forced upon us or not, is called transition. In order to change, to see things in a new light, to enjoy new life, we must go through the process of accepting the new by grieving for the old. And grief cries out for companionship, for God's tangible presence, for someone to help lessen the pain.

On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away; and likewise anyone in the field must not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it. (Luke 17:31–33)



Jesus spoke much about change. He encountered resistant people who wanted life's status quo left alone. He reached out in word and deed to those who were mourning losses, those who were unable to sense healing in their grief. He spoke of the futility of pouring new wine into old wineskins. He reassured those who left the security of home to follow a renegade teacher. He chastised those who refused to accept changes that had been prophesied through the sacred word for centuries. He reminded disciples that, like Lot's wife, looking back with longing exacts a costly price on the present and future.

Jesus was moved, often to tears, by the plights of those the world called "losers." And he provided a caring touch, a healing word, and a loving embrace to those who would receive it. He consciously chose to enter the pain of ultimate loss—giving up his body so that resurrection's story could forever change the way the world experiences change.

But it didn't come easily. Easter Sunday's triumphalism cannot be hailed without counting the cost of the previous Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Gethsemane and Calvary were excruciating, painful moments for Jesus, for his followers, and for his family. Equally debilitating were the subsequent days of seeming defeat when his body lay in a borrowed tomb. "Pain is a tragedy. But it's never only a tragedy. For the Christian, it's always a necessary mile on the long journey to joy."¹

So let's get practical. It is here that the issue of seeing our own struggle with death (death of the body or death of our role identity) becomes problematic. In the fellowship of other Christians, we often find it impossible to address our inner turmoil concerning the dread of transition. If a congregation's worship emphasizes praise, those who are struggling with loss and grief can feel out of step and very lonely. On occasion, we need to hear readings from the lamenting Psalms, from Jeremiah's grief dialogues, from the despondent tone of Ecclesiastes, from Gethsemane's prayer of angst, or from Paul's un-removed thorn in the flesh.

I remember my affliction and my wandering, the bitterness and the gall. I well remember them, and my soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope. Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness. (Lam 3:19–23, RSV)

The truth is, every worshiper in an assembly is dealing with loss on some level. And every worshiper needs to hear that the Bible is far from silent on this issue. In fact, it is highly significant to acknowledge that the Christian faith's central symbol is the juxtaposition of a cross and an empty grave.

Of all entities, the church as a corporate body must claim its healing role in letting its members acknowledge the intense pain of losing precious treasures, of feeling disappointment with God not responding to our hopes, dreams, and felt needs. And the church must proclaim that the tumult of dealing with loss is not the same as being unfaithful. As one writer says:

Unbelief is something very different from doubt. Unbelief is an attribute of the will and consists in a person's refusal to believe, that is, refusal to see one's own need, acknowledge one's helplessness, go to Jesus and speak candidly and confidently with him about one's sin and one's distress.

Doubt, on the other hand, is anguish, a pain, a weakness, which at times affects our faith. We could call it faith-distress, faith-anguish, faith-suffering. Such faith-illness can be more or less painful and more or less protracted, like all other ailments. But if we can begin to look upon it as suffering which has been laid upon us, it will lose its sting of distress and confusion.

Faith-suffering is not as dangerous as we feel that it is. It is not harmful to faith nor to prayer. It does serve to render us helpless, and nothing so furthers our prayer life as the feeling of our own helplessness.²

A few years ago, I was called into the intensive care unit to minister to a young couple in their 30s. As a chaplain, I had journeyed with them through the wife's experimental treatment protocol, a treatment that failed to reverse her fast-growing cancer. Ultimately, Brenda was placed on a respirator at the doctor's request until it became evident that she no longer had any reasonable hope of regaining breathing functions on her own. As I entered the ICU, the husband and his immediate family were facing the ethical dilemma: do we remove Brenda from the respirator; or do we hope against hope that she'll rebound if she's given more time on the machine?

They asked me about the theological implications of such a decision—would it be second-guessing God to choose either option? We spoke quietly, reverently to each other, to the medical staff, and to the Lord. Gary then declared, "When she began this treatment, we discussed extraordinary life support. We'll do now what Brenda requested then—we'll not prolong her current existence any longer."

And so the difficult decision was enacted. The family gathered around Brenda's bed, and Gary gently but firmly told the unconscious Brenda what was about to transpire, that the medical machinery was soon to be unhooked from her body. He asked me to pray with them, and I also read the 23rd Psalm. At that point, the medical staff began methodically to disconnect the various machines. They then told Gary it would only be a few minutes until Brenda's breathing ceased.

The next few minutes moved like a time-warp scene from a movie. She slowly began to cease breathing; subsequently, her heart rate also began a rapid slowdown. Gary knelt beside the bed, placed his head and hands on her arm, and cried out, "I love you Brenda. It's okay. Go be with God." The transition from life to death occurred right before our eyes. The family's emotions of loss were raw; and yet, a certain sacredness of the transformation permeated the room. Gary had wrestled with losing his wife, had questioned God's role in that loss, and had arrived at a place where he could finally say, "You can go . . . it'll be okay."

To lose that which is most precious—that's what we're called to do in our daily living. Some of the losses are rather trivial. Some are so deep and wrenching that words fail to describe them adequately.

Loss and its accompanying grief is a theme of people of faith. Our vocation includes leaving, letting go, joining others going through loss, and calling out to God. We are called as Christians to enter, not avoid, the realm of pain and loss. And we can be certain that the God who knows loss continues to mold us, joining us as a faithful companion on our spiritual journey.

A Prayer of Grief

Lord God, hear my prayer.
My struggle, as You know,
is with loss.
Through death, I've lost
a significant part of me.
I'm left here wondering,
striving to pick up the pieces
weary
of the task.

Like a bird whose nest has been robbed,
I feel lost, alone
and purposeless.

Some days, I'm better—
energized, feeling alive,
ready to engage life.

Other days, I regress—
despondent, feeling lonely,
laden with sorrow.

I'm told to get out more, to snap out of it,
to move on
to quit hurting.
And I wish I could. But this work
of grieving takes time,
for my life is slowly taking
new shape, new directions
and such a process, like birth,
takes time, and the kind
assistance of others, and You.

Lord, I appreciate the memories,
those private, sacred treasures
that bring me tears and laughter.
I thank You for Your Word,
replete with stories of other grievers,
and comforting phrases
of Your love.
I praise You for those special friends
who give me space to hurt,
who ask me to recall precious stories,
who refuse to let me despair alone.

Such gifts, Lord, keep me going,
and remind me
that tomorrow, like yesterday and today,
is in Your capable, caring hands.

Lord God, hear my prayer.³

VIRGIL FRY

Dr. Fry, guest editor of this issue, is Executive Director of Lifeline Chaplaincy, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing caring support to patients at the Texas Medical Center in Houston, Texas.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Larry Crabb, *Shattered Dreams: God's Unexpected Pathway to Joy* (Colorado Springs: Waterbrook Press, 2001), 4.
- 2 O. Hallesby, *Prayer* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishing House, 1994).
- 3 Virgil Fry, et al., *Accepting Bereavement: The Healing Process of Grief* (Nashville: 21st Century Christian, 2000), 12.

