

## **APRIL 16**

I apologize for missing the last two days of notes. I seem to be having technical difficulties. I trust this message will get through.

A week or so before Easter I came across several articles in which the authors observed that many people may be feeling sad or anxious, even depressed these days without any obvious reason (like having a risky job or life situation these days, as so many face) due to the covid-19 pandemic.

What they were suggesting is that for all the obvious circumstances that have overtaken many of us— like someone dying, or losing one's job or investments, or having plans and dreams be cut off—what many people are feeling is grief. They've had a terrible, disruptive event in their lives, and they're in the middle of dealing with all the feelings and circumstances such losses involve.

But, these authors went on to say, we've all suffered losses in these trying times. Only a partial list of losses includes weddings, trips, special events, graduations, championship contests, even family gatherings and religious observances, and so what virtually everyone is feeling on some level is grief. Think about the myriad ways your life has changed, some things are small, others huge. Some stuff we're dealing with is inconvenient, but ultimately not very important; other things are just awful and may not be fixable.

I suspect at least one person reading this is thinking, "Thank you for your thoughts, Captain Obvious". Of course we're grieving: we're angry, depressed, anxious, and generally feeling lower than a snake's belly because our lives are blown up and it is not at all certain how much can be put back together. Small and large disruptions are marking us—will we ever again take access to household cleaning products and paper goods for granted? Will we ever feel at ease in a crowd?

How will we adjust to serious damage to our lives? Particularly poignant are the stories of things that can't be recaptured—opportunities lost for athletes who have limited time to achieve their goals, births and deaths, life milestones not marked as we hoped to do.

And all of this is magnified for those who care for the sick and dying.

Things are not going to be the same when this crisis passes—which will take time; it will ebb and flow, diminish and return tidal fashion until we have vaccines and other treatments for those who fall ill.

So, what do we do?

As I've said before, delving into our history helps. History is not dry old stuff in books, it is our past and we can learn from it, be reassured and inspired by it, draw hope from it

as we look to the future and prepare to roll up our sleeves in the face of whatever is ahead.

We can also find the good in our grief.

1) We can honestly identify our feelings and not be cut off from them. Emotional numbness has its value and its uses to cushion us a bit and for a time from the full impact of a loss, but denial (not just a river in Egypt) is not really a source of health and hope. It is more a freezing of the soul, a crimp in the spirit.

Sometimes we say we're not certain what we feel and that confusion doesn't help us get along either. I think we would agree that knowing ourselves is better than not knowing, being honest and letting ourselves feel what we feel is better than damming things up or pretending the feelings aren't there.

What may help here is reading, praying, meditating, or just thinking about psalm 139:1-12—it is a call out for help, made in need but with a certain amount of trust, a request made for guidance in understanding ourselves and our situation:

“O Lord, you have searched me out and known me, you know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thoughts from afar. You comprehend my going out and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways...if I ascend into heaven you are there, if I make my bed in hell you are with me; if I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand will hold me fast...search me, O God, and know my heart...lead me in the way everlasting.”

2) We can acknowledge that life is fragile and unpredictable, not settled and sure, which is precisely what makes it precious and gives value to relationships and accomplishments. We often say that we don't miss what we don't know, but the opposite is worth paying attention to also: we do well to treasure what we have and not take it for granted. Here, Psalm 90:12 can be of use: “Teach us to number our days and apply our hearts to wisdom”. Grief brings this home to us and our memories become more than recollection, but pathways to understanding and appreciation.

3) Grief can teach us much about being humble, if we are willing to learn. What happens here is that we face our confused notions of being “in control”. We may steer our own canoe, but along with everyone else, we ride on a great river which we do not manage. The lesson here is not so much about our power as our perspective. Just because we're in rapids doesn't mean all the others are, and we may not know what they're dealing with. Moreover, they have their canoe to steer and they don't work for us. We can help and be helped, lead, contribute, receive and be appreciated, but it is all part of learning how we're all making our way and how much who we are and what we have is dependent upon our relationships and circumstances. All of our life, of course, is a gift in the first place. And while our life did not come with an instruction manual, we can turn to the source of life for help and guidance. Psalm 25:4 and following says it

well, "Show me your pathways, O Lord, and guide my feet; lead me in your truth and teach me..."

4) Another good we can take from grief is valuing ourselves as just that: persons of unique worth, never before seen and no future copies possible, and holding onto that when things seem uncertain. We can say this to ourselves and at the same time admit that we aren't always entirely sure about who we are or what we're doing or why we do it. Not being certain of ourselves or what our future holds is often very disquieting and uncomfortable. Psalm 121 helps me: "I lift up my eyes to the hills. From where shall my help come? My help comes from the Lord, the maker of heaven and earth. He will not permit your foot to stumble, the Lord will not sleep.. He will watch over your going out and your coming in...". Along with this bedrock assurance we may set another idea.

The great black singer Ethel Waters is generally credited with the aphorism, "God don't make junk", which is a pithy summary of Psalm 139:14, (mentioned above) which one translation expresses this way, "Thank you for making me so wonderfully complex, your workmanship is marvelous—how well I know it" (new Living Translation). The point here is that unimaginably huge though the canvass of the cosmos is on which God is at work, we are not a blot or a dust mote, but a part of the great creation.

5) And yet another good from grief is appreciation and gratitude and hope we can use to live into the different future before us. We can carry on, shaped and even encouraged by what we have experienced and learned, and recognize our resilience and strength in the face of experience. We may move on to think about how we can incorporate our loss and grief into living on. Even deeper, we can ask with the psalmist in Psalm 8:4 "Lord, who are we human beings to you that you are mindful of us?"

If we have been blessed to live and to move into and through our grief to a place where we begin to ask, what shall I make of this loss, what can I do with my grief to give it some use and meaning beyond simply enduring it—what might I be able to contribute to others, and how can I find a way to be glad in life again? This is the point at which we may begin to see with the psalmist in psalm 16, "Thou art my portion and my cup...thou shalt show me the path of life, and at thy right hand are pleasures forever more."

I've rattled on for a goodly while here, so I shall stop. Let me encourage you all to keep on calling and checking in on each other. This is when things really start to get tough. The days drag on and we feel impatient. Fear not, better days are coming, and they'll be sweeter for our being able to rejoice that we passed through these times together.