

“The Transformative Power of Grief”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno  
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“Funeral Blues” W. H. Auden

Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,  
Silence the pianos and with muffled drum  
Bring out the coffin, let the mourners come.

Let aeroplanes circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,  
Put crepe bows round the white necks of the public doves,  
Let the traffic policemen wear black cotton gloves.

He was my North, my South, my East and West,  
My working week and my Sunday rest,  
My noon, my midnight, my talk, my song;  
I thought that love would last forever: I was wrong.

The stars are not wanted now: put out every one;  
Pack up the moon and dismantle the sun;  
Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.

.....

Fans of the movie “Four Weddings and a Funeral” will recognize this poem of lamentation. It was read to heartbreaking effect at the funeral named in the movie’s title and is a spot-on description of grief in the immediate aftermath of death. We see the mourners and imagine ourselves among them, practically pouring ashes over our heads, tearing our clothes to tatters. For that’s what we desire in our raw and inarticulate grief. We want lamentation as dramatic as the grief itself. We want to ...

*Stop all the clocks, cut off the telephone,  
Prevent the dog from barking with a juicy bone,*

*We want ... aeroplanes [to] circle moaning overhead  
Scribbling on the sky the message He Is Dead,*

It is perfect in its explosive cathartics, which is why we love the funeral scene in the movie.

*"Where has this poem been all my life?"* I wondered.

But then there's this: although it is perfect in death's immediate aftermath, in life's long run, this poem is total malarkey. Had I been the vicar at that British funeral, I would've coaxed dear Matthew to share a different poem because finally, it comes off the beam in the last two lines:

*Pour away the ocean and sweep up the wood.  
For nothing now can ever come to any good.*

Yikes.

If grief is mindfully integrated into our hearts, minds, and spirits, there is much good that comes of it. Unlike this poem, good grief doesn't end with a thud. We learn how to carry on and make meaning of our loss. We find beauty in sorrow.

Grief is a process of becoming and "Funeral Blues" lays bare the first part of that process that arcs finally to transformation. There have been wise people who have named many stages of grief – you have heard about Elizabeth Kubler Ross' model: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

But there is one stage rarely named but known by the heartbroken. It begins about a week after the memorial service after everyone else has returned to their lives. Let's call it the "What am I supposed to do now?" stage. The "What am I supposed to do now?" stage is faced by those who were in closest proximity to the deceased:

The widow.

    The widower.

        The fatherless child.

            The motherless child.

                The childless mother.

                    The childless father.

                        The best friend.

The ones most deeply shattered.

Yet this stage is not directly about us rather it is deeply influenced by everyone around us - those who care for us but who also don't know how to manage our grief.

As if grief can be managed.

Reynolds Price was a writer who was struck with a rare form of spinal cancer that left him paralyzed. In an interview he said the following:

When you undergo huge traumas in middle life, everybody is in league with us to deny that the old life has ended. Everybody is trying to patch us up and get us back to who we were, when in fact what we need to be told is, "You're dead. Who are you going to be tomorrow?" ("Oxford Review")

There it is. Your loved one has died. And then the most peculiar thing happens. In the midst of our "becoming" the people around us, those we love dearly and most, they get a little nervous. A little panicked. Didn't you detect the distinct scent of panic after you had the miscarriage or when your spouse or your child or your sibling or best friend was dying or died? It was panic that was tinged with sympathy but it was panic nevertheless as your loved ones searched for the you they knew before this thing took hold.

How might that experience have been different for you if instead, their response was something more practical and brave? How might it have been different if instead they placed their hands on your shoulders, locked you in their steady gaze and with great love and care and said, "Oh honey, I'm here to tell you; *you're dead*. But I'll be here to see who you are going to be tomorrow."

Or conversely, maybe it was you standing outside the tomb ... the rock rolled away ... your loved one having sustained deep loss and now grieving. Remember your own panic as you searched for the living among the dead. Remember your fear of your friend's transformation - an inevitable transformation that followed the trauma they suffered, their old self but a ghost.

Grief cannot be managed to ensure a particular outcome. Not our own and certainly we cannot manage - it even sounds absurd to say it out

loud – we cannot manage another person's grief in our desperate hope that they will emerge unchanged by grief's seismic jolt.

The newly laid and still shaky foundation upon which I walked was a mix of panic and helplessness. From this vulnerable stance I thought I could help my friend recover his old self from the rubble.

The love of his life died in the manner that so many young gay men of his time died: shrouded in secrecy.

The day before the wake, his mother said:

*"We're saying it was lung cancer ... and so should the two of you. The photo on the coffin will be one of him smoking. It was lung cancer."*

Desperate, she hoped that this lie would throw the well wishers off the strong scent of AIDS.

The next day, at the funeral, he, the widower without title and certainly without rank, was relegated to the way back of the cavernous Catholic church from where he watched the coffin roll by and way up the aisle to the altar.

And I, the best friend, began to panic:

*"Who will he be in the wake of this devastation?  
How can I bring him back from this harrowing sorrow?"*

As though that was possible.

It was not. The person I knew and loved was also dead, really. He was never the same. Someone new rose up from grief's ashes. Transformed, that person was pretty fabulous himself, but new.

And still, when something terrible happens to the people I love, I feel myself grieving for the loss of the person I knew. I grieve in the definitive certainty that forever more, there will always be a deep sadness. But now, blessedly, I also know that that's okay. Sadness is integrated and meaning made. Their grief and my own are both okay.

I finally learned. There is no more powerful a teacher than grief.

We learn to say, "Honey, I'm here to tell you. You're dead. I wonder who you'll be tomorrow?"

We learn about humility. That no good person is immune to bad things happening.

We learn about sympathy. We do our best when we lead with empathy but if we are honest, sympathy, having been through it ourselves, is a more effective balm to those we love or serve.

We learn what to say in the face of death. More importantly we learn that really, there's not a lot we need to say. That we show up is enough.

We learn that grief is universal and that every one's experience is unique.

We learn that we need not hold it together at the memorial service. That lamentation in community brings release and peace. We learn that ritual is a container for our collective grief and so we light candles of remembrance.

We learn to mark anniversaries. To remember the initial shock and with each passing year it is never easier but our love grows deeper and so does our strength.

And we wonder, "Where has this strength come from?"

The molecules of our souls have been rearranged and we are surprised by who we have become. Stronger. More sympathetic. More patient, practical, and compassionate.

The 7<sup>th</sup> stage of grief, Dr. Kubler Ross, is transformation.

I leave you with this poem fragment for it is wise, true and reliable.

*"Recipe for grief  
Fold laughter into sorrow  
Make a grief soufflé"* Mary Havren.

Grief mixed with all that you are creates a remarkable you.

Who will you be tomorrow?

Blessed be.

