

Drinking the Tears of the World: Grief as Deep Activism

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by Francis Weller

I have written often of the value and importance of grief. In the context of this section on resistance, I would like to amplify the essential importance of this often-neglected emotion and situate it squarely in the heart of our capabilities to respond to the challenges of our times.

Denise Levertov has a brief, but illuminating poem about grief. She says,

To speak of sorrow
works upon it
moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall.

It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss, when left unattended, that block our access to the soul. To be able to freely move in and out of the soul's inner chambers, we must first clear the way. This requires finding meaningful ways to speak of sorrow.

The territory of grief is heavy. Even the word carries weight. Grief comes from the Latin, *gravis*, meaning, heavy, from which we get gravity. We use the term *gravitas* to speak of a quality in some people who carry the weight of the world with a dignified bearing. And so it is, when we learn to accompany our grief with dignity.

Freeman House, in his elegant book, *Totem Salmon*, shared, "In one ancient language, the word memory derives from a word meaning mindful, in another from a word to describe a witness, in yet another it means, at root, to grieve. To witness mindfully, is to grieve for what has been lost." That is the intent and soul purpose of grief.

No one escapes suffering in this life. None of us is exempt from loss, pain, illness and death. Yet, how is it that we have so little understanding of these essential experiences? How is it we have attempted to keep grief separated from our lives and only begrudgingly acknowledge its presence in the most obvious of times? "If sequestered pain made a sound," Stephen Levine suggests, "the atmosphere would be humming all the time."

It feels somewhat daunting to step off into the depths of grief and suffering, yet I don't know of any more appropriate way to continue our journey of reclaiming the indigenous soul than by spending time at the grief shrine. Without some measure of intimacy with grief, our capacity to be with any other emotion or experience in our life is greatly compromised.

Coming to trust this descent into the dark waters is not easy. Yet without this passageway being successfully transited, we lack the tempering that comes only from such a dropping. What do we find there? Darkness, moistness that turns our eyes wet and our faces into streams. We find the bodies of forgotten ancestors, ancient remnants of trees and animals, those that have come before and lead us back to where we have come from. This descent is a passage into what we are, creatures of earth.

The Four Gates of Grief

I have come to have a deep faith in grief; have come to see the way its moods call us back to soul. It is in fact, a voice of soul, asking us to face life's most difficult but essential teaching: everything is a gift, and nothing lasts. To realize this truth is to live with a willingness to live on life's terms and not try to deny simply what is. Grief acknowledges that everything we love, we will lose. No

exceptions. Now of course, we want to argue this point, saying we will keep the love in our hearts of our parents, or our spouse, or our children, or friends, or, or, or, and yes, that is true. It is grief however, that allows the heart to stay open to this love, to remember sweetly the ways these people touched our lives. It is when we deny grief's entry into our lives that we begin to compress the breadth of our emotional experience, and live shallowly. This poem from the 12th century, beautifully articulates this lasting truth about the risk to love.

FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DIED

ELEH EZKERAH – These We Remember

'Tis a fearful thing
To love
What death can touch.
To love, to hope, to dream,
And oh, to lose.
A thing for fools, this,
Love,
But a holy thing,
To love what death can touch.

For your life has lived in me;
Your laugh once lifted me;
Your word was a gift to me.

To remember this brings painful joy.

'Tis a human thing, love,
A holy thing,
To love
What death can touch.

*Judah Halevi or
Emanuel of Rome – 12th Century*

This startling poem goes to the very heart of what it is I am saying. It is a holy thing to love what death can touch. To keep it holy however, to keep it accessible, we must become fluent in the language and customs of grief. If we don't, our losses become great weights that drag us down, pulling us below the threshold of life and into the world of death.

Grief says that I dared to love, that I allowed another to enter the very core of my being and find a home in my heart. Grief is akin to praise, as Martin Prechtel reminds us. It is the soul's recounting of the depth to which someone has touched our lives. To love is to accept the rites of grief.

I remember being in New York City less than a month after the towers were destroyed in 2001. My son was going to college there and this tragedy occurred shortly after his first major time away from home. He took me downtown to show me the city and what I saw touched me deeply. Everywhere I went there were grief shrines, flowers adorning pictures of loved ones lost in the destruction. There were circles of people in parks, some silent, others singing. It was clear that the soul had an elemental requirement to do this, to gather and mourn and weep and wail and cry out in pain in order for the healing to begin. On some level we know that this is a requirement when facing loss, but we have forgotten how to walk comfortably with this potent emotion.

There is another place of grief that we hold, a second gateway, different than the losses connected to losing someone or something that we love. This grief occurs in the places never touched by love. These are profoundly tender places precisely because they have lived outside of kindness, compassion, warmth, or welcome. These are the places within us that have been wrapped in shame and banished to the farther shore of our lives. We often hate these parts of ourselves, hold

them with contempt and refuse to allow them the light of day. We do not show these outcast brothers and sisters to anyone and we thereby deny ourselves the healing salve of community.

These neglected pieces of soul live in utter despair. What we feel as defective, we also experience as loss. Whenever any portion of who we are is denied welcome and instead sent into exile, we are creating a condition of loss. The proper response to any loss is grief, but we cannot grieve for something that we feel is outside the circle of worth. That is our predicament, we are chronically sensing the presence of sorrow but we are unable to truly grieve because we feel in our body that this piece of who we are is unworthy of our grieving over. Much of our grief comes from having to crouch and live small, hidden from the gaze of others and in that move we confirm our exile.

I remember one young woman in her early twenties at a grief ritual we were doing in Washington. Over the course of the two days that we worked to turn over our grief and compost those pieces into fertile soil, she continuously cried quietly to herself. I worked with her for some time and heard the lamentations of her worthlessness through gasps and tears. When it was time for the ritual, she rushed the shrine and I could hear her over the drums crying out, "I am worthless, I'm not good enough." And she wept and wept, all in the container of the community, in the presence of witnesses, along side of others deep in the shedding of their grief. When it was over, she shone like a star and she realized how wrong the stories were about these pieces of who she is.

Grief is a powerful solvent, capable of softening the hardest of places in our hearts. To truly weep for ourselves and those places of shame, invites the first soothing waters of healing. Grieving, by its very nature, confirms worth. I am worth crying over: My losses matter. I can still feel the grace that came when I truly allowed myself to grieve all my losses connected to a life filled with shame. Peshya Gerstler beautifully speaks to the compassion of a heart opened by grief.

Finally

Finally on my way to yes
I bump into
All the places
Where I said no
To my life,
All the unintended wounds
The red and purple scars
Those hieroglyphs of pain
Carved into my skin and bones,
Those coded messages
That sent me down
The wrong street
Again and again,
Where I find them,
The old wounds
The old misdirections,
And I lift them
One by one
Close to my heart
And I say
Holy
Holy
Holy

The third gate of grief comes from registering the losses of the world around us. The daily diminishment of species, habitats, cultures, is noted in our psyches whether we know this or not. Much of the grief we carry is not personal, but shared, communal. It is not possible to walk down the street and not feel the collective sorrows of homelessness or the harrowing sorrows of economic insanity. It takes everything we have to deny the sorrows of the world. Pablo Neruda said, "I know the earth, and I am sad." At nearly every grief ritual we have held, people share after

the ritual that they felt an overwhelming sadness for the earth that they hadn't been conscious of before. Walking through the doors of grief brings you into the room of the great grief of the world. Naomi Nye says it so beautifully in her poem, Kindness, "Before you know kindness || as the deepest thing inside, || you must know sorrow || as the other deepest thing. || You must wake up with sorrow. || You must speak to it till your voice || catches the thread of all sorrows || and you see the size of the cloth." The cloth is immense. There we all share the communal cup of loss and in that place find our deep kinship with one another. That is the alchemy of grief, the great and abiding ecology of the sacred once again showing us what the indigenous soul has always known; we are of the earth.

During one ritual we do annually called, Renewing the World, in which we communally address the needs of the earth to be fed and replenished, I experienced the depth of this grief held in our soul for the losses in our world. The ritual lasts three days and we begin with a funeral to acknowledge all that is leaving the world. We build a funeral pyre and then together we name and place onto the fire what it is that we have lost. The first time we did this ritual I was planning on drumming and holding the space for the others. I did an invocation to the sacred and when the last word left my mouth I was pulled to my knees by the weight of my grief for the world. I sobbed and sobbed for each loss named and I knew in my body that each of these losses had been registered by my soul even though I never knew it consciously. For four hours we shared this space together and then we ended in silence acknowledging the deep losses in our world.

There is one more gate to grief, one difficult to name, yet it is very present in each of our lives. This entry into sorrow calls forward the background echo of losses that we may never even know to acknowledge. I wrote earlier about the expectations coded into our physical and psychic lives. We anticipated a certain quality of welcome, engagement, touch, reflection, in short, we expected what our deep time ancestors experienced, namely the village. We expected a rich and sensuous relationship with the earth, communal rituals of celebration, grief and healing that kept us in connection with the sacred. The absence of these requirements haunts us and we feel it as an ache, a sadness that settles over us as if in a fog.

How do we even know to miss these experiences? I don't know how to answer that question. What I do know is that when granted to an individual, the aftermath often includes grief; some wave of recognition rises and the awareness dawns that I have lived without this all my life. This realization calls forth grief. I have seen this time and time again.

A young man of 25 recently participated in one of our annual gatherings for men. He came filled with the bravado of youth covering his tracks of suffering and pain with a multitude of strategies. What lingered beneath these tired patterns was his hunger to be seen, known and welcomed. He wept the most wrenching tears upon being called brother by one of the men. He shared later he considered joining a monastery so he could hear that word spoken to him by another man.

During our time together we held a grief ritual. Every man there, save this young man, had experienced this ritual before. Seeing these men dropping to their knees in grief broke him open. He wept and wept, falling to his knees and then slowly he began to welcome men back from the grief shrine and felt his place in the village solidify. He was home. He later whispered to me, "I have been waiting for this all my life."

He recognized that he needed this circle; that his soul required the singing, the poetry, the touching. Every piece of these primary satisfactions helped to restore his being. He had his beginning in the new life.

The ability of grief to act as a solvent is critical in these times when the rhetoric of fear saturates the airways. It is difficult to resist the temptation to retract and close down the heart to the world. What then? What becomes of our concern and our outrage for the way things are going? Too often we go numb, covering our sorrows with any number of distractions from television to shopping to busyness. The daily portrayals of death and loss are overwhelming, and the heart, unable to set any of them down, goes into seclusion: And wisely so. Without the protection of the community,

grief cannot be fully released. The stories above of the young woman and the young man illustrate an essential teaching in relation to the releasing of grief.

To fully release the grief we carry, two things are required: containment and release. In the absence of genuine community, the container is nowhere to be found and by default we become the container and cannot drop into the space in which we can fully let go of the sorrows we carry. In this situation we recycle our grief, moving into it and then pulling back into our bodies unreleased. Grief has NEVER been private; it has always been communal. We often are awaiting the others so we can drop into the holy grounds of sorrow not even knowing that we are doing so.

It is grief, our sorrow that wets the hardened places within us, allowing them to open again and freeing us to once again feel our kinship with the world. This is deep activism, soul activism that actually encourages us to connect with the tears of the world. Grief is capable of keeping the edges of the heart pliable, flexible, fluid and open to the world and as such becomes a potent support for any form of activism we may intend to take.

Pushing Through Solid Rock

Many of us face challenges however, when we approach grief. The most noted obstacle perhaps, is that we live in a flatline culture, one that avoids the depths of emotions. Consequently, those feelings that rumble deep in our souls as grief get congested there, rarely finding a positive expression such as through a grief ritual. Our twenty-four hour a day culture keeps the presence of grief shunted to the background as we stand in the brightly lit areas of what is familiar and comfortable. As Rilke said in his moving grief poem written over one hundred years ago,

It's possible I am pushing through solid rock
in flintlike layers, as the ore lies, alone;
I am such a long way in I see no way through,
and no space: everything is close to my face,
and everything close to my face is stone.

I don't have much knowledge yet in grief--
so this massive darkness makes me small.
You be the master: make yourself fierce, break in: then your great transforming will happen to me,
and my great grief cry will happen to you.

Not much has changed in the intervening century. We still do not have much knowledge in grief.

Our collective denial of our underlying emotional life has contributed to an array of troubles and symptoms. What is often diagnosed as depression is actually low-grade chronic grief locked into the psyche complete with all the ancillary ingredients of shame and despair. Martin Prechtel calls this the "gray sky" culture, in that we do not choose to live an exuberant life, filled with the wonder of the world, the beauty of day to day existence or welcome the sorrow that comes with the inevitable losses that accompany us on our walk through our time here. This refusal to enter the depths has consequently shrunk the visible horizon for many of us, dimmed our enthusiastic participation in the joys and sorrows of the world.

There are other factors at work that obscure the free and unfettered expression of grief. I wrote earlier how we are conditioned deeply in the western psyche by the notion of private pain. This ingredient predisposes us to maintaining a lock on our grief, shackling it into the smallest concealed place in our soul. In our solitude, we are deprived of the very things we require to stay emotionally vital: community, ritual, nature, compassion, reflection, beauty and love. Private pain is a legacy of individualism. In this narrow story the soul is imprisoned and forced into a fiction that severs its kinship with the earth, with sensuous reality and the myriad wonders of the world. This itself is a source of grief for many of us.

Another facet of our aversion to grief is fear. I have heard hundreds of times in my practice as a therapist, how fearful people are of dropping into the well of grief. The most frequent comment is "If I go there, I'll never return." What I found myself saying to this was rather surprising. "If you don't

go there, you'll never return." It seems that our wholesale abandonment of this core emotion has cost us dearly, pressed us towards the surface where we live superficial lives and feel the gnawing ache of something missing. Our return to the richly textured life of soul and the soul of the world must pass through the intense region of grief and sorrow.

Perhaps the most salient obstacle is the lack of collective practices for the releasing of grief. Unlike most traditional cultures where grief is a regular guest in the community, we have somehow been able to cloister grief and sanitize it from the gut wrenching and heart-breaking event that it is. Attend a funeral and witness how flat the event has become.

Grief has always been communal and has always been connected with the sacred. Ritual is the means whereby we can engage and work the ground of grief, allowing it to move and shift and ultimately take its new shape in the soul, which is one of deep acknowledgement of the place we will eternally hold in our soul for what was lost.

William Blake said, "The deeper the sorrow, the greater the joy." When we send our grief into exile we simultaneously condemn our lives to an absence of joy. This gray sky existence is intolerable to the soul. It shouts at us daily to do something about this, but in the absence of meaningful measures to respond or from the sheer terror of entering the terrain of grief naked, we turn instead to distraction, addiction or anesthesia. On my visit to Africa I remarked to one woman that she had a lot of joy. Her response stunned me with the comment, "That's because I cry a lot." It was a very un-American sentiment. It wasn't "that's because I shop a lot, or work a lot, or keep myself busy." Here was Blake in Burkina Faso, sorrow and joy, grief and gratitude side by side. It is indeed the mark of the mature adult that we can carry these two truths simultaneously. Life is hard, filled with loss and suffering. Life is glorious, amazing, stunning, incomparable. To deny either truth is to live in some fantasy of the ideal or to be crushed by the weight of pain. Instead, both are true and it requires a familiarity with both to fully encompass the full range of being human.

The Sacred Work of Sorrow

Coming home to grief is sacred work, a powerful practice that confirms what the indigenous soul knows and what spiritual traditions teach: we are connected to one another. Our fates are bound together in a mysterious but recognizable way. Grief registers the many ways this depth of kinship is assaulted daily. Grief becomes a core element in any peacemaking practice, as it is a central means whereby our compassion is quickened, our mutual suffering is acknowledged.

Grief is the work of mature men and women. It is our responsibility to source this emotion and offer it back to our struggling world. The gift of grief is the affirmation of life and of our intimacy with the world. It is risky to stay vulnerable in a culture increasingly dedicated to death, but without our willingness to stand witness through the power of our grief, we will not be able to stem the hemorrhaging of our communities, the senseless destruction of ecologies or the basic tyranny of monotonous existence. Each of these moves pushes us closer to the edge of the wasteland, a place where malls and cyberspace become our daily bread and our sensual lives diminish. Grief instead, stirs the heart, is indeed the song of a soul alive.

Grief is, as has been said, a powerful form of deep activism. If we refuse or neglect the responsibility for drinking the tears of the world, her losses and deaths cease to be registered by the ones meant to be the receptors of that information. It is our job to feel these losses and to mourn them. It is our job to openly grieve for the loss of wetlands, the destruction of forest systems, the decay of whale populations, the erosion of soil, and on and on. We know the litany of loss but we have collectively neglected our response to this emptying of our world. We need to see and participate in grief rituals in every part of this country. Imagine the power of our voices and tears being heard across the continent. I believe the wolves and coyotes would howl with us, the cranes, egrets and owls would screech, the willows would bend closer to the ground and together the great transforming could happen to us and our great grief cry could happen to the worlds beyond. Rilke came to realize the profound wisdom in grief. May we too, come to know this place of grace inside this dark evergreen.

Duino Elegies
The Tenth Elegy

Someday, emerging at last from the violent insight,
let me sing out jubilation and praise to assenting angels.
Let not even one of the clearly-struck hammers of my heart
fail to sound because of a slack, a doubtful,
or a broken string. Let my joyfully streaming face
make me more radiant; let my hidden weeping arise
and blossom. How dear you will be to me then, you nights
of anguish. Why didn't I kneel more deeply to accept you,
inconsolable sisters, and, surrendering, lose myself
in your loosened hair. How we squander our hours of pain.
How we gaze beyond them into the bitter duration
to see if they have an end. Though they are really
our winter-enduring foliage, our dark evergreen,
one season in our inner year-, not only a season
in time-, but are place and settlement, foundation and soil
and home.

Rainer Marie Rilke

Resources on Grief Work

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