

Living with loss

Philippa Skinner - New Wine 5th August 2016

We lost Jim 9 years ago. It was, to date, among all the losses of my life, the single most cataclysmic event.

I suppose it is obvious really, but grievous and traumatic loss, when it happens, doesn't happen in isolation... the rest of your life rumbles on with all the joys and strains that you were already carrying... and we have found that other losses follow on as well and these 9 years have been full of different sadnesses... loss of our fathers, loss of a grandchild through miscarriage, loss of valued relationships. Such events are part of all our lives... and knowing that never makes them any easier to bear.

So what has God been teaching us? A great deal as it happens, but it has to be said, at the great price of the loss of our son and other hopes and dreams. These years have been, and continue to be, a transition and in many ways which I can't really explain in this short time, we have been reshaped... literally as a family, and metaphorically as we have moved from deep grief and despair to hope. We've learnt a lot and been changed a great deal, maybe in some ways for the better, but given the choice we'd rather have Jim with us, than have walked the stony road of sorrow and deep learning, which is so often the place where we encounter God in new ways.

When Jim died, we were often reminded of the grain of wheat that has to die and be buried if new life is to come... but when that grain of wheat is a beloved son, daughter, sibling, partner or friend... we may well cry out that we don't want the new life, we only want our loved one back.

There are so many metaphors to try and describe what is hard to put into words... and I reckon I've used them all over these years. An earthquake, darkness, waiting, the void... all of them try to capture the dereliction of profound loss but in the end, there are no words that do justice to those times where we are forced to realise with a new stark clarity our utter helplessness,

utter dependence, our total inability to control our lives and what happens to us and our loved ones.

I'd like to highlight 2 themes which I believe God is teaching us in these years and also provide a 'content warning'... these things take unpredictable lengths of time and there is no right or wrong way... we all do it in our own unique ways

1. The Growth of our capacity to bear what we thought we could not bear.

The first theme is that with the help of God and by being reliant on his mercy, we can learn to live with situations we thought we could never bear (please hear me... behind this confident sounding statement, there has been for us and continues to be a lot of soul searching, a lot of questioning the ways of God, the place of prayer and so on). But in the heart and soul struggle of despair, there often is, eventually, a mysterious growth of our ability to bear the unbearable. Grief is a burden we cannot put down, and when it is the loss of someone so dear to us, we would not even choose to put it down.

Imperceptibly, painful month by painful month, year by long year, our capacity grows, and where, once, we could do no more than crawl out of bed and attend to the daily necessities of life, we gradually acquire more strength. While our loss never goes away, we find, in time, we are carrying it more comfortably, which gives us more strength to engage in life and relationships.

This idea is beautifully expressed in a poem about grief by Mary Oliver called 'Heavy'. Look at the poem when you have a moment. It's a simple poem that has helped me so much. Gradually I found whereas once the loss of Jim was all consuming and life felt as if it had lost meaning, it became meaningful once again, but different to the life we led before. We became different; life will never be the same but life can once again have joy, gratitude and purpose. So often, people who have been through the bleakest of times talk of having found a deeper sense of love, compassion and understanding of themselves and of the heartbreaks and frailties of others. In such ways you realise you are learning what it means to live WITH your loss.

This mysterious and widely recognised process, sometimes called Post Traumatic Growth is, in my view, a God given capacity, whereby drained of our own resources, we draw on a pool of wisdom which is deeper than ourselves; the wisdom that is the deep healing love of God, shown to us in the face and person of Jesus Christ. He is our loving Lord who walks beside us in all circumstances, just as he walked beside the two grieving people on their way to Emmaus, so soon after the crucifixion, when they were trying so hard to make sense of those events.... just as we tried to make sense after Jim died. Often, it seems, we can't make sense of such unexpected and traumatic events, but we CAN go on to make new sense of our lives in the face of such events.

2. The second theme is simply the love of God

...which is closely linked to, and implicit in the first theme, "The growth of our capacity to bear more than we thought we could"... once again, I realise the words hide the struggle, the wrestling match I have had with God before breaking through to a place of relative peace about Jim, about myself, about God...

The love of God weaves through every experience we have, even the worst ones, like a thread, holding all of it together. I can trust that while I have no idea how Jim ever came to die of heroin... what caused him to engage in such dangerous practices when he knew the dangers through working in a rehab centre... God's love is steady and constant and will not let me go and has not let Jim go. In God, 'everything belongs', as one of my favourite authors, Richard Rohr explains in his book of the same title... I trust this and it gives me the courage to keep going even though I have no clever explanations. 'Christ is all in all' and 'In Him all things hold together'. Colossians 3:11 and Col.17.

The love of God is the single, golden unbreakable thread that weaves through our stories and binds up our broken hearts. Of course, our hearts are forever cracked, forever wounded, but remember... they can also be your gifts to a hurting world. Many have noted.. St Paul, the poet Rumi, author Henri Nouwen, songwriter Leonard Cohen to name a few, that "our wounds- our cracked and broken places - are where the light shines through". Broken hearts, watered

with copious tears, can become softer hearts, more open to others we meet along the way, who also have broken hearts.

Not for one moment am I suggesting that any of this is easy, quick or automatic, and believe me, I have raged, sobbed and yelled at times over these years and especially in the earlier times... at God, myself, Graeme, life itself; far from the reasonably collected and contained person I might sometimes seem to be now. Perhaps such things are 'Treasure of darkness' (Isaiah 45:3), riches gathered from places we would rather not have gone to, through traumas we wish heartily had never come our way. One person expressed it like this: "traumas can either break you up... or break you open..." and when you are broken open you are vulnerable and softened and made ready for new learning and new appreciation of life.

So... I don't have any answers to the many persistent and always understandable 'why' questions... nor do I have any 'how to' answers... but instead I am finding we can learn to wait with God, our broken hearted God, trusting that our losses aren't wasted now and won't be wasted in times to come.

Meanwhile, our call... and of course... it is endlessly demanding... is to keep walking, keep trusting and keep asking God to open our eyes and hearts to all that he has to teach us in our sorrows and losses, and he will, in Christ, be with us. Our lives and their events may not write the story that we anticipated, but they might write a deeper story that encompasses our losses and may be a channel of blessing for others.

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is available from Care for The Family

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