

Joining Our Wildernesses by Liz Tichenor

My friend was visiting Berkeley. After a long walk through the Cal campus, we ended up at the best deli on the Northside. Saul's was packed, people waiting for a table alongside the glass case filled with pickles and kippers and chocolate-dipped macaroons. We slid into our red leather booth, and amidst the warm din of line cooks calling out orders and oranges being juiced, we laughed and ate. My plate past half-empty, I looked up to the bare pipes of the lofty ceiling, gathering the courage to explain my hope of writing a book. I was eager to hear my friend's perspective, as he's fifteen years my senior, and a well-established writer.

I felt my face heat up as I gave him the thumbnail: the book would be what it was to become an Episcopal priest even as I was coming to terms with my mother's suicide, even as I was grieving my infant son's sudden death sixteen months later. All three events had happened in less than a year and a half, my ordination bracketed by almost insurmountable tragedy. How do you lead a congregation toward hope? hold up the Good News that are the Gospels through all that?

My friend listened carefully. Finally, he spoke: "I think you have to choose one. Your mom or Fritz." He paused, then added, "Telling both in one book? That's just too much."

I felt the heat draining from my face and I dunked my latke in applesauce and sour cream, buying myself time to respond. His feedback mattered to me, enough so that I felt suddenly embarrassed for pitching the idea. Fumbling forward, trying to explain my intent, that embarrassment began to burn hotter in my chest — first as disappointment, then anger. He was directing me to splinter my story. I wanted him to understand: yes, of course it was too much. That was precisely my point.

Overwhelming and overlapping tragedies have become commonplace in this last year. There are the obvious disasters of Covid-19 and white supremacy, both wreaking havoc all around us. And there are profound and sometimes quieter losses piling up: parents forced to choose between being present to their children and making ends meet, relationships sunk by the weight of such stress, losses of identity and companionship and palpable community.

We are living through a relentless constellation of loss, and I hear a near constant attempt to downplay just how hard it is. Asked how we're doing, I utter such words too: "Of course it is impossible for me to work full-time and homeschool my children, but — but!" — I race ahead in the same breath — "it is a wonder to be so involved in their learning." The gratitude is genuine. And it is so tempting to push my weary appreciation forward, eclipsing how untenable this situation really is.

Our collective coping also comes through in cordial rounds of Competitive Grief, these the

Olympic Games of pandemic times. The rules have shifted though, the goal is no longer to come out on top with the most impressive woes, but instead to contort oneself towards the belief that it's not that bad, that indeed it could be much worse. We win by convincing ourselves and anyone in earshot that no matter how buried we may be, there is no need for sympathy or lament. When someone checks in, particularly when asking about observable hardships, the accomplished Competitive Grief athlete leaps to offer an explanation of how it's truly fine, how someone else has it worse.

In my years as a priest, I have come alongside people grieving all kinds of losses: freedom lost to illness, identity lost to financial hardship, energy and hope lost to the relentless crush of systemic oppression. Utterly mundane losses, too: the boredom that so often accompanies caring for a newborn, the less-than-thrilling routine that emerges after many years of marriage. These losses, this grief — they can all crack us wide open, leave us undone. It doesn't matter how they measure up, one to another. They are only transferrable insofar as we join one another in these losses, help shoulder them for a while.

My hunch is that this silver lining dance of ours finds its roots in the adage that God — or the universe, or life — will not give us more than we can handle. Even as we may reject this insidious and fraudulent proverb, I think we often will let it be true as we navigate the gauntlet of our lives. This way is not serving us. Maybe it never has, but proclaiming that we will not be given more than we can handle will not carry us now. It's all too much.

Let me tell you about my friend Beth. We had only met once, briefly, months before my son died. When she heard the news, she booked a flight from her state to mine to come to his funeral. A few weeks later we were at a conference together in Sonoma County, and we stole away to a little cupcakery in town. There were two small metal tables filling the middle of the shop, each with two chairs. We sat talking long past the bottom of our lattes and the end of our cupcakes, trading stories of our lost children: me recounting the whole story of my son's sudden death, and the aftermath, and Beth sharing candidly about losing her daughter at twenty weeks several years earlier. This was not a quiet conversation. And it was real, we did not mince words. After some two hours, we glanced up, surprised to notice that there were other people present. A few customers waited for help beside us; an employee was carefully sliding cupcakes into a white cardboard box, maybe also carefully averting her eyes from our table. Beth and I looked at each other, not cringing, but breaking into laughter. What had it been like for this young woman to hear the weaving of our heartbreak from the other side of the counter? Perhaps this was not normal, speaking so openly, but I did not care. With Beth, I realized, the loss was still enormous, certainly still more than I could handle, and yet for those hours, the grief was something I could live with another person.

Yes, all this actually is too much. Joining together in this too muchness does not make it manageable, it does not magically make it something we can handle. But I believe it transforms us. Ross Gay speaks to this truth in his *Book of Delights* when he wonders aloud: "What if we joined our wildernesses together?" He rehearses all manner of wilderness, every shape of loss and grief, the theme of this past year, and then he keeps asking: "What if we joined our sorrows, I'm saying. I'm saying: What if that is joy?"

The joining happens not just with people who have survived a similar loss, though that familiarity can bring a particular kind of comfort. In the first year after my son's death, I realized with some degree of terror that the anniversary of his death was going to undo

me. I couldn't be alone. And so that day, and each year since on that day, my friend Phil has walked with me through the Berkeley Hills. We slowly make our way up through the meandering ivied paths and he asks real questions about my son, my grief, my living with both. Last year it was foggy when we set out, and way up in the hills the fog turned to a driving downpour. We returned drenched, and sat in an empty sanctuary. Phil held my hand as I was wracked with grief, both of us quiet as rain and tears pooled deep red on the polished cement floor. It was not a day for finding the rosy upshot of all this loss, but for being accompanied even as I crumpled under its weight, trusting that this too was held.

The joy that comes is hard-won. It is proven through the furnace of our pain. It does not come cheap. And friends, it matters that it's too much — this past year, this life, all that they hold, too much. There are those who will shoulder it with you, who will join you there. The way forward is not in convincing ourselves that we can handle it, or in choosing what sliver of loss we think others might be able to take, our very selves splintered in the process. The way to live this grief emerges in being honest about what we're weathering and joining each other there. Your wilderness and mine, whatever their shape and all of it too much, and trusting that somehow, in their joining, we will find this elusive, precious, necessary joy.

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