

On Meeting Loss, Finding Life by Roshi Joan Halifax

A talk given by Roshi Joan Halifax on October 25, 2021, as she received the Sandy MacKinnon Award from Covenant Health, Edmonton, Canada

I want to open this talk with a haiku by the 18th century Japanese poet Kobayashi Issa, whose baby daughter suddenly died, and this after multiple losses. Struggling to come to grips with her death, utterly devastated, he wrote:

The dewdrop world
Is the dewdrop world
And yet, and yet

Hearing his words, we might sense that Issa hasn't been released by anguish and sorrow; he can't comprehend how his baby girl's life could be as fleeting as the tiny, perfect world in a drop of morning dew. Yet even in this haiku, in these few words, we see his tightly closed hand beginning to open.

Just like Issa's daughter's life, even grief is transient, and eventually it can be transformed, leaving us wiser and humbler for it. Before this transformation, though, we must do the slow, hard work of swimming through sorrow. To deny the pain we feel is to rob ourselves of the heavy stones that will eventually be the ballast for the two great accumulations of wisdom and compassion. When we face the difficult experience of loss, grieving can be like swallowing bitter medicine. Our whole being seizes up, and then something settles deep into our bones that gives us strength.

In this regard, I recall the words of Terry Tempest Williams: "A good friend of mine said, 'You are married to sorrow.' And I looked at him and said, 'I am not married to sorrow. I just choose not to look away.'"

And physician Carole Milligan, a radiation oncologist, wrote this short poem: Examining Room

As I enter into this new space
May I see and be seen.
May I touch and be touched.
May I speak and be spoken to.
May I feel and be felt.
May I experience and be experienced
That we may both become whole.

Not looking away... Becoming whole.... This is the work of grieving...

Sometimes it may seem that our Western culture fails to address grief, maybe looking on it as a weakness of character or a personal failure. But it's precisely the experience of grieving that can serve as a crucible of maturation, giving our lives depth and humility.

Please, may I read another poem.
This one by Denise Levertov

Talking to Grief

Ah, Grief, I should not treat you
like a homeless dog
who comes to the back door
for a crust, for a meatless bone.
I should trust you.
I should coax you
into the house and give you
your own corner,
a worn mat to lie on,
your own water dish.
You think I don't know you've been living
under my porch.
You long for your real place to be readied
before winter comes. You need
your name,
your collar and tag. You need
the right to warn off intruders,
to consider
my house your own
and me your person
and yourself
my own dog.

And what have we faced in the past year and a half? And how are you? How are you really?

This pandemic has been an experience of grief at scale:
As of today, it has led to a global death toll of nearly five million people;

Can we be with the individual and collective grief of this historic time, and how it has touched and changed many of our lives, directly and indirectly? The toll on those who have been sickened by the touch of this virus, and those who carry the viscosity of grief from the loss of life?

It has also exposed the widening cracks in our medical system, where moral suffering and moral injury have become a commonplace experience in the lives of those who serve as health care workers.

And for many, it has also caused the loss of our daily structure, social contacts, and a sense of social safety.

Yet most importantly, it has been a crisis of the heart and mind that goes right to the core of how we live as social beings, how we deal with failure, moral distress, fear, loss,... and how we grieve and how we die.

And we have experienced other losses, including the loss of connection, autonomy, certainty, predictability, and normalcy.

Many are grieving the passing of a way of life, as we realize that many things will not return to “normal” after this pandemic subsides.

And all this in the midst of a global climate crisis, causing a pandemic of fires and floods, drought and food scarcity, and a future that is hard for many of us to come to terms with, including our part in contributing to this suffering.

Indeed, the multiple catastrophes we are currently experiencing encompass breakdowns in the cycles of our economies, climate, and ecosystems, and as well our medical system – and we are realizing that some of these losses are in their early stages. Because of this, many of us are experiencing a range of emotional responses, including grief at scale.

And we have faced another complexity that primes grief: physical distancing and isolation. We are like magnets with reversed polarities, sliding off pavements onto roads, turning our backs to others, distancing ourselves from each other, anything to avoid being close to others.

The effects on us extend far beyond the immediate shift in behavior; we are social animals and our evolution is built upon the ability to communicate and cooperate, not just through words but also through body language and physical contact.

For many there is an anxious heaviness that we are experiencing at this time, and this might be the heart adjusting to the terrible weight of unacknowledged grief of so much passing from our lives.

C.S. Lewis described the feelings rising up from loss. Those feelings are wired into the body, he says: the yawning for more air, the unsettling in the stomach, the repeated swallowing of an unaccepted sorrow, all sensations associated with fear. In his book *A Grief Observed*, he said “No one ever told me that grief was so much like fear.” We have begun to realize that fear and grief are intertwined

With the widespread losses and uncertainty we now face, it is essential that we allow ourselves to grieve and to work with our fear in a wise and brave way –collectively, as well as on our own.

Yet our society often struggles with grief, and often regards it as something to be ashamed of, to be denied, to be hidden away, or to be processed as quickly as possible. And this is often painfully true if you are a clinician, a health care worker.

Yet, we learn that grief cannot be transformed through denial or by someone else telling us how to do it. Perhaps those close to us can help us through by shining light into the darkness of our suffering, as we learn to swim in the waters of sorrow. But we have to pull ourselves through these waters to the other shore. Others can come alongside us, and this can be helpful, but finally, it is up to us to do this work of grieving.

And what will be the cost if we do not do this work? I cannot say.. but we must ask ourselves that question.

I am recalling Christine who had uterine cancer. She called and asked me to meet with

her and her husband. No real emergency, she said, but would I come? Sitting with these two, I saw that Christine seemed to have accepted her imminent death—it was her husband who carried the suffering of anticipatory grief. Wound like a tight spring, with lines of worry and fear creasing his brow, he was bubbling with anger beneath the surface. I sat there with the two of them and listened as Christine helped her husband find his footing. Her words were like saving stones in the rough waters of his anxiety, anger, and sadness. And Christine laid down the stones for him to step on. Yet she could not and would not walk those stones for him. Her courage and wisdom is something for us to consider.

The sorrow of all our human losses, great and small, anticipatory or contemporary, feeds into a river that runs underground beneath our lives. When that dark water breaks through the surface, at first we might feel totally alone. We may truly believe, “No one but me has ever felt this kind of pain.” And that is half the truth, for grieving is vast and varied and is part of all of our lives; yet, we can only really discover it through our own intimate experience.

Our ability to navigate these waters might be complicated by the fact that most of us have also lost touch with the myths, stories, practices, and rituals that in former generations have helped give meaning to loss, death, and grief.

When my mother died, I received one of the hardest and most precious teachings of my life. One morning, I realized that I only had this one chance to grieve her death. On the one hand, I could be a so-called “good Buddhist,” accept impermanence, and let go of my mother with great dignity. The other alternative was to scour my heart out with honest sorrow.

I chose to scour. After her death, I went to the desert with photographs of her and letters she had written my father after I was born. Settling under a rocky ledge, I sank back into shadows of sorrow. When your mother dies, so does the womb that gave birth to you. I felt that my back was uncovered and exposed even as I pressed it into cold, solid rock. When I let myself drop all the way through to the bottom, I found that my mother had become an ancestor. As I finally released her, she became part of me. And my sadness became part of the river of grief that pulses deep inside me, hidden from view but informing my life, my whole life.

Our struggles usually begin when we don’t attend sufficiently to the painful, strong emotions which can flood us after the loss of a loved one, the loss of a patient, the loss of a way of life. It’s easy for to become consumed in the urgent “busyness of business” right after the experience of loss.

But grief has gifts to offer us, hard as it may be to see this when we are in the thick of the experience.

This is like the mother I heard about who bathed her dead baby in her own breast milk. She teaches us tenderness and patience with our own sorrow and reminds us not to hold on too tightly. Impermanence is inescapable, we learn; no one and nothing escapes its touch.

These deep feelings related to loss and sorrow can be profoundly humanizing; they can deepen our empathy and can increase our capacity for compassion and insight. And we are called not to avert our gaze: Again, Terry Tempest Williams:
...“there is deep beauty in not averting our gaze. No matter how hard it is, no matter how

heartbreaking it can be. It is about presence. It is about bearing witness. I used to think bearing witness was a passive act. I don't believe that anymore. I think that when we are present, when we bear witness, when we do not divert our gaze, something is revealed—the very marrow of life. We change. A transformation occurs. Our consciousness shifts.”

If we are able to see that loss can teach us and fear can reveal our edges and priorities, we can begin to understand that grief is part of a natural process of transformation, and more so now, as we face radical uncertainty.

We also can discover that healthy grieving can be relational, and in other societies grieving and mourning are shared experiences. So being transparent with others about our grief can be transformative

We can also explore how our ancestors grieved. Every culture has its own rich and deep history of rituals of transformation - and ours is like a treasure house waiting to be rediscovered.

We also might create new rituals and practices to deal with our collective and individual losses. Ritual reminds us that we have lost what we love and helps us metabolize our fears. It also points us to the value of community, honoring, and meaning.

And it can be important to recall our values as we grieve and what has given our life meaning and purpose: What do you care about, whom have you served in the course of your life, what obstacles have you overcome; whom have you loved; who needs to be forgiven?

Indeed it can be important to take stock of what has been a source of strength in our lives and how our struggles and failures have taught us.

And it can be so important to ask for forgiveness from those who might have been harmed by you. And to forgive those who have harmed you. As well as forgive yourself for mistakes made and things left undone.

And can we thank those who have supported us, and share our love with those especially close to us.

Forgiveness and gratefulness are powerful forces of healing as we swim in the waters of grief.

We can also serve others who grieve. We can learn from, be uplifted, and healed through compassionate service to those who suffer like us.

Yet we must remember: no matter what we do, it probably does not mean that our lives will go back to how they were before.

Kentucky poet Wendell Berry describes the sycamore not far from his house:
Fences have been tied to it, nails driven into it,
hacks and whittles cut in it, lightning has burned it.
There is no year it has flourished in
that has not harmed it. . . .
It has risen to a strange perfection
in the warp and bending of its long growth.

It has gathered all accidents into its purpose.
It has become the intention and radiance of its dark fate.

We have to remember that people who have survived trauma, who have gone through wrenching grief, might come back transformed by the experience, and see that their suffering has made them more resilient rather than more fragile, with the ability to thrive in the present rather than being overwhelmed by the past. Beyond the ending of the old way of life, there is hope for the emergence of the new, and to imagine a future in which our wounds are still there, but in a form that both reconnects us and makes us wiser and humbler and helps us to thrive.

I want to finish this talk on grief and life with yet another poem, this one by Ellen Bass:

The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even
when you have no stomach for it
and everything you've held dear
crumbles like burnt paper in your hands,
your throat filled with the silt of it.
When grief sits with you, its tropical heat
thickening the air, heavy as water
more fit for gills than lungs;
when grief weights you like your own flesh
only more of it, an obesity of grief,
you think, How can a body withstand this?
Then you hold life like a face
between your palms, a plain face,
no charming smile, no violet eyes,
and you say, yes, I will take you
I will love you, again

I thank you for the opportunity to share some thoughts on grief and life. And as Ellen Bass wrote: "Then you hold life like a face between your palms, a plain face, no charming smile, no violet eyes, and you say, yes, I will take you I will love you, again"

I hope we are truly able to meet grief and embrace life as we move through this historic time and allow our consciousness to shift or be shifted, as Terry Tempest Williams has suggested, by facing fully what we are experiencing in this time of loss and extraordinary possibility.