

Grief is Praise

by Martin Prechtel

The following is an excerpt from *The Smell of Rain on Dust* by Martín Prechtel. In his book, Prechtel explains that the unexpressed grief prevalent in our society today is the reason for many of the social, cultural, and individual maladies that we are currently experiencing. He goes on to show how this collective, unexpressed energy is the long-held grief of our ancestors manifesting itself, and what work can be done to liberate this energy so we can heal from the trauma of loss, war, and suffering.

-- Marina Snyder

Grief expressed out loud, whether in or out of character, unchoreographed and honest, for someone we have lost, or a country or home we have lost, is in itself the greatest praise we could ever give them. Grief is praise, because it is the natural way love honors what it misses.

...

I don't know why I'm always so surprised, in this day and age, with so many possibilities and choices at their fingertips, how people, who having lived for so many generations, so distant from any semblance of the old wisdoms known to their ancestors about what the living should be doing when someone dies, will so wildly and emotionally defend the unemotional flatness and spiritual vacuum they have come to live in and accept a repressed lack of expression as a normal existence, coming to its defense with more energy than it would actually take to have a tangibly good custom of storytelling, weeping, and active grief, as if such sanity were some backwards barbarity!

One night a little while back I remember how a very Midwestern friend called me the day his old-time mother had passed quietly away. Because he had been on good terms with her, and because his father was already dead, he as the oldest son had been put in charge of the funeral proceedings, as was his family's custom.

The entire extended family including himself had been raised to be very "stoic" Lutheran Christians, and excepting himself, all of them were still governed by that kind of "minimalist" Northern European ethos.

Nonetheless, my friend, though he loved his people, had over the years become somewhat more adventurous and called himself an "alternative person," which translated to his relatives as "overly dedicated to diversity"!

He had listened to recordings of my talks on grief and had attended some lectures and conferences, and in keeping with what was taught there regarding the welfare of both the living and the spirit of the deceased, he wanted to make certain he was doing everything

possible during that strange trancelike place that happens after someone close dies, to see that his dead mother was well grieved, mourned, and “sent on” in a good way to the “next” world.

He wanted my advice and direction to make sure he wasn’t overlooking anything. She was lying in state in a little mortuary chapel in his hometown and would be buried the following afternoon at the direction of the same Protestant minister who had always been the family’s old-time minister.

“Well,” I replied, feeling that I would probably be too overtly pagan to have any advice of mine remotely embraced by his American-born Scandinavian flatlander relatives as anything proper and real, “if it were me, the first thing I would do would be to feed the soul of the dead and to spiritually notify your mother’s last happy ancestor in the other world to get ready to receive her. The problem, I said, is that all of this generally involves the entire family, as it needs everyone and should be a group effort.

“The next main thing is a fire has to be kept going gently, nonstop, without ever flagging. If a fire can’t be had, then burn seven candles in front of her body. When one gets low, add another to it. The soul of the dead needs the people to care about them, out loud, but in such a way as to make sure their spirit doesn’t linger about. Your mother’s soul needs to start to travel to her new ‘home’ away from here. To do this the spirit needs to ‘ride’ the story of her people’s origins back to their spiritual origination place ancestrally. She will get to that place of origin by someone singing or speaking the story of their origins from the beginning all night long from sundown to sunup. This is called paddling home. The sun should rise just as the story of her passing is added on to the old story.

“Typically this story is told as two people prepare the body, by meticulously binding up the midriff and groin of the dead with a continuous handspun cotton thread which is wound around and around as the story of origins, her life, and death are told—ending at sunup. This thread is the story, and the deceased is ‘bound’ into it to carry the soul home.”

“Martín?” he interrupted.

“Yes,” I said.

“I can tell you right now, I’m pretty darn sure they’re not going to go for any of that.”

“Well, just see what they say and call me if you need any help.”

Two hours later he called me:

“No one will help with the story, forget the thread—and after an hour of arguing, my mother’s sister said one candle might be alright. What do I do now?”

“Then, you’re going to have to tell the whole story by yourself. Get a beautiful bead, tie a string through it like a fishing weight. Call the bead the ‘belly button of time,’ light the candle at sundown, and begin to slowly wind the thread around the bead like a ball of yarn as you begin to tell the tale of all your mother came from: the whole story. Don’t worry if you forget anything, just keep going. If you get stuck just begin to sing her favorite songs, best as you can, then go ahead with the story—always winding the ball of thread with the bead as the core. If you begin to cry, let her loose, don’t hold back the tears; then when you’re ready as soon as you can, begin to sing, then go ahead and keep

on telling the tale. Keep the one candle burning all night. When the Father Sun begins to crown onto the horizon, commend your mother's spirit to him and add on the story of her passing. At that point stop winding the ball of string, put your breath on this ball and hide it in a pocket. Before the burial takes place that afternoon, put the ball into the coffin before they close it. When you all get to the grave and they start piling on the earth then begin your real heartfelt weeping, and sing. Sing and weep with honor. Sing your mother on home."

"Alright, Martín, I'll do my best, since its only me."

I gave him my blessing and that was that. I didn't hear any more that night or the next day or the next, but three days later I got a call.

"Well, how was it then for you and your mother?" I asked.

"My relatives thought it mighty barbaric to have a candle there; it had never been done they said, but all in all the night part went pretty much like you said. That went okay.

"But the next day, during the funeral, when I threw in my ball of string before they closed the lid, things started heating up. But nothing as hot as when we got to the cemetery and I began weeping as they began to throw dirt on the coffin and fill the grave.

"I tried to step up for my mom, Martín; I think you'd have been proud of me. I kept on weeping, and shaking then singing as they buried her away, and as the earth began to cover her, my people wanted to leave, but I didn't want to. I couldn't stop crying; it just came right out of me like a broken dam and was flowing so well I dropped to my knees and shook and wept and sang some more. People were running around and kept asking my relatives what was wrong with me, and my aunties kept asking me if I was alright, and this all went on of course until the ambulance arrived. I didn't know who it was for, but it turned out it was for me!

"They tried to haul me away, convinced I'd lost my marbles and needed some drugs, but I just kept on weeping. The minister had called the ambulance; he thought I was sick and had gone overboard.

"Finally I let them take me to the local clinic. I didn't really care because it felt so good to weep, and in the end they just let me go when I cooled off.

"I asked my relatives why an ambulance was called. They said, 'You were crying and shaking and singing. You looked like you were in terrible distress!'

"'That wasn't going to bring your mother back,' they said.

"I wasn't crying to bring her back. I was weeping to help her get where she was going faster and easier. Then I told them how you had advised that grief was a good thing for both the dead and the living. You could've heard an ant sneeze it got so silent.

"Then my auntie spoke up and said, 'Well, you can't blame us, no one ever wept at a funeral, much less a man. We didn't know what you were doing.'

"Well, Martín, I feel good about it and thank you but that's what grief gets you in the Midwest: an expensive ride in an ambulance!"

Grief is praise of those we have lost. Our own souls who have loved and are now heartbroken would turn to stone and hate us if we did not show such praise when we lose whom we love. A nonfake grieving is how we praise the dead, by praising that which has left us feeling cold and left behind. By the event of our uncontrolled grief, wail, and rap, we are also simultaneously praising with all our hearts the life we have been awarded to live, the life that gave us the health and opportunity of having lived fully enough to love deep enough to feel the loss we now grieve. To not grieve is a violence to the Divine and our own hearts and especially to the dead. If we do not grieve what we miss, we are not praising what we love. We are not praising the life we have been given in order to love. If we do not praise whom we miss, we are ourselves in some way dead. So grief and praise make us alive.

Excerpted from *The Smell of Rain on Dust* by Martín Prechtel. (c) 2015, North Atlantic Books.