

## **Grief is not a problem to be solved, but a mystery to be lived**

*Just when the caterpillar thought the world was over, it became a butterfly.*

(Chuang Tzu)

Because grief arises from the deepest parts of us, its double-edged sword brings both immense pain as well as a unique possibility for self-discovery. Our internal perspective – the lens through which we embrace our suffering - strongly shapes our experience and will determine our capacity to grow through the great fire of grief, or not.

Loss rattles the youngest and most tender sections of our psyche, the least illuminated because they are the most protected; the darkest shadows hiding the biggest wounds. But uninvited, grief kicks open the basement door and given our reflexive response to unwanted pain, we generally don't welcome what arrives from the underworld.

Unfortunately, however, that door flies open whenever and however it wants. Sometimes it's gradual, but sometimes the hinges are blown off by the force of the explosion. A loved one suddenly dies. Our spouse leaves us for the neighbor. Your lab results suggest getting your affairs in order. Whatever the details of the loss, our world is forever changed, and we now occupy a life defined by Before and After. Our system implodes into a kind of primal shock.

And while we each have our own unique style of grieving - depending on our particular mix of nature and nurture – our response is invariably some blend of The Big Three: fight, flight, or freeze. This is normal and expected behavior from a human nervous system which has evolved over tens of thousands of years. It is no surprise that our natural impulse here - deeply embedded in our ancient wiring - is to “fix the problem” as soon as possible. Identify the source of pain and remove it. This kind of limbic logic worked way back when the threat was a hungry saber tooth or an angry cave neighbor with a club, but is counter-productive in affairs of the heart. The deeper caverns of soul respond more generously to friendly curiosity than to fear and anxiety.

Entering the great ocean of grief requires a radically different approach if we are sincerely interested in its transformational power, instead of just something to be fixed, managed, or “resolved.” The soul-level invitation of grief is immense - it reveals a rich but unfamiliar inner horizon, while demanding navigational qualities we’re not sure we possess. On the one hand, it invites us to embrace the very shards of our suffering, every messy detail of our woundedness. But at the same time, it hints that who we are is something fundamentally greater than our pain. Grief points beyond itself.

But such a recognition is hard-earned, and requires a new kind of inner listening, a mood of compassionate attention to our rawest edges. For most of us, this is unfamiliar ground. We were not raised in a family or a world that values and models a soul-affirming approach to our humanity. So when the stuff hits the fan, we lose contact with our center and with our capacity to respond with kindness and curiosity to what’s hurting inside.

However, when the great beast of grief arrives at the door, there is a new opportunity. We can choose to adopt a more inclusive posture – one which honors both the gritty content as well as the larger field of Self in which it arises. When this happens, there is a gap and we’re left trembling on the visceral edge between the weight of our emotional history and some new possibility. These are precious moments that do not come often. When these doors open, it is the Mystery saying, “Hello, please come in!”

Many years ago, I went through a tumultuous romantic breakup which invited me to become quite intimate with my version of this edge. I had been brought to my knees and humbled by the great gravity of grief. Fortunately, I was not working at the time so I could spend most of my days caring for my broken heart. I basked in nature and took refuge in close friends. But mostly I deepened my long-term relationship with meditation, which provided some sense of ground and perspective when it felt like there was neither. Little by little, over some months, I noticed that my sorrow began to feel more workable, as though I could consciously participate in how it moved through me.

*"The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground." – Chogyam Trungpa*

After what felt like a long time squirming on the ground, I noticed that some part of me had stood up. Wobbly at first, but hey, at least I was standing! Through the blessed alchemy of desperation and grace, my soul-cry was heard and something had shifted. My perspective opened and I could see more of my inner geography. Previously, at ground-level, all I could see was the dirt, rocks, and bramble bushes that crowded the path.

But now, upright, my vision expanded to include the sky and the surrounding hills. And while my heart still stung, it felt held by something greater than itself and began to relax and open in a new way. Somewhere deep in my belly I had stopped fighting. Finally, I had turned downstream and allowed myself to move with the larger current. What an ineffable relief to feel carried by this beneficent tide that animates our human journey, and guides us with great care through and beyond the landscape of loss.

As we surrender to this great river, we have begun the arduous journey of transforming grief – and therefore, our very lives – from a problem to be solved to a mystery to be lived.