

Brokenness, Sorrow, and Resilience in Loss

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Thanks to Tom Ovanin for the invitation to speak with you today about brokenness, sorrow, and resilience in loss, a topic I have been teaching about for nearly forty years. We both know that many here today, despite the summer weather, are struggling with losses.

A wise person once said, "Although our world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it."

When I first began thinking about loss and grief in the 1970s, it was all too common to think only of *grief reaction*, or the brokenness and sorrow that come over us when a loved one dies. Most were paying attention to the suffering that follows loss, but not to the overcoming of it. There was much talk of stages of grief, especially Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's five stages – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. There was also medical talk of grief reaction as coming down with symptoms, as if grief is a disease. This thinking suggests that grieving is entirely passive, something to be endured.

I devoted most of my energy trying to restore balance in thinking in the field by describing *grieving response*, or what we do as we actively engage with what happens to us – bereavement and the suffering it entails. My own experiences with loss and listening to countless grief stories led me to describe grieving response as a process of relearning the world, including our physical and social surroundings, our place in the great scheme of things, our selves, and our ties with those who have died.

Today I want to tell you some stories to illustrate what I've learned about brokenness, sorrow, and resilience, and especially about what enables us to relearn the world following loss. Though I will confine myself to stories of grief following the death of a loved one – the stories I know best – I'm confident that what I have to say applies to grief following other life-changing losses, e.g., major changes in personal relationships, debilitating illnesses, crippling injuries, house fires, unemployment, or devastation in the wake of natural or man-made disasters.

"Although **our world is full of suffering**, it is full also of the overcoming of it."

A friend of mine, Doug Daher, begins his book, And the Passenger Was Death, with this description of his experience of brokenness when he received a phone call telling him that his twenty-something son had died from an accidental fall from a roof.

I am a figure of glass on a glass mantel, attached to a glass wall, in a glass house, located within a glass community. A part of a glass country, which is located on glass earth. The delivery is made and a small crack begins to spread, and all the glass is breaking. All is in shambles. One of the parts left is large enough to rise in order to walk, eat, talk, cry, and sleep, but it is all shattered glass.

We've all known brokenness, and Doug's broken glass imagery is some of the most powerful I know. Of course, the great web of life that holds us all never unravels when we suffer loss, but the subjective experiences of chaos within our individual webs of life can make it seem as if it has. On one hand, it is disconcerting to see the world going on as if nothing has happened. But, on the other hand, there is much support and comfort to be found in what has not broken around us.

Brokenness came into the lives of Roger and Helen, frequent visitors to my classes and workshops, when their three-year-old daughter, Mary, hit her head in a fall from a backyard swing. They rushed her to the hospital when they could not waken her. While there was no skull fracture, doctors discovered that Mary had had a previously undetected serious illness in her brain. The fall triggered a cascade of effects that ended in her dying three days later. The suddenness of what happened and the unexpected diagnosis of Mary's serious illness took their breath away. They couldn't help wondering what life would be like for them and Mary's five-year-old brother in a house, yard, and neighborhood filled with reminders of Mary.

Brokenness came into Kathryn's life when she learned that her husband Mark was dying of cancer. It became clear in the second summer of his illness that Mark was not going to live to see the holidays. In their early thirties, Mark would be leaving Kathryn with two children, Josh and Sarah, both under five. When she asked him about the worst of facing his dying, he said that he feared his children were too young to remember him well, save perhaps through a couple of old photographs. Kathryn faced a daunting and entirely unanticipated future without Mark by her side.

Brokenness came into three-year-old Julie's life when her father left her with her grandmother and took her mother to the hospital, expecting to return home with a baby sister for Julie. Tragically, the baby was stillborn. Having asked her grandmother not to say anything to Julie about what had happened, Julie's dad brought her mom home without the baby. When Julie asked about the baby, her parents said, "Your sister is with Jesus." Julie sensed that she was supposed to understand, but she really didn't. She began acting out instead (as children often do to express sorrow). Her parents, in their own grief, did not know how to calm her.

Think about the brokenness in Doug's, Roger and Helen's, Kathryn's, and Julie's lives. Whatever ego illusions they may have had were shattered – about their control over life events, abilities to fix what goes wrong, being invulnerable, or being exceptional (perhaps because of their faith). Their daily life patterns were shattered; they could not return to life just as it was before profound changes came their way; things and places, experiences and activities, their interactions with others, and their beliefs and values were all shadowed by loss. Their life stories were profoundly disrupted. Their next chapters could not unfold as they had anticipated. They were physically separated from their loved one. Ties with family, friends, or community were threatened, weakened, or broken. And they may have felt betrayed by the divine.

The sorrow that comes over us when we lose someone dear is a mirror on our brokenness. It stops us in our tracks like serious physical pain. (Emotion literally means "without motion.") Just as physical pain persists when something is seriously broken in our bodies, so sorrow persists when there is brokenness in other dimensions of our lives. Both invite us to give brokenness the attention it deserves. When we attend to brokenness we can be compassionate with ourselves, grow in understanding of our deepest needs, and begin to discern how we can draw upon resilience within us and in the great web to meet those needs. (Allan has invited me to elaborate in a separate note to be posted on the First Met website about how we can use sorrow-friendly practices to attend effectively to our brokenness.)

"Although our world is full of suffering, **it is full also of the overcoming of it.**"

Helen recalled being greeted by her priest before Mary's funeral - "Congratulations, you now have a child in heaven." Stunned by the coldness of those words and his utter failure to acknowledge her sadness, she said that if she had had the energy, she would have punched him in the face. Quoting the shortest verse in the Bible, "Jesus wept," she said that if it was OK for Jesus to cry, surely it was OK for her. And she insisted that the God she knew is compassionate. She also told of how a neighbor whose little girl played with Mary asked her to come for coffee and to see some photos of their daughters playing. She was grateful that someone was unafraid of her tears. They viewed the photos and cried together. She advised that no one should be afraid of making a grieving person cry because "We are crying anyway."

Helen and Roger found that many friends couldn't be with them or listen to their stories. With another grieving couple they formed a support group for bereaved parents, primarily out of deep needs to tell their stories to others who would understand, to be comforted and supported in the telling, and to learn how others were carrying on in daily life. The sharing helped them immensely, and their compassion for others grew. As so often happens in support groups, they stayed for several years to return to others the listening and care they had received.

Kathryn decided to ask friends and family on her holiday list to send remembrances of Mark that she would share with him before he died. She gathered the over one hundred notes, letters and photographs she received into three scrapbooks and presented them to Mark. They spent three evenings that fall pouring over them, laughing and crying together. She learned things about Mark she had never known. Deeply touched that so many remembered so well and clearly loved him, he told Kathryn it was the finest gift he had ever received.

After Mark died, Kathryn embraced his legacies and used them in reshaping and redirecting her life. She used his insurance money to return to school and earn the degree in nursing administration he had encouraged her to seek. She talked to Mark nightly and imagined what he would advise, sometimes finding his perspective helpful and at other times not. She used the scrapbooks to enable Josh and Sarah

to know their father, bringing them out every holiday season, on the anniversaries of Mark's birth and death, and whenever the children asked to see and talk about the "Daddy books."

Kathryn recognized and was grateful for having become more confident, nurturing, gentle, affectionate, and patient in her years with Mark. She returned home to and continued to cherish the home they made together, places where they walked, favorite recipes, their song, their church, the children, Mark's parents and family, and their friends. She persevered through her tears bearing in mind Mark's desire that she thrive again one day in a life filled with wonders he wished he could be present to savor with her. And, she took to heart Mark's wish that she reach out to and welcome new love if it came into her life when she married again five years after he died.

Julie's parents knew she needed help but didn't know what to do or say. They asked their funeral director for help, and he said he'd be glad to speak with her in their home. When he came that evening, the three adults gathered for kitchen table conversation. Julie watching and listening out of curiosity, didn't join them, even when he asked her. But when he asked her if she could draw with him, she brought plain paper and crayons and sat beside him. Julie's parents watched as they took turns drawing animals. With several drawings of live animals completed, he asked if she had ever seen a dead animal. They then drew dead animals in turn, putting the live animals to one side, the dead to the other. When he asked her to draw Jesus, she did but didn't know if he belonged with the live or dead animals. So they put him in the middle. He then told Julie he'd heard she had had a little sister. Julie nodded, and when he asked her to draw her sister, she did, and she promptly put the drawing with the dead animals.

Realizing that Julie understood that her sister had died, he told her that her parents had brought her sister's body to his funeral home. She asked immediately if she could see her. He said the next day would be fine, if she still wanted to come and it was OK with her mom and dad. When they nodded approval, he gave Julie his number and made sure she knew how to dial it herself. She could call him any time and he would ask if she actually dialed herself because she still wanted to come, not because anyone told her that she had to come.

Surprisingly early the next morning, Julie called. The funeral director confirmed that it was her idea and then arranged with her parents to bring her later that morning. They entered a lobby with a children's corner with stuffed animals and toys. When Julie asked where her sister was, she learned she was in the next room. She turned to the children's corner to play for several minutes. Then she came to the funeral director and said, "You can take me in there now." He said, "Take my hand and lead me in to see your sister. You can turn around anytime if you want to leave."

Julie took him through the door and across the carpet to see her sister, who was lying in a children's casket. When she saw her sister, Julie said, "She's not dead, she's just sleeping." He put his hand on the dead girl's body and shook it gently as you would to wake a child, saying, "If she were sleeping, she'd wake up." When Julie said, "You're not doing it right," he said, "Try it yourself if you want." Julie tried and concluded, "You're right. She's dead. When do we bury her?"

He then told her there was going to be a funeral the next day, explained what a funeral is about, what she would see and hear if she came (with her parents' permission), and how everyone would then go to the cemetery to bury her sister. She said she wanted to come to the funeral. She accepted his invitation to ride with him in the front seat of the hearse. When the graveside service was over, she insisted on staying to supervise the actual burial.

And so Julie oriented herself to the earthly reality of her sister's death, participated in her funeral, and lovingly supervised her burial. Her parents could explain their beliefs about the baby being with Jesus later, when Julie was better able to understand them. And Julie's acting out came to an end.

These stories only begin to illustrate the resilience that enables us to overcome the suffering that loss of a loved one brings. Active reengagement with what has happened to us is possible because of what has bent but not broken. The breath of life within us, our egos, souls, and spirits, and our love for the one who has died are not broken. It is not a stretch for me to think of that breath and the depths of our souls, spirits, and love as the presence of God within us. They enable us to envision and move toward possibilities for meaningful living that can come through our own efforts (our responsibility).

The great web of life and the love of God that support us are not broken. We can be receptive to and grateful for opportunities for meaningful living that come from others and God (the grace around us).

Before I close, let me tell you one more story I know about a man who wrestled with serious doubts about the grace of God I just mentioned. It is told eloquently in A Grief Observed by the well-known author and theologian C. S. Lewis. He had married for the first time late in life. Within a very few years, in which they knew great happiness, his wife, Joy, died of the cancer they knew she had when they married. In the early going Lewis recounts the agony of missing Joy, doubts about his faith, anger at God, and his memories becoming obscured from him by the intensity of his sorrow, as if he were losing Joy a second time. Later, when he awakens one morning and the grip of sorrow has lessened, he remembers Joy more far more vividly and variously, as if a veil had been lifted, and almost as if she were present in the room with him. Toward the end of the book he finds himself praising Joy and in the process enjoying her again. He expresses gratitude for the gift of her life and her sharing it lovingly with him. In turn, he praises God. And he expresses gratitude for the gift of Joy's life and God's enabling the two of them to know and love one another.

Oh, by the way, the wise person who once said, "Although our world is full of suffering, it is full also of the overcoming of it," was Helen Keller. And you know the rest of her story.

Amen.

Tom is Past President of the Association for Death Education and Counseling. His latest book (available at Amazon.com) is entitled, *Catching Your Breath in Grief...and grace will lead you home*. He lives in Victoria and invites you to visit his web site at www.griefsheart.com.