

Grief and Loss

Losses and Gains in the Midst of Our Losses

Whether we like it or not, grief is something experienced throughout life. In and amongst the numerous emotions that we feel, grief is most often searing, at times unrelenting and frequently deep. Grief is typically attached to and is a by-product of some sort of loss. Most of the losses we experience in life are multifaceted and complex, making grief an emotion experienced at many levels simultaneously. Grief is profound and it's a natural, albeit unwanted part of this journey called life.

An Understanding of Grief

Grief simply defined is a great sadness due to a loss. Losses are part of life and they come in forms both small and terribly large. Losses leave holes within us, spaces and places where something or someone once resided. They represent a felt detraction either by something being lost naturally or something being stolen. Either way, we end up with a hole, sometimes tiny and at other times engulfing, but there is a hole nonetheless, and grief is a response to that hole and the absence of whatever once occupied it.

We know that life is a progression, a series of never-ending seasons where things come and subsequently things go. We celebrate many, if not most of the things that come, but on the other end we grieve them when they go. There is a sense that we'd much rather welcome things or events or people or times into our lives and find some sort of never-ending place to put them; some place from which they'll always be available and readily accessible. But life's not like that. Things go as readily and sometimes more unexpectedly than they come. And we can rarely, if ever hold them.

Why Grief and Loss is Hard

In part, I think that grief is a manifestation of the creative side of us. There's this part of us that's always asking how we can make something better. We see this creativity working itself out by adding to rather than subtracting from. Most times our creativity is based on building, supplementing, expanding, touching up here and there, and making something better by an addition of some sort. Subtractions or deletions work against that, robbing us of something that we're trying to do, or achieve, or accomplish. It's much like a kid building a grand tower out of wooden building blocks, only to have one block removed at a critical place that causes the collapse of the entire tower. Losses appear to detract and destroy.

In another sense, it's also about drawing around us things or people that give us stability, or meaning, or purpose, or some other such resource. We pool these things around us in order to construct the kinds of lives and relationships that we yearn to live out and live in. Yet loss steals away some of these things, or sometimes all of these things. Loss works against our efforts to build the lives we want to build. Our grief is in the loss of these things and the implications of their absence for our lives.

What is Loss?

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Yet, is loss friend or foe? When it first strikes us, we most typically label it a foe of the most evil, uncaring and sometimes cunning kind. Whether the loss is expected or unexpected, it takes away those who we love or that which we have worked for in such a manner that it can be seen as nothing other than a heartless thief bent on nothing more than thievery. Yet, there is great growth in great loss if we are willing to see the possibilities inherent in the pain.

The Benefit

We rail against loss and see it as unfair or savage, yet in the wrestling we grow. We are faced with emotions known and some never before experienced. We are forced to adjust to the losses and make profound alterations to our lives. We have to pick up the pieces, sort it all out and construct something out of the carnage that gives life meaning and our loss a worthwhile sense of purpose. Loss forces us to grow.

Loss also creates space within which things new and fresh can find room. Loss is about a natural life transition where that which comes builds upon that which leaves. There is something foundational about loss as it creates both space and can give nurture to something either entirely new, or something that builds upon that which was lost. It's much like the seasons, each building upon the other in an ever renewing cycle. Loss is opportunity disguised as pain.

Hidden Opportunity

These kinds of perspectives are not necessarily easy nor are they something that we most often welcome. Frankly, most of us prefer the status quo because of comfort and ease. We certainly prefer that when we're in the throes of some sort of loss. Seeing the opportunities is not about avoiding the pain. It's about a cooperative effort where we fully grieve the losses and feel the full onset of the pain while anticipating what growth the loss will bring. In our losses we better regain our balance by completely embracing the losses and, in time, looking to what the losses will generate in our lives.

Make no mistake about it, such a stance is terribly difficult. Grief consumes us often to the point that we can't see anything other than the grief. Yet, if we simply choose to believe that something of value, something inherently good can arise out of our loss, it gives the loss desperately needed meaning and it gives grief a direction. It opens us up to accept the give and take of life; that life comes and goes in a natural succession of which we too come and go. It is engaging a bigger dance filled with exhilaration when life comes and grief when it departs. But it is in embracing both sides that we fully live, that we completely experience and that we are expanded out to be everything that we can be. In loss and the grief that it births, there is great opportunity.

Think through your losses. In doing that, embrace the totality of the pain and anticipate the fullness of what will arise out of it. See both the coming and the going. And in it, be stretched and deepened more than you likely thought possible.