

GRACE IN THE WOUND

Finding Hope in
Long-Term Grief

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INTRODUCTION



*“Blessed are they who mourn, for they
will be comforted.”* MATTHEW 5:4

It has been over four decades since I cradled my first child. Jenny was just past a year old when we found her lifeless body in her crib. While the immediate aftermath and resultant process of bereavement is long past, the grief is still there. The years have mellowed the piercing sadness and longing for her, but now and then the heart wound opens again. The trigger might be a photograph, the sight of a child with Down syndrome, or the passing of yet another anniversary. “Closure” is neither possible nor desired.

There is no shortage of books on grieving, but most are limited to the immediate period following a death. The topic of grief is often confined to the first year or two, and therefore these books carry an unintentional message that bereavement is over and done with. Those walking the path of long-term grief know this to be a fallacy. One doesn’t simply “get over” the death of

a beloved child, spouse, parent, sibling, or friend. Other losses factor into this as well. Mourning the demise of one's health, home, job, mobility, or lifelong dream also entails a lengthy process of re-forming one's life and moving forward. The adage "time heals all wounds" puts no constraints around *how much* time is needed. Even so, our culture has little tolerance for heartbreak. We tend to streamline the process and sometimes limit it to a couple of hours a week in a support group. While these gatherings offer a vital way of helping people through the process, grief cannot be confined to a particular meeting place or timeline. Author Mirabai Starr describes it beautifully:

There is no map for the landscape of loss, no established itinerary, no cosmic checklist, where each item ticked off gets you closer to success. You cannot *succeed* in mourning your loved ones. You cannot fail. Nor is grief a malady, like the flu. You will not get over it. You will only come to integrate your loss... The death of a beloved is an amputation. You find a new center of gravity, but the limb does not grow back. (*Caravan of No Despair: A Memoir of Loss and Transformation*)

Just as there are few resources about grieving over a long period of time, it is difficult to find ones that address the grace that can emerge from the experience. This book addresses both. The first chapter begins with a recognition of grace and the mysterious way in which it might emanate from the deepest wounds. In chapters 2 and 3, I explore the devastating effects of unacknowledged and unresolved grief and the long-range effects on one's life. The fourth chapter considers ways in which the heart

grows mellow as a result of long-term grief—something that comes in a gradual fashion by befriending our woundedness and integrating it into our lives. The book concludes by circling around to the meaning of grace and the movement forward through gratitude, openness, and hope—not as a way to put grief behind us but to see how it opens up into something truly heavenly and generative. Each chapter begins with a passage from one of the post-Resurrection accounts in the Gospels. These help to illuminate various ways of finding God’s grace in our grief and allowing it to draw forth new life. Questions at various points in each chapter can be used for individual reflection or conversation with others.

I am well aware of the danger of funneling a topic as large as grief through one’s personal story. Nevertheless, my experience of grieving Jenny’s death for over forty years serves as a backdrop for the larger themes within each chapter. Therefore, to orient the reader to some of the references made to her short life and the aftermath of her death, I start with her story—and mine. Since you have probably picked up this book because of your own experience, I hope this will serve as an invitation and encouragement to reflect upon and share your own story with someone else.

One

The Awful Grace of God

Jesus said to her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” She thought it was the gardener and said to him, “Sir, if you carried him away, tell me where you laid him, and I will take him.” Jesus said to her, “Mary!” She turned and said to him in Hebrew, “Rabbouni,” which means Teacher. Jesus said to her, “Stop holding on to me, for I have not yet ascended to the Father. But go to my brothers and tell them, ‘I am going to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God.’” JOHN 20:15-17

On the morning of my scheduled return to Denver with Jenny, I awoke with a prayer for strength running through my mind. The thought of her undergoing even more surgery was terrifying. After the roller-coaster year with her, I wasn't sure of my own capacity to handle additional hospital vigils or to absorb the worry and strain of watching her try to recover. Her little

body had already endured so much. How, I wondered, could she sustain yet another operation? As devastating as it was, her death at home rather than in a hospital was a grace.

TURNING CORNERS

The account of Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus in the garden is both tender and jarring. She had witnessed a horrific execution and the dashing of hope. No wonder her first inclination upon recognizing Jesus was to hold onto him. In telling her not to cling to him, wasn't Jesus being a bit cold-hearted?

After years of processing Jenny's death, I can better understand this passage and why it is so vital to let go of the past. Yet, this isn't a quick and easy process. After Jenny died, I had a recurring dream about leaving her in the hospital or forgetting to care for her. At times, I awoke sobbing and shaken by the very thought of being so careless and neglectful. This lasted for several years, until the night when she told me she forgave me. I never had the dream again. In my waking hours, I could recognize the irrational nature of my guilt and remorse. Perhaps, in her own way, Jenny was urging me to let go of whatever restrained me from living more freely. Was this what Jesus did with Mary Magdalene?

My other two children—both born after Jenny's death—moved me farther along in this process. Ron, a gifted photographer, took dozens of pictures of all three children when they were babies. These were pre-digital days, so we had to wait for his photos to be returned, usually as slides. One night he set up the projector and we viewed the pictures in chronological

order. In one, Jenny was propped up on the couch at about the age of six months. Her pudgy feet poked out of a pair of sweatpants, and her freshly washed hair stuck straight up, illuminated by the sun streaming through the window behind her. The image brought a tug to my heart until Eric and Anna burst out laughing. It came as a shock and even struck me as irreverent. I took a second look and then relaxed into a smile. What my children saw was an adorable baby and not a tragic figure. For the first time since her death, I recognized her in the same way. I also realized that I needn't be frozen in time as the grieving mother. It was an important turning point—a moment of grace.

DROPLETS OF GRACE

Amazing grace, how sweet the sound...

JOHN NEWTON

As a child, I visualized grace as a milky white substance that cleansed the stain of sin. This arose from a lesson out of the *Baltimore Catechism*—one with an image of the soul as a milk bottle in which varying levels of sanctifying grace displaced each of our sins. Over time, the image matured. Thus, like the “amazing grace” described in John Newton’s hymn, I “hear” grace and recognize its profound reverberations in my life. Author Anne Lamott describes it as “a ribbon of mountain air that manages to get through the cracks” (*Grace (Eventually): Thoughts on Faith*). This image makes *breathing* grace even more potent. Rather than rising and falling according to our behavior patterns, grace surrounds us, able to penetrate every pore and

vessel. As Newton's lyrics note, it is only by being cracked and broken that we understand its redemptive nature and profound ability to heal and restore life.

The image of the milk bottle stuck with me over the years, perhaps because it was so visual. I could connect with it as a child. It took longer to understand that the container could remain empty for a lengthy period and that much of the grace would come in the form of teardrops—those shed and those withheld. Grace in this context is not always amazing.

He who learns must suffer. And even in our sleep pain that cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart, and in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom to us by the awful grace of God. AESCHYLUS

This quote by the ancient Greek dramatist Aeschylus helped draw the late Robert F. Kennedy through a devastating experience of loss. The words are engraved in a monument by RFK's own grave and provide a glimpse into both the devastation and the transformation he experienced after the assassination of his brother, President John F. Kennedy. It might seem contradictory to find consolation in the words of "the father of tragedy," as Aeschylus is called, but it makes sense while in the midst of grief. Anyone who experiences the pain that even sleep cannot alleviate can also appreciate the slow drip upon the heart that occurs over the long term. It also leads, over time, to the grace that can emerge through awful events and circumstances.

This is not to say that God sends these losses and trials to test our faith or measure our mettle. I long ago rejected the notion that Jenny's death was part of a divine plan or that God needed another "angel in heaven." Both explanations were offered to me by well-meaning people who didn't know what to say in the wake of my loss. Ironically, it was through the last days of her life and then her death that I came to recognize the God who weeps with us amid our pain and suffering.

Over the years, I also began to understand the value placed upon tears in both the Jewish and Christian traditions. *Penthos* is an ancient Greek word meaning sorrow, grief, or sadness. In both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, it is associated with contrition or a turning of one's heart away from sin and toward God. Thus, the tears that flow from *penthos* are sacred because of their transformative possibilities. The great mystic Catherine of Siena described the evolving nature of tears that flow first from a punctured heart and, in time, provide an opening to inner growth and eventual consolation from a God of endless love. This is not an overnight process, however. It entails an inner knowing that can only come from suffering.

Another lesson I absorbed as a child—one not as warmly embraced as that of milk bottles full of grace—was that suffering was not only necessary in life but also desired. Here, too, it took some maturation to distinguish redemptive suffering from extreme asceticism. My Catholic upbringing included exposure to the prominence of the cross in Christian tradition. It was a constant presence as part of liturgical rituals, particularly during Lent. At first glance, the veneration of the cross, which takes place during the Good Friday liturgy, seems maudlin and even a bit sadistic. After traversing the long and painful

path of loss, however, it becomes possible to recognize “the awful grace of God” enfolded in the practice. More than one saint prayed for a cross that would overcome their pride and school them in humility. While sometimes taken to extremes, such a petition acknowledges the paradoxical nature of human suffering. James Finley, a clinical psychologist and author of several books on contemplation and spirituality, frames it this way: “The deeper the brokenness, the greater the momentum of the descent. The greater the momentum of the descent, the more deeply compassionate love descends into the innermost recesses of our doubts and fears. Suddenly encountering such love, our doubts and fears melt in the love that sets us free” (*Christian Meditation: Experiencing the Presence of God*).

It took a lot longer than one night of viewing baby pictures for me to cease clinging to my grief. As Finley notes, there is a descent that comes with suffering, and it is not reconciled in a single experience. Instead, the grace comes in a drop-by-drop measure that allows us to give voice to our anguish and acknowledge the depth of our pain.



For Reflection *or* Conversation

What is your image of grace?

How have you experienced “the awful grace of God”?

What released you from a hold on past grief?