

Living with Loss
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2 Corinthians 1:1-7
Genesis 32: 22-31

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My friend Sarah has PLS, primary lateral sclerosis. Like ALS, PLS is a disease of motor neurons that causes progressive nerve degeneration. Over the past five years or so, I've watched Sarah lose the ability to walk, speak, and eat solid food. She is 35 years old, with a bright, flashing smile, a husband and two young children. Sarah has been an inspiration to everyone who knows her. In spite of the successive losses in her life, she has continued to be a great mother, has offered online support to others with her disease, and founded and organized an annual race in downtown Raleigh for professional and amateur runners to raise money for research.

I trotted beside her wheelchair last year on a sunny October day as she sped down Fayetteville Street at the end of the event she called "The Magnificent Mile". Sarah, the former marathon runner, maneuvered her chair down the road, the wind in her hair, beaming at the crowd who cheered her on. She raised almost \$25,000 that day for PLS research. She has an even bigger goal for this year's race which will be held in a few weeks.

My home church organized a care team to help Sarah with the challenges she faced in her daily life. The members of our care team were given an orientation and training by Stan, a friend who is a chaplain at Wake Medical Center in Raleigh. Stan had those who had volunteered to be on Sarah's care team take strips of paper and write the people and aspects of our lives that were most important to us. We wrote things like "my health", "my children", "spouse or partner", "job", "best friend", "home", not knowing what was going to come next. Then, Stan asked us to hold out the strips face down in our hands. He walked by each one of us and arbitrarily took one or more strips from each person. Some of us lost only one strip, others two or three. Some of us found ourselves losing beloved family members, others sighed with relief when only a job was taken.

This exercise was both disturbing and deeply meaningful. It made me think about the unpredictability of life and about the nature of loss. I realized that it was designed to help me understand more clearly about how the loss of health, along with other losses that ripple out from this primary one, impact a person like Sarah. When we are reminded at a deep level that any one of us could be in Sarah's position, that in fact, we are all wounded or broken in many different ways, then we are in a better place to offer empathy and compassion.

All creatures experience pain and suffering. It is one of the essential qualities of being, a fundamental fact of life. And most religions seem to recognize that existence involves pain. We all live with loss, whether it be suffering in our own lives or the pain of someone close to us. Some losses are transient and may only cause temporary discomfort or sadness. Others are devastating. We may lose our home, reputation, financial security, or job. We can be touched by the profound grief of losing a child, a spouse or partner, or another cherished family member.

We might live with a serious illness or the slow loss of our memory, or we may accompany one we love who faces a terminal illness or progressive dementia. A child or family member born with mental illness or a physical disability causes us to lose the ideal of what we wanted life to be like for that person we cherish. A beloved pet dies, and there is deep grief. Relationships are broken, friendships are fractured, and we feel torn apart and overcome.

Suffering is real, but it is not something that a divine hand does to us, reaching out to cosmically snatch away what is precious to us. It is not the will of a God who embodies love to inflict pain on those that are

the objects of that love. This we do know: loss is woven into the fabric of existence, and we cannot explain why.

Grief is the natural first response to loss. Like the psalmist or Job, we cry out “Why?” We mourn what was precious that has been taken away. We grieve from the pain that hits us like a brick between the eyes, and we *should* do this. It is the human response to suffering that is both wrenching and necessary.

Yet, even though suffering can be brutal, and even though it has no intrinsic value or meaning, it can sometimes be a source of transformation. This is the mystery that we witness again and again. Somehow, there are those who have become more real because of their suffering. Some have made their own wounds a way of bringing healing and compassion to others.

Rachel Remen, a Jewish writer and cancer surgeon, remembers her grandfather telling her the story of Jacob wrestling with the angel when she was a small child. He helped her see it as a teaching that what brings pain can also bring wisdom, that we can bless others from the place of our own woundedness. Remen writes:

Sometimes a wound is the place where we encounter life for the first time, where we come to know its power and its ways. Wounded, we may find a wisdom that will enable us to live better than any knowledge and glimpse a view of ourselves and of life that is both true and unexpected.

Almost the last story that my grandfather told me was about a man called Jacob who had been attacked in the night as he slept alone by the bank of a river....the place had seemed safe enough. But it was not so. He awakened to find himself gripped by muscular arms and pinned to the ground...Gathering all his strength, he began to struggle to be free...

“How long did they struggle, Grandpa?” I asked with some anxiety.

“A long, long time, Neshume-le,” he replied, “But the darkness does not last forever. Eventually it was dawn, and as the light came, Jacob saw that he had been wrestling with an angel.”

*‘Let me go,’ the angel told Jacob, ‘The Light has come.’ But Jacob said, ‘I will not let you go until you bless me.’ And so the angel gave him his blessing....but Jacob’s leg was hurt in the struggle. Before the angel left, he touched him on the place where he was hurt....He touched it to remind Jacob of it. Jacob carried it all the rest of his life. It was his place of remembering.” (Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather’s Blessings*, Riverhead Books, New York, 2000, p. 25-26).*

Like Jacob, we may have found ourselves struggling with an unknown force in our lives that could be enemy or angel, and perhaps both. We all long for the darkness to give way to light and for the struggle to end. We limp away with wounds that remain with us the rest of our lives as places of remembering.

Rachel Remen concludes in this way:

Looking back on it, I have wondered if my grandfather, old and close to the time of his death, had not left me with this story as a compass. It is a puzzling story, a story about the nature of blessings and the nature of enemies. How tempting to let the enemy go and flee. To put the struggle behind you as quickly as possible and get on with your life. Life might be easier then but far less genuine. Perhaps the wisdom lies in engaging the life you have been given as fully and courageously as possible and not letting go until you find the unknown blessing that is in everything. (Ibid, p. 27)

If this is one definition of wisdom, then I have met many in my life who are wise. They move from, and through great loss, engaging life with courage and grace, wringing from it unexpected blessing.

Those who live most gracefully through loss share other characteristics, as well. They seem to approach life with the default position of gratitude rather than entitlement. It is easy for us to get caught up in the excessive expectations we are taught as members of a consumer culture in the western world. Daniel Boorstin says it this way:

We expect too much of the world.... When we pick up our newspaper at breakfast, we expect- we even demand- that it bring us momentous events since the night before...Returning in the evening, we expect our house not only to shelter us, to keep us warm in winter and cool in summer, but to relax us, to dignify us, to encompass us with soft music and interesting hobbies, to be a playground, a theater, and a bar... We expect our two-week vacation to be romantic, exotic, cheap, and effortless... we expect everything to be relaxing, sanitary, and Americanized if we go to a faraway place...

We expect anything and everything. We expect the contradictory and the impossible. We expect compact cars which are spacious; luxurious cars which are economical... We expect to eat and stay thin, to be constantly on the move and ever more neighborly, to go to a "church of our choice" and yet feels its guiding power over us. To revere God and to be God.

Never have a people been more the masters of their environment. Yet never has a people felt more deceived and disappointed. For never has a people expected so much more than the world could offer.

*(Daniel Boorstin, **The Image**, Atheneum Publishers, 1961, pp.3-4).*

Those I have come to know who live authentically and joyfully in spite of their losses don't feel entitled to all the world has to offer. Rather they express a sense of deep appreciation for what they receive and experience. They view life as a gift rather than something owed to them.

These wise ones also have an exceptional ability to enjoy the present moment, to live deeply within the circumstances and relationships that have been handed to them without constantly wishing for it to be otherwise. Many of us have not yet figured this out. We often forfeit happiness by imagining what might have been.

Haven Kimmel has a character in her novel, *The Solace of Leaving Early*, who epitomizes the agony of those of us who sense that making any choice entails the loss of other options. Amos Townsend is a young minister in a small town in Indiana.

Amos remembers driving to work and being passed on the highway by a decrepit car packed with people. Inside is a Mexican family, a father and mother with at least four children in the back seat and two squeezed between their parents in the front.

For just a moment, Amos couldn't swallow, so dearly did he wish to be one of them....Certain houses caused the same wave of longing- the look of a particular curtain in an upstairs window, or a bike left on the lawn- and some movies did it, too. Why? He wanted to ask his congregants. "Why does this happen to us? Because we have abandoned an infinite number and variety of pure possibilities, and perhaps they live alongside the choices we did make, immortalized in the cosmic memory.

Perhaps there are unknown lives walking alongside ours, those paths we didn't take, and we reach for them, we ache for them, and don't know why.....What he really wanted to say was: have you felt this? This phantom life streaking like a phosphorescent hound at the edges of your ruin?
(Haven Kimmel, *The Solace of Leaving Early*, Doubleday: New York, 2002, p. 33)

Sometimes we torture ourselves with a sense of false loss, imagining that our lives would somehow have been so much better had we taken a different career path, married a different person, lived in a different place, made a different choice. But, we could be happier if we accept what has taken place in the past. We could be more balanced, more whole, if we are grateful for our current life, embrace both its joys and sorrows, and live fully into the circumstances we have been given.

Harold Kushner is a rabbi who wrote the bestseller, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, after the death of his son. In a later book, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Kushner explores the themes expressed by the writer of Ecclesiastes and other scriptures as he identifies three essentials for a meaningful life: Belong to people. Accept pain as part of life. Know that you have made a difference. (p. 162)
(Harold Kushner, *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Summit Books: New York, 1986, p.162.)

For Kushner, accepting pain also means accepting death as a natural part of existence. He writes:

As the author of the Twenty-third Psalm understood so many years ago, God does not redeem us from death. We will all die one day. But [God] redeems us from the shadow of death, from letting our lives be paralyzed by the fear of death. [God] helps us prevent death from casting its shadow over the years we do have to live. (p.161)

Kushner's other two essentials for a meaningful life, belonging to people and knowing that you have made a difference, circle us back around to the point made by Rachel Remen's grandfather: companionship one another in spite of our own losses makes us wounded healers, giving back good from the place of our own pain. We remember Jesus who spent much of his life's work not only teaching, but going around the countryside healing those who were hurting, because, as the scripture says, "his heart was filled with pity for them, because they were worried and helpless". (Matt.9:36) He was willing to risk danger and even death to live authentically and compassionately.

And so, we who try to follow Jesus while living with our own losses, we too have the opportunity to reach out a hand to someone else. "Pain is profoundly social, it is eminently shareable", says theologian Matthew Fox. It is "the most legitimate school for compassion that I know of." (*Matthew Fox, Original Blessing, Bear and Company: Santa Fe, 1983 p. 143.*) Pain links us to others. "All social movements and organizations were born of pain. Not privatized pain or pain kept to oneself or the wallowing in one's own pain, but pain shared. Unemployment shared. Unjust taxes shared," writes Fox. (p.145)

And so, may we all learn to live with loss. May the pain in our own lives give us a wise compassion and the energy to fight those things which bring pain to others. May we limp away from our places of suffering, not quite sure whether we have encountered enemy or angel. And may our wounds be places of remembering, reminders not only of long hours of struggling in the darkness, but also of blessings that come at sunrise.

Amen.