

LOVE'S LABOR LOST  
A Sermon by Fritz Hudson  
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"Bit by bit ... it comes over us that we shall never again hear the laughter of our friend, that this one garden is forever locked against us. And at that moment begins our true mourning ... For nothing, in truth, can replace that companion. Old friends cannot be created out of hand. Nothing can match the treasure of common memories, of trials endured together, of quarrels and reconciliations and generous emotions. It is idle, having planted an acorn in the morning, to expect that afternoon to sit in the shade of the oak." These words come to us from the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, best known for his fable "The Little Prince." The feelings he expresses are known to all of us. They arise quite naturally for our reflection this weekend every year—Memorial Day weekend.

I was in the fourth grade when I first knew the feeling of irremediable loss. A friend of mine, Randy Farina, one of my baseball pals, began being absent from school frequently. "Randy is sick." That was all we were told. Then one day, our teacher opened class saying: "Boys and girls, I must tell you today that Randy has died." He had had stomach cancer. And I was among those boys asked to be a pall bearer at his funeral, my first. It was a scary day, an empty day. And life, for me, on that day turned a page.

Over the decades I lived through the deaths of three grandparents, two aunts, three uncles and most recently my father and then my mother. And, along the way, I've survived the death of five dogs, many friends, and nearly 200 members of my churches. I've also lost, or given up, or been deprived of more than one lover, several more friends, nine churches, more than a dozen houses and neighborhoods, ten cities and even a country or two - and many, many cherished achievements, goals, and ideals. And so have you, and more.

What we feel at these losses and partings is often called grief. But frankly, I think it's far more accurate to say that what we feel is pain—an emptiness; a tight, dry throat; a bound chest; a sinking stomach; weak knees; weak eyes. Grief—or grieving, mourning, more accurately, is what we do with the pain of those losses and partings, and how we grieve is what determines what feelings will follow our pain.

All losses and partings involve pain—both those losses that are voluntary and those that are involuntary. The type of loss, though, makes quite a difference in the kind of pain we feel

- With losses which happen to us, particularly irretrievable losses, as when a loved one dies, the pain is mostly one of emptiness.
- With losses that we choose, as when we move from a neighborhood or create distance in a friendship, the pain is more likely to be felt as an awful doubt, an unsureness that one has made the right choice.

For all losses, the pain carries with it at least a hint of guilt. We ask ourselves:

- Did I do everything I could have done for the fulfillment of that relationship?

- Might I have done more to make it better or last longer?

John Updike, in his novel *Rabbit*, taught us that a person who cannot acknowledge that he or she has lost something has no chance of really living beyond the loss. And the most difficult part of learning to live after a loss is learning and accepting that no matter how full a life may yet lie before you, the pain of the loss will never totally disappear. To begin to grieve, to begin to work beyond the pain of loss, one must first face the parting, with all its pain and all its guilt.

Alla Bozarth-Campbell's poem "Scars," captures the lesson.

Grieving is an art  
like surgery or verse,  
essentially the art of healing  
loss of losses unaccounted for.

Losses cut the soul  
in twos and threes  
a wide green gash  
like the wound of  
a tree cut down  
suddenly.

So much more time  
than expected  
so slowly heals  
the severed pieces  
of the self shock-shattered  
by guilt and rage and the simple loneliness  
of something missing.

the hug, the casual telephone talk,  
the good occasional fight lost forever  
to the harsh nonphysical world of death.

Grief lived faithfully heals itself  
in time not fully.  
Where once an open wound burned unbearably  
now a thin transparent scar.

Still I know that 'till  
the hour of my own death  
the scar glows  
and now and then bad weather  
will come and waken the same old ache.  
A scar is a now and then throb  
that dies only with one's own death.

Each time we come to terms with the permanence of a loss and of its pain, we are faced with a decision. We must answer the question which Albert Camus identified as the fundamental and constant question of life: "Given who I am now, given what I know now, given what possibilities lie before me and what possibilities are forever closed, is life still worth going on?"

- If our loss comes upon us unbidden, we may wonder what more surprises life has in store for us and whether we can weather any more.
- If our loss comes upon us by our own choice, we may wonder whether we can trust ourselves to make wise choices in the future.

Whatever our wonderment, whatever our doubts, however deep and overwhelming our immediate, excruciating sense of pain and guilt, our faith is well-captured by Shelley Jackson Denham, in the song "Credo," numbered 354 in our hymnal:  
"We believe in life and in the strength of love."

Our faith—our sense of our individual worth and dignity, our sense of a capacity for love, for compassion, for freely and responsibly seeking out truth and meaning—all the values of our faith, until they are all entirely exhausted, call us ever to choose to go on.

What calls us forward? Well, that changes.

What first calls us forward may be simple curiosity: our intrigue with change itself, our "I-wonder-what-will-happen-next" spirit, even if the change does not bring pleasure. The pain of loss, while never eradicable, is always changing.

- The pain of loss often begins in shock and numbness, with an absolutely enervating inability to do anything, even to insure our own survival. If we hang in, this will pass.
- What the numbness passes into may well be a feeling of being swept up onto a most erratic roller coaster. At one moment we feel demon-driven to hyper-activity. Then at the next moment we are overwhelmed with guilt at dishonoring our loss by even trying to live without what we once had. And yet, this too will pass.
- As our manic-depressive swings begin to smooth out then, they might well be replaced by fits of rage, anger at the injustice of our loss, anger
  - at whoever we fancy caused our loss
  - at the one who died (why didn't he take better care of himself?);
  - at ourselves (why didn't I know she was in trouble?);
  - at the world beyond us (what kind of a neighborhood, city, country, species, God, would let such a thing happen?)
- Anger is what we feel; what we do often is to vent our anger on the powerless innocents with whom we currently share space and time—on our children, on our pets, on our belongings, on strangers in the streets or stores. But again, this too will pass.
- It often passes into a kind of calmness, but a calmness with an uncertain foundation, a sadness in the soul, a sluggishness in the body and spirit both.

All these passages make grief a long ride, an exhausting ride. The riding, though, is a wonder in its way. It is, I believe, part of any real search for truth. It is also the only path by which one

can enter a new life of love.

Ultimately, we are called to go on with life by more than our curiosity, more than our search for truth. We are called to go beyond our losses by our search for meaning and our commitment to spiritual growth. Painful as the process may be, grief is one of the surest doors to growth. "Growth always confronts us with having to give something up," (Charles Stephen), or as Friedrich Nietzsche told us "That which does not kill me makes me strong." Our very capacity to feel the pain of loss is also a measure of our capacity to feel anything at all. So only if we open ourselves to that pain, can we open ourselves to feel something more beyond the pain.

Khalil Gibran, the Persian poet, said it for us:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears. And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain. Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven? And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

And we are weeping for something else as well. We are weeping in our deepest longing, our hope against hope, that we will one day again feel such delight.

What grieving is, really, is an emotional rehabilitation program. It's just like the physical rehabilitation program any athlete enters after suffering a career-threatening injury. The whole purpose of the grieving process is to make oneself able, once again, to enter the game of life. Ultimately, as the athletes all tell us, the success of the process rests on our own will to see it through. And yet there are some things, just like there are rehab programs, and some people, just like there are rehab trainers, that can help us see it through.

Remember, loss forces all of us to face the ultimate question of life—is it worth going on? There is always the possibility that someone close to you will answer that question "No." Indeed eventually, given the chance, we will all answer it "No." But many days before that final day, our lives and theirs will be richer if we both answer the question, "Yes." If you know someone in the pain of loss, and you know that your life would be poorer if he or she answered that question "No" today, there is much you can do to help them say the "Yes" you want to hear.

At the formal level, our church's memorial services are an aid in the decision to say "Yes" to life. Many churches now, with us, call these services "A Celebration Life." In binding grieving people together to affirm a life now passed, this formal ritual suggests to those awash in pain that the pain may hold within it other possibilities.

From time to time, I've had church members tell me in advance that they want no memorial services at their death. I tell them then. I'll tell you now. I may well not honor such a request. The service is not for the dead. It speaks not to the dead nor to the life beyond this one. The service is for the living, the grieving. It is a path which can help them take up their life anew.

At an informal, personal level, simple words we might say to one in pain can also help them choose life. There are words that seldom help:

- The words, "I know just how you feel," can attempt to make too quick and easy a connection.
- The words, "It is for the best, you know," can seem to diminish a grieving person's right to feel the pain they feel.
- The words, "If there is anything I can do, call me," puts the burden on an already weak person to think up something for you to do.

There are other words, however, that I believe do help:

- The words, "This is hard, isn't it," places you next to the pain and let's its owner know you would welcome an invitation to share it.
- The words, "I'd like to be with you, but only when you want me. Can I call you?" Those words let another know you're there but let them choose when and where your presence will assist them.
- More specifically these words can help
  - Can I call relatives or friends for you?
  - Can I arrange for your visitors' housing?
  - Can I bring some food over?
  - Can I do some shopping for you, or run an errand?
  - Can I help you write your thank-yous?
  - Can I help you go through what s/he left behind?
  - Can I take you to a movie?
  - Can I take you out to lunch?

When you suggest what occurs to you as possible ways you could help, the griever need only make one of two responses: "Yes, that would be great," or "No, thanks." If you get the "No thanks" response, and you still care; ask again later. Part of the journey of grief are our changes in our receptivity to help.

And what is the end of all this work? What does it feel like to get fully back into the game of life?

The end is really has two dimensions. On one hand, the end of grief is a full appreciation for what one has lost and what one still has.

Anne Morrow Lindbergh's poem "Testament" captures this gift.

But how can I live without you? she cried.  
I left all world to you when I died:  
Beauty of earth and air and sea;

Leap of a swallow or a tree;  
Kiss of rain and wind's embrace;  
Passion of storm and winter's face:  
Touch of feather, flower, and stone;  
Chiseled line of branch or bone;  
Flight of stars, night's caravan;  
Song of crickets - and of man -  
All these I put in my testament,  
All these I bequeathed you when I went.

But how can I see them without your eyes,  
Or touch them without your hand?  
How can I hear them without your ear?  
Without your heart, understand?

These too, these too  
I leave to you!

On the other hand, the end of grief is the ability to fully commit oneself to share the gifts received in one life now ended in other lives yet living and before us.

As Stanton Coit says it:

The love you can no longer give to one, the many cry out for.  
The sympathy you can no longer give your friend, the friendless call for.  
In lightening the burdens of others, you own sorrows will be lightened.  
And in healing the world's woes, your own will find their cure.  
For only the duties of the heart can truly console the heart.