

Grief Makes Us Whole

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On September 5th, I got the call just before 10 p.m. My friend and skydiving instructor Dennis Johnson had been killed in an ultralight accident that afternoon in Gobles. It was Labor Day and my brother was calling with the news.

My initial reaction was physical. I doubled over quickly, as though I'd been punched in the gut. Then came disbelief. It simply wasn't possible that Dennis was dead. I kept waiting for my brother to tell me it was a joke, but he didn't. Then I wanted all the facts. Where did it happen? What time? Whose ultralight was it? Was his wife Mary there when it happened? Jim shared with me what information he had, though it wasn't much. My feelings came last. I started to cry, and then I sobbed. I was devastated.

A friend asked me a few days later why I was so upset. Dennis wasn't the regular part of my life he once was. Why did his death bother me so much?

I think it's because I can't ever go back. My life is like a puzzle. All the pieces of it fit together and make me who I am. The pieces that represented Dennis are now gone forever, and the puzzle has a hole in it.

At the visitation, Mary and I hugged each other and cried for a few minutes. It was as though we'd just seen each other the day before. I learned that time and distance didn't matter. My grief was bitter and sweet.

Here are the other things I know about grief:

I know that it serves a purpose. Like blood flowing when we are injured, grief cleanses the wound.

I know there is a difference between grief and mourning. Grief is the internal experience of loss, all the thoughts and feelings. Mourning is the expression of loss. Mourning can occur in a number of ways – crying, praying, talking, singing... I know that mourning must occur, no matter what form it takes, because grief doesn't go away by itself. In the absence of mourning, grief can manifest itself as a disease, violence, or an addiction.

I know, even when I am feeling my worst, when the world seems to be a dark place that will never be light again, that I won't always feel so bad. It will probably take longer than I want it to take, but I will feel better. It feels impossible now, but I will feel joy again.

I know that healing from grief is innate – it is how we are made. When a bone is broken and a cast is put on, the doctor isn't doing the healing. The doctor is creating an environment where healing can occur. The healing itself comes from the Source of All Life. Grief heals the same way.

Ernest Hemingway said, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, many are strong in the broken places." The scar tissue at the point of a healed broken bone makes that part of the bone stronger than the rest of it. Why shouldn't the same be true of our spirits?

I know that grief has its own timetable. In the same way that we don't peel open a flower to see the beauty of the bloom, so too should we be patient with our grief.

Death is the great equalizer, but grief is the great connector. There are things we know and understand about others who are grieving. Those who have not experienced loss cannot possibly understand.

I recently met a man who was funny, intelligent and a good storyteller. He was also paralyzed from the waist down and used a wheelchair. He was so enjoyable to listen to that, after the first two minutes, I completely forgot about the chair. Later I thought about what a great person he was despite his horrible accident and permanent injury. Then I realized there was no possible way his injury didn't affect him. Was he a great person because of his accident?

I started thinking about the gifts of grief and the increased understanding I now have: that I can't go back – the puzzle pieces are gone forever; that time and distance don't matter, that even during the darkest most painful times, I know that grief is serving a purpose; that I won't always feel bad; that healing is built into me and has its own timeline; that we can make authentic, deep connections with others who are grieving.

I didn't know all these things until I was hit with a significant loss. My life has been enriched, added to. Grief has filled in some of the empty places with a knowledge, an understanding; its gifts.

It's a paradox, but it's true. Grief makes us whole.