

Grief:

A Long Dark Journey Back To Life



by John Dobbs

Looking Back

Like all parents, we never knew what this new life we held in our arms was going to bring. He was born a little too soon, so he spent his first two weeks in ICU. With his head cradled in my palm his feet barely reached my elbow. I held this little boy and could not see what lay ahead. His mother and sister and I were filled with love since we knew he was coming. It did not take long before our little preemie boy was a full grown young man looking at us eye to eye. Well, it didn't seem very long. So losing John Robert at age eighteen just a few nights before his High School graduation was the most painful thing any of us have experienced.

This ebook is not John Robert's story. I would like to write that one day, and I'll mention him several times. I just wanted you to know as you begin this reading that my family is on this long dark journey back to life. I bet that many people who take the time to read this are too. Maybe you didn't lose a child, but lost some very significant person. Maybe you lost a loved one due to divorce, or maybe you've got a list of losses that could fill a book of your own.

Grief is a strange experience. It's almost the same for everyone, but not quite. No two people have exactly the same thoughts, feelings, or struggles. Still, there are many things in common for those who struggle through grief. Whether it is your home or mine, the chair is still empty. The sounds are no longer there. The hopes for the future we expected are gone, replaced by the past. Looking back becomes a comfort as we try to find a path forward.

In spite of good intentions, some of the “help” available for those who are bereaved is not very helpful. The philosophical and religious musings of those who have not suffered a loss are of no value. Why would anyone even attempt to address such an immense hurt if they have not suffered it? Please do not think me irreverent if I tell you that the theological answers about why God allows suffering haven’t helped much either. I do love God. I do know that He had the power to prevent John Robert’s death. I do know that he did not. If we spent the next fifty years digging through the writings of theodicy we would not find a complete and healed heart on the other side.

So how do we find our way back to life? I am sharing with you some of the things that might be a little help. I wish I could tell you that I’ve found a secret that is going to bring instant and complete healing. Sorry. Your world has been changed forever and nothing is going to undo that. Since we are only two years into our season of grief, I feel sure we will re-write this at some point in the future as we grow and learn. In other words, we are adapting and growing as we go.

For now, I just wanted you to know that we have experienced a death in our family. We are determined to find new life.

~Grieving People Are Not Crazy~

Grieving people do crazy things and think crazy thoughts. They also can become convinced that they are crazy. Short term memory is lost in the haze of losing someone we love. Simple things that used to be no trouble at all now find us almost on our knees trying to get the

courage to give them a try. The world is in slow motion at times, and in fast motion at the same time. Days and nights go by without sleep, and then with nothing but sleep. One moment we find ourselves doing well, even feeling some happiness return. The next moment we are on the floor barely able to move under the weight of our loss. Maggy and I know what those kinds of days are like.

"After a personal loss people think that nothing looks the same. Food loses its flavor, music seems hollow, and nothing satisfies. Tears come at strange times, often for no apparent reason. The bereaved person may see someone walking down the street who looks like the person who died, and pain comes without warning." (Graham, p. 166) I wish I could number the times when we "saw" John Robert. He was everywhere. For a time there is that sliver of hope that maybe this wasn't true and he will be coming in the door any minute.

If you have experienced something like this, I will tell you that you are definitely not insane. Maybe you heard voices, had vivid dreams, or even visions of the one you lost – those are not indications of mental instability for grieving people. A friend of mine who lost her husband many years ago told me that she would often wake up in the night to find her television on. That's not so odd, except that she remembered turning it off on her way to bed. This was in the days before remote controls, so the television had to be turned on manually. It was not a frightening event for her. It was re-affirming.

Another unavoidable event that may leave us questioning our sanity is the grief attack that arrives without warning. Grief attacks are

common for those who have a fresh loss. They can be set off by any number of events. Hearing a song that our loved one used to enjoy, a scent of a certain kind of cologne, revisiting a familiar scene – any of these may trigger tears and pain. It is also true that we may not know what brings these attacks on.

One authority on grief said there is "a rather vague misery that we feel everywhere at once and nowhere in particular." (Graham, p. 170) This kind of experience can leave us questioning our sanity, but you are not crazy. In fact, "grief is a natural and healthy consequence that should occur when a loss has happened in a person's life." (Williams p. 30)

John 11:35 says "Jesus Wept."

~Grief Is A Journey~

It is crucial to always remember that grief is a journey. It is not like a cold that we suffer from for a while and then get over. It is an ongoing condition that never ends. Grief never ends because those left behind continue to live. "So I own my grief. I do not try to put it behind me, to get over it, to forget it. I do not try to *dis-own* it." (Wolterstorff, pp 5-6)

We were surprised by the significance of the 'first things'. The anniversaries of the first year are especially painful. John Robert died in May. I believe that Maggy's family reunion was the first special day we had without him. We could not bear to go. Then came our anniversary in July. August began a series of birthdays in our family, each one a celebration without John Robert. His own birthday in October was a day

we dreaded, but somehow found peace within. Thanksgiving? It was so hard to see that empty chair, to not hear his laughter. I'm pretty sure we never took our Christmas tree out. And then the anniversary of his death in May marked a year without him. To tell you the truth I remember very little about that year. Perhaps that is a blessing from God.

Nicholas Wolterstorff calls this the "neverness...Never again to be here with us – never to sit with us at the table, never to travel with us, never to laugh with us, never to cry with us, never to embrace us as he leaves for school, never to see his brothers and sister marry...Only our death can stop the pain of his death." (Wolterstorff, p. 15)

This journey is one we must take. Every anniversary, special day, event, leads us to a safer place in our heart. It is a place where we can smile again, and not feel guilty. The severity lessens over time. Our losses will always hurt. We will never stop loving or missing our loved ones. However, the sharpness of that pain diminishes. William Cowper once wrote, "Grief is itself a med'cine."

In so many ways grief is a journey of faith. It is easy to understand the gospel story, many of us heard it from the time we were children. It is not until our faith is tested that we realize the value of our convictions and God's power. We have learned that faith is not for the good times, faith is for the times when we have nothing left to hang on to.

Watch for signs that the storm is calming. Experiencing genuine joy, smiling at things that touch your heart, a desire to help other people, and comfort in the memories.

Isaiah 53:3-4 says “He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief...” (NLT)

~Hurting People Can Help Hurting People~

After John Robert passed away and we had taken some time away to get a grip on our new life without him, we came back to our new home in Monroe. We had just moved to Monroe, LA after many years on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. One of our elders and his wife (and our dear friends), Mike and Mignon Riley, invited us to have lunch with another special couple. French and Marilyn lost their son, Stephen, while he was still a young man. Although several years had passed, their love for him was just as strong. During that lunch I was mostly quiet. Maggy was quietly crying. French said something I did not believe and really did not want to hear. He said, “It will get better.”

French and Marilyn, along with many other strong and supportive people were leaders in a group called The Compassionate Friends. I had never heard of them before, but they have been around a long time. This was a group with only one condition of entrance: you have to have lost a child or sibling. It is a club no one wants to join. When we went to our first meeting I was crushed by the amount of pain in that room. A very gracious woman introduced herself, gave me a hug and said to me, “I wish we didn’t have to meet like this, but I’m glad you chose to be here tonight.” In that room was another couple who lost their son almost on the same day, and in the same manner, as we had lost John Robert. We also met people who had lost their children thirty and forty years ago.

Another group that helped us was a support group called GriefShare, introduced to us by our friends Royce and Carol Ogle. This group also provided needed support at a crucial time. Our church still offers GriefShare through the work and encouragement of the Ogles.

No one really knows how you feel, but those who have suffered a significant loss will be able to sympathize with you in a deeper way than others can.

In connection with this, seek out counseling if you feel you need it. Don't be surprised at the lack of grief counselors in your area. Grief counseling is treated by most schools as a segment of the overall counseling program - not as a standalone specialty. I was blessed by a wonderful counselor in Monroe named James Bagwell. From our first meeting James said that I could say whatever I wanted, however I wanted to say it - a completely safe place to express myself. Without worrying about offending him or anyone else, my heart was free to find that expression.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4 says "God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us."

~Grief Must Be Expressed~

Whether you write, weep, blog, or give gifts in honor of loved one, grief needs to find some expression in your life. Do not trivialize grief! It is not something we can simply dismiss. When we act as if we are doing

great when we are not, we are taking a very important emotional reaction and stifling it to our own harm. I found it very cathartic to write blogposts for others to read during the most intense time of grief. That came natural for me, and it might not be your way. Choose something that expresses your heart and it's broken condition.

Try not to feel guilty for expressing grief. There is no need to apologize when tears come unexpectedly. How often my wife and I are feeling hot tears of grief spill down our cheeks while we are worshiping God. That reverent moment reminds us of the awesome promises we believe, and that we will see John Robert and other loved ones again. We are not letting the Lord down or being a bad example when we express our grief.

Sometimes there is real guilt to deal with. "When we lose one we love, our bitterest tears are called forth by the memory of hours when we loved not enough" writes Maurice Maeterlinck, *Wisdom and Destiny*. When someone is gone it is too late for them to hear you express your sorrow or apology. It is at these kinds of times when we must be flooded by God's grace and recognize that our shortcomings are not beyond his healing touch.

"Grief hides under many masquerades. It takes many forms. The facade of grief may be indifference, preoccupation, anger, cheerfulness, or any variety of emotions." (Graham, 162) Pretending that we are not hurting does not fool our friends and it does not help our hearts.

There are some who seem disturbed when grief is expressed. Often our friends or coworkers may think we ought to be farther along

in our grief than we are. We must exercise grace to those who have no idea what this feels like. I remember at some point realizing that I never knew how bad grief hurts...until now. Maybe they do not know either.

Colossians 2:2 says “That their hearts might be comforted, being knit together in love, and unto all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the acknowledgement of the mystery of God, and of the Father, and of Christ.” (KJV)

~Learning To Live Again Is Killing Me~

It is a long journey – it takes a long time. I’m sure that even after two years I have more than my fair share of learning and growing to do. It is a dark journey, darkness like none I have ever known. It is also a journey back to life. In the beginning, it seems that this lament expresses things best:

Lament

Life must go on, and the dead be forgotten;

Life must go on, Though good men die'

Anne, eat you breakfast; Dan, take your medicine;

Life must go on, I forget just why

--Edna St. Vincent Millay

When we lose someone we love so dearly it feels like our old lives were taken away from us and we were given new ones ... lives we do not really like. It is so hard to rebound from such losses. But each day is an opportunity to move ahead. I like “move ahead” rather than “move on”. Moving on suggests that we are leaving behind the painful reality of the

loss. We don't want to forget. We want to always remember, and we would like to remember without it hurting so bad. That is moving ahead.

~Without Answers~

Dr. Richard Whitlock saw Maggy and I sometime after John Robert died. He is a positive man of faith, a compassionate man. He advised us not to try to find out all of the answers. Sometimes we expect to lose someone we love due to their old age. Sometimes when someone has suffered for a long time it is a relief to the one who has passed. Other situations, though, are plagued with the unknown. The truth is that even if we know what happened and how it happened that we lost our loved one, it would not bring them back.

Why? This is "... one of the first questions that will be asked, and will continue to be asked." (Williams p. 39) We have to live with a certain amount of unanswered questions. I know of very few losses where there aren't legitimate questions. It seems to me that we have to learn to live without answers. One reason is because the answers we seek are out of our reach. We will simply never know. Another reason is that the answers will not bring us what we most desire.

Psalms 42:3 expresses grief this way, "I'm on a diet of tears— tears for breakfast, tears for supper. All day long people knock at my door, Pestering, "Where is this God of yours?" (MSG)

Looking Forward

It is our hope that reviewing some of the major struggles and dilemmas of grief will be a help to someone who is experiencing such

personal pain. There are others who know pretty much how you feel. They are ready to give you a hug and assure you that things will get better. But no one is ready to console and comfort you like our Father desires to do. Allow Him into your heart in order to know the joy and comfort of His presence.

Micah 7:8b "...Though I sit in darkness, the LORD will be my light."

Looking Forward

There is no easy way to get through personal grief. W. Graham Scroggie wrote these words:

Let grief do its work. Tramp every inch of the sorrowful way. Drink every drop of the bitter cup. Draw from memory and hope all that they can offer to see the things our loved ones have left behind will give us daily pain - the clothes they wore, the letters they wrote, the books they read, the chairs in which they sat, the music they loved, the hymns they sang, the walks they took, the games they played, their seat in church, and much besides - but what would we be without these reminders? Would we like quickly to break with the past in order to assuage grief? Those who truly love will say that they have found in sorrow a new joy, a joy which only the broken-hearted can know."
(Graham, 168)

We walk through this long dark journey because we are looking forward. God has blessed us with a life so that we can bless others. Then true healing can come to our broken hearts.

References, Resources & Readings

- Apple, Dennis L. *Life After the Death of My Son*. Beacon Hill Press, 2008.
- Broyles, Stephen E. *The Wind that Destroys and Heals*. Shaw Books, 2003.
- Clinton, Tim. *A Healing Journey Through Grief*; CD.
<http://www.worshipmusic.com/3859713992.html>
- Christmas, *The First Christmas After*; CD resource.
<http://store.godisbiggerthan.com/music/first-christmas-after.html>
- Duke, Susan. *Grieving Forward*. Warner Faith, 2006. <http://suzieduke.com>
- Filkins, Kenn. *A Comforting Word*. Self published, 1994.
- GriefShare. www.GriefShare.org.
- Graham, Billy. *Facing Death And The Life After*. Word Books, 1987.
- Grollman, Earl A. *Explaining Death to Children*. Beacon, 1969.
- Helping a Hurting Friend. Article
http://www.helpguide.org/mental/helping_grieving.htm
- Jones, Jerry. *Beyond the Storm*. Howard Publishing, 2002.
- Loss, The Center For. www.centerforloss.com/index.php
- Manning, Doug. *Don't Take My Grief Away From Me*. In-Sight Books, 1991.
- Kolf, June Cerza. *When Will I Stop Hurting?* Baker Books, 2007.
- Means, James. *A Tearful Celebration*. Multnomah Pub., 2006.
- Olson, Roger E. *Finding God in the Shack*. InterVarsity Press, 2009.
- Smith, Edward M. *Healing Life's Deepest Hurts*. Vine Books, 2003.
- Stores, Family Christian. *God's Plan for your Life Overcoming Grief*. Family Christian Stores, 2008
- Townsend, John. *Where is God?* Thomas Nelson Pub., 2009.

Williams, Don and Ron. Walking With Those Who Weep. Sain Pub. 1996

Wolfelt, Alan. Understanding Grief: Helping Yourself Heal. Routledge, 1992.

Wolterstorf, Nicholas. Lament For A Son. Wm B. Eerdmans, 1987.

Worden, William J. Grief Counseling and Grief Therap: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner. Springer Publishing, 2008.

Young, William P. The Shack. Windblown Media, 2007.

Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Susan J. and Robert C. De Vries. Getting To The Other Side of Grief. Baker Books, 1998.

Zonnebelt-Smeenge, Susan J. and Robert C. De Vries. Travelin Through Grief. Baker Books, 2006.

Cover

Cover Art Provided by David Christian:

<http://dchristianphotography.com>

<http://twitter.com/dcmba>