

6/18

The process of grief is tailored, it seems, to each individual. But some characteristics seem to repeat themselves.

Early in the grieving process, the deceased is all you can think of. You want to call them every time something good or bad happens. You miss telling them everything that is going on in your life. You want to share the story of your loss with everyone who will listen. And for the first three months most people will listen.

But after that, people expect you to move on. They don't want to indulge your grief any longer. But *you* still remember, and *you* have the need to talk about it.

After six months you still think of calling the deceased, but by now the painful reality has really set in. They are no longer with you; at least, not in the same way. Holidays and anniversaries remain difficult, but there are actually times when you are able to become absorbed in other things.

Eventually time can heal all pain, but only if the work of grief is allowed to unfold. When time fails to heal, that is often an indication that professional, individual or group, counseling might be helpful.

I really did not face the loss of my father until the death of my mother fourteen years later. Then, for the first time in my life, though surrounded by dear friends, I felt like an orphan.

I dealt with the loss, my anger with God, my contempt for the medical profession, by taking time off for spiritual renewal. Spiritual conversation with my director, a change in routine, a new assignment, all of these eventually effected the healing I sought.

If the grief is going on beyond what *you* feel is healthy, don't be afraid to ask for a referral. There are many highly qualified grief counselors available. There are people who care.

6/17

For fifteen years, I worked as a spiritual counselor in an urban, parochial high school. And for the first ten years, the principal, a dear friend and a fine man, would stand before the incoming class and tell them that these next four years would be the best years of their lives. And as much as I loved the man, I wanted to smack him across the side of the head.

I am sure that high school was a wonderful experience for Hugh. He was a handsome man, a star athlete, possessing a wonderful personality. However, for many of the teenagers I saw over the four years, this was a painful time. And it was made more difficult by the expectation that these were supposed to be the best years of their lives.

Many of these young people faced death for the first time during high school – the loss of a parent; the loss of peers in automobile accidents or in crimes. They fell in love and had their hearts broken when they discovered how exploitative some people could be. They trusted, and found their confidence violated. They had a date for the prom who decided, the week before, that they would rather go with someone else.

They went to their first wakes and funerals, often coming to me to ask, "What do I say to the family when I go?" They questioned their faith, and sometimes even the very presence of a loving God.

They were difficult years for the teenagers, but significant ones.

The process of dealing with loss does not begin with adolescence. It begins the first time mother or father walk out of the room and leave us alone. It happens when we lose our treasured blanket or stuffed animal. It happens when we are no longer the only child.

I remember quite vividly my first real loss. It happened in November of 1954. My mother had just returned from working at the Election Board. She came up to check on us, and then went next door to check on her father, who had ALS and was living with us.

I heard her call to my father, and even as a six year old child, I could sense the urgency in her voice. My father came upstairs, they spoke quietly, and he left. Then my mother came in to the room for my brother and me.

She brought us into grandpa's room. She told us that God and the angels had just come to take grandpa home. And so we knelt and prayed in the space where grandpa, God and the angels had just been.

My mother's peace in the presence of her father's death was a powerful lesson about life and death for a six year old child.

Other losses would follow this one, but none was a more powerful lesson than the first. It prepared me for every other loss that would follow.

On Fathers' Day, many are remembering parents who are no longer with us. I pray that the consolation of the thought that God and the angels have taken them home provides some consolation for them, just as it did for a six year old child more than fifty years ago.

6/16

Romans 8: 14-17

I'm not sure whether it happened in the desert, or earlier, while he was sitting at the knees of his mother when he was a child. But at some point Jesus discovered that he was God's child. The communication of this insight became central to his Good News.

What makes it Good News, however, is not that Jesus is the child of God. That would be Good News for Jesus. What makes it Good News for us that we are the second person of the Trinity, the object and recipient of God's gracious, undeserved love. And that this love, which unites us to God and God to us, is the Holy Spirit.

Everything that Jesus said: "You are the light of the world"; "Those who hear you, hear me"; "If they hated me they will hate you too"; "I am the vine, you are the branches," indicate that this was central to Jesus' message. He stands with us, not apart from us. Therefore, we too are empowered to cry out, "Abba! Father!"

Jesus was not an only child. According to Paul, he was the first-born of many brothers (and sisters). Paul was not speaking biologically (though he may not necessarily have excluded this implication), but he was clearly speaking spiritually. If Jesus is the first-born, we are the next-born.

We are the offspring of God.

Thus, what we predicate of Jesus we must also predicate of ourselves. Whether it is that we will share his journey through death to new life, or that we share in his divinity. Mary is our mother,

as well as the mother of Jesus. We are all priests, prophets, and royalty, like him. We have *our* stories to tell, just as he did. And each of us must take up the cross, like our brother.

We have our own little Messianic secret. So, grasp your divinity!

But don't tell anyone. They might not understand.

6/14

Dear Tony,

I'm a parishioner from a former parish & happened to come across your site. Very interesting!

I'd love to read "Surprised by Love" in its entirety.

While I can't say I always agree with your views... well, actually, I disagree with many of them...I do enjoy reading what you have to say :-)

All the best,

Liz from Queens

Dear Liz,

The article is on the way.

Sometimes when I look back on the things I wrote, I disagree with me too. That's the wonder of dialogue and growth.

I also enjoy reading things that I know I will disagree with. Not only do they force me to clarify my own thoughts, but sometimes I actually learn something.

It has always disturbed me that Roman Congregations condemn the writings of liberal theologians. Don't we need vigorous dialogue and debate? And how can we have that if one side is excluded from the conversation?

Let's keep the discussion going.

Tony

6/9

Hi Tony!

You get my vote for spiritual leader of the 21st century. I recall so many of your reflections on the scriptures, and that you always had so much to say about the present condition of the Church.

I sent your site to my sons. K. was to have his daughter baptized on the 11th of this month.

However, after being interviewed by the visiting foreign priest, who queried him and his wife about their stance on same-sex marriage, they canceled the baptism.

More at another time. For now, *Deo Gratias!* I found your refreshing site.

Love,

C. from Queens

Dear C.,

How good to hear from you! You get my vote for concerned mother of the millennium. The priest's question was totally inappropriate.

Is there any way I can help?

Please let me know. I would love to speak with your son and daughter-in-law. There are many options. Please tell them not to turn away because of the inappropriate behavior of one person.

Tony

6/8

A friend from Queens, NY wrote:

"I've just signed the "ONE Declaration" committing myself to help fight the emergency of global AIDS and extreme poverty. The first thing I'm doing is asking you to make that commitment, too.

"ONE is a new effort by Americans to rally Americans - one by one. So far, over two million have signed the declaration in support of a historic pact for compassion and justice to help the poorest people of the world.

"I hope your name belongs on that declaration, too. You can put it there by visiting:

www.one.org

6/6

The young lady who lives next door asked me if the world was going to end today. I'm not sure if she wanted it to (she had to give a scary performance at a school assembly tonight) or not. Since I am writing about this, we are still here, and I hear that she performed magnificently as the emcee at her school concert.

Reports of the earth's imminent demise have evidently been greatly exaggerated.

6/2

Dear Tony,

I recently found your Website and I am grateful that you are maintaining a forum for discussion and information. I wish you strength in your decision, and hope that you find happiness in your choice. I am quite surprised, however, that the reason you give for leaving active ministry is the Church's tacit support of George Bush, and his "theft from the poor." I also disagree with many things the Church does. I am angry at the sex abuse scandal; I am angry at the school closings. The list goes on. However, this does not diminish my faith. I am sure it is difficult being a priest - I understand the Church is not a democracy and religious obedience leaves no choice. Anyway, when I read your message, I thought, if such a good man of faith like Father Tony gives up, then am I being fooled? I can not tell you how many times I argue with disaffected Catholics who gave up. I am not giving up, but when I see you revoking your vocation, it makes me think about things.

Charles from NYC

Dear Charles,

Good to hear from you and I am grateful for your concern.

As you can well imagine, my decision to resign from active ministry (not the Church, but active ministry) was very difficult, and much more complex than just my feelings about the Church's seeming endorsement of President Bush in the last election, in spite of his contempt for much of what Jesus proclaimed.

I resigned because I felt that I could not any longer publicly represent an institution that was so absolute. I believe in the give and take of dialogue - just like the early disciples at the Council of Jerusalem. When the Church makes an absolute statement like "women can't be priests," and then adds, "and you are not allowed to discuss it any longer," then that is a problem for me. It is in violation of the tradition of the early Church, which was much more "democratic" than many are aware.

Whether I support women priests or not, no institution is going to tell me "you can't discuss it anymore."

I will never leave the Church (the People of God) because it is my family. However, I will never stop criticizing it when it is wrong (because it is my family).

I trust that you and I can always find a home in our Church.

Tony

6/1

Dear Tony,

When last we talked, it was during the darkest, scariest days of my life. I was in the midst of what would become four mid-life crises, all at once. Any *one* of them might have utterly destroyed a person who had expected aid and deliverance only from other children of God. The discovery that all the king's horses, and all the king's men, and all of God's children could not put me together again was what finally made me give up on those sources. They simply do not have the power to keep their promises. "Transcend" has always been one of my favorite words; much favored by my intuitive instincts. So, I began to look for that one thing that transcended everything else.

I found what I sought in a field that belonged to another. I sold everything I had invested in old ways and beliefs and reinvested in the field in which lay hidden the treasure of great value. I now have, and continue to be given, the answers I need.

I am still an active, practicing Catholic but I value my Christianity first. If I had to choose between the two, I must choose my Christianity. That only means that I put God first in my life. It is not a rejection of the Church. Catholicism is how I express my Christianity. This includes helping others to find the treasure. To me, Christianity came first and will always transcend human bureaucracies, no matter how well intentioned. The self-professed primary function of the Church is to spread the teachings of Jesus and to make those teachings clear to all, that all might know the joy of following the Christ. Replacing the teachings of Jesus with their own version of Jesus' teachings has not been helpful. This suggests that the Church bureaucracy might benefit from searching again for its lost understanding of Jesus' message. Finding the humility necessary to set aside 2000 years of rationalizing is their problem, not mine. As I said, I have bought the field with the treasure of great worth. I know the Truth as best a child can. I share the source of the Truth with those who seek it for themselves. I know the Truth because I recognize it by its good fruits.

When we parted, you gave me a warm hug and your blessing. What I had hoped for was help in finding a job to keep the failed machinery of my family life afloat financially. Though your love and concern for me was abundantly evident, it was a long time before I came to understand how truly powerless you and the people and the institutions I looked to for deliverance really are. I now know that it is not for God's children to have such power. That is God's job and He makes His power abundantly available to His children when we are open to let Him do it for us. His work for our benefit is always a gift from His love for us.

I am OK today. My Old Testament friend, Job, and I have much in common. We share an ability to learn from our self-created adversity and to experience the restorative power of God's Love for us. You can visit my old friend by going to easternmost Forest Park (just off Park Lane South) where he is represented by a striking bronze sculpture, and spend a few moments reflecting, as I often did during the dark days. May you receive the inconceivable abundance of gifts that God wills for you.

F. from LI

Dear F.,

It was a wonderful surprise to hear from you after so long. I had no idea, when we last met, how deep the darkness was. Had I known, I probably would not have let you out of my office.

I am honored by your trust in sharing this part of your journey with me (and with us). Job's friends were not enough for him, either. Their words of consolation quickly turned into accusation. "If you really loved God," they said, "none of this would have ever happened to you." But Job stood up before them, brushed the ashes from his sackcloth, and said, "I don't know about that. But what I do know is this. My Redeemer lives and one day I will see him face to face." That's what kept him going. His faith in God.

As Paul reminds us, people can be "yes" one minute and "no" the next. But God is the eternal "Yes."

Your insight that we find our strength in God and not in an institution is particularly relevant for those who are struggling to separate their disappointment in the Church from their faith in God. Remember, it was not God who disappointed us. It was some members of the hierarchy. And we can still find the presence of God in the Church if we remember that the Church is the "People of God." We must keep praying for that New Pentecost which will promote our own continual conversion and the renewal of our leadership.

Paul said, "For freedom Christ has set you free. So do not enslave yourself for a second time." To me that means, do not enslave yourself to any person or to any institution, including the Church, because the Church is only a means to an end, which (Who) is God. It means that we remain free –to question, to choose, and to doubt. (Matt. 28: 14-17)

I pray for you, my friend, that God will continue to guide you on your journey. And I commend you to the prayers of those who will read your message here.
