

Grief, Loss, and Shame

Some of the most transformational, not to mention, painful losses for me and for many I have known who have been in treatment with me, have not been around death and dying, but the more mundane losses. These losses do not have rituals, religious or secular, prescribed for them. There is no public acknowledgement, no condolence cards, no meals arriving at the door, not even people being especially nice to you for awhile. These losses may come with secrecy and shame even an intense loneliness: a feeling that no one else has had this happen to them. Ever.

Losing a job in a lay off may come with shame. Having a child that does not go to college, or fails in college, might be experienced as both a crushing loss and something to be borne in secret. Parents whose children act in ways very contrary to their values or to the values of their family and community experience shame. Some parents whose children declare their love for same sex partners may experience a whole host of very painful feelings. Even illness can have this aspect of shame attached to it. Individuals who are very proud of their health, their athleticism, their good looks, and their good luck can experience shame when they become ill.

Some of the losses I speak of are what I call developmental loss: children leaving home, children not turning out the way you had thought they would or hoped, marriages or very close friendships ending, infidelity, divorce, disappointments in fertility for younger women, or menopause and its attendant miseries for older women. I have found that becoming a parent can trigger depression/grief for parents. First time mothers may experience the profound and permanent loss of their relatively care free life. First time fathers may feel acutely the loss of the exclusive affection and devotion of their wives.

The failure of a business or other career disappointments can also trigger profound feelings of both loss and shame: you will never be the great scholar, musician, athlete, business person, lawyer, or surgeon that you had always hoped, and maybe even counted, on being. Perhaps you have not been the kind of parent you had hoped to be. The current economic collapse, affecting almost everyone, confronts folks with a host of unexpected losses. Depleted retirement and college accounts have challenged both the mature and the young to revisit their expectations of the next stage.

And then there are the ubiquitous indignities of aging, chronic illness, catastrophic illness. Each brings with them their own particular pattern of difficulty.

Somewhere in this exhausting if not exhaustive list you may recognize yourself. Somewhere in there I recognize myself. Significant experiences of grief are not avoidable.

How we negotiate the grieving process can make us better or worse, more rigid or more open, embittered or mature, collapsed or enlightened. How we negotiate will depend on a multiplicity of factors:

- ✚ How much support we have at the time of our loss.
- ✚ What the culture provides for us in terms of support. If you have lost a spouse everyone knows you need support. If you have just learned that your child is gay and it has unsettled you profoundly, you may not know where to go for help or even know that you need help.
- ✚ What we have learned from our families about what emotions are permissible.
- ✚ What our emotional histories are, how much loss we have sustained.
- ✚ What kind of psychic structure we come to the crisis with.

There are some guidelines, actions that one can take, to mitigate the difficulties of the losses of which I speak.

✚ ***Find others who are going through something similar.*** If you are a new parent and struggling with sadness, anger, an unaccountable depression look for parenting groups through your church/synagogue, a parenting center, a “Y” or community center. If, for instance, you have just learned that your son or daughter is gay and this presents many difficulties for you that cannot easily talk about, there are organizations such as P-Flag, an organization for parents of homosexual children. Group support is amazingly helpful with both feelings of isolation and feelings of shame.

✚ ***Start your own group:*** If you can’t find an existing group or class, start your own. You may not believe it, but there are lots of folks out there, just like you.

✚ ***A class:*** The adult school in your community may be a great resource, unlike a group, you can be entirely passive, listen and learn and perhaps ask some questions. A class can feel more anonymous and safe.

✚ ***Bibliotherapy:*** A fancy word for reading. There may not be a group for you or you may not be ready for a group, but I’ll bet there is a book out there, or hundreds. Between *Google* and *Amazon*, it will not be difficult to find. Suppose you have just realized that you are an incest survivor or suspect that you may have a problem with shop-a-holism or bulimia and you are not yet ready to see a therapist or find a group. Reading can really be enormously helpful. It gives you a community, an anonymous one, and reduces feelings of isolation and the conviction that you are a creep, and probably provides you with useful information and a list of resources to help you move forward.

✚ **Psychotherapy:** This isn't necessarily your last stop or your most desperate option. Unfortunately people often feel that it is and wait far too long, and suffer far too much before availing themselves of this option. Please don't wait until your toes are hanging over the cliff before presenting yourself to a well qualified psychotherapist. It does not have to be terrifying, and it doesn't need have to last for years and years. Therapists are specialists in careful listening and careful guidance, commodities not easily found. A one or two session consultation can help you decide.

Pain, sadness, and fear are the signal to you that something is wrong. These feelings are not really the problem. They are the beginning of the solution: a process that will lead to something new.