

Bereavement, Grief, and Mourning*

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Dimensions of bereavement

At the time of writing, it is too early to say just how devastating will be the damage done by the global pandemic that began at the end of 2019. Clearly nothing will be able to erase the loss of life, and the suffering of the relatives and friends of those lost. And there will be much human misery accruing from the economic catastrophe that the virus brings in its wake. But I want to start by referring to an aspect of the crisis that may at first seem minor by comparison with the horrors just mentioned, but whose implications turn out, I believe, to be of strong relevance to the idea of mourning. I refer to something experienced by very many people during the ‘lockdown’ period when the virus first got a grip on the planet, namely the sense of disorientation and loss caused by the sudden enforced isolation from the company of other human beings.

Humans are by nature social animals. So being deprived of the company of friends and relatives, colleagues and neighbours, is a loss that cuts deeper than can be expressed in a simple utilitarian calculus. Not for nothing is isolation, solitary confinement, regarded as the most severe and most feared of the punishments that prison authorities have at their disposal. Not being allowed to mix with our fellow human beings for a prolonged period is not just unpleasant; it cuts at the roots of our nature, undercutting our sense of meaning, leaving us not living but merely existing.

Being deprived of association with others, is a source of grief in itself, but it also carries with it the further grief at being deprived of all the enriching human activities that are predicated upon association with others. What is lost in isolation is not just ordinary social intercourse such as eating together or sharing a walk in the country, but more structured and organized social activities such as, for example, participating in choral singing, playing in an orchestra, taking part in a dramatic performance, playing a sport, engaging in philosophical discussion – the list is endless, though for any given individual there will probably be two or three such activities that are prized as especially enriching, and which serve to lift the spirits and give life meaning and point.

To be told that one will not be able to participate in any of these precious human activities for a protracted period is a kind of bereavement. This applies to everyone affected, but it may be worth adding that for those in the last decade or so of their lives there is a special extra dimension of distress – there is grief at something taken away, and there is the additional sadness that the time remaining for such activities would in any case have been short, so that the opportunity for renewing them in the future is correspondingly diminished.

Is it pretentious to talk of the pain of loss in such cases as a bereavement, or as a cause for mourning? It is certainly the case that many people did indeed describe the enforced isolation during the pandemic as a kind of bereavement, and this accords with a long standing use of the term to denote that state or condition which, in the words of one

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nineteenth-century writer, ‘in its essence is always the loss of some object accustomed to draw forth the soothing or cheering reactions of the soul’¹ Added to this, one effect of the isolation was to produce a kind of foretaste of the bereavements that await us all sooner or later, if we survive long enough. The human condition is such that the grim facts of ageing and advancing bodily and mental decline are destined to deprive us, perhaps slowly and progressively, perhaps through sudden onset of disease, of the chance to engage fully in the social activities that are the bedrock of our happiness. And to these bereavements will, for many people, be added the ever increasing risk of personal bereavement, the loss of a partner with whom one’s life is shared, and through whose living presence its joys are enhanced and its sorrows mitigated.

Being deprived of future happiness one might otherwise have hoped to enjoy is of course a grievous blow not just for the old but for all; and since the young, for whom the expected future is longer, have potentially more to lose in this respect, such deprivation can be reckoned to be all the worse. One might also suppose that a special kind of compensation for the loss of happiness is available to the old, namely they are likely, other things being equal, to have had an larger existing store of happy experiences they can look back on; so when disaster strikes and truncates happy activities, the mourning of old age will be alleviated by the memory of all the past happiness that is ‘in the bank’ as it were. But fathoming the way human grief and loss are actually felt by human beings often defies such calculations. Yes, the old person facing loss should no doubt rationally be consoled by the past happiness they have been fortunate to enjoy, but this does not accord with the way grief for such loss is actually experienced. For in the real world, as Dante so vividly pointed out, the memory of past happiness only seems to exacerbate present misery:

*Nessun maggior dolore
che ricordarsi del tempo felice
nella miseria ...*

No greater grief
Than to remember happiness gone by
In time of sorrow.²

Something fundamental is expressed here about the phenomenon of mourning. The grief of bereavement is not just a painful pang at something bad that has happened, but is a longing for something good that cannot be recovered. The Latin noun for longing, *desiderium*, often (like its ancient Greek counterpart πόθος [*pothos*]) used in connection with mourning, conveys this idea of a painful reaching out towards something that is out of reach, as in Horace’s fierce lament for Quintilius, where the poet asks what restraint or limit there can be to this *desiderium*, this longing, this regret, this grief, for so dear a friend:

*Quis desiderio sit pudor aut modus
Tam cari capitis?*³

¹ W. R. Alger, *Solitudes, Nature & Man* [1866], quoted in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, s. v. ‘bereavement’.

² Dante Alighieri, *La Divina Comedia* [c.1310–14], *Inferno*, Canto V, 121–123, transl. J.C.

³ Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Odes* [*Carmina*, 23 BC] I, 24.

In existential terms, grief and mourning are emotions that are pregnant with our human finitude. *Alle Lust will Ewigkeit* says Nietzsche⁴ – we yearn for joy to continue; but when, brutally and against our will, it is brought an end we are brought face to face with the clash between our infinite longings and our inherently finite nature. This does not just hurt, but it produces a profound sense of disorientation. The ground on which we were standing crumbles from under us, and we seem to be sliding into an abyss of meaninglessness.

The pervasiveness of grief

Understanding the deeper existential nature of bereavement, grief and mourning is complicated by the tendency, particularly prevalent among philosophers, to over-intellectualize. We schematize grief as related to the loss of one or more goods that enrich our lives, and thus construe it in terms of a kind of calculus, where its degree is proportionate to what has been subtracted from the list of goods. But what such an account leaves out is the peculiar phenomenological character of grief. Clearly, it is an unpleasant feeling, something painful as opposed to pleasurable, a sorrowful as opposed to joyful sensation. And suitably qualified and elaborated, these ideas no doubt capture something of what is going on. But perhaps the most important aspect of the way grief is experienced, and the most damaging to our equilibrium, is its *pervasiveness*. Grief is like a held pedal note on the organ that continues to sound, pervasively affecting the way in which we hear whatever else is being played above on the keyboards. So what might otherwise have been a brilliant and uplifting melody is now suffused with a sinister or melancholic undertone that radically alters the character of what is heard. The poet John Keats used another analogy, that of a sounding bell that ‘tolls me back to my sole self’, bringing his imagination back down to the earth, even as it strives to lose itself in visions of far off lands where the nightingale’s song is heard.⁵ And even in the more mundane and prosaic settings of our everyday lives something similar can occur: the pedal note of grief is the first sound heard in the morning as the sleeper, after a blessed forgetful instant of ‘normal’ waking consciousness, swiftly recalls their situation: all is as bad as it was the night before; the loss remains. The droning pedal note resumes, and continues sounding throughout the day, infusing the felt quality of every activity and experience. One may strive to divert the mind, but the grief for what is lost constantly intrudes, sapping the concentration, dulling the motivation, souring even those pursuits that might otherwise have been a cause for joy. In that great poem of mourning, *In Memoriam*, Alfred Tennyson depicts this peculiar intrusiveness of grief when he describes the first Christmas after a bereavement, when the family has to go through normally joyful and bustling activities of putting up the Christmas decorations under a dark rain cloud that seems to ‘possess the earth’, the gloomy sky outside mirroring the black cloud of grief that hangs permanently over them.⁶

The inner world of feeling and the outer world of nature do not always coincide in this way, but where they do not, the very dissonance can itself serve to exacerbate the

⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra [Also Sprach Zarathustra]*, 1883-5, §59 (Third Part, Second Dance Song).

⁵ John Keats, ‘Ode to an Nightingale’[1819]: ‘Forlorn! the very word is like a bell /To toll me back from thee to my sole self!’

⁶ Alfred Tennyson, ‘In Memoriam A.H.H.’ [1849], section 30.

grief. In the magnificent spring that England enjoyed in 2020, when the death toll from the virus was mounting daily, many reported that there seemed to be something uncanny or even sinister about the unusually rich profusion of blossom to be seen on every tree and hedgerow. A signal proof here of the power of grief to infuse our perceptions, almost as if the colour and richness of the spring scene no longer lifted the spirits but lowered them. Instead of the exuberance of nature finding an echo in the joy of the human heart, nature now seemed to threaten, like the alien, proliferating presence of the virus, calling to mind Housman's anxious line 'I, a stranger, and afraid, in a world I never made'.⁷ The benign, calm sense of being at home in the world, what Heidegger called *Zuhause-sein*, is an undramatic but vital ingredient of human happiness. The 'uncanny' spring of 2020 – the German word for uncanny, *unheimlich* is particularly apt here – managed to be so disorienting partly because those very wonders of nature that normally, in the spring season, make us feel peculiarly at home in the world, now seemed to emphasise the sinister threat concealed beneath nature's exuberance and bounty.⁸

Mourning the human condition

Grief and pain for what is lost often relates to something very specific, as in the case of the deprivations of isolation we began by discussing. But there may also be a case for thinking it is in some form or other an intrinsic part of the human condition. The human finitude and vulnerability of which we are always implicitly or explicitly aware may give rise to a generalised sense of loss that lies in waiting, ready to be mourned, an inchoate sadness beneath the surface that may bubble up at any moment. Gerard Manley Hopkins beautifully describes this in 'Spring and Fall', a poem about what might at first seem a sentimentalised and fanciful case, that of a young girl seen weeping at the sight of the dead leaves falling in Autumn:

Margaret, are you grieving
Over Goldengrove unleaving?
Leaves like the things of man, you
With your fresh thoughts care for, can you?

The initial feeling of the onlooker is almost of surprise or bemusement that tears could be shed over trees losing their leaves. Perhaps indeed these are (to quote the opening of another poem, by Tennyson) 'tears, idle tears'; or perhaps (as that poem goes on to imply) no tears are really 'idle', but rather signs whose meaning is not yet fully understood.⁹ At all events, in the Hopkins poem, the pregnant phrase 'leaves, *like the things of man*' already proleptically hints that this young life will before long have more to grieve at than the annual fall of leaves. Soon enough, all too soon, the girl will not spare a sigh for any number of such sights, and yet the tears will come, for reasons that will be only too clear:

⁷ A. E. Housman, 'The Laws of God, the Laws of Man', from *Last Poems* [1922], XII.

⁸ See Martin Heidegger's discussion of 'uncanniness' or 'unhomelikehood' (*Unheimlichkeit/ das Nicht-zuhause-sein*) in *Being and Time* [*Sein und Zeit*, 1927], §40 (1957 edn, pp. 188-190). It should be added that while for Heidegger the state of not being at home is the root of human anxiety, he is also wary of the 'tranquillized familiarity' and 'self assurance' of those who are too much at home, uncritically absorbed in ordinary life.

⁹ Tennyson, 'Tears, idle tears', from *The Princess* [1847].

Ah! as the heart grows older
 It will come to such sights colder
 By and by, nor spare a sigh
 Though worlds of wanwood leafmeal lie;
 And yet you will weep and know why.

The lines that now follow, in the final three couplets of the poem, gently address the child, taking away any earlier faint suggestion of bemusement that mere falling leaves could trigger tears, and acknowledging that her tears betoken something universal. The ‘springs of sorrow’ in the human soul are shared by all, and so her grieving is recognized as having been called forth by something that could not be articulated in words, or intellectually expressed, but echoes of which were faintly heard by the heart, or guessed at deep within the soul:

Now no matter, child, the name:
 Sorrow’s springs are the same.
 Nor mouth had, no nor mind, expressed
 What heart heard of, ghost guessed:
 It is the blight man was born for,
 It is Margaret you mourn for.¹⁰

Notwithstanding the final line, it would trivialize the message of the poem to infer that Margaret’s grief is selfish or autocentric. Yes, she mourns for herself, but as surrogate or representative of all humankind. Her seemingly idle tears at the decay of the woods are intimations of the ‘blight man was born for’, the pain and loss that is inseparable from human existence. Hopkins’ universalism here enables us to put into perspective the tendency we all have to say ‘poor me!’ – to place special emphasis on the woes that beset us personally, or those of our immediate circle. So without retracting the point made earlier, about the special force and poignancy that attaches to the griefs of the old, one may also acknowledge the vivid sharpness and intensity of grief felt in youth, and the peculiar anguish characteristic of the pains and disappointments of middle age. For clearly the truncating of worthwhile activities, and the sudden elimination of sources of joy can happen at any age, and there is perhaps something distasteful about quantitative judgements as to which types of loss are more grievous. The ‘blight man was born for’ does not discriminate, and the spectre of grief and mourning (though some may be fortunate enough to escape it longer than others) hovers in the background for all of us.

Mourning and meaning

Although there are many contexts in which the terms ‘grief’ and ‘mourning’ are virtually interchangeable, the concept of mourning has a more formal flavour than that of grief. Grief, as already suggested, is the pain that pervades our consciousness when we suffer serious loss, while mourning often denotes an enactment, a formalized ritual, or a liturgy owed to the one for whom we grieve. As with many spiritual practices, mourning has a potentially healing function: it is an attempt to find closure to grief, or at least to find a ritualized way of expressing it, so that it can contribute to some kind of understanding of what has happened, and perhaps, in due course, enable us to come to terms with it.

¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, ‘Spring and Fall’ [1880].

But can one mourn for oneself, as the last line of Hopkins' poem implies? Not clearly in the formalized sense in which one engages in the rituals of mourning in order to pay one's respects to the dead. But there may be an analogous kind of mourning for oneself, an act in which one explicitly acknowledges and confronts the pain of loss. Margaret, in Hopkins' poem does not do this, though the implied onlooker, the speaker of the poem, does it for her, acknowledging on her behalf the grief and loss that awaits her simply as a member of the human race. And in another beautiful poem of mourning, *At Castle Boterel* by Thomas Hardy, we find a remarkable fusion of mourning for another and mourning for oneself. With a keen sense of loss, the poet glimpses through the rain the vision of a 'girlish form benighted', the lover with whom, many years ago, in 'dry March weather' he once climbed the hill that is 'now glistening wet':

Primaeval hills front the road's steep border
And much have they seen there, first and last,
Of the transitory in Earth's long order;
But what they recall in colour and cast
Is – that we two passed.

The pervasiveness of grief hangs over the scene, and the narrator is all too aware that the one he loved, whom he walked and talked with on that distant March day, is now no more. The bitter truth is that she is gone – as later lines of the poem have it, 'Time's unflinching rigour/ with mindless rote has ruled from sight/ the substance now' – and all that remains is the phantom figure of his imagination:

I look back and see it now, shrinking, shrinking,
I look back at it amid the rain
For the very last time; for my sand is sinking,
And I shall traverse old love's domain
Never again.¹¹

So what is mourned is, yes, the grievous and irreparable loss of the loved one; but there is also an awareness of all else that inevitably passes, the endless role-call of the 'transitory in Earth's long order'; and then finally, as the poem reaches its resonant and elegiac cadence, the rueful acknowledgment that this life too, the life of the poet who contemplates all this, is drawing towards its close. What is conveyed here with consummate skill is not just the fact of mortality, but the gap between longing and reality that is the essence of mourning. We see stretched out before us what might have been, what will perhaps be for others; but for this one protagonist, who knows that his sand is sinking, that old domain of love will be traversed 'never again'.

Hardy is mourning here: mourning his first love, but also mourning himself. Yet in the poem we perhaps see not just the expression of grief, but also a kind of closure, the kind of recognition and acknowledgment that has something in common with what the formalized rituals of mourning are designed to bring. What expressed by the end of the poem is not just pain, and certainly not mere self-pity, but a kind of acceptance of finitude. The poet takes his own place amid the 'transitory of Earth's long order', and will soon himself go the way of the loved one whom he is mourning.

¹¹ Thomas Hardy, 'At Castle Boterel' [1913].

None of this takes away the genuine sadness of the poem, but it does indicate that a kind of meaning has been achieved. Not a full meaning, not a full reconciliation: for there is still anger at the loss caused by ‘Time’s unflinching rigour’ with its ‘mindless rote’. But at least the materials of suffering have been caught up and woven into a pattern, a pattern of loss and memory, of past revisited, and of a wider temporal flow of which the protagonist is now willing to acknowledge that he himself is a part.

It is one of the tasks of great art, whether in music or painting or poetry, to enact the kind of meaning that cannot always be found in life itself. So for example in the set of beautiful choral motets entitled *Songs of Farewell* by the composer Hubert Parry, we find music of mourning and consolation that has uplifted many listeners. Grief is there, but also a kind of serenity. And perhaps in our ritualized acts of mourning, which themselves so often draw on music and poetry not as mere embellishment but as an intrinsic and essential part of what is enacted, we seek after just such a sense of meaning, so that we can hold on to something of enduring value and significance in the midst of desolation.

Yet grief remains particularly hard to bear, and mourning finds it hard to achieve its goal of closure, in cases where the circumstances of our loss are such that their meaning stubbornly eludes us. So to come back to the pandemic example with which we began, that sense of painful disorientation which so many felt was surely bound up with a sense of the *meaninglessness* of the disaster. Millions were cowering in their homes, deprived of the social intercourse that is the very signature of our humanity, yet for no grand reason or noble cause, but from mere fear – fear of something that had suddenly come upon them without warning, without meaning – not even an adversary like a tyrant whose malign purposes they could take pride in resisting, but a minute random strip of genetic coding, something not even alive in its own right, unravelling its devastation indiscriminately, blindly, and without plan or purpose.

Such kinds of bereavement are hard to mourn properly, hard to knit up into any sort of narrative that might offer the hope of reconciliation or closure. Of course there were many such attempts among the commentators and pundits who hurried to point out the possible lessons to be learned, the connection between the spread of the infection the global scale of our human exploitation of the planet. And to be sure, these analyses did and do highlight the risks and terrible costs of our greed and selfishness in treating the world as a set of commodities to be plundered for our short term gratification. But one does not have to deny the importance of any of this in order to feel that such attempts to read off meaning from the disaster nevertheless left out something crucial. It seemed, if one may put it like this, as if they tried too hard to force the occurrence into a meaningful framework without acknowledging the extent of its brute contingency. The pandemic may have been an accident waiting to happen, but it was, for all that, an accident, something dependent, as with so many natural disasters, and so many of the tragedies of everyday life, on a long and complex chain of contingent circumstances, a small change in any one of which might have averted the ensuing horrors.

Though we like to imagine ourselves as in charge of our destinies, the human condition is such that a minute variation in any one of a thousand circumstances can at any time reveal our vulnerability. The ancient Greeks, as often, had a phrase for this: *σμικρὰ ῥοπή* [*smikra ropē*] – the tiny nudge of the balance that can tip the scales to tragedy.¹² How is it possible to come to terms with this? The sheer irrationality and contingency of it all threatens to swamp our natural human impulse to seek for meaning and closure. Music

¹² Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus* [c. 429 BC], line 961; cf. *Trachiniae* [c. 421BC], line 82.

and poetry, as just suggested, are among the most potent resources we have at our disposal for transmuting our grief into something of enduring value. But where the loss seems the result of blind irrational processes, the grief risks mutating into helpless sorrow and impotent pain.

Mourning and transformation

There are no simple answers here, since how far the arts may offer a healing role in assuaging human grief will depend on complexities of context that may vary from generation to generation. The sonorous consolations offered by Parry's *Songs of Farewell* (1916-18), or the resonant cadences of Laurence Binyon's famous poem 'For the Fallen' (September 1914) have found echoes in many hearts, but to many others they now seem somehow overblown, too bound up with imperial justifications for warfare, and too tainted with dubious concepts of the 'glory' of dying in battle. The search for meaning requires a certain keenness of gaze, and where that gaze is distorted by sentimentality the attempt at closure may founder. Rather than trying to unravel these puzzles here, let me end instead by moving from the domain of art to that of religion, and looking at one scriptural example of the search for meaning in the midst of grief and loss.

I have in mind the famous story in Luke's gospel of the journey of two disciples who encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus, following the disastrous events leading up to the Crucifixion.¹³ Luke vividly depicts the emotional reaction of the disciples as the stranger asks them what they are discussing – first the sullen confusion, next the 'burning' of the hearts as the scriptures are expounded so as to explain how the messiah was destined to suffer, then the warm impulse of offering hospitality to the stranger ('Stay with us, for the evening is come and the day is far spent'), and the final opening of their eyes at the breaking of the bread. As narrated by Luke, the transformation is partly an intellectual one, caused by the stranger's exposition of the scriptures, but the outcome also involves a profound emotional shift, or rather it hinges on that intricate interplay of the affective and the cognitive that is crucial to the possibility of moral and spiritual transformation.

For those who accept the message put forward by Luke, the remarkable change from despair to hope is to be understood in theological terms – terms which many in our present culture may reject. But the message is also partly to be understood in human terms. For there is a remarkable capacity in the human heart to bring joy out of sorrow, to find consolation in the midst of grief. And what is required for this purpose is not a clinical analysis of the facts, which may often provide little to console, but rather a determination to hold fast to the good in the midst of distress, and to open oneself, as the two disciples did in the story, to the possibility of change and renewal. The story opens with the deepest grief, grief at having lost what had been longed for. But it ends with the discovery of a wholly different perspective on what had happened, and a new resilience and empowerment.

However one understands the narrative of tragedy and triumph at the climax of the Gospels, the grief, and the deep mourning it engenders, are an irreplaceable part of the story. And it cannot be otherwise, since our finite and vulnerable human lives cannot escape the ever present risk of loss. What is more, the hope that emerges does not amount to an easy solution, or glib assurance that all will suddenly be well. But it is an affirmation of the power of the human mind to draw on resources that will find a way through grief to renewal. Sometimes in human life, to be sure, the loss or pain will be too heavy for such a

¹³ Luke 24: 13-35.

way to be found.¹⁴ Yet that is no reason not to cultivate, in so far as our weak natures are able, the virtues of resilience and hope. This of course is the goal of many traditional spiritual practices, though whether the power they seek can come from our own resources alone is a metaphysical question that cannot be adjudicated here. What is clear is that if mourning is not to collapse into depression and despair, we will need to be fortified with faith that it will have an end, or at least that its sharpest and most anguished aspects will in time somehow be assuaged. We will need to hold on to something like the thought expressed by the Psalmist, a thought not based on clinical assessment of the evidence, but on a deep conviction of the enduring power of goodness: ‘Heaviness may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.’¹⁵

¹⁴ See Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 480.

¹⁵ Psalm 30:5 (English version from the 1535 Coverdale translation of the Psalter as incorporated into the 1662 edition of the *Book of Common Prayer*).