

On the Path from Loss to Renewal

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By Miriam D. Benhaim and R. Benjamin Cirlin

A few weeks ago a man named Walt walked into our offices for his second therapy session. Walt's wife of close to thirty years had recently died after a long bout with lung cancer. What was unusual in this instance was that Walt was 86, and his wife Laura was just 68. The tables had turned on Walt and Laura. They had lived their married life together assuming all along that Walt would predecease Laura. Walt had always found comfort in this assumption, for he couldn't imagine living on his own at this late stage of the game. And thus when Laura died, Walt told us that he felt "manipulated and played with" by his new reality. It wasn't supposed to be this way.

Walt, who swims three times a week and looks like a man of 70, was stunned by the death of his wife. Like many men who appear for counseling, Walt initially claimed to have very little to say. Yet when encouraged by the right question, he unloaded with the force of a cannon.

Over the years and the course of our work with grieving people, we have heard many formulations of the "why me, why now" question regarding the death of a loved one. It is a natural and understandable response to hateful new life circumstances. Many people come from a place of moral outrage: "the death of my loved one is simply not fair." Others come from a place of upended logic: "the death of my loved one makes no sense: I have no way of taking it in."

Never, however, have we heard this question formulated as Walt did that day.

Walt entered the office looking dour and somewhat dazed. After being asked how he was feeling, he answered rather tersely, "not so good." At this point his eyes began to fill with tears and he was making great efforts to hold back his pain. A short response of "it's hard to let it out" led to the following wail deep from within Walt's broken heart.

"You bet it is hard. I don't understand this life. Evolution is supposed to improve the way things function. What is useless and serves no purpose is supposed to fall along the evolutionary wayside. What good does grieving do? What purpose is being served by my feeling horrible? My wife is dead. Why do I have to feel this way? My wife was cremated, and now I carry her ashes in a bag. Is this what life comes to? Is this all there is? This is scientific progress? Why can't I continue without this dread, this deep sense of despair?"

Walt's search for meaning in the context of science and evolutionary theory was stunningly to the point. What purpose does grief serve? Does it really help us to experience crushing pain and disorientation at the loss of our loved ones?

A grief therapist's truism: speak to a bereaved individual and you will uncover a myriad of questions. Questions about ultimate meaning, questions about timeliness, questions about suffering, questions about fairness. Grief knocks on the door and a thousand questions rush in like uninvited guests. Who am I now that my loved one has left me? Will I ever know joy again? How will I ever navigate through this horrible darkness? Can I ever trust again now that my heart has been broken? A grieving person goes to sleep in the evening hounded by questions, and before the coffee is brewed in the morning, those

unanswerable demons return once again. How is it possible to live in the presence of so much uncertainty?

When faced with unanswerable questions, we often turn to stories for help. The following story is a retelling of a tale found in Elie Wiesel's *Four Hasidic Masters and their Struggle against Melancholy*.

It happened once that a young disciple came to see Rebbe Pinchas of Koretz. He entered the Rebbe's study with a countenance full of distress and despair. He poured out his heart to his teacher, and he told him he did not know how he could continue to live. "My doubts about life are eating away at my soul. Wherever I go I see suffering and cruelty. What used to seem true I now see as lies and illusions. I don't recognize myself anymore. What can I believe in now that I have viewed the abyss? I am sinking, Rebbe, and you must help me."

Rebbe Pinchas was silent for a moment, and then he replied: "Your questions are real. At such a time I suggest that you go back to the holy books and search deep within them for an answer."

The disciple's voice cracked with pain and tears began to flow from his eyes. "Dear Rebbe, I have tried to look in the books and study, but my mind simply wanders. I stay on the same page for days at a time. My doubts give me no rest. The holy texts used to give me strength, but now my foundation is no longer solid. What am I to do?"

The Rebbe took a deep breath and motioned to his disciple to draw closer as he began to speak. "I have something to say that might surprise you. When I was your age I too was riddled with doubts. One of my closest friends and study partners died suddenly, with no warning. I was stunned. For weeks on end I was plagued day and night by only one thought: 'how was it possible for someone so good and kind to be taken from us for no apparent reason?' I too could not study. I wandered in the forest questioning my life, my beliefs, and my purpose. At times I even wondered if I should take my own life, for nothing seemed to help. Not study, not prayer, not meditation."

The disciple was gripped by his teacher's tale, and a slight but discernible lightening of his mood was visible. "Tell me my teacher, how did you find a way to exit from that morass?"

A warm smile appeared on the Rebbe's face as he recounted his journey. "One day I was walking towards the town square and I witnessed a great hubbub. I inquired what was causing such a stir, and one of the townsfolk told me that the great teacher, the Baal Shem Tov, the Master of the Great Name, was to speak the following day in the next town. I decided that I must hear him, and so the next day I walked several miles to the place where he was speaking. To my great distress, I entered the hall just as the Master was finishing his teaching. I figured that I had reached my end. But just then the strangest thing happened. The Baal Shem looked in my direction and gazed into my eyes. I was convinced that he was seeing me, and no one else, though many others there that day reported the same experience. He was looking into my soul. He understood my distress and despair. Suddenly I no longer felt so alone. A weight somehow had been lifted. I returned to my home and began to study once again."

The Rebbe was silent once again for a moment, and looked deeply into the eyes of his disciple. In the quietest of voices he revealed the following. "You see of course, that the questions remained questions. To know that I was not alone was enough."

Loss has a way of narrowing our focus. The world seems to shrink, and often it seems that we and our questions and doubts are its only inhabitants. This existential isolation can be excruciating as we wander through too many dark days and nights of the soul. We are not only bereft of our loved one, but also of our sense of control and choice. What does it take to come out emotionally alive from these straits of despair?

Healing from a grievous loss comes about through the slow process of reattaching ourselves, perhaps to a lone hope, to a person, or to a purpose. When we are forced to twist and turn through a gravity-less environment of fear and pain, we discover day in and day out that our old ways are no longer sufficient. It often seems that we will never again plant our feet on solid earth with the knowledge that our next step will lead us to our desired destination.

The risk of reconnecting to something or someone often seems too difficult, too painful. We know that our present predicament has come about because we once were attached, and the thought of becoming vulnerable once again to someone or something strikes terror in our hearts. And yet there seems to be no other way. Isolation and loneliness slowly are decreased only when we risk making room in our worlds for something other than our pain and questions. We need to look for those lifelines wherever they may appear.

Rebbe Pinchas discovered his lifeline in a glance from the Master of the Good Name. He dared to believe that someone could actually see his pain and respect his despair. Not cure it, but see it. We often see this process at work in our groups. In the beginning sessions a collection of individuals come together because they have been stranded on deserted islands of agony. Each group member's pain seems so large, so impenetrable. One at a time the members of the group begin to share their stories and to reveal their tales of loss. As the storyteller unfolds his or her life journey and its too frequent unfortunate destination, heads begin to move with nods of recognition. Around the circle assents of "yes," "of course," and "I know exactly what you mean" punctuate the telling. The group comes to an end. Substantively nothing has changed in the reality of the mourner. The loved one remains dead, absent, gone forever. And yet, somehow, the group members often leave feeling somewhat lighter, somehow less afraid. "You see of course, the questions remained questions. To know that we are not alone is enough. It has to be enough."

(Next month - some reflections on the evolutionary purpose of grieving)