

On the Path from Loss to Renewal

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To speak about grief and loss is to approach mystery.

Who among us can really grasp what it means to lose a loved one? Who among us can really fathom what it means to never see, touch, smell or feel a beloved ever again? We are assaulted and overwhelmed by the death of those for whom we care. Reality creeps up on us as a mugger in a dark alleyway and we are defenseless and out of control. Is it any wonder that death induces such intense fear and insecurity?

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Coping with loss is ultimately not about understanding, but about responding; it is not about gaining an intellectualized, rational explanation, but about finding a way to continue walking in a world of unanswered questions in spite of our wounds and emotional limps.

For the last twenty years I have spent most of my working life in the presence of people attempting to cope with loss. My clients have faced the loss of loved ones from illness and disease, suicides and homicides. They have faced both timely and untimely deaths. I have witnessed the grief over mothers, fathers, brothers, sisters, children, husbands, wives, partners, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts, uncles and cousins. I have been present for those grieving babies who failed to survive their journey out of the womb, and for those coping with the death of a 95 year old relative who succumbed to Alzheimer's Disease. So many similarities in all of these losses, yet so many differences. Each grief is as unique as a fingerprint.

I can not count the number of times I have heard over the years the following sentiment: "I can not survive this pain - it is too great. This darkness is too heavy. I will never truly smile again." People walk into my office having deposited hopefulness outside my door. And thus I am often asked: "how do you do this work? Aren't you constantly depressed?"

It would be a lie to say that I never feel sad. Those clients who have witnessed my tears over the years know that to be true. Yet it is also true that I rarely feel depressed by my work. In fact, I often feel enriched and energized by the struggles I witness. I am blessed to be in the presence of builders, human beings valiantly striving to reconstruct lives of meaning and purpose on the edge of the abyss. Construction work is dirty and messy: you can't build in formal attire. But for those of us who are willing to get grimy and sweaty, building is possible. The hope deposited at my door does not disappear. It waits to be reacquired in a newer, deeper fashion.

In this monthly column we plan on sharing some of what we have learned over the course of our work and lives, examining the journey from loss to renewal, from despair to mature hope. We have read many professional and clinical books through the years, yet nothing is ever quite as satisfactory or illuminating

as the simple story or parable. Each month we plan on sharing a story and commenting on its connection to the process of loss and renewal. We hope you the reader find this helpful, and we look forward to hearing your thoughts, comments and reactions.

The story I would like to share this month is called "The Great Fixer." It is based on an old folk tale called "The Wooden Sword," and has been told in many forms over the years. This version is based on a telling of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach.

It is told that the King of the World, the King of Sadness, wanted to see if all was well in the world, namely, if all of his subjects were sad, for the truly sad person is most happy in the presence of other sad souls. The King of Sadness visited his entire kingdom and discovered that the whole world was miserable. Not one person was happy or satisfied. The King could not have been more overjoyed.

However, as the King returned to his capital city, he noticed a very disconcerting and terrible sight. There in the distance sat a man on an old broken down porch, on an old broken down chair, with nothing but scraps of food in front of him on a cracked plate. This man was singing and playing the guitar. Unquestionably, this man was happy!

The King was stunned and frightened, for he knew all too well that one happy person could wipe out his entire kingdom. The King knew that he must watch this man, and that no one except himself was capable of performing this task. Sadness must be guarded at all costs.

Now the King disguised himself, wearing rags and hand me downs, and approached the man, saying, "I don't believe that we have met. Who are you?"

The man replied: "Everybody knows me. I am the Great Fixer. I walk the streets of the world yelling, 'I am the Great Fixer! Bring me into your broken homes, your broken lives, your broken hearts. Don't worry about the cost. Just a few cents-just enough to buy myself a little feast, because one must feast at all costs.'"

The king was unnerved, for he knew that sad people never feasted. Food has lost its taste for the sad heart. He knew that his kingdom would be at risk if people would begin feasting in spite of sitting on their broken down porches, in their broken down chairs, nursing their broken hearts and eating leftovers.

The King devised a plan. The next day, when the Great Fixer began walking down the streets, inviting the people to bring him their broken lives, someone shouted out a window: "What is the matter with you? Don't you know that the King decreed that fixing is now illegal?"

The situation looked bad for the Great Fixer, but no doubt about it, a person can not be happy without a small feast. And so, the Fixer approached a man who was chopping wood and asked him if could perform this task for a few pennies. The man agreed, and that evening, after buying a small portion of the cheapest food available, the Fixer made a feast.

The King appeared at the Fixer's house and saw him singing. He was puzzled, and so he asked the Fixer, "what's new?" The fixer replied that the King was crazy, that he had forbidden fixing. The King said, "if that is so, why are you singing, why are you feasting?"

The Fixer told him that he had found work as a wood chopper, and that he had done such a good job, that he had been invited back the next day to earn a few more pennies. The next day, when the Great Fixer approached the man for whom he was chopping wood, he found the man in a state of dismay. "I'm so sorry to tell you this, but I have just learned that the King issued a new decree forbidding wood chopping. You will have to go away."

The situation was looking bad for the Great Fixer, but he refused to give up, and he thought to himself: "I have to keep walking the streets of the world looking for something else to do in order to make my feast."

The Fixer was on his way when he saw a wealthy and beautiful woman sweeping her porch in her finest clothing. The Fixer asked her why she was doing this, and she replied that her maid had deserted her. The Fixer offered to do this job for a few pennies, and that night the feast was definitely a feast.

The King, disguised again, once more appeared in the midst of the meal and asked the Fixer: "how do you do it. I thought wood chopping was forbidden." The Fixer replied: "Your right. The King is crazier than ever, so I found new work today sweeping floors."

Now of course the Fixer arrived at his job the next day to learn that sweeping had been banned. This was followed by bans on baking, gardening, painting, and building. Whatever the Fixer found to do, the King immediately banned it the next day. Soon enough the whole kingdom was in shambles.

The Fixer, however, refused to despair. There just had to be some way to get a few pennies. The Fixer decided that he had no choice but to join the King's army. Soldiers were always in demand, and in spite of the fact that soldiers were usually paid quarterly, the Fixer was able to work out a special contract with the King's Captain that allowed him to be paid a few pennies each night.

Soldiering (and killing) was the furthest thing from the Fixer's mind, but he decided that he could march up and down all day waving his sword, pretending to be loyal to the king. Each day he received his pennies, and in the evening he sat down to his little feast.

One day the King was reviewing his troops he saw a man with a smile on his face marching. That evening, disguised once again, he approached the Fixer during his feast and asked, "how did you do it?" The Fixer replied, "The King is crazier than ever, his kingdom is falling apart, but a Fixer always finds a way. I bargained with the Captain and now I am assured of feasting every night. I can wave this sword like the best of them."

The King of course was furious. He forbade the Captain from paying the Fixer on a nightly basis, and once again the Fixer was forced to change his ways. That day while on a march, the Fixer passed a pawnshop and had an idea. After maneuvers he went to the shop to exchange his sword. He received enough money to feast for years!

Soldiers however must have a sword. The Fixer found a thin piece of wood and covered it with silver paper. He placed it in his scabbard and returned to his daily routine of marching with the soldiers.

The next day the King, wearing the dress of a common soldier, approached the Fixer. The Fixer laughingly told him how he outsmarted the King once again by pawning his sword.

The King was delighted to hear this, for the law of the land stated than any soldier without a sword would be put to death. The King devised a plan. He went to this Captain to see who was to be executed that day, and instructed the Captain to make the Fixer execute the criminal. The King would be in attendance, and all would see the downfall of the Fixer.

A great crowd had gathered at the execution site, with the King of Sadness sitting high on his throne. The Captain approached the Fixer and instructed him to kill the condemned man with his sword. The Fixer, however, was not worried. He turned to face the King and the throngs of people and declared: "I am a healer of broken hearts. Never in my life have I killed anyone, and I shall not kill today."

The King was delirious with joy and loudly stated: "If you do not kill this man instantly, you shall be executed on the spot."

Calmly, the Fixer replied to all that could hear: "My friends, you all know me. I am the Great Fixer. You brought me your broken lives, your broken hearts, your broken homes. You know that I build, not destroy. I give hope, not create despair. And so, if my message is true, this man will live, and return home. If it is false, this man will die.

The Fixer removed his sword from the scabbard and shoved it into the belly of the men. It of course crumbled, and the man was set free.

And the Fixer? He returned to sing a new song on his broken down chair, on his broken down porch, feasting on his penny's worth of food.

I love this story because my forty-eight years on this planet teach me that much of the important work of life centers on continuously fixing that which is broken and breaks down again and again. We engage in fixing when we struggle to find a way to sing a song on that broken down porch in spite of what has occurred in our lives.

The Great Fixer exists within each of us – it is that part of ourselves that has the capability to retain hope and a sense of courage in the face of deprivation. We grieving people eat on a table of limitations day in and day out. Everywhere we turn we face the King and his decrees: nothing is as it once was. The world becomes a smaller place because every act has the potential to remind us of the loss of our loved one. The Great Fixer comes along to teach us that we are capable of making a feast, some small sense of purpose and meaning, in spite of sitting in a broken down chair on a broken down porch in front of a plate of scraps and leftovers.

Making a feast is about growing to accept one's own portion, as small or big as it may be. We have choices within our limited circumstances. Even a few pennies can make a feast. We have no choice about the cards we are dealt. We only have choice about how to play our hand. And so my client Ruth struggles with the question: "can I take a vacation without my husband? Can I allow myself to experience pleasure even though the man I loved to share this pleasure with is no longer present?" Ruth struggles with the dilemma of letting go of her time-honored notion that pleasures are possible only if it includes her spouse. Ruth is struggling to find the Great Fixer within herself that will allow her to use her memories as a source of strength rather than as a source of stagnation. Most likely the pleasure Ruth will experience on vacation will not be as intense or fulfilling as that she once knew, yet pleasure it will still be in spite of her loss. A small feast is still a feast, and very necessary.

The Great Fixer teaches us that making a feast is ultimately about finding new ways to reattach ourselves to meaningful endeavors while remaining in the presence of our loss. In walking the streets of the world the Fixer finds that there are many people in need of his services. As we the grieving walk through the deserts of our pain and loss we naturally keep our focus on our own fate. We are blinded to any footprints in the sand other than our own. Yet as time passes, and our questions about our place in the world multiply, the Great Fixer within each of us whispers: "look outside of yourself." Wiping the sand out of our eye stings us in an excruciating manner, yet it is a necessary act. The desert sands are full with legions of tracks. To be committed to fixing is to be committed to the Other.

Zalman Schachter, in his wonderful book, *From Aging to Sageing*, makes the distinction between being an elderly person and being an elder. An elderly person is one who has been defeated by the losses he or she has suffered one whose memories give rise to despair instead of wisdom. An elder is someone who has plumbed the depths of his or her own moments of enslavement and discovered that his or her personal truth and legacy wait to be revealed. Livers of life, regardless of class, status or any other limiting factor, have life lessons to teach. Each of us has something that someone else can use. Fixing is about connecting to our personal legacy and having its power and strength inform our present life,

however broad or limiting it might be. To do so is to feel integrity in spite of our losses and wounds. Discovering that we can make an impact on someone else's life is a sure recipe for creating a feast.

Often we wander through the desert of our lives following a loss. The pain, the hopelessness, the boredom – sometimes it all seems too large, too overwhelming. Such are the moments when we need more than ever to remember the Great Fixer. Fixing is never complete. Fixing is a process, not an event. We need to search for those few pennies on a daily basis in order to make our feast, in order to sit on that broken down porch and sing the following song: "This is my life now. It is not the life I have chosen; it certainly is not be the life I desire in my dreams. But it is my life now, my only life. I have choices now, if only a few. But I have choices, and my choice is to fix myself in anyway possible in order to create my own little feast."