

Reflecting on and Tending Grief

Within the ancient tradition of Yoga, it is taught that humans carry trauma buried under deep layers at our heart centre. This corroborates with the western tradition of wholeheartedness, in which we are tasked to investigate, and ultimately begin to remove the layers of protection around our heart, in order to allow ourselves the freedom to feel all joys and all sorrows.

The sorrows are hard to bear. Humans may be unequipped to tend to the grief that comes from brokenheartedness in early childhood experiences. Instead, the untended grief becomes grievance. Grievance may surface over and over again, triggered in all manner of situations, by all manner of people. This could be seen as the heart's way of asking for attention, asking for deep attention, in order to heal the original heartbreak.

Willingness to be Vulnerable

Whether welcomed or not, we all are vulnerable, as is every living organism in the known universe. An intrinsic characteristic of aliveness is vulnerability. There are ideal conditions for life to thrive, then there are hostile conditions in which life must adapt or meet its demise. The cellular programming which instructs a living thing to live is what enables the magic of adaptation, survival, and ultimately evolution. To fully connect with others and ourselves, we must be willing to be vulnerable.

Trauma

The human experience begins in trauma: the trauma of birth. This unremembered trauma remains in the body of a full grown adult as perhaps the inability to draw breath easily, a compression in the bones of the skull, or irregularity in the pelvis. Assisted births over the centuries have decreased mortality rates in both babies and mothers (forceps, ventouse, episiotomy, cesarean section). However in the normalisation of assisted births (cesarean section rate 44% in Latin American countries), mothers have lost the knowledge and confidence in their bodies to birth with ease and without fear. The preparation for birth may instead be cloaked in fear, with negative and traumatic birth stories shared more readily than positive or pleasurable birth stories. The cortisol levels (stress hormone) in mothers sets the levels for their unborn baby. Which means, in very real terms, that trauma begins in-utero. The unborn baby experiences her mother's emotions and is already adapting. Trauma is not only something which we experience early on, but it is something which can be created through difficult experiences throughout life. We carry this trauma with us and it impacts our interactions with others and ourselves. To address and overcome such trauma, we must investigate it and be willing to be vulnerable.

Crying

Weeping and wailing are wonderfully efficient ways of processing and moving trauma out of the body. However, some human cultures are more welcoming of weeping and wailing than others. The rejection of crying begins at infancy, when babies are shushed. Babies have well developed modes of communication, cues for hunger, for discomfort, for fear, and when a responsive adult looks carefully for these cues, the baby is understood and a relationship of communication develops. There are times when a baby must cry. The crying may be the most efficient way to urgently communicate hunger, a wet nappy, fear, a fever, pain, and also to process trauma. When adults receive the crying communication as failing to do their part as responsive carers, they may shush the infant, and do all they can to stop the cries (pacifiers, feeding, playing, distracting) when in fact sometimes the crying is absolutely necessary, and the infant needs to be held and feel safe as they cry out their trauma.

Men are particularly susceptible to being raised to believe that crying is an unacceptable behaviour. The trauma, when not released through weeping and wailing, looks for another avenue of expression. A common substitute is the expression of anger. Imagine a relationship between a man and a woman, into which both adults bring with them their individual traumas. The man gets angry about something trivial, at which the woman begins to cry, seeing the tears as unacceptable the man gets angrier at what he sees to be an overreaction, and the woman cries even more. And so they become stuck in a cycle of past trauma brought into the present, neither one understanding the other.

If they were able to process their traumas together they might find out that both of them came from families in which father was often angry, and mother would often cry. Unable as children to understand the family scenes they witnessed, they learned the behaviours, and the roles played out by their parents. The woman grew up to be terrified of angry outbursts, suppressing her own, and identifying with her mother. The man grew up to believe that men don't cry, and that crying is an irrational response in any given situation, and that anger was an acceptable male character trait, identifying with his father.

Connecting with our Grief

Grief can become deeply and securely buried for very good reasons. There may be no safe space available to tend to our grief, so it is repressed, as connecting to it could be too difficult to bear. The other side of grief is love, they are two sides of the same coin. We grieve because we love. We grieve when that which we love has gone. We grieve for an imagined future that will never come to pass. We grieve for the death of ancestors we have never met. We grieve for future generations that may not have life. We grieve for the taking of innocence. We grieve for missed opportunities. The deeper we go into compassion and empathy, the deeper we grieve. Grieving expands our capacity to feel, the capacity of our hearts to connect, because it expands our capacity to love.

How to Grieve

There are innumerable ways to grieve. If you have experienced the death of a loved one, you will know that the grieving never ends, it changes, and becomes part of who we are in our daily lives.

We don't move on from grief, it moves forward with us into the rest of our lives. Grief can be described by giving names akin to seas and oceans: deep and dark, hits in waves, pulling under, crashing and smashing against the rocks. Thinking of oceans now, the power, the wildness, also the beauty, biodiversity, and unexplored depths, this could be a helpful metaphor of grief, for many more reasons than the darkness and fear. Grief is also what fertilises hope, nourishing new life. There are no rules, there is no manual, no correct or incorrect way to grieve. However, there is a way to feel safe enough to let grief surface. Connecting with other people who want to share or explore their grief can help. Finding a grief counsellor, or a co-counselling group can help. Or finding ways to make a record of your emotions: journaling, audio or video recordings of yourself. Sometimes knowing it's there, but being unable to connect to the grief, will be the difficulty. A strong and trusted support network is vital when working through grief, however you do it, make sure you are not alone.

Moving Forward alongside Grief

Perhaps grief becomes a companion, and a friend. Perhaps the grief in our life lets us see a deeper level of existence and connection in the everyday. Perhaps grief lets us savour the sweetness, tenderness, and frailty of life. Perhaps grief is the acknowledgement of the inconvenient truth: that all life has an end, and within its decay, nourishes the next generation. Perhaps grief gives us strength to live bravely. Perhaps grief is a window to knowing our purpose. Perhaps grief gives meaning to why we are alive.
