



The Truth *of* REDEMPTIVE SUFFERING

by BARBARA LYGHEL ROHRER

When my father died in 1992, my heart broke. Seventy-nine years old, he had fallen while retrieving his trash can that had blown into his neighbor's yard. He hit his head on the corner of the foundation of that neighbor's house. Two days later he was declared brain dead.

The Monday after the funeral, while getting ready to return to work, I turned on National Public Radio, as usual, only to find I wanted to scream at the world that it brought into my kitchen. *How dare you go on with life! Don't you know that Frank Rohrer died!* I jumped to turn the knob off. It would be four months before I could turn that knob on.

My grief was transparent, and co-workers would later tell me that they were worried about me during the weeks following Dad's death. I wasn't self-aware enough at the time to say that what I was experiencing was normal. I simply was

letting, to flip the words from Mary Oliver's poem, "Wild Geese," "the soft animal of (my) body" grieve what it had lost. I realize now there was true wisdom in allowing my grief to overtake me.

Still, why must there be loss? And how do we process the profound impact of loss without losing hope?

None of us wants to face loss, and we routinely take steps to avoid its pain at all costs. Even when the loss is clearly for our benefit, for example, the loss of an addiction to some behavior that is destructive to our very being, such as the abuse of alcohol or drugs, we resist. It seems we prefer clinging to that which is destroying us rather than embracing loss.

Most of the time we are only willing to embrace loss when we have no other choice. And even then we try to move away from it as quickly possible.

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I am not advocating for the return to times when widows dressed in mourning clothes for twelve months following the death of a spouse, but there is wisdom in having such concrete practices that remind us, gently as the folds of a black skirt, that we need to pay attention to our grief.

What in our Christian tradition can help us embrace loss more fully?

Franciscan priest Richard Rohr points to the time that Jesus offered us the sign of Jonah (Matthew 12:38-42), after the Pharisees asked for a sign that would justify Jesus' actions. A sea monster swallowed Jonah when he was running from God. He spent three days in the darkness inside that large fish. This sign is seen as a precursor to what was to come between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection. But, says Rohr, it is important to also see this story as a metaphor for transformation and the rebirth possible when we give ourselves over to loss.

"We seldom go freely into the belly of the beast," he says. "Unless we face a major disaster such as the death of a friend or spouse or the loss of a marriage or job, we usually will not go there... Mature religion shows us how to enter willingly and trustingly into the dark periods of life. These dark periods are good teachers."

Loss and grief are our time of winter. It is our time to rest in the darkness, to develop the insights that let us see in new and creative ways. But we are not to be fooled by this restful image: *this work is difficult*. Facing loss squarely, living it fully, is not simply riding it out until all is well again. Instead, it requires an active engagement of what we are feeling and an openness to the lessons that may be trying to be born within us. It is asking what is this all for. "The spaciousness within the question allows Love to fill and enliven us," says Rohr.

Indeed loss informs who we are.

Feeling the Loss

At times of loss, we simply have to go through the pain, the grief we feel down to the marrow of our bones. Upon arriving in Bethany following the death of his dear friend Lazarus, Jesus wept (John 11:1-44). He was in touch with who he was to the core and was grieving the loss of his friend. How could Jesus not cry? No other response would have been authentic.

The call to be true to one's self, one's authentic self, not the false self created by our ego and its mistaken desires, is not limited to Christianity. What our Buddhist brothers and sisters call enlightenment is not to exist in some consistent state of serenity. It is to respond faithfully to the situation. A student once asked his master why he was crying when a child died because "wasn't all life an illusion." Yes, said the master, tears running down his cheeks, and the death of a child is the saddest illusion of all.

Once the tears have passed, we must dig deeper and ask, within our loss, in spite of our grief, what are we to learn, what is God trying to teach us.

Learning what God would have us know

Change is the constant state of all things. Not only must we live with this truth, we must embrace it. Some change, by its nature, is difficult—and hence, the reason for our losses. The children grow up and leave, the spouse dies, the house must be sold. Or, the hope of a love flickers then fades, the child falls ill, the dream is never realized. The school denies us entry, the job goes to another, the money is tight. Where are we to turn in such times? Yes, we turn to our families and friends, our churches and communities of support. More importantly, we need to turn to ourselves—not in some false bravado of individualism but to the very real, very quiet world where God speaks to us, that inner voice calling us deeper into our loss so we are open to being called beyond our present state into a new life.

Staying with pain, without any solutions, without any answers, is what loss asks of us. That's because our task, says author Marianne Williamson, "is not to avoid painful emotion but rather to transform it at its roots." It is our very sadness and grief that must be "*allowed* in order for life to go on."

Opening our compassionate hearts

Through the cries of our own broken hearts, we can find the way to *open* our hearts. We develop true compassion for others, leading us to greater joy, says Williamson. We may not be able to see that immediately, but ultimately that is where we are headed. Something inside of us is being mined and recast into something new.



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The central image of Christianity—the crucifix—is a clear demonstration of how Jesus transformed his pain rather than pass it on to another. Rohr calls this the truth of redemptive suffering.

Within our own suffering, we find God suffering with us. God does not abandon us. One of my favorite stories comes from the late senior pastor of New York’s Riverside Church William Sloane Coffin, whose son was killed one night while he was driving along the edge of a cliff. His son missed the curve, broke through the guard rail, and plunged into the crashing waves below. As the black, icy waters closed over the car and his son breathed his last, Coffin says, God’s heart was the first to break.

I have found comfort in this story in the dark periods of my life, knowing that God’s heart was breaking with mine. And it is those dark periods that have most opened my heart to others. Connecting with suffering is a way to awaken “the compassion that is inherent in all of us,” says Buddhist nun Pema Chödrön.

All of us are scarred because of our losses in some way. Many of us still carry open wounds. But if we see that God is with us and listen to our deepest wisdom, we will eventually find ourselves on the road to redemption, to healing, to an open heart.

Living in the darkness those four months after my father died, and returning to that grief for periods of time since his death, has taught me, yes, that it is only through the cracks of a broken heart that the light can get in. I loved my father and he loved me. That’s all that matters. My job now is to pass on that legacy. 🌿



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