

Healing with Haven

October 2007

I Feel So Selfish

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By Doug Manning

My friend’s wife died three weeks ago. She had complications following knee surgery, and suddenly she was gone. A healthy and vibrant woman one moment and gone before anyone could imagine or prepare. I was out of town at the time and did not know until a day or so after the funeral. My friend and I have been meeting for lunch at least once a week since. His story seems to fit so many people that I thought it should be shared.

Almost as soon as we sat down in the restaurant Jim said,

“Every electrode in my mind is firing constantly. I cannot concentrate on anything for more than a few seconds, and it is all a whirl. I am amazed and disturbed by the things that I am thinking. I would never have guessed that I would have some of the thoughts I am having. I wake up in the night wondering what I am going to do with my life. I even think of sexual things, and that just

can’t be normal. To think those thoughts just days after my wife of fifty years has died just must be weird at best and sick at worst. I have even thought of women I might be interested in, but the last thing I want to do right now is think of such things. I don’t have anything to give anyone. I guess the thing that bothers me the most is that I am not thinking about Mary as much as I thought I would or as much as I should be. I know I loved her with my whole being. She and I had a great marriage and a wonderful life together. I would think she would be all I could possibly be thinking about and yet all this stuff keeps whirling in my head. I called you to see if I am ready for the funny farm.”

That is just a summation of what he said. He talked for quite a long time, mostly disjointed spurts as his mind would fire about one subject and then jump to the next without any transitions at all. I let him talk until he seemed to be completely run down. Then we began to discuss some issues together.

He has done great deal of work as a counselor so he is aware of many of the concepts we explored together. I explained that when a death happens the mind begins to

whirl like a gerbil in a cage. Concentration for any length of time is impossible. Thoughts whirl by in mad disarray. Reality hits and runs. One moment you think that you will never see Mary again, the next moment you are off on some other idea chase. This seems to be especially true at night. The sleep pattern seems to be what we

fall asleep for a time, wake up, and then cannot get back to sleep. We find ourselves awake in the night with nothing to do except chase a whirling mind that seems to have a life of its own. I wrote a book called **Thoughts for the Lonely Nights** just because of this phenomenon. The book is done as a journal and that is the best thing about it. Writing seems to order the mind. Having it written seems to allow the mind to relax and not think it must remember that anymore.

As we talked further we both tried to remember an author we had read several years ago. We could not remember if his name was Maslow or Massilon, but we did remember that he wrote about the hierarchy of needs. He said that survival

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needs were first in the order of what we needed in life. We wished we could remember the author and the books so we could give him credit for a work we still remember and live by. The idea of this hierarchy is that when we are in need or under stress, the first things we think about is our own survival. If a building is on fire, our first reaction is our own safety. A death creates the same reaction. The first thing we think about is our own survival. "What will happen to me? How will I live? Who will take care of me? What will my life be like?" That is not selfishness. That is the human response to crisis. It is survival.

Survival comes with grief. For a time, we can think of little else. We may think we should have more concern for others, but it is hard to muster the energy. We must first survive. There seems to be a period when we inventory our loss. No one knows the height and depth of a loss until after it happens. It is almost like we have to inventory our loss before we can grieve it. Every day we think of something else the person meant to us, how precious our lives were, and the thousand things we wanted to say or do with that person, but will never again have the chance.

I talked about survival at a recent conference. After the speech, a young woman told me she was glad I had said those words. She said, "When my grandmother died, my grandfather said, 'Who will cook for me now?' I thought those were the most selfish words imaginable. How could he think

of cooking at a time like this? I now realize he was in survival mode and relating to the loss in terms he understood. He was not selfish at all."

I am having lunch with my friend again tomorrow. I expect a completely different set of thoughts and concerns as he continues to fight his way through the whirling of early grief. I am going to stay close to him, especially for the next few weeks, for before long the whirling will stop and all of the thoughts and fears will land and not go away. He will still be trying to survive but he will begin to inventory the loss of the person. His thoughts will be more on her, and the emptiness of her not being there will fill those lonely nights with pain.

Grief seems to hurt more a few weeks after the death than it does at first. That may be caused by this pattern of first thinking of yourself and your survival and gradually moving to thinking of the person you lost and everything he or she meant in your life.

As we left the restaurant, my own hope was that somehow our conversation had helped him discover that he was normal,

and that the feelings and thoughts swirling through his head were not those of a selfish non-caring oaf, but the legitimate responses to the first days of a loss. If I have a calling in life it is to go about telling folks they are normal. I hope I made it with my friend. Maybe I will make it with a reader or so of this magazine. If so, I am blessed. 🙏



Changing Your Perspective

(Anonymous)

An aging Hindu master grew tired of his apprentice complaining, and so, one morning, sent him for some salt. When the apprentice returned, the master instructed the unhappy young man to put a handful of salt in a glass of water and then to drink it.

"How does it taste?" the master asked.

"Bitter," spat the apprentice.

The master chuckled and then asked the young man to take the same handful of salt and put it in the lake. The two walked in silence to the nearby lake, and the apprentice swirled his handful of salt in the water, the old man said, "Now drink from the lake."

As the water dripped down the young man's chin, the master asked, "How does it taste?"

"Fresh," remarked the apprentice.

"Do you taste the salt?" asked the master. "No," said the young man.

At this, the master sat beside this serious young man who so reminded him of himself and took his hands, offering, "The pain of life is pure salt; no more, no less. The amount of pain in life remains the same, exactly the same. But the amount of bitterness we taste depends on the container we put the pain in. So when you are in pain, the only thing you can do is enlarge your sense of things...stop being a glass. Become a lake." 🙏

The Girl in the Porcelain Bowl

Grief stories do not always look as if they are such on the surface, but at one time or another, we have all worn a porcelain bowl.

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A long time ago, in ancient China, there lived an older couple who had a beautiful daughter. As the daughter reached womanhood, the father died. The mother and daughter mourned, and shortly after the father's death, the mother herself grew sick—sick unto her death.

Before she died, she called her daughter to her.

"My child," she said. "You are very beautiful. I do not want someone to marry you just for your beauty alone." And with that, she placed over the girl's head a beautiful porcelain bowl. The bowl changed colors with the sunlight. It shone and shimmered when the girl moved. And all you could see of the girl in the porcelain bowl was her mouth and chin. Then the mother died.

The girl, being very poor, went to work in the rice fields belonging to a rich farmer. She worked hard and made many friends. In a very short time, her friends gathered around her and said, "Let us help you get that bowl off your head."

They pulled. They pounded. They twisted, but the bowl would not budge. All that happened was that the girl woke up the next morning with a really bad headache!

The wealthy farmer noticed the girl in the porcelain bowl. He saw how she treated other workers, the grace with which she moved, her manner and demeanor, and he saw how hard she worked. One day he approached the girl in the porcelain bowl and asked her to come with him, live in his home and care for his wife, who was ill.

From the first day the girl in the porcelain bowl moved into the big house owned by the farmer, she was loved. The farmer and his wife thought of her as their own child. She cared diligently for the wife, and she made friends with the other servants. One day her friends gathered around her and said, "Let us help you get that bowl off your head."

They pulled. They pounded. They twisted, but the bowl would not budge. All that happened was that the girl woke up the next morning with a really bad headache!

One day the young son of the farmer came home from studying abroad. He saw the girl in the porcelain bowl. He saw how she cared for his mother. He saw how she had the respect of everyone in the house. He asked her to go for a walk with him. They walked and talked many times and in a very short time, the farmer's son had fallen in love with the

girl in the porcelain bowl and he asked her to marry him.

"I cannot marry you," she said. "I am but a servant in your father's house."

Over and over he asked and each time she gave the same reply.

One night the girl in the porcelain bowl cried herself to sleep for she, too, loved the farmer's son. That night her mother appeared to her in a dream. "My child," the mother said. "I want only happiness for you. Marry the farmer's son."

So the next day, the girl in the porcelain bowl waited for her beloved to ask her to marry him and when he did, she said, "Yes!"

"Let the feasts begin," the boy shouted, and family and friends came from miles around.

On the night before their wedding, the farmer's son was drinking with his friends from afar when one of the friends said loudly to the farmer's son, "Do you know she has a bowl on her head? She might be really ugly under there. You don't know what is under that bowl." And the girl overheard him.

The next morning she went to her bridegroom. "I cannot marry you!" she said. "I have this bowl on my head!"

The farmer's son took the girl's chin in his hand and kissed her lips. "I love you!" he said, "I love you, bowl or no bowl."

And with that, the most amazing thing happened. The bowl shattered into a million pieces and from it fell gold and silver and precious jewels, and everyone there saw that not only was the girl very beautiful, she was indeed very, very rich.

This is a grief story. When we grieve, it's as if we're covered with a porcelain bowl. We can't see clearly. People can't see us, either. Over and over friends say, "Let us help you get over this grief," and they tug and pound and we have a terrible headache.

We're miserable.

But once we realize our loved one who died would want only happiness for us, we can begin to reach out. There will be setbacks, of course, but once we know we are loved, grief or no grief, our sorrow can shatter, and people will see that through our grief we have become beautiful indeed...and very, very rich. 🏠



Grief & Loss Seminar Series

The next seminar will be held on October 25th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406.

Individual/Group Support

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406

Make a Difference in Someone's life

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

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