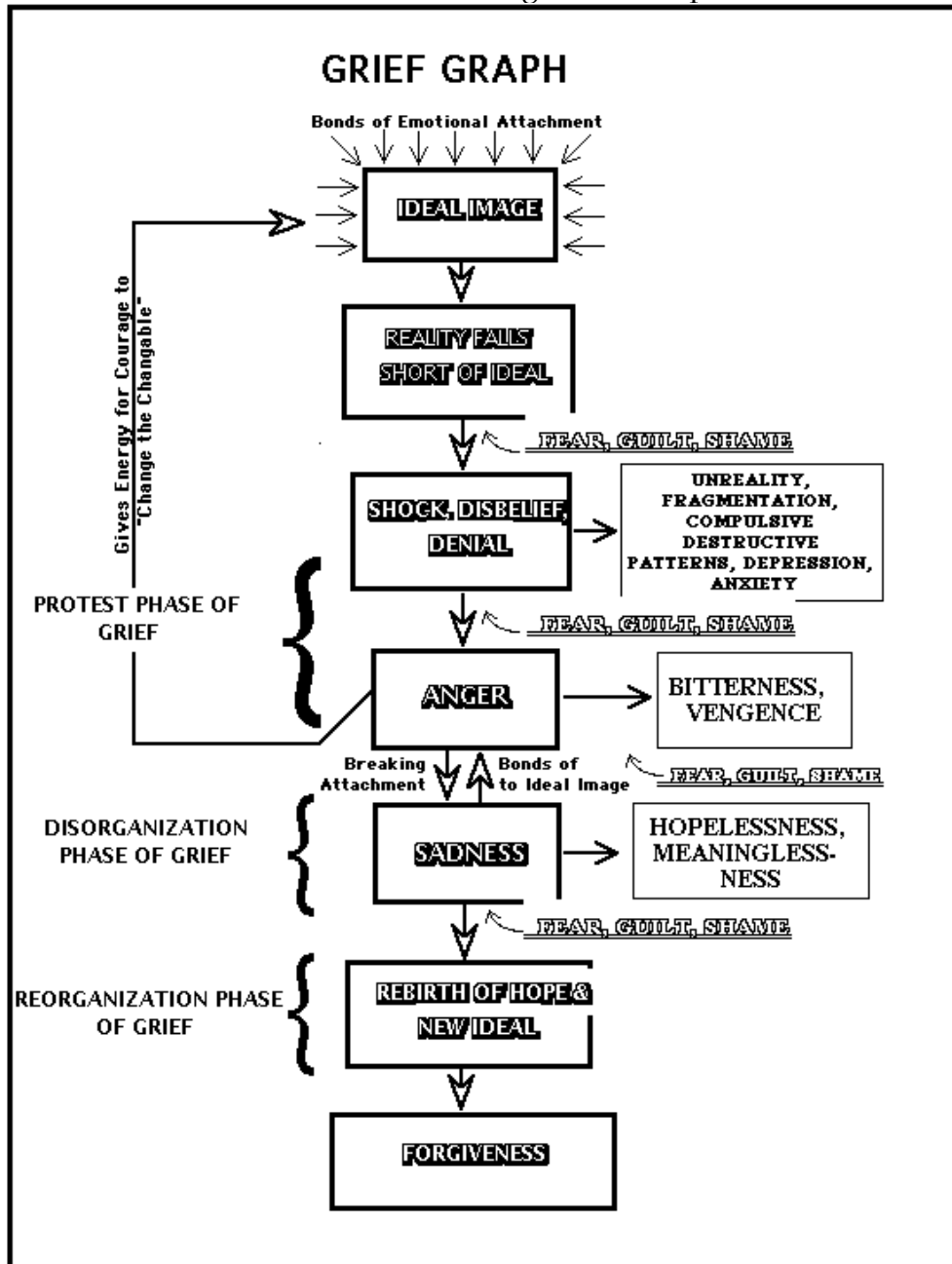


# Good Grief

I just went over the “Grief Graph” with one of the people I have been seeing in spiritual direction. Probably more than any other teaching about the spiritual life, it is our ability to deal with grief successfully that is the most central. How is it that I can make such a bold generalization?

From the spiritual point of view, life is about training souls. There seems to be something beneficial that we develop for eternity by our passage through the land of time and limitations. Courage is certainly one example of a virtue that could not be developed in an environment of full sufficiency like the eternal sphere. Courage requires the risk of suffering real loss. If there was no risk of loss, there would be no courage. God must put us into a situation of real losses therefore in order for courage to develop.



*Agape* love is the same way. We know that we love someone with *agape* love when we are willing to sacrifice on their behalf. Sacrifice would not be sacrifice if there were not the element of loss in it. So, therefore, to love sacrificially, I must be in a situation in which I can lose something in order to promote the other person's gain. We see even God training Himself in this by His sojourn as Jesus.

Whenever there is loss, there is grief. Moving from one stage of life to the next is a often a great gain. However, there are always losses at the same time. We must let go of the "old" way or situation in order to embrace the "new". Therein comes the rub. In order to let go of the old emotionally, we must pass through the stages of grief.

The "Grief Graph" details the stages we pass through when we are letting go of the old in favor of the new. Please download the attached file of the Grief Graph and open it on your web browser as you read the next paragraphs. You may need to print it to see it well.

The left side of the page divides grief into three broad stages: the Protest Phase, the Disorganization Phase, and the Reorganization Phase. Let us suppose a pesky mosquito is harassing us as we walk. This would not be our "ideal" for the day, would it? We start out every moment of our life with a large set of expectations or ideals. During our walk, it is our unexamined ideal to be living mosquito free. On the Grief Graph, the top box illustrates that ideal. Different ideals have different amounts of emotional energy invested in them. The fancy word for the investment of emotional energy is "cathexis". The arrows pointing at the "Ideal Image" box represent cathexis or emotional attachment.

Your and my desire for mosquito-free living is not a huge deal, so it may have only a relatively small amount of cathexis. However, my desire to live happily with my wife has a great deal of energy invested. Even though our mosquito-free desires are modest, you would see us enter the "protest" phase of grief when that mosquito was buzzing around our faces. We would swing and swat, and you might hear expostulations of **anger** during our protest phase of grief when reality was falling short of our expected ideal. We are now experiencing the second dark box of the Grief Graph.

Please notice what the anger is intended to do initially. It is there to inspire "**Courage to Change What's Changeable**". Hopefully you recognize that phrase from the Twelve Step "Serenity Prayer". If not, here it is in its complete form.

## THE SERENITY PRAYER

God grant me the  
**SERENITY** to accept the things  
I cannot change; the  
**COURAGE** to change the things I can;  
and the  
**WISDOM** to know the difference;

**Living one day at a  
time;  
Enjoying one moment at a  
time;  
Accepting hardships as the pathway to peace;  
  
Taking, as He did, this sinful world as it is,  
not as I would have it;  
Trusting that He will make all things right  
if I surrender to His Will;  
That I may be reasonably happy in this life  
and supremely happy with Him forever in the next.**

Pretty good prayer, wouldn't you say? In any case, energized with the courage of the angry phase, we make valiant efforts to obliterate our persistent pest.

But, alas, we fail. He and his friend got us both a good one, and now we anticipate that nagging bump and itch for the next several days. "Drat!" we say to ourselves, and we feel a little sinking in our chests or stomachs. "I can't believe they got us!"

How often, when the unexpected disappointment comes along, do we hear that phrase, "I can't believe it!?" It is quite often. This is because our nervous system is programmed to go to the third step in the Grief Graph next. We feel **shock** and **disbelief** that what we feared and tried to prevent has come about. We have been bit! "Oh, maybe it won't itch this time," or "Maybe I've become immune." "Dream on!" our higher knowing suggests, trying to pull us back to reality. Yet our more ego-centric self wants to live in the bliss of denial just a little bit longer before we let the disappointment sink in.

Denial can be trivial like in my example or it can be profound and reality distorting. Sara grew up receiving beatings since she was an infant. Her father was a preacher who succeeded in intimidating everyone into doing his will. "Don't you dare talk back to the 'Lord's anointed!'", he would threaten if she so much as ventured an opinion. Something in Sara knew what was happening was not right. Yet, in order to suppress her righteous anger at her own mistreatment and avoid a beating, she had to let the surface of her mind believe that Daddy really was a good man. Only later in her life was it safe for horrifying flashbacks to challenge this view. They broke into the unreality of her rationalizations and excuses for Dad with considerable disruption from the time she was twenty five until she was well over thirty. Even still, she must at times remind herself that the lies she told to herself about Dad's righteousness and her worthlessness were not true. The Spirit even prompts her to remember this. As the scriptures suggest, "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place." *Psalms 51:6* Anger has its rightful place. It often teaches us truth.

Certainly this explanation does not exhaust what can be said about either denial or anger. It probably should be mentioned that anger is a *phase* and not an endpoint. We are exhorted in scripture to be angry but not to sin by letting anger fester long (*Ephesians 4:6*). We are encouraged to not let bitterness grow (*Hebrews 12:15*). But probably the more common

wound in good people like my readers is that we have perhaps neglected the useful messages that come to us in the angry phases of our grief. Please be open to the truth in the anger you feel at times of grief. At the same time, realize that the anger is only one side of the full truth and contains within it a good deal of narcissism. It is not our final counselor. Seek the Spirit who lies on the other side of the angry feelings. Only when you find that will you know the whole counsel that God has placed within our mental programs.

Many who knew me probably saw a bit of sadness in me as I was saying good-bye to my private practice of psychiatry. Relationships had grown significant over the nineteen years of my work. I therefore, had to go through a process of grief. There was a definite death-like sense in the letting go of what had been built through the years.

On the Grief Graph, which I introduced to you last time, we are now looking at the box labeled "Sadness". The sadness phase of grief is the death-like letting go of our attachments. Because everything in this world is temporary, Jesus had this to say to us about earthly attachments.

*Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Matthew 6:19-21,33.*

On this Jesus and Buddha agreed. Excessive attachments to things in this world is the source of much suffering. Instead of investing our "cathexis" predominantly upon earthly things and relationships, the spiritual greats encourage us to hold all things loosely in this world. Focus our true hopes upon our relationship to God and His kingdom activity in this world and in the world to come. Other things, then, fall better into place.

Now this is not to say all attachments are bad. We certainly must have love and relationships in the world. But whenever we bond, we are going to hurt. We have to accept this as part of the price that is paid for living in this realm of time. Indeed, about his own forthcoming death, Jesus had this to say to his followers. *"I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn while the world rejoices. You will grieve, but your grief will turn to joy. A woman giving birth to a child has pain because her time has come; but when her baby is born she forgets the anguish because of her joy that a child is born into the world. So with you: Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy."* John 16:20-22. We are supposed to love people and be attached. But whenever we grieve, we are supposed to remember Jesus' metaphor. It is as if he is saying, "I know you feel like you are dying right now. But this that you are undergoing is not ultimately a death. It is a birth as well." Indeed, I appreciate my spiritual mentors often reminding me that in the Kingdom of God, "Nothing is wasted!" No pain is ultimately meaningless. Birth comes after death. Resurrection after crucifixion. When you grieve, you are undergoing birth pangs. Or as Jesus elsewhere said, *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."*

My God, I'm glad this is true! I don't know if I could bear some of the griefs I have suffered in the world if it was not for the hope of resurrection. And I know that many of you have suffered worse. Because of grief and loss this world is going to hurt. But be of good cheer. All that you are going through, even the worst of it, will be used by God to grow you. As Paul is oft quoted to say, *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who*

*love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.” Romans 8:28-29.*

Yet although all of this is true, we can still “lose our religion” when the pain comes. In the midst of pain, it is natural to doubt either the goodness or even the existence of God. And it is quite natural to be mad at Him. In the scriptural book of Job, we do not see him doubting, but we certainly see his wife do so. “Curse God and die,” she urges him. It angered her to see him suffer so. Job himself was plenty angry. Listen as he confronts God with how he feels. Also note how he reacts to those who give unwise advice or imply it must be somehow just that Job is suffering.

*But I desire to speak to the Almighty and to argue my case with God. You, however, smear me with lies; you are worthless physicians, all of you! If only you would be altogether silent! For you, that would be wisdom.*

*Hear now my argument; listen to the plea of my lips. Will you speak wickedly on God’s behalf? Will you speak deceitfully for him? Will you show him partiality? Will you argue the case for God? Would it turn out well if he examined you? Could you deceive him as you might deceive men? He would surely rebuke you if you secretly showed partiality. Would not his splendor terrify you? Would not the dread of him fall on you? Your maxims are proverbs of ashes; your defenses are defenses of clay.*

*Keep silent and let me speak; then let come to me what may. Why do I put myself in jeopardy and take my life in my hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him!*

*Listen carefully to my words; let your ears take in what I say. Now that I have prepared my case, I know I will be vindicated. Can anyone bring charges against me? If so, I will be silent and die. Only grant me these two things, O God, and then I will not hide from you: Withdraw your hand far from me, and stop frightening me with your terrors. Then summon me and I will answer, or let me speak, and you reply.*

*How many wrongs and sins have I committed? Show me my offense and my sin. Why do you hide your face and consider me your enemy? Will you torment a windblown leaf? Will you chase after dry chaff? For you write down bitter things against me and make me inherit the sins of my youth. You fasten my feet in shackles; you keep close watch on all my paths by putting marks on the soles of my feet. So man wastes away like something rotten, like a garment eaten by moths. Job 13*

We see this temporary seeming loss of faith also with the modern great C. S. Lewis. Lewis’ life lit up surprisingly with the entry of Joy, his wife, ending his long bachelorhood. They shone together for but a brief time when Joy’s life was taken with cancer. How seeming sadistic of God to allow this light only to take it away. C. S. Lewis wrestled with these issues in his book, *A Grief Observed*. This world renown apologist for the Christianity ends the book on a very uncharacteristic note. It sounds all the world like Lewis abandons his faith. We know from later works that it was not so. Yet there were certainly moments where the thoughts of his heart carried him to this brink. You may see the drama of this relationship depicted marvelously in the recent film, *Shadowlands*. I recommend it highly.

During the darkness of the sadness phase, we often cycle between sadness and anger. In a major loss, as time goes on, we often experience new aspects of what we lost. My spouse dies, and I know from the start that I will miss her companionship. Only later do I realize that I miss her acting as a buffer against some of the demands of the world. I do not at first realize

how much she does for me in little things like picking up the laundry and making sure there are softening sheets in the dryer. When this hits me, I grieve all over again. In this manner, our major grief is usually filled with many "subgriefs". This results in the repetitive cycling through anger and sadness represented on the Grief Graph by the arrows going in both directions at that stage.

After a time, the tears die down and it is like we are in a tomb. Although we may function adequately, we care about little. Life loses its zest, and our activity seems pointless. We are just going through the motions. Our imagination can envision a future of only the same dead routine. It seems we will never smile again. Yet our faith offers the message of a famous sermon: "It's Friday, but Sunday is Comin'." We give the Friday before Easter the name "Good Friday." Is it really good? Is the loss, the remembered abuse, the wound we are suffering really good?

Well, the answer is both "yes" and "no." No it was not good that you were abused. No, illness, death, divorce, or other losses cannot be considered truly "good" in the fullest sense. Nevertheless, where there is death, there is also resurrection in the economy of God. So early in the process of loss, if we remind ourselves that the gloom is only temporary, and the Phoenix of your spirit really will someday rise from the ashes, then we feel encouraged that all is not as final as it feels at first. *"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."* (Psalms 30:5) It is okay to realize that it may take some time for your feelings to line up completely with this reality. But with your mind you can know its true and keep your hope in God. Indeed Psalm 42-43 encourages us with just those words.

*As the deer pants for streams of water, so my soul longs for you, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and behold the face of God?  
My tears have been my food day and night, while men say to me continually, "Where is your God?"  
These things I remember as I pour out my soul: how I went with the multitude, leading  
the procession to the house of God, with shouts of joy and thanksgiving among the festive  
throng.  
Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me? Hope in God, for I  
will again praise him, my Help and my God.*

Grief and suffering in this life are very difficult. One should never minimize their gravity by platitudes about God or hope. Nevertheless, if we do not get detoured off the path of the Grief Graph, we find that *"Weeping may endure for a night, but joy comes in the morning."* May we live ever in that hope.