

The Gift of Grief

Brad Lichtenstein, ND

*For beings long to free themselves from misery,
But misery itself they follow and pursue.
They long for joy, but in their ignorance
Destroy it as they would their foe.*

Shantideva

Self-disclosure and communication have never been issues for me. One of my earliest memories finds my four- or five-year-old self standing in my tiny bedroom, praying to God that I be struck mute (probably not the word I used) so no one (probably Mom) would ever be upset with me again. What I find so surprising is that I recall my childhood to be idyllic and carefree, and am hard-pressed to bring forth a time when my mother scolded or punished me. Still, feelings of hurt, sadness and grief pierce my heart when that image unexpectedly enters into my consciousness.

It is Fall in Seattle as I write these words, the Metal time of year in Chinese Medical cosmology. The Metal Element is connected with the emotions of grief, sadness and loss. Fall has always been a melancholy time for me, regardless of life situation or circumstance, and grief has been an emotion that has danced about me peripherally, something experienced, but never for too long, or so I thought. As a Fire type, passion, joy, connection and love are where my heart often resides. However, not this Fall. For the first time in my life, my creativity was

blocked, my heart was heavy and I found myself unable to write. Grief clenched my heart and would not let go.

Professionally I felt on my path. This Fall, after 12 years of adjunct teaching, I became a core faculty at Bastyr University. My workshops and classes were growing. I was reconnecting with my community after a short time away. While those pieces seemed to fall into place, my personal life imploded. As September approached its end, so, too, did my relationship of over five years. On its heels, I met another who shook my world like no one has before. Although our encounter was brief, I was left confused and dismantled. My mind ruminated, stuck in a familiar loop - *Did I say too much? Did I reveal my feelings too soon? Why couldn't I have kept my mouth shut? What is wrong with me?* The image of my childhood self passed before my eyes, pointing at me, shaking his finger. *What is this love thing all about?* I cried. *And what do you do with an aching heart?*

As Fall progressed, tales of heartbreak and woe surrounded me. Patients cried about love lost and opportunities missed. I wondered how I could be



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present with them if dazed and numbed by my own pain. As they told their stories, I was stunned to hear them whispering the intimate details of my heart. The players and settings varied, yet the themes remained consistent. I realized again what I have known for so long - we are all the same. Our longings are all the same. We all desire love and freedom from misery; yet how many of us stay blind to love's true essence. My teacher is life and all the people who have blessed me with their heartfelt and soulful stories. In recounting some of these here, maybe you will recognize your own.

Recently divorced after several years of living in a passionless and unfulfilled marriage, Phil found himself in love. "Nicole is the one," he told me, "and I have never said that about anyone before, including my ex-wife." Phil was ecstatic to have found the woman for whom he had been searching his entire adult life, a woman with whom he could open his heart, be vulnerable and trusting. The bond between them was intense, deep and real, and they connected on all levels - emotionally, intellectually, and physically. The fact that Nicole arrived in his life at a time when Phil doubted the very existence of love was, to him, a sign of Divine Providence and portended an enduring relationship of life-long love and devotion. For weeks, Phil's heart soared, and his delight was infectious. Friends reveled in his joy. An acquaintance wading through her own messy and bitter divorce said that seeing Phil in the throes of love lifted her mood, and gave her hope for the future.

Six weeks later, a very different Phil entered my office. In place of the blissful and enthralled man I

had been seeing, this Phil was shaky, anxious and dejected. "It's over. Nicole ended it. After dinner. She said the relationship wasn't working out the way she planned so she couldn't engage in it any more. What does that mean? I just don't understand. I thought we would be together forever. What did I do wrong? What's wrong with me?"

Only days after Phil's abrupt breakup, Julie shared her story of heartache. After five years of living together, her boyfriend, Sam, announced his need to "be alone and find himself." Sam had an epiphany while traveling through Europe that he was not living authentically. On the day of his return, he informed Julie that it would be impossible for him to discover his true nature as long as he continued their relationship. He loved her, but he was unable to be the man she needed if he failed to take this opportunity. Julie felt utterly mystified. She was happy with Sam and their relationship. He was her best friend, her confidant, her companion. They discussed everything. What happened in Europe to bring about such a change when she saw no signs of dissatisfaction prior to the trip? Sitting before me, Julie vacillated between crying and smiling. After long moments of silence, Julie would shake her head aggressively, as if waking herself out of a trance and unconvincingly declare, "It's fine. It's fine. We will be together again."

Over the next several weeks, Julie struggled to maintain an upbeat and positive air, yet each session ended in tears. Conversations began benignly, as she recounted mundane tasks devoid of substance and depth, speaking little of Sam. Then, she would sheepishly glance at the floor and mention



how he had called or texted her just to say hello or share a thought about some new, exciting experience. As Sam was thriving, exploring and growing, Julie was stagnating. He would contact her to express his enthusiasm for life, and in his wake, Julie held her breath, waiting. Asking for space and time to deal with her grief was incomprehensible to her, since she dreamt that his next communication might be an admission of undying love or a request to return. So Julie waited, wondering, "When will he wake up and see that I am here for him. I should be the one by his side as he goes through all this. Why can't I be with him?"

Each of us has a way of framing the world, of assigning meaning to situations and events. Each moment carries equal potential to either free us to experience the spectacular breadth of existence - or to keep us transfixed in pain and suffering. Loss is inevitable, an aspect of living. Seasons change. Time passes. People are born. People die. To run from our grief, loss or pain is an act of self-violence. In an age where the means for distraction are numerous and instantaneous, do we know how to sit with our inner experiences? Distraction and dissociation seem to be the practice of the day. What do we do to cultivate and care for our hurt and loss? How do we approach our grief?

The current and predominant healthcare paradigm in this country seems to promote dissociation in the name of cure. For instance, the *Diagnostic and Statistic Manual IV*, or the DSM-IV, the bible for classifying and diagnosing psychological and mental illness, outlines that normal bereavement lasts for two months. Therefore, if three months after the death of your parent, child, spouse, sibling or loved one, you are still experiencing symptoms of grief, you can be diagnosed with major depression, and therefore seek treatment through medication or therapy. In other words, something is wrong for which you must, or can, be treated. In its previous edition, however, the DSM-III, the time criteria for bereavement was one year. What happened between editions to convince the American Psychiatric Association to reduce the grieving process to two months, other than the rise in prescription sales for selective serotonin re-

uptake inhibitors? Such imposed time frames are not evidenced cross-culturally where the death of a spouse or child can last a lifetime, and yet be considered a normal and healthy part of life. What does this suggest for the sanity of a culture ready to medicalize the common experiences of life and view them as disorders or diseases?

When we fail to enter into our grief, sit with our sadness, witness our pain, we, in essence, argue with reality, and aggressively deny what is. Distraction only spurns healing. Healing, or wholeness, is an act of acceptance, accepting our experience in its entirety. When we acknowledge and embrace our state, a softening occurs. No longer judging sadness or hurt as something that needs to be treated or extracted from our psyche, we can put down our arms, cease fighting and open to the moment.

Phil and Julie both had difficulty sitting with their bereavement. They approached their grief as a problem to be solved, and the solution was singular - to regain the affection of their beloved. Despite the reality of separation, they refused to accept it. Claiming to want solace and peace, every step they took ensured their suffering prevailed. Julie incessantly reiterated every conversation and interaction she and Sam had, causing her to lose sleep and focus. When she did manage to sleep, it was punctuated with dreams of arguments where she defended her love, made a case for their union and pleaded for his return. Phil began each session by cycling through a never-ending list of hypothetical and rhetorical questions, "Was I too needy? Did I move too fast? Did I offer too much? Should I have played hard to get? Should I have not called daily? Did I say 'I love you' too soon?" In both of their minds, they were to blame for the loss of love, and that was intolerable to them.

The loss of love tends to unearth our deepest fears lurking beneath the surface, namely that we are unlovable and unworthy. As long as Phil remained married and living with someone, anyone, this was proof that he was lovable. His unexamined and unquestioned beliefs - that he was somehow flawed and unacceptable - were kept at a distance, never to be acknowledged or healed. Without his wife or Nicole, any hope of validation evaporated.

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Since the issue of his worth was debatable in his own mind, the argument persisted. Unsettled by this, Phil felt compelled to blame this loss of love somewhere, and he picked the closest target he could find: himself.

This was true for Julie as well. Playing the role of the devoted friend, answering every call, returning every text, constantly being available, Julie rationalized that she was doing all she could to bring love back into the fold. Unable to consider Sam's departure as an issue about Sam and not herself, Julie blamed herself, and the only remedy for the pain was to have Sam back in her life.

I believe the connection Phil and Julie shared with their partners was authentic and profound. While grief is an aspect of Metal, the Fire Element also comes into play here. In Chinese Medicine, most of what we call heart break, wounded heart or aching heart involves the role of the Heart Protector, an official of the Fire element. The Heart itself is the Great Controller who ensures the other Fire element officials are operating smoothly. This task is highly time- and energy-consuming, so the Heart requires a sentry, a guard, to ward off any assault. This is the role of the Heart Protector, to suffer the slings and arrows directed towards the Heart, whether physical, mental or emotional. Since the Heart provides warmth through controlling circulation of blood, sexual fluids and Love, that very emotion that leads to connection between people, a faulty Heart Protector can directly impact our warmth and vitality.

When the Heart finds love, the Heart Protector opens to allow for the exchange of energy and con-

nection. When the Heart Protector is weak and gets stuck open, the Heart searches frantically for an object with which to bond. For years, Phil's Heart Protector had kept its gates shut, keeping expressions of love at bay. When Nicole entered the picture, it stirred his soul, and his Heart Protector took a chance. In the presence of a profound love, one that could potentially be reciprocated, the gates flew open, and the love he kept tucked away poured forth like a raging tide. The magnitude and force of the swell was so immense, the gates got stuck in open, even after Nicole left. Longing for an object onto which he could bequeath all the love he had amassed over the years, his heart knew not what to do.

Both Phil and Julie were unable to sit with their grief, and they spent their time either in distraction or mentally replaying scenarios. Both Julie and Phil said repeatedly, "I just don't understand." This has often been my mantra as well. The belief here is that with understanding, we would have the means to somehow fix the situation in some way. Yet what is there to fix?

How do we come to be so wounded? Where do we get these notions that we are unlovable, unworthy, undeserving? Theories abound, which do little to bring relief. Perhaps I interpreted my parents' comments and attitudes in my formative years as rejection. Does it mean I was unloved, and more importantly, does it mean I am unlovable? Will I spend a lifetime seeking approval of others as a replacement for the lost affections of my parents? What if others love me, and not my parents? And if



I enter into the discussion, admit that my capacity to be loved is in question, how then will I spend the remainder of my days?

As I see it, two types of love in the world exist. When the Heart searches for love externally, seeks an object of attention, love solidifies to form. This is human love, physical love, relational love, which brings with it all types of limits and conditions by the mere fact it exists on this dimension. When our Heart Protector is wide open, as it was for Phil and Julie, our fire, our love, our passion disperses outward, draining vitality. In learning to close the door a bit, to oil the gates so they can move with ease and at will, we can conserve our fire and have the opportunity to connect with Source.

Source is Universal Love, Unconditional Love, Pure Love. Source is unlimited, undifferentiated, ultimate. Unconditional Love is the love of pure acceptance, where the Source of one heart connects to the Source of another's heart, recognizing our interdependentness. As its name suggests, Unconditional Love has no requirements or criteria for expression. I love you without reservation, whether you return the affection or not. As creatures living in human form, Unconditional Love may seem foreign or daunting. Regardless of our fumbings and failings, each of us long for the same things, to love and be loved, to be free from harm, to be happy, to be healthy and to live in ease. As Shantideva reminds us, we all want to be free from misery but the steps we take to do so often bring about the very thing we wish to avoid.

Both Julie and Phil were disconnected from Source as evidenced by their impoverished view of

love. This perspective assumes a finite amount of love exists in the world, and if one form is removed, no more will ever come again. Bit by bit, Phil and Julie began to reframe this notion and find inner strength and peace. They slowly began to embrace their sadness and loss and to wholeheartedly grieve. The more they sat in the moment, connected with their feelings, emotions and bodily sensations, the more they cultivated connection to Source. Tending to pain in this way, holding it softly in an unclenched hand, is self-love and a recognition of our Divine nature, and provides a release and clearing for new experiences and new loves to enter into our life.

It is now 4 PM on a gray, mid-December afternoon. The light is waning. Soon it will be the shortest day of the year in North America. Between sips of tea, I descend into my heart and engage my residual sadness. Through my grief, I can cross the shore and arrive on the other side, where through my connection with Source, I can come to value and prize the world as well as myself. From this place, I will continue to share and disclose. Silently I offer words of gratitude to my heart, to the object of my earthly Love, and to the Universe itself. I am alive!

