

I recently had the chance to see a moving film about Stephen Jenkinson – “Griefwalker,.” He is a writer and palliative social worker who puts loss and our acceptance of death at the heart of what it means to live fully. This is a topic I would be interested in forming a discussion group around if anyone is interested, something along the line of the “death café” premise. On this theme I have something lovely from the internet blog *Changing Aging*. –RO

Grief and Praise - Published by David Goff, ChangingAging .org on June 4, 2015

Below is an old indigenous story I know. It expresses something fundamental. I open with this story because I have lost my moorings, and I want my sense of balance back.

Once all the creatures in the world gathered in a great council to clarify the jobs they each perform in the service of Creation. One by one they step forward. The beaver is here to look after the wetlands and to monitor how the streams flow. The worm is here to burrow through the earth so that the roots of plants may find air and nutrients. The deer is here to slip through the woodlands, to watch what is happening.

The council is progressing well — but one poor creature stands away from the fire, in the shadows, uncertain of its role. This is the human. At last this being steps forward and haltingly addresses the assembly “We are confused. What is the purpose of human beings?” The animals and the plants, the insects and the trees — all are surprised. They laugh, but then the laughter gives way to stunned silence. “Don’t you know? It’s so obvious!!” “No,” replied the human, “we need you to tell us.” And the other creatures of the world all responded, “Your purpose is to glory in it all. Your job is to praise Creation.”

I don’t seem to be praise worthy. I am too often preoccupied with my own little worries. I miss the big picture, the reason for my life, because I am elsewhere, living like my life is more important than what is going on around me. I even worry about worrying too much. For good reason it turns out. Life goes on, and I seem to be limping along behind, whining about things not being what I want them to be.

Fortunately, Nature has provided a corrective, not one I like a lot. I’m coming to know this difficulty better, and to respect it a whole lot more. This is grief. There seems to be a relationship between grief and praise. I am learning about this relationship in a somewhat natural way. I am finding that I am experiencing more loss, thus more grief, as I am coming back to life.

I am losing everything and everybody. I have had a few friends die. I know I will have some more. I’ve lost lovers, loved ones, homes, jobs, even my own capabilities. Each of these losses has hurt, sent me spinning, and made me wonder about this thing called Life. And, if I am honest, each has made me a little more grateful for what remains. I don’t like hurting because of these losses. I don’t like knowing that they will continue. But, as the losses mount, I am noticing, each of them pushes me a little further in the direction of really appreciating what is here.

As I grieve the losses I am taking, I am growing my appreciation for the miraculousness of Life. I like this development. I’m just not sure I like the price I’m paying for it.

Grief is opening me up to the real cost of life. The impermanence of everything, the fleeting moment, the embrace that always ends, these are the things I live for, cannot hold, and that make me grateful for my existence. What always evades me, meaning what ultimately passes beyond me, is what I value the most.

I'm learning that losses invigorate my appreciation for life. What I cannot preserve, I value. When I expose myself to loss I am dragged into a whirlwind of pain that paradoxically enlivens me, and opens my eyes to the incredibly beautiful transience of life. Suddenly loss becomes gain. I am thrust into a landscape that breaks my heart, and simultaneously introduces to the delicate persistence of life.

Lately this has taken the form of letting in a painful reality. If I want real contact, to feel palpably connected, I rely upon others. It grieves me that others are so preoccupied with their own lives. There is nothing wrong. I am just lonelier than I want to be. Because I feel this pain and loss, because I can admit this grief, I am more available for the brief moment of real contact that does come. I am more prepared when I don't maintain that something is wrong and I grieve what is. I get to feel more connected because I accept being less connected.

Grief at what passes, or is true, or is what I cannot change, makes me appreciate so much more. Feeling my grief, all that I lose, is what frees me to fully praise this existence. It doesn't matter if I think life is imperfect, if I feel that it asks too much of me, because no matter what, I am being exposed to a waterfall of constantly changing sensations that, because of my losses, take on a hue of poignancy and wonder. Grief gives rise to praise, not because I am just right, but because life is.

Knowing this, having it deep in my experiential bones, is my balance point. Balance may move around, may be very shaky, will be dynamic, because I now grasp, that too have balance, I have to lose balance