

Mundane Grief

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My oldest son leaves for college next fall. I am experiencing what psychologists have called “anticipatory grief.” Or so an interior voice—my best intellectualizing defense mechanism—tells me. I imagine the absence of his light humor at our dinner table, the emptiness of his room, or the house without his music; and I rehearse my impending loss. Like a tongue searching the raw gum after a lost tooth, I stretch toward it, find the missing spot, and then shy away. Mostly I dart away. I even put off writing this because I did not want to touch it. I do not want to spend much time exploring the edges of this loss. But, truth be told, at midlife, as I gray and wrinkle, as my parents mark with gratefulness their days of good health, and as my three sons surpass me in height and life expectation, I spend more of my time grieving change than I ever anticipated.

Life has graciously spared me many hardships addressed in other chapters. Most accounts of bereavement focus, as they should, on major loss—death, divorce, miscarriage, and serious illness. I have not lost a child, a parent, a sibling, or an intimate friend to death. Few close family members suffer from a chronic, debilitating disease. My marriage remains strong, and none of my pregnancies ended in miscarriage or stillbirth. Although there is little point in judging losses comparatively or claiming some kind of superiority in suffering, an unapproachable difference must be recognized between such major anguish and the kind of minor, daily sorrow that I want to consider here. Nothing compares to the suffering of tragic loss. Any book on grief must look at these most difficult parts of life.

This should not, however, preclude considering the relationship between Christian faith and mundane loss. The topic is remarkably absent from most discussions. I cannot think of many books or articles on it. Most people do not talk much about their struggle to deal with minor loss except during a major life milestone or when horrible tragedy strikes. At such points, people expect tears but are surprised when they come at any other time. Yet, if I were radically honest with myself, I would have to argue that I have been living with loss during most of my parenthood and am closer to crying recently than I would like to admit.

Most people yearn to associate parenthood with its many blessings rather than its innumerable sorrows. But I would venture to say that an elementary aspect

of good parenting is learning to live with loss. Frankly, I’m not sure how well I’ve done. And this book raises an even harder question that I have not asked myself often enough: What does the Christian faith, my own conviction, have to do with chronic, nontragic, mundane daily loss?

My computer thesaurus suggests some interesting substitutes for “mundane”: earthly, secular, temporal, and worldly. The Western Christian tradition tends to disassociate the sacred and the mundane, the religious and the ordinary, and has often identified spirituality with extraordinary times of silence, solitude, prayer, joy, and rebirth. Yet, in mundane loss, there is a great deal of room for the sacred. Indeed, if day-to-day parenting is, as I argue elsewhere, a religious practice *par excellence*,¹ and if parenting is filled with loss, then how one learns to grieve within families comprises an important spiritual discipline.

Nontragic Daily Loss and Christian Faith

In the “empty nest syndrome,” contemporary society has invented a rather truncated, hackneyed depiction of parental anguish. This oft-used phrase confines loss to the final stage of a child’s official departure and obscures the infinitesimal leave-takings that occur daily and at each life stage. Otherwise helpful psychological insight unfortunately renders parental sorrow a “syndrome” or abnormal affliction that one ought to get over, rather than as an inherent, ongoing aspect of all parenting. As a result, many parents experience what other psychologists describe as “disenfranchised grief,” or grief over bereavement that is denied social and religious legitimacy.² Disenfranchised grievers must do grief work in private without social support.

So a first step in a Christian response to mundane grief is simply faithful recognition and community support. Ironically, clinical language, spouted by popular efforts to put death back on the table, has been used just as easily to control, manage, and evade suffering. Even the Christian tradition itself has had a hard time appreciating the “prayer of lament” as central to its larger corpus.³

Parents, as art historian Anne Higonnet remarks, “inevitably begin losing their children as soon as they are born.”⁴ This is epitomized in the very nature and condition of pregnancy itself. In conception and pregnancy, a mother experiences a tenacious link to another that begins in separation. In the pregnant body, the other is both the self and not the self and is hourly, daily becoming more separate until that which was the mother’s becomes irrevocably another. And this initial subversive state of being pregnant—what French feminist Julia Kristeva dubs “a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh”—is only a very tiny piece of the subtle bereavements that fill parenthood. Most parents are not all that different from Mary, the mother of God, who, as biblical theologian

Beverly Gaventa notes, contends with a child who is “profoundly hers and yet not hers at all.”⁵

Perhaps this is partly why the author of Luke kept the account of Jesus’ parents’ discovery that they had left their young twelve-year-old son behind in Jerusalem as a central story (Luke 2:41-52). It is significant that this particular aspect of parenthood is the only account of Jesus’ childhood included in all four canonical Gospels.

In her analysis of this pericope, Gaventa argues that the New Revised Standard Version—“your father and I have been searching for you *in great anxiety*”—fails to “capture the poignancy of the word Luke selects (*odynoun*).” A better translation of verse 48b is, “Behold, your father and I have been looking for you *in anguish*.” The emotional claim that Mary makes here “is the real and present terror of parents who do not know where their child is.”⁶ I once dropped off my twelve-year-old youngest son at Starbucks to let him walk across the street with his drink to meet me in my office, and he got lost on the university campus and showed up a half-hour later. Mary and Joseph searched for three whole days—an almost unfathomable amount of time for parents who have become hysterical in only minutes when a child did not show up at an appointed time and place.

Not surprising, parents are perhaps most distressed by what many acknowledge as among the hardest tragic losses—the death of a child. “It’s so wrong, so profoundly wrong,” exclaims Nicholas Wolterstorff, who lost his twenty-five-year-old son in a disastrous mountain climbing accident, “for a child to die before its parents.”⁷ He, like others in his situation, has to work hard to reconfigure his beliefs about God, suffering, and death. Such parents are irrevocably changed, perhaps by this more than by any other single life event. For Wolterstorff, a chasm opens up between time before the disaster and time after.

Again, any comparison between death of a child, in which the “*neverness* . . . is so painful”⁸—never again to be with the person—and the kind of daily loss I’m considering is ludicrous. Yet all parents stand on a continuum as people vulnerable before the utter precariousness of the created lives most dear to them, whether they live with present loss or forebodingly contemplate impending loss. In fact, those who have suffered the death of a child are precisely those who are in a good position to remind the rest of us, as pastoral theologian Bruce Vaughn does, that mourning is “an ongoing and fundamental dimension of what it means to be human.” It is not a “discrete, diagnosable, and transient clinical entity” to be spotted and cured, but rather a spiritual challenge to be met. People need, Vaughn argues, “not ‘grief recovery,’ but the recovery of grief” as an ever-present, existential reality.⁹ Or, as funeral director and author Thomas Lynch puts it, “the question is not so much whether or not, but rather how well, how completely, how meaningfully we mourn.”¹⁰

The Lukan account of Mary and Joseph’s search is a powerful portrayal of parental distress, foreshadowing the ultimate sorrow awaiting them at the death of their son on the cross. Some commentators have criticized Mary in Luke 2:48 for her selfish concern about how Jesus treated them and her failure to recognize the important mission to which he was already drawn. She seems to have forgotten quickly her earlier words magnifying God and rejoicing in God’s blessings. Yet all good parents can identify with getting caught up in the complicated tension between hopeful care and overbearing solicitude that interferes with a child’s growth. From another perspective, Mary’s anguish over young Jesus seems entirely justified and does not contradict her previous proclamation of joy and faith. Nor should parents see their own similar distress as incompatible with committed Christian practice. In this same Gospel, Jesus gives those who mourn special status, alongside the poor and hungry.

Parenting demands a constant giving up and letting go, whether literally at the doorway of the day care, preschool, and college dorm; or figuratively in making a huge array of disciplinary and recreational decisions about a child’s everyday life that close off certain possibilities while opening others. Children are gifts in the best Christian sense, given to us on loan, so to speak, by a gracious God as part of God’s good creation. At the same time, adults owe them care, nurture, discipline, and guidance. Finding the right balance between holding on and letting go is perhaps one of the most difficult challenges of parenthood over the long haul.¹¹

The parental role must be, as Catholic ethicist Christine Gudorf remarks, “a constantly diminishing one in the life of a child.”¹² Her claim is accurate in one sense, but it also exaggerates or simplifies a complex process that involves something a bit different than mere parental diminishment. Instead, dealing with mundane loss requires seeking new, creative ways to sustain and deepen intimacy under increasingly distant and more limited circumstances.¹³ In the best of all possible worlds, a decreasing role in one sense is balanced by a different, possibly richer, kind of connectivity in another sense.

Many factors inhibit such fine balance. Fear often lures parents to exert excessive control. Parents are also tempted to overidentify with children, as especially prevalent in the middle-class obsession with children’s achievement in sports, school, and beyond. I would wager that behind some of this anxiety and preoccupation stands the deeper problem of fear of loss. To let go means to admit one’s own limits and mortality.

Mundane Loss as Curse

Faithful recognition of life as a “school in the art of dying,” as Henri Nouwen dubs it, comes in part out of a larger twofold Christian proclamation on death as

curse and as that over which God has triumphed.¹⁴ In contrast to popular opinion, one stream of the tradition sees death as a curse and not as a natural part of life. Our family just watched *Forrest Gump*, a movie two of our kids had not seen yet. It dawned on me as I held this essay in the back of my mind, that the movie's appeal lies in its willingness to confront daily loss, loss of intimate relationships, loss of dreams, loss of physical and mental potential, and loss of time gone by. At one poignant moment, Gump comments, "My momma always said, 'Death is a part of life.' I sure wish it wasn't." When Gump adds his own twist to his mother's truism, he stands closer to the Christian tradition than he realizes.

Common rhetoric today claims dying as a natural part of life to counter the pervasive repression of death in our modern technological society. Psychology coaches an acceptance by reminding us, as did Elisabeth Kübler-Ross decades ago, that death is as much a part of life as birth. At a fundamental level, the Christian tradition does not agree.

The early tradition, including Paul and then, most definitively, Augustine, declared death a punishment for sin. Seeing loss in this way sounds antiquated to modern ears, but it captures an important facet of Christian faith. Although Paul develops this idea because he wants to draw a sharp theological contrast between Adam—the father of sin and death—and Christ—the source of grace and new life—Augustine grapples with loss on a more personal and spiritual level. He ponders the strangeness of time, recognizes the deep human aversion to dying, and fights back tears at his own mother's deathbed. Such tears flowed as a natural response to the severing of body and soul—a "harsh and unnatural experience as long as it lasts" that mocks the immortal life for which God created humans.¹⁵

Not much can really be said in the face of this rending, as is most clear in dire situations. Wolterstorff pleads, "Please: Don't say it's not really so bad. Because it is. Death is awful, demonic.... What I need to hear... is that you recognize how painful it is."¹⁶ There is a decided relentlessness to time and finitude against which even good faithful Christians fight. Pleading rhetorically whether there is "no one who can slow it down, make it stop, turn it back," Wolterstorff asks, "Must we all be swept forever on, away, beyond... sorrow hard on sorrow, until the measure of our losses has been filled?"¹⁷ The very goodness of creation "makes death all the more difficult to live with." Although Christians do not worship the world or human bodies, doctrines of creation and salvation affirm the inherent worth of embodiment. We are more than our bodies, but "of nothing on earth do we have more intimate possession."¹⁸ Grief involves the real loss of the materiality and minutia of ordinary touch, nurture, and affection. Even as I celebrate my sons' growth, I sometimes grieved the transition, often around four and

twelve-years-old, when immediate physical touch began to change to less tangible forms of intimacy. No wonder many parents cling long and hard to their youngest child.

Early theologians labeled death not simply an unnatural evil, but a curse, because loss is made harder by sin and guilt. In caring for one another, people fail or, worse, pervert and damage each other, sometimes despite intent, but sometimes by mean-spirited intention. Guilt intensifies loss because it adds to the anxiety of death that is, in Paul Tillich's words, "an anxiety which it would not have without guilt, namely, the feeling of standing under judgment." People are anxious about the future, not only because of its brevity, but also because of "its impenetrable darkness and the threat that one's whole existence in time will be judged as a failure."¹⁹ Both he and Wolterstorff contrast this Christian view with that of the Stoics and, I would add, with contemporary discourse. Whereas Stoic rhetoric asserts, "Be calm and accept death as a part of life," Jesus says, "Weep with the wounds of the world."²⁰

"Bambelela"—Never Give Up: God Triumphs

Fortunately, this is not Christianity's final word. There are other steps in grieving mundane loss besides faithful recognition, justified anguish, irate defiance, and remorse. Although Christians lack immediate, concrete, empirical proof, faith in the face of loss is also all about the sometimes uphill battle to trust the whole gospel—that God conquers death and guilt. As Christ was raised, so too are we, however literally or figuratively we understand this promise. Death and mundane loss are not all there is.

Letting go of children goes against the grain of human self-preservation. It requires trust that we are preserved and upheld by a force greater than our own efforts. The Christian tradition has long hoped to sustain such trust. Perhaps the hardest spiritual lesson or the most difficult virtue to acquire in the care of children is entrusting oneself and those most loved to God's care and protection. It is only such trust that finally allows one to stop short of using one's children to build up oneself and to love others genuinely.

Struggle with loss, as I see with the impending departure of my son, is closely aligned with the depth of love. Grief is a testimony to attachment or, as Wolterstorff comments, to the immeasurable "worth of the one loved." In what Lynch calls the "dull math" or illogic of life, we love or are commanded to love one another; therefore, we suffer and God suffers with us.²¹

Loss is made especially difficult because in loving the other we take that other into our own being as part of our self. This past spring, in a course on psychoanalytic self-psychologist Heinz Kohut, one student remarked that Kohut's theory

does not deal with grief. I countered that loss stands at the heart of his understanding of how infants and children develop. He argues that self-structure results from "optimal frustrations" or incremental nontraumatic disappointments in parental response to need. When the parent fails to answer the baby's cry for food, the infant must internalize a representation of the remembered parental response as a rudimentary internal self-soothing function.

We usually think of development in terms of the child incorporating aspects of the parent. But it works both ways. After months and years of a parent guarding and supporting a child, the child becomes what Kohut calls an important "self-object" for the parent. A "self-object" is a psychoanalytic term that attempts to describe that aspect of the self, which is neither completely self nor other, but a combination of the two. It is a transformed aspect of the other that a person internalizes to sustain the self. So, at his son's burial, Wolterstorff cries, "I buried myself. . . . It was me those gardeners lowered. . . . It was me on whom we shoveled dirt. It was me we left behind."²²

The good news is that God enters into suffering and triumphs over it, turning pain into sympathy for the world's wounds; anguish into trust; and distress into gratitude, deepened commitment, and expanded love. While writing this essay, I found myself drawn to a South African freedom song I sang at a retreat center a month ago.²³ The repeated lyric urges *bambelela* or "never give up." In times of trouble, when times are hard, or when we are in pain, we should "never give up." The refrain, like good liturgy, allows the singer to moan in lament, and then echo "never, never, never give up." *Bambelela*; God triumphs.

"On Eagle's Wings": Held in the Palm of God

Right after I started writing this essay, I had to go pick up my oldest son at the airport. I waited, as person after person filed past, for him to appear around the corner. When he did, I found myself surprised by tears, and the more I thought I might cry, the more I wept and the more my son looked at me strangely. I figured I'd just spent too much time on this essay, but I really couldn't explain it to him easily. To stare finitude straight in the face seems like something brilliant philosophers such as Søren Kierkegaard can pull off better than I can.

I have come close enough to spark some insights, but who needs to stand mourning at the turn of every corner? No need to become the tragic character in a novel I read recently, *The Secret Life of Bees*, who sees the pain on everyone's sleeve magnified and eventually takes her own life. One cannot live always at the point where Wolterstorff arrives when his bereavement causes him to notice that "we are surrounded by death. . . . Before, I saw it only here and there." But now "the dead show up. . . . All around me are the traces and memories of the dead."²⁴

It is not that I will move on and leave mundane loss behind. It's just that there is always, as in the words of another hymn, a time to be "raised up on eagle's wings" and to rest "in the palm of God's hand."²⁵ It isn't just that grief doesn't feel good. Nor is it that grief should be controlled or managed. Ultimately God has promised more abundant life than sorrow. Christians await the day when the old order will pass away; and death, mourning, crying, and pain will be no more (Revelation 21:4).

Endnotes

1. See *Let the Children Come: Reimagining Childhood from a Christian Perspective* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003).
2. Kenneth Doka (ed.), *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* (New York: Lexington Books, 1989), cited by Lucy Bregman, *Beyond Silence and Denial: Death and Dying Reconsidered* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 111.
3. Kathleen D. Billman and Daniel L. Migliore, *Rachel's Cry: Prayer of Lament and Rebirth of Hope* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 1999); Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," in *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 98-111; and Denise Ackermann, "On Hearing and Lamenting: Faith and Truth Telling," in *To Remember and to Heal: Theological and Psychological Reflections on Truth and Reconciliation*, ed. H. Russel Botman and Robin M. Petersen (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1996), 47-56.
4. Anne Higonnet, *Pictures of Innocence: The History and Crisis of Ideal Childhood* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 200.
5. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, "The Challenge of Christmas," *The Christian Century* (15 December 1993): 1270f; see also my essay, "'Pondering All These Things': Mary and Motherhood," in *Blessed One: Protestant Perceptions of Mary*, ed. Cynthia L. Rigby and Beverly Roberts Gaventa (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 97-114.
6. Beverly Roberts Gaventa, *Mary: Glimpses of the Mother of Jesus* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1995), 68.
7. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 16.
8. *Ibid.*, 15.
9. S. Bruce Vaughn, "Recovering Grief in the Age of Grief Recovery," *The Journal of Pastoral Theology*, 13:1 (Spring 2003): 36-38; see also David L. Massey, "Theological and Biblical Interpretations of Current Movements and

Emerging Paradigms Within Bereavement Studies," *Pastoral Psychology*, 48:6 (July 2000).

10. Thomas Lynch, "Good Grief: An Undertaker's Reflections," *The Christian Century* (26 July 2003): 20.

11. See Herbert Anderson and Kenneth R. Mitchell, *Leaving Home* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993).

12. Christine Gurdorf, "Dissecting Parenthood: Infertility, in Vitro, and Other Lessons in Why and How We Parent," *Conscience*, 15:3 (Autumn 1994): 22.

13. See Pamela D. Couture, "Over the River and Through the Woods: Maintaining Emotional Presence Across Geographical Distance," in *Mutuality Matters: Faith, Family, and Just Love*, ed. Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, and Robert Schreiter (Lanham, MD: Sheed and Ward, forthcoming).

14. Henri Nouwen, *A Letter of Consolation* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1982), cited by Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 95.

15. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 515 (Book XIII.6).

16. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 34.

17. *Ibid.*, 23.

18. *Ibid.*, 31, 36.

19. Paul Tillich, *The Meaning of Health: Essays in Existentialism, Psychoanalysis, and Religion*, ed. Perry Lefevre (Chicago: Exploration Press, 1984), 190.

20. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 86; and Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 17.

21. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 5; Lynch, "Good Grief," 20.

22. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 42.

23. "Bambelela," adapted and recorded by Marty Haugen on *Turn My Heart: A Sacred Journey from Brokenness to Healing* (GIA Publications, Inc.) (see <http://www.giamusic.com/scstore/P-547.html>).

24. Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son*, 79.

25. "On Eagle's Wings," *The United Methodist Hymnal* (Nashville: The United Methodist Publishing House, 1989), 143.

Grieving and Reconnecting in Community

R. Esteban Montilla

In 1970, at the age of seven, I was suddenly and unexpectedly introduced to grief and mourning. My sister Carmen, two years younger than I was, was taken to the hospital and never returned. To this day, the image of Carmen that remains in my mind is of her being carried out of the house in the arms of my mother. She looked so beautiful with her long black hair and yellow dress with a flower embroidered on it.

I have no recollection of being told Carmen had died, of being at her funeral or graveside service; but I instinctively knew she was dead. The week after my sister's death, something very peculiar took place. It was something that for many years I did not understand. One night my mom was called to a neighbor's home; they had found me sleeping under their bed. My mom went to wake me up and take me home. As she was leaving our neighbor's house, she apologized, stating that she could not understand why I was sleepwalking. She thought it was somehow connected with the loss of my sister. The first month after my sister's death was difficult for me. I felt "invisible." No one discussed Carmen's death with me or asked how I was coping with the loss of my sister.

In the months following, my mother took me along to the cemetery when she visited Carmen's tomb. During those visits, she would talk to my dead sister. That was confusing to me. My mother explained to me that, although Carmen was dead, she was still part of our family, and we needed to maintain our connection with her. During those cemetery visits, I began to make sense of my little sister's death. I reconnected with her and from time to time found myself engaging her in conversation by using my memories and imaginative capacities. The sleepwalking stopped and never recurred. Perhaps my mother was right in connecting it with my grief. Today, after more than thirty years, I feel a strong bond with Carmen. She is still a part of our family.

I give thanks to my mother, who introduced me to the process of making sense of my sister's death by learning to connect with her on a different level. This process was completely different from the academic training I received on death and dying many years later. Experts on thanatology taught me about the importance of separating from those I have lost, resolving my loss, and moving on with