

Embracing Loss and Grief, Healing with Grace and Hope

By Pamela Prime

The longer we live, the more opportunities there are for joyous and heart warming moments. However, those same long lives can be challenged with numerous occasions that cause us to grieve. Life appears to be a mixture of both. This paper deals with the pain and suffering of life, our losses. It focuses on the challenges and suggests ways to open ourselves to the grace and blessings they bring.

Loss and the grief that ultimately heals the loss provide painful trials through out our life's journey. Certainly loss and grief are significant in terms of our immediate happiness and sense of well-being since it is hard to be happy and have a sense of wellness while grieving. They can, however, be profoundly transforming.

It is well known to us as Christians that there are blessings inherent within suffering. As I write this, we are still in the Easter season, celebrating the Resurrection of Jesus, looking forward to the Ascension and the inflow of the Holy Spirit, but all of this is ushered forth only after enormous suffering. Blessings are revealed on the other side of suffering, a possibility that we don't often experience in the midst of our pain. As we move through the grieving process with a willingness to be open to ourselves and to God, we become more and more aware of our blessings. The losses and the grief that we bear are the means through which we grow more fully into our true selves and into God. It is how we, like Jesus, receive the fullness of life. As we feel the devastation, the sense of abandonment, and even in

some cases the loss of hope that may accompany suffering, we enter into the depths of our soul, and it is there that we find God. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is not an unfamiliar cry to many of us, but it is this very cry, a cry that comes from that deep place within us, that leads to the One who awaits us. Strange as it may seem, we are grieving well when we contemplate the mystery of our suffering.

St. Hildegard of Bingen, a 12th century mystic, writer, herbalist, and musician, who is known for her great wisdom, wrote in effect that, ‘contemplation and suffering are the pathway to God.’ While it is no surprise that suffering is a pathway to God, Hildegard is adding the word contemplation. When we sit humbly with God in love, in the fullness of our pain...our sadness, anger, fear or whatever we feel...and become raw or real, we are on the pathway. Then we are open to God’s wisdom and grace. By adding contemplation to suffering as a pathway to God, Hildegard is inviting us into an intimate relationship with God and especially with Jesus.

There is another way of saying this...no matter what happens to us, no matter how filled we are with pain and suffering, our experiences have the capacity to bring us into God. This is so if we are willing. If we sit with God in prayer with an open heart and ask the simple yet profound question, “What am I learning now?” we will be blessed with Divine Wisdom and Grace. We will grow more deeply in love, joy and peace and be more fully in communion with ourselves and with God. It is helpful to remind ourselves that God does not cause our suffering but rather walks with us and weeps with us. However, it is also important to remember that God will use our suffering to transform us into God’s Self, into the Love and Light of Christ, if we are willing.

What I am sharing with you is not from books or classes but from experience, my own experience. I too have known loss, and what I write in this paper has been a crucial part of my path to healing. I have grieved deeply and have by God's generous grace and my vigilance healed my heart, a heart that was harshly torn open again and again.

Two of my children have died. Maggie, my fourth child, died of sudden infant death at four months, and Sean, my oldest, my first born, died from suicide at the age of sixteen. I often hear people say, "I hope I never have to experience this or that," or "I could never withstand that if it happened to me," but I have learned that our experiences, whatever they are, are just as grace-filled as they are tragic. Without the things that I have experienced that have caused me to suffer, I would still be asleep, still ruled by cultural norms, and still living in significant darkness...which I now realize is a greater suffering by far. I was numb and never knew it, and the deaths of my children awakened me to God's presence, God's love, and my communion not only with God but with all creation. These tragic moments also awakened me to myself, a self buried under years of being told who I was and how I was to live my life. I would never have asked for my story, but I am ever grateful to God for the wisdom and grace that has come because of it. Today, I can honestly say that I embrace my entire life with love and gratitude. To embrace ourselves with love in the midst of life's suffering is to heal the heart.

The invitation before us seems clear. Since contemplation has to do with the inflow of God's love, I am suggesting we embrace our feelings with love, even the feelings we are not proud to carry or the feelings that are terribly painful and trust, as Hildegard suggests, that we are on the pathway

to God. According to the dictionary, the etymology of the word “embrace” is as follows: it comes to us in the mid 14th century from the Anglo-French. The words “en” and “brace” refer to two arms coming together. The dictionary says it means to encircle or enclose; to take or clasp in the arms; to press to the bosom; to hug, cherish, include, and welcome.

The word embrace often has a sense of warmth but can bring up many feelings.

A personal Encounter with a Loving Embrace:

- * Find a quiet place to be, close your eyes and prepare to do some inner exploration.
- * Recall a time when you experienced a loving embrace.
- * Many memories may come, choose one.
- * Stay present to the feeling of that embrace for several minutes.
- * Notice where you hold the feelings in your body and gently place your hand on your body where you hold the feelings.
- * Feel it deeply, treasure it for as long as you like.
- * Then take time to write about this.
- * When you are ready, share this experience with someone near you, taking care not to share beyond what you are comfortable sharing.

A personal Encounter with an Uncomfortable Embrace

Sadly, not all embraces evoke a feeling of love and pleasure.

- * I invite you now, if you are willing, to close your eyes and recall an embrace that was uncomfortable, in which you felt awkward or even violated.
- * Notice what this feels like in your body.
- * Notice also where you are holding the feelings in your body from this particular hug.
- * Honor those feelings.
- * Place your hand where the feelings rest and hold yourself with love and compassion, without judgment, and just be.
- * Listen respectfully to what the feelings might reveal.
- * Allow love and compassion to heal this memory.
- * Take some time to journal about this hug.
- * Share this experience with another.

Afterwards, reflect on the differences you noticed between the two embraces. The memory of the embrace that is uncomfortable is asking for a genuine embrace of love so that it can be healed and released. The loving embrace becomes the one with which you hold all feelings as they come to you for healing. The word embrace is very important in our healing because we are meant to gently caress ourselves with love and compassion as we feel our pain. This is a meaningful part of healthy grieving. It is how God is with us, a listening and compassionate presence who embraces us with love. It is often a challenge for us to be this way for ourselves. In the great Commandment of Jesus to love, the most difficult is self-love, yet the love of God and the love of neighbor depend on true and humble self-love.

Take a moment to check in with yourself and notice what you are feeling before reading further. This is a practice that is important to incorporate into our daily lives. It will keep us emotionally healthy. It is what has given me the freedom to celebrate my life even though I will always miss my two children who are in the Spirit world.

You may or may not have lost a child, but you may be grieving the death of a spouse, the loss of a job, income, or home, the loss of health, the loss of your youth, or even the loss of your faith. None of us escape the experience of loss and grief. Whatever we are grieving, whether it is something significant or something minor, we must grieve it. We must feel whatever is within us and pray to be honest with ourselves about the pain we carry. Grief is grief, and, to clear our inner path way, it is essential that we grieve whatever is before us.

I am presently grieving the awareness that I have chosen a life for myself in which I will most likely never retire. I am responding to God's call to use my gifts each time I write or teach or guide others on their journeys, and it brings me much joy. It is a choice. None-the-less, someone inside me is in grief about the choice I am making. I am aware of others who because of this economy are not able to retire as they had planned. This is not a choice for them. It is a financial necessity. They are grieving too and like me must pay attention to the longing within themselves. Though it is a small part of me which longs to have free time and who grieves because this will probably not be so, I must pay attention. I must make friends with this inner voice who weeps and sighs at yet another commitment or the latest passion that I will write about and teach. Even though the greater part of me

enthusiastically celebrates my energy and my creativity, it is of grave importance that I pay close attention, as I sit with God in prayer and listen to the little voice that quietly whimpers within. I must wonder about the truth that this voice longs for me to hear and respect.

It has become ever so clear to me that if we are willing to listen to the voices within our inner sanctuary, the world of memories and feelings that exists in our depths, we have the capacity with God's love to heal what is wounded or in some cases to accept what we must live with that will never be healed. These feelings and memories are often untended and patiently await our attention.

As you enter into your inner world, especially into your pain, I suggest you invite God or Jesus, Mary or perhaps a favorite saint to be your companion. Also, ask God for the grace to explore this inner world with love and compassion. If you find yourself judging your feelings or your experiences, pray for the grace to release the judgment and return being present with love and compassion. Our feelings or experiences often have something to tell us, and, if we judge any part of ourselves, that part will be unwilling to reveal itself. I recall discovering hatred within me. I was horrified not because I had never felt hate before, but because I realized that I had carried this emotion in my body without awareness for such a long time. It was an emotion that I thought I had healed but in hindsight, I became aware that I had simply 'stuffed' it. When I was a child, I was taught that hate was evil and was never allowed to use the word. I could say "I intensely dislike..." but never could I say I hate something. I judged hatred so harshly that I could not allow myself to acknowledge it. I had to pray to release the judgement before I could address and feel the hatred. As

I felt the hate, with God as my companion and without evaluating it as good or bad, it began to melt away.

We often overlook the part our bodies play in our healing, but I believe that our bodies hold our emotions until we are ready to fully feel them. My body held hate for over 50 years until I was ready to be honest about it and learn from it. When we do this work of recovering buried emotions, we often have an important insight or teaching....an “ah ha moment”! In this case, the “ah ha” was to learn that I had projected hate onto another for harming me when I really hated myself. I had chosen to remain in an abusive environment and had never been honest with myself about that nor had I forgiven myself. I had kept the hate a secret because it was unthinkable to hate. I had kept the part I played a secret as well.

Realizing this was startling but it was a gift. Once I got over the surprise and really felt the shame, the dishonesty and the blame, I embraced myself with love, and with love I told myself the complete truth and forgave myself. I then asked God to forgive me for the hatred I had held for so long. Now, when I look inside, there is no more hatred. I am free.

Since I believe that we are all connected, I also think the person whom I projected the hatred onto is more free as well. I sent an apology to the world of Spirit where this person now resides. It is never too late to say, “I am sorry.” At this point in the process of feeling our emotions, the body relaxes, sighs and feels lighter, and the emotion dissolves. There is only gratitude to God for revealing these desolate parts of ourselves to us and for the love that heals us. With the recovery and healing of this buried emotion, I am more whole and more connected to God and to myself. Some of the greatest losses we face are the lost parts of ourselves.

There are many kinds of losses. The loss of loved ones, the loss of a relationship through divorce, a break-up, loss of a friendship, loss of a pet, loss of money, job, reputation, loss of one's faith, loss of one's health, and loss of hope. These are some very significant losses, but there are also losses that, although they may not be on this scale, are important to grieve.

As we age, for example, we experience many losses. Our face begins to wrinkle. We cannot see as well. Our memory fails us. Our hair begins to grey and even fall out. We can't walk as fast, or work as hard. It's challenging to bend, and we have more and more aches and pains, illnesses and broken bones. If we are honest with ourselves along the way and lovingly grieve each loss as it comes, noticing that our days on earth are growing shorter, we will often avoid depression or an overwhelming, often unbearable sense of loss. We will also be much better prepared for death when it comes and eager to meet our Creator as well as those whom we love on the 'other side.'

Each loss, whether it is especially significant or not, has feelings that accompany it. When we genuinely feel our feelings, they dissolve, and we are free to enjoy our lives even more fully. If we have not fully felt our feelings, they wait for us and rest in our bodies until we take the time to feel and listen with love.

A Journey into Our Inner World

- * I invite you now, if you are willing, to find a quiet place to be and to close your eyes. Breathe naturally and feel your body relaxing.
- * Ask God, or who ever you have chosen, to companion you as you journey into your inner sanctuary.
- * Notice what you are feeling right now. It might be a physical pain or an emotional pain or some other feeling.
- * Choose one feeling or experience to focus on.
- * As you sit quietly with that feeling, ask your companion to help you to be open to experiencing your feeling with a felt sense of love, the love you recalled a while ago in the loving embrace exercise.
- * As you pay attention to your feeling, notice where it lives in your body. Is it resting in your heart, your belly, or maybe in your shoulders?
- * When you find where it lives in your body, take your hand and place it on your body where you feel the pain or discomfort .
- * Say, “I am here with you now, and I want to listen to you with love and compassion. I will not judge you in any way. Please trust me.”
- * And then sit quietly and listen.
- * Remember, if you judge the feeling or experience in any way, it will disappear, just like a child who closes down when judged.
- * Stay present to your feeling for as long as you are comfortable.
- * Then give thanks to the feeling that has come to visit with you.
- * If you need more time, make a date for another visit.

- * Bring this experience to a close as you would any prayer, and thank your companion and yourself.
- * Take a moment to write about what happened.
- * Then if there is someone with whom you can share what occurred, please do so. Your blessing will deepen as you share. Please share only what is comfortable for you.

Before you continue reading notice once again how you are feeling and honor your feelings.

Healing grief is a journey that we must take seriously. It is a lonely journey even though we are privileged to be surrounded by support groups, therapy, spiritual direction, friends and family. The healing is essentially between the griever and God. It requires that we be courageous as we open our hearts to Divine love and guidance. Our friends and grief counselors support us in opening to the pain when often we want to deny and bury it. We have to feel all that is within us to heal. It is humbling and it is hard, but it is good! It is where God works.

Reflecting on a Loss

- * I invite you to find a quiet place, close your eyes and, as you reflect on your life right now, notice if there is a loss that comes to mind. It

can be a recent loss or one from years ago. It can be a significant or a minor loss. Trust what comes to mind.

- * Ask yourself, what feelings accompany this loss?
- * Choose one feeling to work with.
- * Notice where the feeling is in your body.
- * Gently place your hand on the feeling wherever it lives in your body.
- * As you sit quietly with the feeling, be aware of God's presence, and recall the love you experienced earlier in the embrace exercise.
- * Hold yourself with that felt sense of love, and be with your feeling...without any judgments.
- * Stay with the feeling for as long as you like.
- * When you are ready, thank the feeling for coming, and thank your companion.
- * If you need more time and want to return to this feeling, make a date to be together again.
- * Take time to journal.
- * Share this experience with a friend, someone you trust!

As we reflect on our feelings, our losses and our grief, we begin to experience God's grace at work healing what we hold in our hearts. Divine Grace and God's love are somehow moving us to the same end...God. Both are intended to awaken us and to free us to live in God's love. It is God's grace that brings forth the healing that we seek. Love in the midst of suffering is the grace that opens the pathway to God and to healing. Love can heal anything from a broken heart to a dreadful disease. Love can transform us. Clearly we are being transformed and Divinized, but until we are open and willing, God can not enter our hearts and bring us into Oneness

with God's Divine Self. St. John of the Cross, a 15th century mystic, poet and doctor of the church, says, "We become God through participating in God." I have come to experience the words God and Love as synonymous.

When I began to replace the word God with Love, I understood the power of Love. Two years ago I was diagnosed with lung cancer. Shortly after the mass was discovered, I heard God speak to me as I sat in prayer, "Do not worry... just send Love." I did just that. Every time I began to wander into the future and worry, I would send love to my lung and then listen to whatever feelings emerged. Two months later, the mass in my lung completely disappeared. I now live more in love than ever and trust in the power of Love as never before! (notice, that's Love with a capital L).

This is our hope as we walk with Christ...that though out our lives, as our sufferings break open our hearts, God / Love can enter, fill us and free us to be all that we are created to be. Thus, when loss and suffering befall us, we can rest assured that we are not alone, and we are being prepared for an inflow of Wisdom and Grace, an inflow of God. The awareness of blessings to come is not especially helpful when we are in the midst of intense suffering, but we can hold this awareness gently as our hope. I am very fond of the quote by Emily Dickinson, "Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without words, and never stops at all". Hope is always for the tomorrows when the todays are unbearable. Thank God for hope!

All of life is about God's work in us... the work of being Divinized. Through our suffering and our contemplation, we rise to become for others what God is for us, and, like Jesus, we lead them home to God and to Love

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