"GRIEF WORK"
Rev. Don Rollins
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Tragedy and suffering will come to you. You cannot insulate yourself from them. You cannot avoid them. They come in their own season and in their own time.

When they come, they will overwhelm you and immobilize you. You will feel for a time like you can't go on…

The great lesson of suffering comes from the fact that it is so much greater than the confines in which we live our daily lives. When all is going well, our world is a small, controlled experience bounded by our daily necessities. Going to the store, finishing a paper, getting new tires for the car, wondering whether the girl who smiled at me yesterday likes me – these are the levels of concern that occupy our daily lives.

When tragedy and suffering come swooping in, they are unexpected, unforeseen, unprepared for. They shatter our tiny boundaries and break our world into pieces. For a time we are living inside a scream that seems to have no exit, only echoes. Those small cares that seemed so important yesterday become nothing, our daily concerns, petty.

When we finally reclaim ourselves, as we ultimately do, we are changed. We have been dropped into the chaos and nothing is as it was. We look longingly on life as it used to be and wish we had the chance to do things over again.

But we don't. Our lives are unalterably changed, and we will never again be the same persons we were before. We have been carried into a larger realm where

we see what truly is important, and it is our responsibility to carry that knowledge back into our daily lives. It is our chance to think life afresh.

How we respond to tragedy and suffering is the measure of our strength.

Some eighteen months since the death of her high school sweetheart (and frequent nemesis, sparring partner and comedic foil) she still has days when she locks the doors and turns off the phones so no one will interrupt her wailing. She alternates between white-hot anger that he could be so selfish as to drink his liver into mush (the children were launched, the money was there – health, good; time, plentiful; but, husband, dead) and the stark, indisputable fact that she will always love him. She grieves.

My (adoptive) sister was not raised to be introspective. The double-edged sword of self-reflection came courtesy of my gene pool, not hers. But sorrow has a way of bending soul, mind and body toward the arc of grief work, exposing us to all sorts of inner and outer turmoil, so I'm proud of my older sister's stubborn, intuitive drive to do the active *work* of grieving for her sweetheart and the life she once knew. She's down, but not out.

As we mark another Labor Day together, I make no apology for taking liberties with the theme of work. Since coming to Nora, I've used this Sunday to talk about the American worker, past and present, as the backbone of the nation – and likely will again – but you and I are more than laborers, active or retired; in our liberal religious tradition, we're also the keepers and caretakers of our own souls. And that means that we pause now and then to talk of things of the soul. Things like grief work.

Much of what I hope you take with you when you leave today will be expressed in the words of others; take, for example, the excerpt from Kent Nerburn's book,

"Letters to My Son", that I used to begin this sermon. What's to improve? (I'm not a plagiarist, but I *do* know when another has a point better than I; some thoughts deserve a kinder fate than to be cluttered up with the cackling of preachers.)

As I read, I invite you to listen – with both head and heart – for the sound of your own grief. The heavy stuff you don't talk about, but is always present. And don't stop there. Listen, too, for the sound of the resolute soul. The one engaged with life despite all.

From Naomi Nye, "Music (for my mother)":

When you wanted a piano
everyone wanted something:
Betty prayed for a red silk dress
with polka-dots,
Mother wanted a gold watch
to hold the time
that kept leaving her
before she could find it.
Even your father,
who spent hours calculating
figures in a checkbook,
wanted a green Studebaker car
with fat headlights,
a Venetian blind that didn't stick.

That was the first lesson.

You made a paper keyboard
and played it in the dark,
singing the notes.
If you pressed your foot
you could feel a pedal in the carpet,
hear the murmur lasting beyond itself
the way it did when they played
the piano at school.
Everyone would turn, pack their books,
while you stood hinged to that last tone
emptying into the air. It was gone.

But if you tilted your head?
Your father found the keyboard
And slapped you for wasting paper.

The second lesson was long.

Folks, not everybody had the Cleavers or the Waltons or the Huxtables for parents. Some of us suffered neglect or abuse at the hands of people who, nearly always without malice or forethought, parented from all sorts of deficits and afflictions of their own. We, like them, may have sought solace in all manner of things, healthy and unhealthy, to assuage the grief of lost connections. To grieve those wounds can be a lifelong project for those most abused and least equipped to recover. That kind of grief work is crucial for the soul to grow.

But let's not leave it at that, for, regrettably, some long-grown men and women are still laying blame and shame at their long-gone parents' feet as though today were yesterday. Honestly, I know people in their seventh or eighth decade of life, telling and retelling the story of the heartless ogres that set them on the path of destruction – the path on which they remain until this very day – seemingly clueless that blame and grief are not the same thing.

Let me say this: *grief work related to healing the past requires us to choose and engage that which is life-giving and energizing – call it God or call it nothing – so we may no longer be dependent on the past for the now.* That's the *work* part of this kind of grief work – to add to the healing work of time our own conscious, gentle-but-firm, efforts. The goal? That we, like the biblical figure of Jacob, may wrestle with our ghosts until we emerge from the struggle stronger, clearer and wiser human beings. That we may heal and become healers.

So, is it legitimate soul to still be grieving our past? Of course. Everybody's working on something. Does that grief require us to walk zombie-like through the rest of our days? Not by a long shot.

But there's a second, more visceral kind of grief work. While some of us experience shades of grief from the distant past, others, like my sister, are grieving over the *now*, not the past.

In this more concrete and immediate kind of grief work, many of the things I've just said mean little or nothing. In fact, our theories and stages and pep talks can be insulting to the one whose pain is still fresh. This is not the sorrow that can be addressed once-removed, as through in life's rearview mirror; this is the grief that shakes us awake at night – the cold-sweat kind that flings us into some surreal orbit, where our plans are shattered and even friends are strangers. It's the grief of the ended relationship, the diagnosis of the dreaded disease or the death of the one whom we loved best.

In this second kind of grief, the wound is still fresh. The work we do here is simple but by no means easy: make it through. *Just make it through*.

So far, I've tried to point up the differences between grief work that is immediate and debilitating versus that from another time and is perhaps less intrusive in our everyday lives. But thus far I've been talking in the hypothetical. From an article in the September & October issue of *AARP Magazine* (yes, I not only subscribe, I *read* it!) comes author Iris Krasnow's article, "On My Own":

I am 52, but it wasn't until my mother dies last December that I finally felt like a real adult.

She watched my hair turn gray, my arthritis set in and my four baby boys become teens with stubble. Yet to Helen Krasnow, no matter my age, I was always her little girl. At times now, without her, I feel like one. I'm old enough to be a grandma myself, but this slap of loss leaves me heaving, at odd moments, with kindergarten sobs…

After more than half a century together, separating is staggering. Today I grieve for a woman who not only grilled my cheese sandwiches until I was 18 but also grew into my drinking buddy (vodka martinis, slightly dirty, two olives), staunch advocate, staunch adversary, the most loyal girlfriend I will ever have…And when that primal and seemingly ancient connection was cut, it was like being yanked from the womb again – only it was way tougher than the first time. She grew on me and in me, and the distinction of selves became blurred. We shared a heart.

It wasn't always this pretty

I spent much of my adolescence wishing my formidable mother belonged to somebody else. A Polish-born survivor of the Holocaust, she wasn't a classic, cuddly mom…rather than coo if I took a tumble, she would huff and say, "Stop crying. It could be worse."…He [my father] was the one I fled to for solace when a bad dream shook me awake. You did not arouse my mom for something as piddling as a bad dream. This witness to the Nazi purge of an entire civilization did not tolerate whining…

…Friends' mothers smiled a lot. She used to lie on the smoky-blue chair in the living room, her eyes closed, clutching a tattered black-and-white picture of her dead parents…

…Her closest family was burned in Nazi ovens when she was in her teens. At 65 she watched her husband die on a San Diego vacation, from sloppy care in a small hospital treating him for a heart attack. Instead of retreating in despondent widowhood, she put on silk scarves and blue blazers and worked at Lord & Taylor in Chicago, becoming the top salesperson in menswear. At 82 she lost her foot to circulatory disease. This stunning woman, who didn't like to leave her house without dusty-rose lipstick on, now boldly ventured out with half a leg.

She would drape a paisley shawl over her stump and sit regally in her wheel chair, savoring the sun on her face during walks along Lake Michigan, proudly meeting the eyes of those who gaped.

Let me interrupt here, for Iris Krasnow is about to change the discourse of her article, perhaps to signal to us the "grit-and-steel" stage of her grieving process – the part in which sorrow is no less present, but now serves as the fire in the belly for true recovery.

Even from her grave [my mother] is propping me up and pushing me forward. When the tears come, as they do each time I realize she is no longer just a speed-dial away, I feel her shake me and huff and say, "Stop crying. It could be worse." Her parting example of courage is indelible…The doctors thought she would live six months after losing her leg. She lived another three years.

…In her final years, I probed and listened hard, desperate to hear any leftover stories and the last of her advice. And she prodded me in areas of my past she had dared not to excavate before. We cried a lot and said, "I love you", a lot. When death started whispering her name, I knew I had to dig in, love wholly, forgive and hold nothing back.

Listen now for what happened when Krasnow began to use her sorrow as the fuel for getting through the paralyzing grief to a place of power and healing:

…I wailed when my mom was dying and wondered: "Who will I be when my mother is gone?" Standing on the other side, I am happy to discover who that person is: I am my mother's daughter, an adult woman who will persevere. I could live another 40 years, and she prepared me well to make this voyage without her, however lonely it may get.

It's the first morning of June, and outside my kitchen window the pink of dawn glistens on the Severn River in Maryland. I hear my mother asking for coffee, with a trickle of skim milk and a half-teaspoon of sugar, the way she liked it. Making breakfast – slathering jam on toast and chopping cantaloupe – is when my mother feels most present, as I do what I watched her do for decades, a wet towel slung over her shoulder. I look at my hands, calloused and large veined, rough from water and children and time. They are my mother's hands…

Nora friends, grief work is more art than science. Trust no one who tells you that the things of the soul are safe and predictable; they're not. But unpredictability and all, it's the only way through this old life. Grow or die, it's said. Grow or die.

Joe Biden, senior Senator from the state of Delaware, is running once again for the Democratic nomination for president. In a recent book about his father, Biden talks about his dad's version of tough love. In a phrase, his father's motto was: Get Up! If your spouse or partner just walked out on you, get up! If you just got fired, get up. If you're addicted to a substance or process, get up. Depressed? Get up! Broke? Get up! This is the original tough love – to honor the very real pain and lack of hope, and still put one foot in front of another.

I tell you often how proud I am to be associated with you and this church on the hill, but not why. Let's change that right now. I'm proud to be associated with you because you are or have faced life-threatening illness with courage and grace. I'm proud to be associated with you because you treat age like a number, not a limitation. I'm proud to be associated with you because you have lost husbands and wives and sisters and brothers and children and friends, yet you put one foot in front of the other, grief be damned. And I'm proud to be associated with you because life has thrown you for loop after loop, and still you

get up. You model a courage that is the core of the life of the spirit – a courage made real every time you get up after the latest sorrow, the latest crisis, the latest illness has run its course. In many ways, it's you who should be preaching the sermon about grief work, not I.

Recall that I began this sermon by quoting the author, Kent Nerburn, who told us that pain and suffering comes to us all. I want to close by returning to Kent Nerburn's book, "Letters to My Son":

…Those who insulate themselves from further pain miss a great opportunity. They miss the chance to use their pain to grow outside themselves and recognize something greater and shared in our human experience.

Maybe your pain is the loss of a girlfriend or the death of a pet. Maybe it's the death of a parent or an accident that maims or a sickness that never retreats. Whatever it is, it is your measure, and you need to look upon it as a gift to help you reclaim what is important in your life.

*…The question you must ask yourself is not **if** you will heal, but **how** you will heal. Grief and pain have their own duration, but when they begin to pass, you must take care to guide the shape of the new being you are becoming. They reduce our life to chaos, but in return they offer us a chance to rebuild our sense of values and meaning.*

So you should not fear tragedy and suffering. From them can come your greatest creativity. No one should seek them out, but no one can avoid them. Like love, they make you more a part of the human family. Experience them for what they are, but use them for what they can be.

They are the fire that burns you pure.