

The Wisdom of Loss and Trauma by Rodney Smith

Once in a great while tragedy creates a challenge for which we are completely unprepared. There can be no prior readiness for such events. The pain is so acute that it spills over into everything we do. We cannot access solace because there is none. It is not a question of coping, but surviving. Sometimes it feels like we have been pushed off the earth and there is nothing to break our fall.

As devastating as such events are, they are also inevitable. A parent loses a child, a child a parent; September 11th comes to mind, an inoperable malignancy, or the end of a 60-year marriage. Such trauma seems to indicate a loveless and godless universe where fear and cynicism are the defenses of choice. From a secular view, these events seem without meaning or purpose where suffering is whimsical and pointless. But is there a way to make spiritual sense of such catastrophes? If so, we must answer the question of how to navigate a world whose ground is uncertainty.

A student at a recent retreat in Massachusetts spoke about his experience on the 78th floor of the World Trade Center on September 11th as the towers crumbled. As he recounted the horrors he observed, he showed no emotion. He spoke dryly and factually about seeing people jump out of windows falling to their death and friends dying as the building collapsed. When I pointed out the discrepancy between his traumatic story and his affect, he nodded and fell silent. He said he couldn't feel anything anymore. At first he could cry, but now he couldn't. He said he felt his heart sealed shut.

A woman during another retreat recounted the death of her eight-year-old son who had been killed while hanging from monkey bars on the school playground. A class bully jumped and grabbed the child's dangling legs, pulling her son to the ground where he fractured his skull and died. In the ensuing week the mother went to the classroom of the bully and spoke to the class. She said the greatest legacy the class could give to her dead son was to forgive the child. She said she wanted the class to befriend him and hold no grudges. She did not want the tragedy to end two lives.

Here are two very different responses to trauma. It seems from these accounts that trauma can either lead to self-protection or awaken the heart. After September 11th we saw how the heart can open and the nation come together as a community, and how just as suddenly, it can close around a protectionist attitude and a patriotic fervor. When pain jolts us into protectionism, the heart constricts and prejudice is the inevitable outcome. Prejudice begins to form around the edges of our pain like ice in a cold stream. It holds people guilty by association, be it religion, ethnicity, skin color, or facial hair. Everyone is condemned until proven innocent.

Our response to pain is individually determined. Some move into the deeper recesses of their mind and shut out emotions, others blame and thrash out. As long we have a strategy to circumvent the personal pain we feel, we will do so. If we can blame it away, then the pain of the emotion is not ours to bear, but your fault. Through that reasoning, all I have to do is eliminate you and my problem is solved. Most murders and wars are fought from this logic. As long as blame is a viable tactic to alleviate any sense of self-accountability, our mind will find its way to persecution.

From the eyes of the persecutor you are either on our side or not. The lines of inclusion and exclusion are drawn to align with our righteousness. Within anger our footing is clear and justified. The pain is pushed away and is used to focus the wrath on external causes. Who wants pain when we can have power! So what if our power to retaliate creates the same conditions for pain to arise in others. So what if the backlash from our use of power is that power will be used on us. We are right and that is good enough for now. If they hit us back we will strike even harder. Self-righteousness strengthens itself with use of power and refuses to yield to forgiveness or understanding.

The last strategy the mind will adopt is to be accountable to the pain and allow it to be as it is. Though the pain may have arisen through external causes, the fact is that it is our inward experience and must eventually be dealt with by us alone. Pain makes us vulnerable to our fears. We have no assurance, no guarantee that we will emotionally survive the crisis. We feel helpless and hopeless. The egoic sense of self finds helplessness intolerable. Helplessness reminds the ego of its essential powerlessness and by implications its ultimate emptiness. To fight this knowledge it moves in the opposite direction towards empowerment. It moves with anger and

prejudice to cut off and isolate the perceived source of pain, or it uses its power to close down and shut out the emotion.

Pain comes in many disguises from anguish and hatred to contraction and isolation. Each pain carries a personal description of the sense of me, a set of beliefs about the adequacy or inadequacy of the person we feel we are in that situation. To move into the pain means we face the terror of the truth of those beliefs. We in fact face our own illusion. There is nothing more devastating than to discover that we are what we most feared to be. It is out of this fear that we search for some other justification for the pain. All prejudice, projections, blames, complaints, and judgments come from a reaction to our imaginary self-image. It is as if the mind searches for anything to take the focus off what we fear to be true about ourselves.

I was working with the staff at a mediation center around this point. During a staff meeting each person in the room was to non-judgmentally hold the pain of whatever arose in the person who was exploring his/her inward traumas. One staff member began investigating a quality of her character that had annoyed her for years. She said she felt the need to impress everyone all the time. As we investigated the pain together, she moved slowly into the realization of her longstanding sense of insufficiency. The pain of this was so acute that as she spoke she was trembling uncontrollably. She came to the point of seeing the possibility of letting this pain go but became even more frightened by losing something she had lived with her whole life. As difficult as that problem was for her, the fear of giving it up and having no identity outside of it was even stronger.

Abraham Lincoln is quoted as saying, "I have been driven many times to my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I have nowhere else to go." When there is pain, none of us have anywhere else to go. The pain is ours to bear. When we are totally willing to experience the pain from the inside, without any resistance whatsoever, we will not be lost in it. We can only be lost when we are trying to escape from the belief about who we think we are.

Sometimes we have the capacity to move into these emotions, and sometimes we do not. It doesn't matter, either way the emotions are our responsibility alone to understand. We do not attempt to conceal our inability to surrender to the emotion

by allowing our minds to shift towards blame and persecution. We can neither give up nor give in to the pain because cynicism and projected hatred are lurking as the alternative unconscious choice.

I used to keep a sign on my desk that read, "It is better to be wanted by the police than not wanted at all." The levels of aversion to pain are deep and layered, moving from the personal to the impersonal. We are well defended on every layer. We blame others as a defense against feeling our own inadequacy, but the belief in our inadequacy is a further defense against a deeper fear of being nothing. We will maintain the image of our inadequacy so that we can at least feel something about ourselves. The image provides some security against the terror of being lost and unknown. It is better to feel something, even if it is an image of personal torment, than to have no image at all.

Finally the fear of being nothing is a defense against the silence in which our nothingness is confirmed. We cannot maintain "the story of me" in silence. We create the story from the "stuff" of life, the past experiences and future expectations that defines me from you. We need something to resist and rub up against so our outline is known, so we will not be homogenized and lost in the ocean of human existence. Silence does not provide a surface of resistance. In fact, it is the absence of resistance. It absorbs all definitions into itself and allows nothing to stand in relief. Here then is our greatest dread. Silence shows that we are nothing, and it is against the unformed nature of silence that all drama is created. The drama is a cry to be someone, to make some noise, to be noticed, to have a purpose, and to be anyone but what the silence implies.

A teacher friend tells the story of a mother who received a call from the police to come down to the morgue and identify the body of a child who had been drowned. The woman's sixteen-year-old daughter had been missing for two days after a boating accident. She said when she viewed the body and saw it was her daughter, she almost fell unconscious. Her mind tried desperately to place the blame on someone, but her daughter had been alone on the boat. Her mind went faster and faster searching for an explanation until in utter fatigue it collapsed on itself. She said in that moment, "I knew god. There was nothing but stillness and complete serenity. My daughter was not separate from me."

The sudden impact of traumatic grief may allow a glance into something beyond space and time. If the mind does not move toward justification or blame, it stops trying to find a reference outside itself. Expected loss may not hold the same possibility because the mind moves in anticipation of the loss even before the loss has occurred. Thereby the mind still has grief as a reference point to justify its existence. But in the moment a form on which our life depends is unexpectedly torn away, before the grief reaction is assumed, there is a stopping that can occur. The mind no longer looks for a solution and implodes on itself. In that instant it may shut down completely. If that occurs there is a loss of all references outside of oneself and the end of the world as we know it. That rift in space and time is an opening through which something else can enter.

In the Hindu tradition there is a statue of Shiva, the multi-armed god, who is dancing on the back of a human being. The man is hunched over with his attention totally on a leaf he holds in his hand. The implication of the statue is that the man is so interested in the forms of the world he misses the fact that god is on his back. Sudden unexpected trauma has the effect of tearing the leaf out of our hands allowing us to notice what is on our back, or to be more specific, what is immediately before our eyes.

How can reality access our hearts except by death showing us where we have misplaced our focus? We refuse to look away from the leaf. Death and pain are the only instruments available that will get our attention away from the forms of the world. Rather than allowing pain and death to point to the interconnection behind all forms, we usually pass over these opportunities and lose ourselves in the pain of the loss.

All spiritual traditions honor loss and death for this reason. Most of us are unwilling to notice what is in front of our eyes. We are more interested in the utility and pleasure derived from the displays of life than to notice what holds the display together. But the nature of life is that it must depart, and the displays must change. Most of us lament the passing of each presentation and try to piece ourselves together by finding other displays to re-engage in. But these too end. This constant

reconstruction and destruction determines our moments of pleasure and pain and our direction throughout our life.

Death and loss give us a moment of respite from this process. Death cleans off the knickknacks and shows us the shelf. Bereavement is the process of settling with the fact that the shelf is empty. It is a consuming and self-actualizing process. Grief is an attempt to rebuild our self-image after a piece of ourselves has been lost. Grieving fills in the space that was created by the loss. Grieving itself now becomes the form we place on the shelf. The grieving process gives us something to do somewhere to focus so the hole of nothing created by death is avoided. If we attend only to our grief we can distract ourselves and maintain our misperceptions. Grieving is often a further attempt by the self to remain continuous despite the evidence that death offered to the contrary.

The first spiritual action needed after death is to surrender to the reality of the loss. This means opening to life as it is without perpetuating the myth that the person is still present. But depending upon the degree of attachment, that is not always possible. The next level of surrender, if the first level is missed, is to fully attend and allow the entire range of feelings that occur after a loss. We surrender without opposition or judgment to those emotions. Total surrender whenever it happens always contains the possibility of opening to the space within the grief.

Grief can become a portal through which something else is seen. When something of value is removed, nothing can completely fill the void. Behind this emotional void the fullness of life lurks. We have access to that fullness after a loss if we do not fill the space too quickly. The terror of nothing keeps us moving from attachment to attachment missing the message of death.

Each attachment defines us even as we define it. We are known to be separate and distinct from our loved object. The attachment and I rub against one another and each is safe in its uniqueness and separation. We have to maintain that distinction in order to love the object. It has to be seen as other than me. We have to focus and attend to it. We have to have a binding emotional relationship in order to love it. All of this requires that I lose sight of the great nothing of god on my back.

The crisis of trauma can force a depth of insight often unavailable within normal perceptions. It is easy to see why the path of insight is the road less traveled. As long as there is a way to impede pain and obstruct fear, we will take it. It takes a crisis in which our usual strategies are blown off the map to awaken to the cause of pain. Without that crisis we are loathed to follow pain to its source.

The source of pain reveals the moment of self-creation. It is the Big Bang of the universe occurring moment after moment. We create the sense of ourselves to camouflage the ground of our being. It gives us a personal sense of self at the expense of seeing the interconnectedness of all beings. On and on the creation occurs, seamless to our consciousness, the original motivation no longer obvious. Then a catastrophe occurs, and there is a brief opportunity to open beyond the illusion of self and other. To walk through that illusion is the sole purpose of life. Yet few of us take that extraordinary step.