

THE HEALTH NUGGET



AUGUST 2006

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Grief and Compassion

Grief is defined as deep, acute personal sorrow, arising from irreplaceable loss. My own recent passage through sorrow has enlarged my understanding of this, at times unavoidable, journey.

To often our sense of security lies in our desire to be free from want, discomfort, and pain—the things we typically take for granted. Through my grieving I have become conscious of how tightly I grasp those things in which I find security—the things I can count on and that make life harmonious and pleasant, even easy.

We depend on parents for love, co-workers for validation, money in the bank and careers for financial safety. We assume that our children's health will always be fine and that we can in some way control their futures. We look to our routines for predictability and husband/wife/family/friends to meet our emotional needs. The list can go on. But life's interruptions happen. Our loved ones do not love; they move away, die or disease takes over. We lose relationships, jobs and financial resources. Our dreams never get off the ground or they get shot out of the sky. When any or all of these props are removed, we realize how tightly we have clung to them. Both hands clutch only a mirage and the grieving process begins.

How do we greet life's pain? We may try to push through it, claiming, "I've got to be strong!" Drifting through the maze of grief's common responses: denial, depression, mourning, anger, hopelessness and despondency, we are tempted to think, "What is the quickest way out of

this?"—wanting to escape it at all cost. But instead Scripture opens another door, "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing."¹ God invites us, right where we are, in our pain to enter a dance with Him as our partner.

"Ultimately mourning means facing what wounds us in the presence of One who can heal."² He wants to take our hands and begin the dance right there in the midst of our agony. He wants to teach us a dance that "is unafraid of suffering and even death because we learn to live with lasting hope."³

Jesus said to "resist not evil."⁴ While we instinctively want to avoid or escape suffering, Jesus is here speaking of the times and situations when we must accept it and not run. At these times our choices can be directed, not on what has occurred, or what we fear will happen, but on "How will I relate to life's turns, devastations and interruptions?"

There is a period of wishing this trauma had never happened. There is a time of desperate searching for answers. There is even anger at the injustice or the power of evil working behind the scenes. There is the release of deep sadness through agonizing tears. For some there are the unanswered questions of "How come?" and "Why me?" We process the event and the pain, and hopefully come out of the grieving process with a strength that has gradually become our own. We enter the dance and hold fast to the hands that lead.

"And as we dance, we realize that we don't have to stay on the little spot of our grief, but can step

beyond it. . . . Our step grows lighter because God has called out others to dance as well.”⁵ As others enter our grieving process and extend compassion, we become lithe.

Compassion is a step many of us find clumsy and uncomfortable. Our attempts at helping the hurting or offering advice to the ailing can be rough around the edges. Our own awareness of this often leads to our silence. How can we have compassion that makes a difference? It is a spiritual command. “Finally, be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous.”⁶ “Thus speaketh the Lord of hosts, saying, . . . shew mercy and compassions every man to his brother.”⁷

Yes, compassion is sympathy for the suffering of others, coupled with a desire to relieve it. But scripturally, compassion requires that we give of ourselves: “For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods.”⁸ It leads us to identify with the sufferer. (See Hebrews 5:2.)

The term *compassion* comes from a root word that means “to suffer with.” Sharing in the suffering and passion of another is more than a string of words: “Look on the sunny side of life;” “It’s not as bad as you think;” or “Let me tell you what happened to me.” In fact, it silences the quick, eager explanations we give to others. How many of us have someone who easily hears our weeping and sadness, who gives us permission to mourn?

To enter into another’s dark moments is not to look away or cross to the other side of the road. It is embodied in the Good Samaritan. I have been the recipient of Good Samaritans—the grateful recipient of compassion. In my darkness there are those who offered and gave so much to me, who I knew without a shadow of a doubt were praying for me, who

invited me to spill out my story of woe. They spoke powerful words to me, like, “I am grieving with you.” “If I were a child I would want you to be my mommy.” “Wow! That is so tough! God must be taking you through graduate school.” Others may not understand why certain words are so powerful to you. But in my experience, these supporters helped me to let go of my securities. It takes two hands to carry the cross.

It has been said, “The actual source of our cruelty and callousness lies in the rejection of our own suffering” (Arno Gruen, psychoanalyst). Does this mean that the deficit of compassion that many of us have suffered in our traumatic times has hardened us into cruelty? We want to blame outside influences such as TV for the violence in our society. But maybe there’s more to it than that. Maybe there are too many people hurting under the disguise of toughness who have never shared their pain with anyone.

The Good Samaritan saw the sufferer lying half conscious on the road in his blood. Ezekiel 16 paints a picture of the compassion God has for us right in our own mess—in our blood. Jesus had compassion on those whose mess made them outcasts: lepers, the demon-possessed, prodigals, the ignorant and the loathed. His response to them is found in Ezekiel 16:6, NIV: “Then I passed by and saw you kicking about in your blood, and . . . I said to you, ‘Live!’”

Sometimes the most difficult job we have is to keep living in our pain. But His invitation is to live, with both hands in His and our heavy feet gradually growing lighter as we dance.

¹ Psalm 30:11.

² *Turn My Mourning into Dancing*, Henri Nouwen, p. xv.

³ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁴ Matthew 5:39.

⁵ *Turn My Mourning into Dancing*, Henri Nouwen, p. 13.

⁶ 1 Peter 3:8.

⁷ Zechariah 7:9.

⁸ Hebrews 10:34.

