

Spiritual Direction for the Bereaved:

Grief, Spiritual Crises and Dark Nights of the Soul

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The Power of Loss

Loss has the power to shake our core beliefs to the point of annihilation, leaving us uncertain about the meaning of our lives and our purpose for being. We need to know that God is still vitally and lovingly present in the midst of our pain. We need to know that the answer to every question resides within our hearts, patiently awaiting our readiness to receive it. We need to rage at God in the presence of one who listens with loving acceptance—just as I believe God is doing—although, in the depths of our grief, it may seem as if God has turned away from us.

When this happened to me, I turned to psychotherapy, primarily to treat the depression that impaired my ability to cope with my loss. While I gained insight into my motives and behavior, the questions that burned most deeply within me had to do with the nature and purpose of God in my life. Why had God not answered my prayers? Why could I not have what I wanted in life? Why was no insight forthcoming about how I needed to be different in order to deserve happiness and fulfillment? Whenever I raised those questions in therapy, my psychiatrist remained silent, as if I had not spoken at all.

Unfortunately, spirituality and theology were outside the realm of my psychiatrist's expertise, and I had never heard of spiritual direction. Apparently, neither had my psychiatrist, or perhaps he would have referred me to a spiritual director. Although I did not know it at the time, I could have addressed the psychological issues with my psychiatrist while I explored my relationship with God with a spiritual director. I could even have given them permission to collaborate and deepen their respective insights into my challenges. However, because it was many years before I encountered the ministry of spiritual direction, my questions remained unanswered. Even as I improved psychologically, my anger and resentment toward God continued to simmer. Today, I have no doubt that exploring my questions about God's presence

in my life would have done at least as much to lift my psychological depression as psychotherapy did.

Although I ultimately found that I was completely incapable of rejecting God for more than a brief time, it took years of prayer, study, and reflection on my own to begin to understand God as a loving, compassionate presence that can be found at the very heart of the feelings of anger, betrayal, and abandonment that I felt toward God. As I allowed myself to experience the full range of what I believed to be blasphemous feelings, they began to dissolve. A sense of peace slowly began to fill the vacuum, and eventually I realized that this peace was a truer perception of who and what God had always been in my life. If I had been in spiritual direction during my bereavement, I have no doubt that the insights would have come to me much sooner than they did. A loss does not have to be devastating, however, to cause us to grieve and question the nature and purpose of God in our lives.

The Many Faces of Loss

Loss takes so many different forms that we often fail to recognize when we have even suffered a loss (Roussell, pp. 22–23; Rupp, p. 102). In a culture that discourages much introspection, we all too often go through life unaware that we are grieving. We wonder what has happened to our motivation, our discipline, our creativity, our ability to concentrate, make decisions, or feel enthusiastic about life in general. We feel exhausted. Things that used to excite us no longer seem to hold the meaning they once had. Chances are good that a loss has occurred somewhere in our lives and that we are grieving without realizing it.

Not all losses are obvious, and grief can be very subtle. Graduating from school, for example, represents success and the culmination of years of hard work, yet it involves leaving old friends and giving up a certain amount of security. Getting married may be the realized dream of a lifetime, but it also means giving up a simpler lifestyle in favor of greater accountability to another, as does becoming a parent (Roussell, pp. 22–23). Later, we want our children to succeed and are genuinely happy for them when they do, yet watching them reach adulthood and leave home for the first time can be hard. As much as we



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God works for love and purpose since [God] loves us and wants everything for us. God wants pain to pass to us the worse we we have deserved. God sends us gifts so that our sibling and to prove that we love God as much as we do. We may celebrate with them, we cannot help but feel some degree of loss. Our role in their lives has begun to change. Meanwhile, we may realize that we are not going to be or accomplish everything we thought we would when we were younger (Roussell, p. 22; Rupp, p. 102). We begin to think about the people we have hurt or disappointed, and we recall the ways in which others have wounded us or let us down (Rupp, p. 102). We have regrets and wish it could have been different, but we know we cannot go back and change things. We realize that nothing is perfect, at least according to the standards we have counted on for so long. Faith communities sometimes gossip and are unsupportive; spiritual leaders betray our trust, manipulating for power and control. We realize that our idealized visions of how things ought to be do not always represent how they really are (Roussell, p. 22).

As we grow older, we notice that, in addition to being a little wiser, we are also a little slower. We may count ourselves fortunate if the only things that inconvenience us are a sore back in the morning and vision and hearing that may not be quite what they used to be (Roussell, p. 22; Rupp, p. 102). All of these things represent losses that we grieve on some level, whether we are aware of it or not. For some of us, however, the losses we suffer are anything but subtle. Cataclysmic, they bring with them a tidal wave of grief that threatens to drown us with its magnitude.

The loss of our lifelong beloved, a precious child, a career, our health—anything that defined our world, gave us identity, meaning, and purpose—all lead us into the blackest, most profound depths of grief. These losses ravage us. They cause us to question the image of God that we have held all our lives. Early in life, we hear that God is love. We encounter images of the Divine as guiding, protecting, nurturing, and willing to offer the most profound personal sacrifice to ensure our eternal joy and well-being.

Were We Wrong about God?

Now, inexplicably, all of that seems to be gone. Perhaps we were wrong about God all along. Perhaps those who taught us about God were mistaken. If not, to what far reaches of the universe has that love departed? Why has God abandoned us? We invest our entire lives in an image of a God who would never permit such pain and injustice, yet here we stand in the midst of our worst nightmares realized. What could we possibly have done to deserve such pain and loss? What could we have failed to do? What should we have done differently? Our minds swirl with questions and suppositions in a vain attempt to make sense out of the senseless. How could this devastating loss be the will of a loving and protective God (Rupp, p. 35)? People try to help, but sometimes they just make it worse with words meant to comfort. Instead, our sense of isolation only increases with words such as, "It was God's will," "It was his time," "He's in a better place now," and "God must especially love you to test you this way." It seems that our supporters can hardly wait for us to get over our loss. The sooner we get back to normal, the sooner they can forget that the same thing could happen to them. We feel contagious. No one seems to understand what we are going through. We feel so alone.

When I suffered a loss that was profound enough to shatter my lifelong understanding of who and what God was, I felt deceived, betrayed, and abandoned. At first I tried to accept that I could not understand everything about the will of God and felt certain that my loss was due to my own failure—failure to be faithful, to be obedient, and to pray hard enough. With no insights forthcoming but with deepening confusion, my questions finally gave way to rage and disgust. What kind of God would consistently fail to answer prayer or to grant insight? I did not understand at the time that I had bought into several



theological understandings of God that had created for me an image of a punitive, capricious, and indifferent deity who liked to play with humans just as a cat would play with a mouse. Rupp identifies these theological perspectives as follows (pp. 35–36):

1. God sends the loss and pain since [God] loves us and wants to strengthen our faith.
2. God sends pain to punish us for some sin we have committed.
3. God sends suffering to test our fidelity and to prove that we love God no matter what.
4. God sends suffering for unknowable reasons. As a demonstration of faith, submission, and humility, we must accept our suffering as God's will.

Additionally, Harold Kushner, author of the classic *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, observes that we may question our worthiness to receive an affirmative response to our prayers, fearing—or even believing—the following (p. 115):

1. We do not deserve what we asked for.
2. We did not pray hard enough.
3. God knows what is best for us better than we do.
4. Someone else's prayer for the opposite result was more worthy.
5. Prayer is a sham; God does not hear prayers.
6. There is no God.

In fact, the rage I felt toward God arose from these very beliefs. Ironically, they are all *false* (Rupp, pp. 35–36). Unlearning these beliefs often comes through painful circumstances accompanied by dramatic realizations. I determined that if God refused to answer my prayers by granting me what I prayed for, all of these beliefs must be true. If so, I wanted nothing more to do with God. I could no longer withstand the pain and confusion. I vowed to stop praying or trusting in God for anything. I was determined to take back my life and bring purpose to it on my own. With that decision, I went into a spiritual, religious, and theological free fall. I no longer knew who God was or what to believe. Some would call my experience a "dark night of the soul." Whether it was or not, I do not know. I do know that I was in a deep spiritual crisis.

A Personal Metaphor

When I think of that time in my life, an image comes to mind. I see myself standing at the top of a tall, precarious platform near the roof of a darkened, cavernous circus tent. All is silence, darkness, and shadow. I have no memory of climbing the ladder. The narrow, highly unstable platform sways with the slightest shift in the air current. I know that it cannot support my weight for more than a few more seconds. Making my way back to the ladder is impossible—the slightest movement will send me careening into the shadows below. If there is a net somewhere below me, the darkness obscures it. Out of the blackness, a trapeze bar swings toward me. Instinctively, I know it is my only chance. I dive toward the bar, leaving the platform swaying wildly behind me. As I grasp the bar, I kick forward, hoping to drive my weight toward what—I do not know. Is there another bar out there in the darkness that will rise to meet me? I cannot see the platform—if there is one—on the opposite side. My only choice is to trust or die.

My arms burn with fatigue, and when the bar I cling to reaches its full extension, I know that the moment has come. I must let go. If I fail to release it, I know the bar will lose momentum and I will be stranded, unable to move forward or return to my starting point. I release the bar and spin into a free fall, supported by nothing but air. The first bar swings behind me, forever out of reach. There is no other bar in sight. As I tumble through the shadows, I feel oddly free. For a second, the outcome does not matter. The surrender wraps me in a cocoon of warmth and security, as if someone or something else is cradling me. Then a second bar emerges from the blackness. I believe that I no longer possess the strength to grasp it and swing out again. With nothing but shadows below, I lunge forward with the little strength I have left. As the bar swings up to meet me, I focus only on grasping it. From somewhere within me comes the strength to dive forward and catch it. Miraculously, emerging from the shadows as I swing forward is the opposite platform, this one strong, steady steel with a railing I can grasp if only I can catapult myself forward with enough power. I surge forward and reach for the platform railing. I am on solid ground. As I catch my breath and look below, I see a solid staircase with railings, leading me down into the now lighted arena.



Spiritual Direction

Perhaps, as was true for me, spiritual direction is a new concept for you or someone you know. Even those of us who are familiar with spiritual direction may be unclear about what it is or how to find a spiritual director. The terms *direction* and *director* are somewhat misleading. According to the Spiritual Directors International Web site (www.sdiworld.org), spiritual direction is far more about companionship, guidance, and mentoring than it is about giving direction. Spiritual direction is a relationship of trust between one who guides others on their spiritual journeys and another who longs to deepen the connection with God and to discern the movement of God in her or his life.

It took some time to understand what this image represented. The first ladder I had no memory of climbing tells me that it did not really matter how I had arrived at theological beliefs that were false and too weak to support me. In the face of the losses and grief that accompany ordinary life, my theological grounding swayed beneath me, and I had to leave it behind or go down with it. It took great strength to release those beliefs, but the anger I felt at God propelled me away from a false image that was toxic and limiting. That image could never allow me to fully imagine and experience a God of compassion who was present at the heart of my loss. Lunging from the platform to the first trapeze bar represented my determination to reject the limiting beliefs I had held about God and trust only in myself. That the bar appeared at all was actually God's support of my efforts, although I would have rejected the notion of such unconditional divine love at the time. After all, the idea of God supporting me in the process of rejecting God seems illogical.

At the time, that first bar represented my own strength, which felt more solid and stable than the image of God I had left behind. I released the bar when I realized I had gone as far as I could under my own power. Progress was no longer possible. This time I had nothing to leap toward—no new image of God to replace the old. I had to surrender and radically trust that there was more to God than I had understood before. I had to relinquish all I had believed to be true of God, my world, and myself. For a time, there was nothing new to replace the old image and

experience. I was in total darkness. I had no idea who or what I was trusting. I was in a spiritual free fall. In the midst of this free fall, I found a peace and security that I had never known before. Through my surrender, I reached the eye of my spiritual storm.

When I could no longer rely on myself or on my old, limiting understandings of God—when I was completely empty of any imagery or belief at all—something new emerged. This time the second bar was clearly God's willingness to meet me at the point of my complete surrender—in the very heart of my vulnerability. This new experience of God became my strength, allowing me to trust that this loving Presence would carry me forward. Even though I would not be free of the pain and fear that are a part of human experience, God would not permit me to fall.

Spiritual Crisis and Dark Nights of the Soul: Is There a Difference?

I use the metaphor of story to describe a spiritual crisis—what some would call a “dark night of the soul.” Even though a dark night of the soul is a form of spiritual crisis, not all spiritual crises are dark nights of the soul. A spiritual crisis results when the circumstances of our lives shift so drastically that all we understand about God, our world, and ourselves comes into question (Marrone, pp. 773–774). For some of us, our prayers may seem to disappear into a black void, or we find that in light of our changed lives, we no longer feel enriched or consoled by prayer, sacred scripture, liturgy, or our faith communities (Cronk, p. 1; May, *Care*, pp. 102–103, 107–108). While dark nights of the soul share these characteristics, mystical theologians traditionally see dark nights of the soul as arising out of a life devoted to spiritual practice—through prayer, meditation, devotional reading, and participation in liturgy, or even spontaneously (N 1, 9; May, *Care*, pp. 106, 109–110; *Dark Night*, pp. 155–159; O’Connor, pp. 142–143)—rather than out of the painful events that we all experience as part of human existence. The trapeze metaphor describes the far more common form of spiritual crisis that arises when something precious to us and essential to our understanding of life is lost. Because most forms of spiritual crisis, including a dark night of the soul, involve the loss of a sense of God’s presence, is there any relevant difference between a dark night of the soul and all other forms of spiritual crisis? I think there is.



- A third situation involves loss. In a dark night, when we experience an apparent loss of God's company, loss is actually a gain. We realize in this moment that God is part of our experience in spite of seeming absence. We are actually experiencing a continuation of God's presence in our lives. With other forms of spiritual crisis, our experience of loss is often such as the death of a loved one.

The Value of Spiritual Support during Crisis

Whether our spiritual crisis is a dark night of the soul or not, if we walk this path alone we may feel prey to our own tendencies toward despair (Culligan, pp. 11–12; O'Connor, pp. 106, 109–110).

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On the other hand, if we seek out a spiritual director, he or she is more likely to see our experience for its graced potential and try to help us to gain insight into what is happening to us from a spiritual perspective. In some instances, this insight alone may be all that is necessary to alleviate any despondency we are experiencing. An experience of spiritual darkness can also make us question if our spiritual practice is also a dark night of the soul. If this is the case, we may realize that God has not deserted us but has simply given "underground" support to help us through the present crisis. Although this realization may be difficult to accept, we who

"The Dark Night" is the title of a poem written by the sixteenth-century Spanish Carmelite mystic John of the Cross. He wrote the poem to express his experience of divine union with God. Later, John wrote a commentary on the poem, explaining it as a metaphor for the blessings and challenges often encountered by those on a spiritual path toward divine union through a life devoted to spiritual practice.

As we move along our spiritual paths, we may experience moments of transcendence, when we know complete oneness with God or with the world around us. Once the experience subsides, we may feel as if God has departed from our presence and we no longer feel consoled by prayer. We redouble our efforts at spiritual practice, to no avail. As with other forms of spiritual crisis, the liturgy may seem meaningless, and we may recognize a low-level sadness. The things we once enjoyed now leave us feeling empty and alone. We no longer feel motivated to achieve the way we used to. We feel detached. Nothing means anything anymore. We are grieving. All we want is God, and we wonder what we have done to cause God to desert us. In a dark night of the soul, although we are suffering an apparent loss and are grieving, we are probably not angry with God. We continue to long for an experience of the Divine Presence. Even though our prayers feel dry, we find the thought of giving up prayer heartbreaking. The idea of turning our backs on God is unspeakable (N 1, 9; Culligan, pp. 11–12; O'Connor, pp. 142–143; May, *Care*, pp. 106, 109–110; *Dark Night*, pp. 135–142). With other forms of spiritual crisis, as in the one I experienced, prayer is sometimes the last thing we want to engage in.

The primary differences, then, between a dark night of the soul and other forms of spiritual crisis are three:

- First, a dark night is understood to be a direct outcome of longstanding spiritual practice. Other forms of spiritual crises more often result from our intellectual and emotional responses to painful life events.
- Second, in a dark night, however dry our prayer life may seem and how bereft of God's presence we may feel, we can think of nothing but God. Our longing for God and desire to please God are intense. With other forms of spiritual crises, we may (although not always) experience feelings of anger toward God and give up prayer for a time.



- A third distinction involves loss. In a dark night, what we experience as the *apparent* loss of God's companionship is actually a *gain*. We remain in union with God even as our experience is one of seeming absence. We are actually experiencing a transformation of God's *presence* in our lives. With other forms of spiritual crises, our experience of loss is *actual*, such as the death of a loved one.

The Value of Spiritual Support during Grief

Whether our spiritual crisis is also a dark night of the soul or not, if we walk this path alone we may fall prey to our own confusion, which can breed depression (Culligan, pp. 11–12, 15–18; May, *Care*, pp. 106, 109–110; *Dark Night*, p. 142; O'Connor, p. 138; Rupp, p. 33). If we seek psychotherapy, that will help to alleviate psychological distress and any depression. As to the grief surrounding our relationship with God, many psychotherapists are not prepared to help us explore what God is inviting through the experience. Instead, they may see our situation only as a problem to solve. They may not recognize the potential for profound spiritual growth at the heart of our experience.

On the other hand, if we seek out a spiritual director, he or she is more likely to see our experience for its graced potential and help us to gain insight into what is happening to us from a spiritual perspective. In some instances, this insight alone may be all that is necessary to alleviate any depression we are experiencing. An experienced spiritual director can also assist us to discern if our spiritual crisis is also a dark night of the soul. If it is, we may recognize that God has not deserted us but has simply gone "underground," beneath the level of our awareness, to work on our spiritual maturity without the interference of our egos, which would certainly happen if we were aware of it. Through the gentle questions of a spiritual director who

understands what to ask, we may come to realize that, in spite of our loneliness for God, life seems to be going well—perhaps even better than before God's apparent disappearance. Somehow, we seem to have retained our sense of humor. We may notice that our relationships are richer and more rewarding—all in the midst of experiencing losses and grief that are very real. We realize that we really would not change things, even if we could. This experience of grief is characteristic of a dark night of the soul as John of the Cross described it.

If this is *not* how we are experiencing our grief, or if the level of depression we feel increases to the point that it interferes with our daily lives, our spiritual crisis may not be a dark night of the soul. Here, it is important to note that while the phrase "dark night of the soul" is highly evocative of those times when we feel completely disempowered to be at purpose in our lives, the images can serve to romanticize a potentially serious situation involving a clinical depression for which

we genuinely need psychological support.

If this is true for us, our spiritual director can support us in determining if working with a psychotherapist or pastoral counselor might produce better results than spiritual direction, at least while depression remains an obstacle to our spiritual growth. Alternatively, it may be clear that the best route is to be in spiritual direction *and* psychotherapy or counseling at the same time. In any case, if depression begins to threaten our well-being, it is vital to seek psychiatric consultation—which does not necessarily mean that we must give up spiritual direction. Spiritual directors are generally very sensitive about seeing their directees through difficult life challenges and support them in making the choices that best facilitate their overall well-being. Usually, suspending spiritual direction while we are in psychotherapy is not necessary.



CONTEXTS & CULTURES

Ministry of Presences Presenting the Conference on Death and Grief
Sandra Kavanagh, title

Through our experiences of loss and grief, some of us will continue to feel deeply consoled by our prayer life, our relationship with God, and our faith communities. We may simply want support and encouragement as we explore the meaning of our loss and integrate the experience into a new understanding of who we are in the drastically changed context of our lives. We have a solid and healthy theological outlook that supports us through our grief. Others of us may find, just as I once did, that one or more of the false theological perspectives mentioned above have us trapped in a spiritual crisis.

Choosing Our Spiritual Direction

My own spiritual path has led me to believe that God does not cause loss but that we experience loss as part of our attachment to what is familiar, comforting, understandable, and predictable—all of which is part of the human experience. The study, experience, and giving of spiritual direction have all taught me that the only way to find God in the midst of loss and grief is to dive deeply into the full range of emotion—anger, fear, resentment—all of it. If we need to rage at God, God will meet us there and fully receive us in that holy experience (Province). Loss, through death or other means, is part of life. When we lose someone or something that in some way defined our world and our identity, we find ourselves adrift, directionless, and in search of new meaning. Spiritual direction helps us to discover where we are on the path of our spiritual evolution and to choose the direction in which we will grow, when we are ready. Until that time, spiritual direction is a warm, compassionate, and very safe relationship within which to experience the depths of our grief and, when the time comes, to claim the profoundly rich transformation that has taken place within us because we were willing to grieve. ■

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