

Transformation Through Tragedy

“Transformation Through Tragedy” – that was the title of a paper I wrote when I was an undergraduate student in pre-ministry at Alaska Pacific University. The night I was scheduled to present it to my class, I was called out of the classroom by an urgent message. My house was on fire.

I lived more than an hour away, but someone drove me home, and I stood in the driveway with my husband of one year, and we watched the firefighters trying to put out the fire. Jim had come home from work to find the driveway filled with fire trucks. It was November, the temperature was about 20 below zero, and it was very windy. The water tanker trucks had anti-freeze of some sort in them to keep the water from freezing.

My husband Jim, a master craftsman, had built the house out of logs. Log homes do not so much burn down, because logs take a very long time to burn, as they burn up. It took hours to put out the blaze. When neighbors invited us into their house for dinner, the house was still burning and we watched it from their dining room window.

Hours later, in the middle of the night, the firefighters were gone and we surveyed the wreckage. The metal roof was mostly gone, the living room had a huge hole in the floor and the wood stove had fallen into the basement, the staircase to our bedroom was gone. Everything was black and wet. We were devastated.

Then we heard a faint and frightened meowing coming from under my step-daughter’s small cabin next door. After much coaxing, I managed to get our cat, Blackie, to come out. He smelled of smoke, but was unhurt. It was then that I thought, “We’ll be alright.” Not just then, but eventually.

We were in shock, and went about in a daze for days. I asked a girlfriend to take me shopping, because I couldn’t think of what I needed to buy. She helped me think through a practical list of toiletries and underwear, and other things that people were unlikely to give us.

Over the next few months, we spent days in the burned out house, cataloging its contents for the insurance company. Our books had to be identified one by one, and we pulled charred and frozen, crumbling bits of paper off the shelves and tried to figure out what they had once been. We wept and sometimes laughed, finding photographs that had survived the blaze because the bookshelves were so tightly packed.

When we had finished cataloguing, and salvaging, and hauling away, we held a ceremony in the burned out shell. Our closest friends came, those who had spent many happy hours in the old house with us, and we said goodbye. Then we tore down the old walls, and began building a new house.

We designed an even-more beautiful home, and blessed it when it was complete, with the same group of friends who had mourned with us the loss of the old one.

My transformation from that experience was not really profound. I learned some valuable lessons about generosity, giving without attachment, using the things I have or giving them away if I'm not using them. I had lost all the things that my grandparents gave me, but I began having dreams about them, and learned that I hadn't really lost the people I loved, even though they were long dead. I learned about the universality of human suffering.

Jim and I both became more generous in sharing our home. One of his daughters lived with us, with her baby, and her best girlfriend. Jim's brother lived with us while he built a house. Two friends had seasonal jobs in our area and stayed with us three summers. Another friend was unhappily divorced, and spent two years in our house before he got back on his feet.

But the process that allows us to look back without bitterness at that tragedy from our life, is that we allowed ourselves to feel what we felt. We worked through our grief, informally, and ritually. It took time, and often felt awful, but we both knew that the way out was through.

This is always the case, with every tragedy, big or small. The way out of it is through. Every loss in our life that is big enough to cause grief, demands that we honor it through mourning. Briefly defined, I am using grief as the feelings we have in response to a traumatic loss, and mourning as the process we use for working through it.

The saddest man I ever met was a retired Lutheran minister. He had lost his wife 20 years earlier, but still teared up every time he thought of her. He told me, proudly, of how he wouldn't allow his children or grandchildren to cry when she died, because she was now with Jesus. He had never allowed himself to mourn, and he was still trapped in the grief he felt when she died.

You probably all know someone like that. They'll describe some traumatic event in their lives with all the emotion as if it happened last week: like a woman who defines her life by her husband divorcing her, 30 years ago.

Or, perhaps worse, are the people who describe a traumatic event in their life with no emotion at all, having denied its impact at the time and ever since. But grief doesn't go away, not without mourning. It goes underground, infecting our belief systems and our physical well-being.

Tragedy is a heavy word, often reserved for specific types of events: sudden death, suicide, loss of a child.... And all those are tragic. But I believe that tragedy is personal, and defined by you and your reaction to your circumstances.

It is related to and interwoven with dark nights of the soul, and life-altering events such as having your life threatened by illness or natural disaster. Depression, pain, hopelessness, brokenness, despair – I'm not going to tell you which qualifies as tragedy.

The cure for all of them, the way to transformation, is to feel what you feel. Healing, which may be transformation of that immediate pain into kinder, gentler, memory, takes time, patience, and humility.

Other people, who suffer from ongoing depression or physical pain, may not have the luxury of working through it before finding

transformation. President Abraham Lincoln suffered from bouts of melancholy his entire life. His resolution was to integrate the lessons of depression into his life. He learned to use humor to lift his spirits. He set himself small daily tasks to accomplish. Most importantly for our nation, he learned to look at life unflinchingly – the good and the bad, and to accept that whatever good he accomplished would be imperfect.

A friend from my twenties, David Boyd, became a quadriplegic, confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, when he contracted a disease affecting his spinal cord. David went through a dark night of the soul: his wife left him, and he had to move back in with his aged parents so they could care for him. But he transformed his own personal struggle into a fight for the rights of the differently abled. He lobbied state government and wrote grant proposals, and after years of work, was able to build a wheelchair-friendly housing complex in the small, economically depressed town of Marquette, Michigan. He went on to fight for the rights of people of all ages and abilities with a non-profit group that now lobbies the city of Marquette to design in full access to all city property and public places.

I do not believe that bad things happen to us for a reason – that my friend David was made a quadriplegic in order to bring accessible accommodations to Marquette, Michigan. I do believe that we have an opportunity in tragedy to create transformation. It is not automatic. And it can be very hard. We all know too many examples of people who have been broken by tragedy, veterans living on the streets or committing suicide, victims of childhood abuse who repeatedly go into abusive relationships as adults, alcoholics drinking themselves to death. I do not see this brokenness as a sign of their weakness. I see it as a direct result of not receiving needed help at the right time.

That help will look different for different people. Alcoholics Anonymous and its many 12-step derivatives have helped countless numbers of people. Good counselors and support groups have helped prevent suicides and transform pain. Religious professionals and private beliefs can be helpful. Friends and family can be enormously helpful.

A friend of mine needed an emergency hysterectomy. She was only in her forties but, with the removal of her uterus and ovaries, experienced what is called surgical menopause. Menopause causes many changes in a woman's life, but usually, she has a chance to adjust to them gradually. Gerry did not. And she was suffering as a result. So a group of friends created a ritual for her, acknowledging her loss and honoring her transition to a new stage of life. We listened to Gerry tell her story. We told stories of our own transitions, the good and the bad. And it helped. She felt welcomed into this new stage of her life. It didn't change her physical reality, but it helped her adjust emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually.

These are the four areas that are changed with any crisis situation: emotions, physical, intellect, and spirit.

The emotional changes may seem the most obvious, but since our society tends to encourage us to get over emotional distress, few have the opportunity to mourn as fully as their grief demands. Then the emotions go underground. They may be expressed through physical symptoms instead, or pop up as displaced anger at people or circumstances unrelated to their origin.

Whether you notice it not, our bodies respond to the grief of tragedy, trauma, crisis, or just prolonged stress. Not just with the adrenaline rush of an emergency, but with high blood pressure, heartburn and ulcers, irritable bowel syndrome, neck pain and headaches, difficulty sleeping, and a host of other medical problems. If you pay attention, you will be able to tell how your body is responding.

At the intellectual level of loss are the stories we tell ourselves about the tragedy, and the rational solutions we search for.

Loss affecting our spirits may be the worst of all. But these dark nights of the soul, have within them, the spark of our own recovery, which can only be intuited. It is that bit of God in us that we can hold onto.

You are not damaged goods because you have experienced tragedy. That belief often comes from a warped value system called meritocracy, a belief in which the supposedly virtuous are rewarded

and the less worthy are punished, by God, or the Universe, or the free market economy. This belief conflicts with our first principle, the inherent worth and dignity of all people.

Every tragedy transforms us. We will never be the same again, even after we have made it through. This is life. The question is, how does it change us? Do we become more open to change, or hold it off with more fervor? Are we more compassionate toward others, more empathic, or less? Can we reach out for help when we need it, or do we deny that we need anyone else? Do we recognize our own boundaries and limitations, or do we say, "Yes," to everything, no matter what we really want?

Joanna Macy said, "The heart that breaks open can contain the whole world." The gifts of tragedy may be wholly unexpected.

Relatively few people transform into public heroes as a result of tragedy. There's Candice Lightner, whose 13-year-old daughter was struck and killed by a drunk driver, but who went on to found MADD, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers. Or Eve Nichol, the mother of kidnap and murder victim Polly Klaas, and founding member of the Polly Klaas Foundation, which works with parents and law enforcement to find missing children. And there are many more like them. But most transformations are more private.

When my father was dying, he had been paralyzed by a stroke, and was completely dependent upon my brother and me and his hospice workers for every bit of his care. Food, water, bathing, dressing, turning. My father hated dependence. When he had the stroke, he lay on the floor for hours, refusing to let my step-mother call an ambulance, because he wanted to die. He had never been a compliant patient to begin with, hating doctors and hospitals, constantly grumbling and arguing with his doctors over their diagnoses and treatments. But when he was settled into home hospice care, he became gracious and forgiving, making jokes with the hospice workers and visitors, and being endlessly patient with my brother and me as we learned the skills we needed to care for him. That was a transformation.

So, the gifts of tragedy... what are they? How do you find them?

First, allow yourself to mourn for whatever you have lost – a loved one, a job, your house, your health – whatever it is, loss is loss. Transformation rarely happens in the middle of tragedy and mourning. The way out is through. The stages of loss fall loosely into denial, anger, bargaining, sadness, and acceptance. These are not neat, discrete stages, like steps up a staircase, but a messy flow of up and down, back and forth. They do not take any particular length of time – just usually more time than we allow.

Reaching acceptance does not mean that we are OK with the tragedy that has occurred. It does mean that we have accepted the reality of the loss of what was, and have adjusted our lives to deal with what is real, now.

Second, for some of us, it helps to be able to sort out our actual pain, from the thought patterns and stories we tell ourselves that create additional pain. Now, 'my father died' is a source of real pain. But, "If only I had gotten there a day sooner and had more time with him," that's a story that just creates additional pain. Psychologist Amy Johnson defines these as clean pain and dirty pain.

Clean pain is: "I've lost my job and don't know how I'll support my family." Dirty pain is: "I'll never find another job as good as the one I lost."

"My house is gone and my life is in disarray," is clean pain. "My house is gone and my children's lives are ruined," is dirty pain.

Physical symptoms of an illness are an example of clean pain. Adding to that, the thought that, "my life will never be happy again," is dirty pain.

Sorting the two of these out requires an attitude of non-judgment. Simply notice what you are feeling and what you are telling yourself. Clean pain will be transformed by mourning. Dirty pain will not.

I used to suffer from migraine headaches, frequently. Sometimes three or four times a week, sometimes I would wake up in the morning and go to sleep at night with a migraine for days, and not know where one began and another left off. There are a lot of techniques for dealing with migraines, but this is something that was helpful for me. I asked myself, what is the gift of a migraine? What is it trying to tell me, or teach me?

This was really hard for me to get to, since I put so much effort into fighting migraines so that I could work and take care of my family. But I thought about it and realized that I would feel better if I didn't just try to power through my days with a migraine, but would lie down, in a dark and quiet room, sometimes listening to music or a book on tape, sometimes sleeping, and sometimes matching my breathing to the rhythm of the migraine. Perhaps the gift of the migraine was rest, taking time for myself, and paying attention to what my body was trying to tell me.

So, my clean pain was the migraine. My dirty pain was my belief that I have to keep going even with a migraine. And the truth was, I didn't always have to keep going. My husband could help, or when she was older, my daughter. And no one would starve and the church wouldn't fall down. I don't have nearly as many migraines anymore.

When my house burned down, my father quoted me Voltaire or some such wit, who said, "Everyone should have their house burn down at least once in their lifetime." I was not particularly amused at the time, but I did come to find gifts. Some were the things I learned that I have already mentioned. Then, there was the fact that we had replacement cost insurance on the house and contents, used most of the content money on the new house, and wound up with a much nicer home. The fire got rid of boxes of stuff in the basement left behind by my husband's old girlfriends. It allowed us to be thoughtful about what went into our new home. It clarified our priorities, the things we should make room for. There was the gift we gave to friends who wanted to help us, in accepting their help, sometimes placing the things they had given in us in places of honor in our new home. The fire was a test for our fairly new marriage, which held firm, and gave us the knowledge that we can get through anything together. There were, in the final analysis, a lot of gifts.

Eleanor Roosevelt, a very private and self-doubting person, went through her dark night at age 35, when she found that her husband was having an affair with one of her best friends. It was after her trust and ideals were shattered in this way, that she emerged as the champion for human rights that we remember.

Transformation through tragedy is not a simple, one, two, three process. Every tragedy is different to each person involved. When someone is lost in a dark night of the soul, the path is hard to find. Still, the way will be through in order to get out. Feel what you feel. Looking to the future and having faith in it becomes possible at some point. Gratitude for what you do have remains a good practice, as does generosity or caring for others, when possible. And asking for what you need.

For friends and loved ones, your task is simple. Be there. Be there for as long as you are needed or as long as you can. Your recovery period from your friends' tragedy will be shorter than theirs.

Transformation may come suddenly or gradually, as a burst of insight or a slowly growing idea. You may find your new path in a dream, or something that a friend says to you. When I lost a job a loved, I found my path into ministry through an exercise in the book, *What Color Is Your Parachute?* When the answer to its questions came to me as "minister," I immediately thought, "no." But it grew from there. Talk to someone, a loved one, a friend, a professional. Take your germ of an idea and explore it. Find out more.

"...You must not be frightened if a sadness rises up before you larger than any you have ever seen; if a restiveness, like light and cloud shadows, passes over your hands and over all you do. You must think that something is happening with you, that life has not forgotten you, that it holds you in its hand; it will not let you fall. Why do you want to shut out of your life any uneasiness, any miseries, or any depressions? For after all, you do not know what work these conditions are doing inside you."

Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*

Because we are human and alive, we will experience suffering in many ways. You will be changed by every tragedy of your life. And the change, beyond the pain of loss, can bring you hope, purpose, and blessing.

May it be so.