

To and from the Soul's Hall

By Francis Weller, from *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*

Grief both acknowledges what has been lost and ensures that we don't forget what we must remember

Embrace your grief, for there your soul will grow. —Carl Jung

We are gathered in a room, about thirty of us. We have come together to work the ground of grief. For two and a half days we have been together, turning over our sorrows like compost. The stories we have shared are moving and powerful, often bringing the entire circle to tears. There are stories of loss, death, abuse, worthlessness, and rage. We have been guided to these depths through a writing practice taught by my friend Kim Scanlon. And now we are ready. It is time for the grief ritual. For the last few hours we have been preparing the space, creating a grief shrine full of photos of ancestors, beloved friends who have died, images of species and cultures that have disappeared—the cumulative losses of the world—in a space made beautiful by boughs of fir, colorful cloths, and flowers. Everyone knows it is time to start, and there is tension in the air as we circle.

It begins quickly. Almost as soon as the invocation is complete and the drumming and singing have begun, a few of the participants rush the shrine. Their grief is brimming, pouring over the lip of the cup. We are now in the full flow of the ritual. Gradually the shrine fills with men and women in various postures. Some are standing, gesturing strongly toward the shrine, shouting their protests for



the things that have happened in their lives. Others kneel with their heads in their hands, bodies shaking and heaving as the grief ripples through them. A few are on their bellies, unable to hold

themselves up any longer; their sorrow hits them in wave after wave. It is beautiful. There are few things as genuine as a person grieving. There are no questions to ask, no wondering what someone is

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feeling. It is self-evident. We are revealing the heartache we carry, the sorrows we have shouldered for decades. We are in the tumult of releasing our tears. This is a holy night, and we go on for hours.

No one is alone at the shrine. Every person pouring grief from their warehouse of sorrows is being attended by another. This is not a time to go it alone. Attendants are there to witness and to provide whatever support is needed. Sometimes this means simply holding space for their deep work. Sometimes it means placing a hand on the person so he can feel that he is not alone. For others, the attendant becomes the lap into which the grieving person can crawl to weep her most bitter tears. This display of compassion is an essential piece in our ability to truly lay down our sorrows.

As we slowly come to the end of the ritual, there is a mixture of elation and exhaustion in the air. This form of soul maintenance is hard work, but it is necessary to keep us available to life. As we close, the participants are moving and swaying to the song we have been singing for hours. Their tears have washed them clean, and their faces are shining. The room is lighter. The participants' bodies are giddy with joy—a wild alchemy of sorrow and joy, played out once again, as it always has been, in the container of sacred ritual.

And now we move around the circle and embrace one another, thankful for where we traveled and for the work we have done. It is time for cookies and fruit, for water and rest. For the time being, we are released from the weight of grief, but we know full well that tomorrow, when we return to our daily lives, we will begin to gather more. That is the way of things. Knowing, however, that we will come together again in a year—or perhaps

sooner, as the need arises—reassures the psyche that we will not have to carry this burden alone for long.

When we gather on weekends to work with grief, we often begin by saying that we are entering into a *sudden village*. These rituals frequently bring together

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people from great distances, and yet slowly, over the time we share, the feeling of being in a village takes on a shape that is more than a longing; it becomes something tangible. These gatherings offer some of the constituent elements of a living community. The space is created for deep listening, respectful attention, and a container strong enough to receive our most painful and sorrowful revelations. In a very real way, we are able to generate a vessel capable of holding our joined hearts suffering. This space

enables all of us to risk sharing the wild edge of sorrow.

In *Bouncing Back*, psychotherapist and neuroscience expert Linda Graham reveals how “bonding and belonging nourish resilience.” She relates how our sense of connection affects our ability to regulate our internal states during crisis and stress. She writes, “The process of being seen, understood, and accepted by an attuned, empathic other engenders a sense of genuine self-acceptance, a feeling that we are profoundly OK. We feel safe enough, strong enough, sure enough to venture courageously into the world and develop the competencies we need to deal with life’s challenges.” A sense of belonging offers us much-needed medicine in these times, which are marked by feelings of anonymity and isolation. In fact, belonging protects the heart from much of life’s unavoidable challenges.

One amazing example of this truth on a communal level comes from a longitudinal study of the town of Roseto, Pennsylvania, an Italian-American mining community. Researchers were curious why the rate of heart disease in this town was markedly lower than it was in the surrounding communities. They studied smoking rates, exercise patterns, dietary practices, the availability of medical services, and genetic factors—all to no avail. None of these could account for the difference. The study examined death certificates between 1935 and 1985. For the first 30 years, there was a marked difference between Roseto and the surrounding communities. In the 1960s, however, as cultural ferment swept the country, long-established patterns within the small community also began to change. Rather than living in multigenerational homes where sharing life and meals, rituals and traditions was



the norm, people opted for single-family dwellings on the outskirts of town, and the young men and women left to find excitement in the bigger cities. As the bonds of connection frayed, so too did the protective effects for the heart. Disease rates rose and actually became higher than those of neighboring communities. The only thing that originally protected these people from heart disease was belonging. Now referred to as the “Roseto Effect,” we begin to understand the phrase brokenhearted more thoroughly. Linda Graham relates how

the hormone oxytocin, often called the “love hormone,” is released when we are touched and held or when we engage with someone who cares. Genuine community heals body and soul.

We need to create circles of welcome in our lives in order to keep leaning into the world; to keep moving grief through our psyches and bodies, so we can taste the sweetness of life. Modern psychological theory utilizes the terms *attunement* and *attachment*. The language has become somewhat abstract and clinical, but what it means is that we require touch in body

and soul to help us respond to difficult times with kindness and compassion and also to celebrate the sheer joy of being alive. We need these experiences to feel that we matter—quite literally—that we have matter and substance, that we take up space in the world. When we sense this, we feel that we are worthy of deep and lingering attention and that we can, in turn, offer our caring hearts to others in times of sorrow and pain. No matter who we are, we need the heartening touch of another. Even those of us who are introverted will, at times, require the devoted attention of a friend or a partner who can offer a sensitive ear to our tender woes.

DENISE LEVERTOV HAS an illuminating poem about grief:

*To speak of sorrow
works upon it
moves it from its
crouched place barring
the way to and from the soul's hall.*

It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss, that, when left unattended, block our access to the soul. To be able to freely move in and out of the soul's inner chambers, we must first clear the way. This requires finding meaningful ways to speak of sorrow.

The territory of grief is heavy. Even the word carries weight. *Grief* comes from the Latin word *gravis*, meaning “heavy,” from which we also get *grave*, *gravity*, and *gravid*. We use the word *gravitas* to speak of a quality in some people who are able to carry the weight of the world with a dignified bearing. And so it is, when we learn to carry our grief with dignity.

At times, grief invites us into a terrain that reduces us to our most naked

self. We find it hard to meet the day, to accomplish the smallest of tasks, to tolerate the greetings of others. We feel estranged from the world and only marginally able to navigate the necessities of eating, sleeping, and self-care. Some other presence takes over in times of intense grief, and we are humbled, brought to our knees. We live close to the ground, the gravity of sorrow felt deep in our bones.

The onset of grief following a significant loss initiates a shift in our daily rhythm. We enter into what some cultures refer to as a time of *living in the ashes*. Among the ancient Scandinavian cultures, it was a common practice for those dealing with loss to spend their days alongside the fires that were aligned down the center of a longhouse. They

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would occupy this physical and psychic terrain until they felt they had fully moved through the underworld where

grief had taken them. Ash speaks to what remains, the barest semblance of what once was. James Hillman wrote, "Ash is the ultimate reduction, the bare soul, the last truth, all else dissolved." The soul in grief feels reduced, brought to the place where all other thoughts or matters dissipate into ash.

This sacred season in the ashes was the ancient Scandinavian community's way of acknowledging that one of their people had entered a world parallel to but separate from the daily life of gathering food, feeding children, and tending fields. Little was expected of them during this time, which often lasted a year or more. The individual's duty was to mourn, to live in the ashes of their loss, and to regard this time as holy. It was a brooding time, a deeply interior



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period of digesting and metabolizing the bitter tincture of loss. It was a time out of time, an underworld journey to the place of sorrow and emptying. Whoever came back from this sojourn came back changed and deepened by this work in the ashes. And indeed, any who undertake real mourning return with gravitas, wisdom gathered in the darkness. These women and men become our elders, the ones who can hold the village in times of great challenge.

Imagine what this grieving space does for an individual facing loss. It grants a profound permission to enter a place of sorrow, to work with it, to explore its contours and textures, to become familiar with the landscape of loss. Contemplating this time dedicated to grief, our minds can quickly respond with arguments against it: “This is self-indulgent, over-the-top,” “You could get stuck there,” “I should be done with this by now.” What is true, however, is that these cultural practices were developed over centuries to address what human beings need during grief-stricken times. There is wisdom in offering a period of time to those who mourn. According to Jewish custom as well, the bereaved are given a year to tend to their loss. The tradition of dressing in black or wearing black armbands for an extended period of time to let others know that you are in mourning was widespread in our culture until very recently. When we communally honor this time of living in the ashes, we invite a deepened relationship with death and the underworld of loss. We gain a connection with loss that, in turn, keeps our bond with the living world vital and sustaining: The two states are mirrors of each other, reminders of the great round of life, which must include the reality of death.

BARRY SPECTOR, cultural historian and author of *Madness at the Gates of the City: The Myth of American Innocence*, reminds us of our need for emotional closure following the death of someone close. He focuses specifically upon the role of ritual in helping to come to this state. He writes, “Closure is important in all transitions, but after a death, there are rites of passage for the survivors as well as for the deceased. Completion of their ritual

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responsibilities ... moves the living into a new phase of life. When survivors aren’t allowed sufficient time to grieve, however, the *wounds close too soon, remain infected and never heal.*” (Italics mine.) We require a sufficient season of mourning to tend to the dead and the living, thereby restoring our place in the daylight world. Without an adequate time in the ashes tending the loss, sorrow mutates into symptoms of depression, anxiety, dullness, and despair. We must honor the needs of the soul during times of grief.

Grieving is also intimately connected with memory and the witnessing of those memories and emotions. Freeman House, in his elegant book, *Totem Salmon*, says, “In one ancient language, the word *memory* derives from a word meaning mindful, in another from a word to describe a witness, in yet another it means, at root, to grieve. To witness mindfully is to grieve for what has been lost.” That is the intent and purpose of grief.

Grief both acknowledges what has been lost and ensures that we don’t forget what must be remembered. There are places around the world where memorials have been built to remind the community of what has happened to the people. These are places of mourning and memory: Wounded Knee, the Rwandan Genocide Memorial, the Vietnam Memorial, and the Holocaust Memorial are all sites where grief is given concrete form to remind us of our shared loss. Some grief is not meant to be resolved and set aside. Sometimes grief helps us hold what must be carried by a people so that they never have to endure such pain again.

PSYCHOLOGISTS MARY WATKINS and Helene Shulman explore the idea of *non-redemptive mourning* in their work with social injustice and violence. Non-redemptive mourning acknowledges that some losses should never be allowed to settle, like silt, to the bottom of our memory. Some losses, such as cultures that have been forever silenced, species that have disappeared, and traumatic events that affect whole communities and cultures, should be kept present in our communal memory. The experience of grieving in these situations is “not intended to finish with the past and return

to 'normal life,' but rather to keep the past from slipping away in a present that continues to deny it."

There is a direct relationship between mourning and memory. To counter the amnesia of our times, we must be willing to look into the face of the loss and keep it nearby. In this way, we may be able to honor the losses and live our lives as carriers of their unfinished stories. This is an ancient thought—how we tend the dead is as important as how we tend the living. In our quick-to-forget, future-oriented culture, it is easy to discard the ones who went before, in all their shapes and ways of living. Yet they are all ancestors, from the oak savannahs that have been cleared for housing tracts to marshlands filled for shopping malls. The dead are among us, and we must not forget them.

A colleague of mine, Mary Gomes, co-created an exhibit called "Altars of Extinction." This was her attempt to keep in our memory our astonishing losses, as species continue to disappear from our world.

"Altars of Extinction" is an artistic and ritual memorial that provides an opportunity to collectively contemplate and grieve the extinction of plant, animal, and fungal species at human hands. Why build altars to extinct species when so many are endangered and in dire need of protection? Reasons range from the highly practical—by learning about extinction, we are far better equipped to

prevent further losses—to the deeply spiritual and philosophical. As author Mark Jerome Walters remarked, "Each extinction is a unique voice silenced in a universal conversation of which we ourselves are only one participant. When the tiny wings of the last Xerces blue butterfly ceased to flutter, our world grew quieter by a whisper and duller by a hue... Rarely, in turning our attention from a recently extinct species to our last-ditch effort to save another, do we pause to say goodbye."

Grief helps us acknowledge the losses and to hold these painful memories communally. 

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