

A TED TALK by Grief

Good evening. I am glad to be here and harvest 19 ½ minutes of your time. Statistically, I am granted that time allotment at funerals. I soak up the limelight at those, cherishing the moments that I am not being pushed away, or pushed down into the tissues of your bodies, but welcomed with tissues for your tears. Anyway, I promise to reward you for your attention.

You may think I am up here and you are out there listening, but much of the time, I am inside each of you while looking at old photographs, walking into a place like the hospital where you are reminded of me. Those of you with little to no roadblocks feel me come and go, while you are driving, listening to certain music, during certain movies, having normal conversations.

My superpower is masquerading as a variety of moods, emotions, or even mental illnesses. I am able to move like mercury through all eleven systems of human functions, from circulatory, to muscular-skeletal, to lymph systems. I am stuck in the muscles of your jaw, eyes, spine and heart valves when you do not grieve. I sit next to people and wait to be invited in. who have layers of unresolved loss and feel the clamping down of it in their gestures, physiology, and armor.

There is no prescription drug for preventing me, or warding me off, like an anti-anxiety medication, except in the short term. I am often misdiagnosed. The psychology professionals who designed that heavy barbell book called the DSM-5 - Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders - came up with 3 renditions of me:

- 1) *Prolonged Grief Disorder*
- 2) *Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder*
- 3) *Uncomplicated Bereavement Disorder*

Really? Is there anything uncomplicated about me? In 2013 the DSM team basically removed me from the diagnosis of Depression, arguing that humans were either depressed or grieving. I am entwined into my sister Depression and she acknowledges my influence on her. I am interwoven into those “disorders.” It is a travesty that this diagnostic bible of emotions and “mental” illnesses puts you in labeled, neat boxes. The brain is not a computer and the body not an object. Humans have full being illnesses, not “mental” illnesses. It is not: Anxiety or Me. Depression or Me. Rather, I am like a non-binary emotion, unboxable.

And on the subject of experts in the field of psychology, many of you are familiar with the five stages of grief. But none of the experts consulted me when the stages were reduced to ink on a page. Who goes through a loss like a car wash, in specific steps, leaving you clean and free of the dirt and tears? Not that I deny (which is the first step) their existence or value in buffering a blow, or giving you a menu with variety and

relief from my weightiness.

But if these stages were on this stage (pun-intended): denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, they would say they want a bigger tribe, to include any emotion – OR behavior (hello, overworking, or ice-cream binging!) Multiple stages, overlapping stages, or no stages, I am grief.

My family members are: rage, joy, depression, surprise, disgust, and fear; we argue about who is more important, and which of us is at the foundation of the others. When we get together the topic always come around to that. Like who came first in evolution, and who is the loudest and wields the most influence.

I see through the many costumes you wear to hide or pride me, and the fanciest are the ones of pride: laden with jewels of elegant shine and a call for attention, begging, “Look at me; I have suffered the greatest of losses, or the multitudes of endings, or the heaviness of death.” Using me, grief, as a badge of pride, and showing other people. ALL you have been through. The other costume is not pride, but hiding. Zipped up in suits, workout ones or corporate, always in motion, you keep me at bay. Zipped up in pajamas or loosely hanging anything, still and inert, you keep me away. Successful closed door management.

When I feel most pushed aside is after a nationwide or worldwide crisis. The “be strong” message, after school shootings, flooding, hurricanes, and now the pandemic, is a crushing blow to me, when I am most needed. I am banished from bodies and hearts and headlines. I sit by the survivors and wait until they are ready to welcome me and feel me. This happens usually at a quiet time when the “be strong” message has subsided, or someone has seen it for its fallacy and allowed me to quake through them, my arms enveloping their tender torso.

Individual crisis points, such as cancer diagnosis, divorces, job loss, and death of loved ones is when I see the roadblocks AND the numbness in your bodies. I am sorry you have grown accustomed to aestheticizing yourself to loss and the inevitable life dumps of pain and sorrow. Numbness does a good job of not allowing the chest to quiver. I watch as all of you inherit – over generations - a loyalty to DNA toughness and too few of you question the weight of that armor. It does a good job of not allowing the chest to quiver. But this next generation of youth – they get it. Toughness is not an aspiration.

My invitation to you? Simply to crack open the door, and, naming me anything you like, dressing in nothing special, say, “Come in grief and sip some tea.” You will be relieved to have me as a guest moving through the rooms of your house instead of sticking me in a drawer of your nervous system. I love conversation and knowing I have a welcome mat. I hope to see you for tea soon.



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