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Our Personal Grief as a Lens to Understand and to be in Solidarity with Others in Their Suffering

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Abstract: Listening not only means to listen to their words but also to their silence and cries. It is very difficult to listen to silent suffering and grief of others; especially a person is in pain and unable to express himself or herself. Recalling the experience of our own suffering will help us to understand the depth of other's suffering; even when they are not able to express their pain; we will be able to listen to them and to experience deep solidarity with them. When people are suffering the pain of loss, they are like people walking alone in the darkness of fear, sadness, anger, loss of hope and aimlessness. When we recognize, identify and stand with the sufferings of other who lost hope; we are giving them the hope that Jesus has given us.

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What they need is our presence which make them feel that they are not alone.

Keywords: Grief, Suffering, Resilience, hope, presence in the absence, solidarity, conversation, meaning-making

Introduction

I have always considered grief as something bad or something that needed to be kept away from me. But on 27th August, 2021, on my arrival to the United States from India, at the airport I received the shocking news that my father died in an accident. As I boarded the flight, he was in good health but as I landed, I got this heart-breaking news. My grief grew deeper and deeper for the following reasons: It was an unexpected death; I had not seen my father for the last two and half years; I was the last one in family circle to receive this news; I could not be part of the funeral; I was in a totally new place and with new people at this moment of unexpected sorrow.

I considered this grief like beast which is to be killed or I should be running away from it. The following insights from Fr. James F. Keenan, SJ, on his experience of grief of losing his friend Lucas Chan made a lot of meaning in my grieving process and reflection.

The phenomenon of grief is the willing openness to the loss of love. During that Pentecost, I discovered that my grief was a form of love. In fact, whenever I touch that grief, encounter the love that connected me to my friend Lúcas. Entrance into grief is not solely an encounter with absence but with presence as well. The more one feel's the presence of the love, the deeper one feels the loss, and yet the gulf of love remains, like the upper room itself, a place of vulnerability (Keenan SJ, 2021:9-10).

In that sense, grief was no longer a beast for me but what the grief at the sudden death of my father helped to have a deep bond with my father. It helped me to relive my memories with him. I could speak with him. I could experience his love for me. Now I feel that

my connection with my beloved father remains stronger because of this gap.

Here I attempt to reflect how one's personal experience of resilience after a personal loss makes him/her effective in pastoral care in accompanying the people who lost their dear ones.

Importance of Grieving Process to be Resilient

a. Description of Terms

It is important to understand some of the key terms related to grieving.

Grief

Grief is defined broadly as one's response to an important loss. The response is sometimes marked by severe or prolonged distress, which may be manifested by mourning (Kelly, 2010:8). Each individual has a personal way of grieving, depending on one's own time and space. Normally, we connect grief with death. But we also know from experience that death is not the only loss that gives rise to grief. Loss of job, loss of an organ, loss of memory and loss of relationship are examples of other losses which can also lead to grief.

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Resilience

According to Southwick and Charney, resilience is "the ability to bounce back after encountering difficulty (Southwick and Charney, 2018: 8)." Two other researchers, McKinley and Lilly defined the concept of Family Resilience as "the capacity of the

family system to withstand and rebound from adversity, strengthened and more resourceful (McKinley and Lilly, 2021:111).” We should not limit our understanding about resilience only to overcoming adversities and difficulties; resilience also means the ability to accept, make new meaning and to live with the loss. It also should be noted that "building resilience and bouncing back is easier for some than for others (Southwick and Charney, 2018: 26)." Everyone experiences different amounts of pain and hardship. Therefore, we cannot define a pace of resilience applicable to all. All we can and should do is to be with the people in the adversity without rushing.

b. The role of grieving in developing resilience

Grieving as family communication

Family sharing after loss is a grieving process that is vital to a family’s well-being and resilience in staying together and facing future challenges. According to McKinley and Lilly, family communication is a prominent aspect of family resilience (McKinley and Lilly, 2021:108). Janice Nadeau also affirms the role of family in meaning making, by pointing out that “Grief is a family affair (Nadeau, 1998:95).” When a family experience loss, not only are the individuals in the family left to make sense of the loss, but also the family as a whole. Nobody can make meaning alone, because meanings are co-constructed. Dr. Melissa Kelley rightly points out that human life is fundamentally grounded in stories (Nadeau, 1998:95). Therefore healthy communication within the family will unite the family in love and help the family members in meaning making and to become resilient.

Grieving by expressing one’s pain

Grieving by sharing with others by writing or by personal conversation will help the individuals to reduce their pain, to find hope and to become resilient. Authors like Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche, Nicholas Wolterstoff and C. S. Lewis grieved over their losses through their writing (Adiche, 2021; Wolterstoff, 1987 and

Lewis, 2021). They expressed how they felt when they lost their dear ones. They found it difficult to accept; it was terrible for them. They even questioned God's love. But they found new meaning and hope by expressing their pain and their memories connected to it. When we share our grief with others, our frustration, anger, hurt, loss of hope, sorrow and bitterness may be transformed into a positive energy that will lead us to resilience.

How One's Experience Becomes a Mirror in Pastoral Care

This section focuses on the graces that I received in the personal grieving process which can become a mirror for pastoral care.

a. Experiencing presence in the absence

My grieving process after the sudden death of my father helped me form a deep bond with my father. It helped me to relive my memories with him. I could speak with him. I could experience his love for me. According to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "it is wrong to say that God, fills the gap. God doesn't fill the gap at all. Rather he leaves it unfilled, and in this way, he helps us to maintain our true communion with our loved one, even though it is painful (Bonhoeffer, 2009:89). Now I feel that my connection with my beloved father remains stronger because of this gap. 'Experiencing the presence of our loved ones in their absence', is a grace that all of us can receive by our grieving process.

b. Solidarity

My personal experience of grief has become a mirror for understanding the grief and pain of others much more deeply. One of the graces that a person receives during personal grieving is the ability to connect oneself with people who are suffering with similar pains. Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche

describes how she used to console grieving friends with the following words, “find peace in your memories.” But after experiencing the grief of her father’s death and the pain and helplessness of not being able to be present for the funeral to say final goodbye to him, has given her a different understanding that the consoling words she used to make were not much help to anyone (Adiche, 2021:22). Our personal grief teaches us that what people need while grieving over their personal loss is our presence, not our soothing words. Our presence in the moments of pain will give them the assurance that they are not alone. This is the grace of solidarity which helps us share the burden of others as our own.

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c. Conversations with self, God and others

Conversation with myself helped me be in touch with my own feelings of hurt, anger, frustration, sadness and hope. It helped me communicate with family members and other people my feelings and memories about the loss. It was a process of meaning making and strengthening the bond with others. Conversation with God in prayer helped me grow in my faith and hope; and accept the will of God.

d. Assurance of Strength in weakness

In my grieving process, I experienced the grace that I had the strength to bear my pain. It was god’s grace and the prayerful support of many people. St. Paul says that God’s strength is made perfect in his weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-11). This shows us that resilience is not something we do by our own effort, but God walks with us in our sufferings.

Models to Imitate – For Caregivers and Grieving People

a. Mary

Mother Mary is model to imitate for grieving people as well for the caregiver. When Mary who said “yes” to the will of God; had to go through losses, suffering and humiliations. She had to go through the humiliation of being pregnant before marriage, the pain of not finding a place to give birth to Jesus, losing Jesus in the temple, the pain of Joseph’s death, the pain of being alone when Jesus was away in his mission, the struggle that she went through when people made accusations against Jesus and the pain of witnessing Jesus’ passion and death. She never left the cross. She was at the foot of the cross. She accepted everything as will of God and accepted the suffering with it, because she knew it was for a higher cause (Salvation of the humanity). She also knew that suffering is not the end. She believed and witnessed the resurrection.

b. Jesus

The Agony of Jesus in the Garden (Matthew 26:39): A memorable example was Jesus’s agony in the Garden before the crucifixion. He was not running away from the grief, but was sharing his grief with the Father. That helped the human Jesus to become aware of the vulnerability of his own body, to recognize the will of Father, and accept the cross saying, “Father, if possible, let this cup pass away from me nevertheless not as my will; but as you will (Mt 26:39).” By sharing his own grief with the Father Jesus moved forward with new a spirit of love to save humanity.

Jesus Weeps (John 11:35): James Keenan explains the deep meaning of this passage. He says that Jesus did not begin to weep when encountered by Martha or Mary, but rather when he directly confronted the reality of Lazarus as dead, that is, when he is brought to the tomb. This grief exposed Jesus’

vulnerability to the death of Lazarus. That is revealed to us in the very next verse, “Then the Jews said, ‘See how he loved him!’” (Jn 11.36). Through grief, the Spirit leads us as vulnerable in the face of death, through love to hope (Keenan: 2022).

c. Disciples

The disciples and mother Mary who were grieving in the upper-room after the death of Jesus is a model to imitate. We can assume that they were praying and were sharing their fear, grief and memories of Jesus with one another. They were united in love.

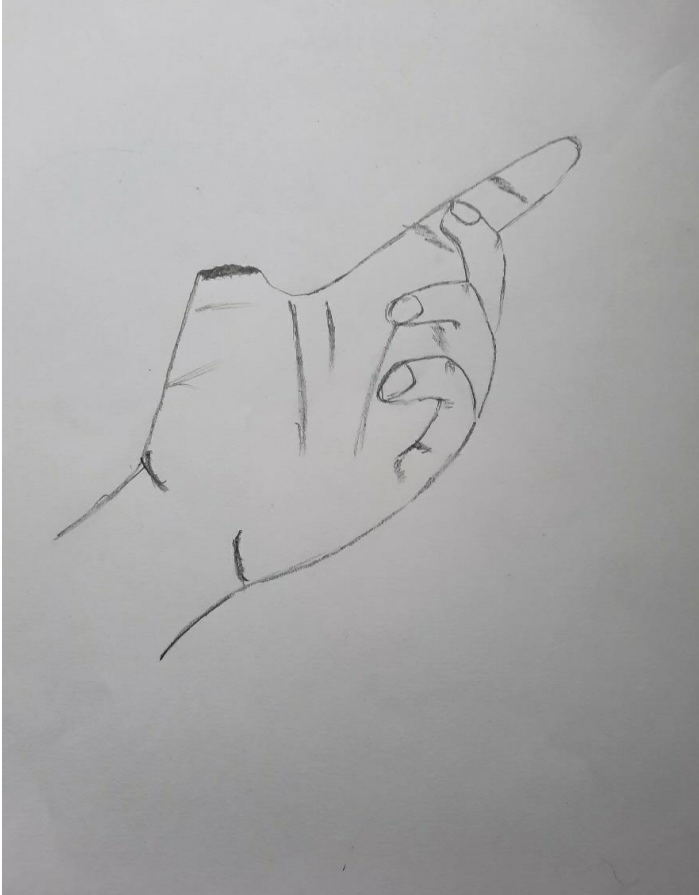
d. Parents who lost their only Son

I vaguely remember that a few years ago watching a TV interview of parents who lost their only son during his graduate study abroad. They shared how hard it was for them. After a few months, they were motivated by the inner-voice to live with this grief. They decided to connect with the people who lost their dear ones in untimely ways. They came together, had a WhatsApp group, and organized gatherings to share their experiences. They started organizing seminars, prayers, arranging scholarship for students, and became involved in charitable works. They have all become a family and have started to support the other grieving people in a profound way. It is a good model to imitate.

e. Images explaining the pain of loss yet being resilient

The following pencil drawings are the attempts to communicate creatively, the pain of loss and meaning making.

Image: 1 The above image is self-evident in communicating to us that wounds cause pain but wounds do not remain a wound. It is healed but there will be always a scar. The mark of the wound will not give us pain but will unite us with the memories, the vision and the love of the lost one. Even with the absence of the thumb, the fingers are united and functions well in communion. Every family can make meaning in their loss when they are united



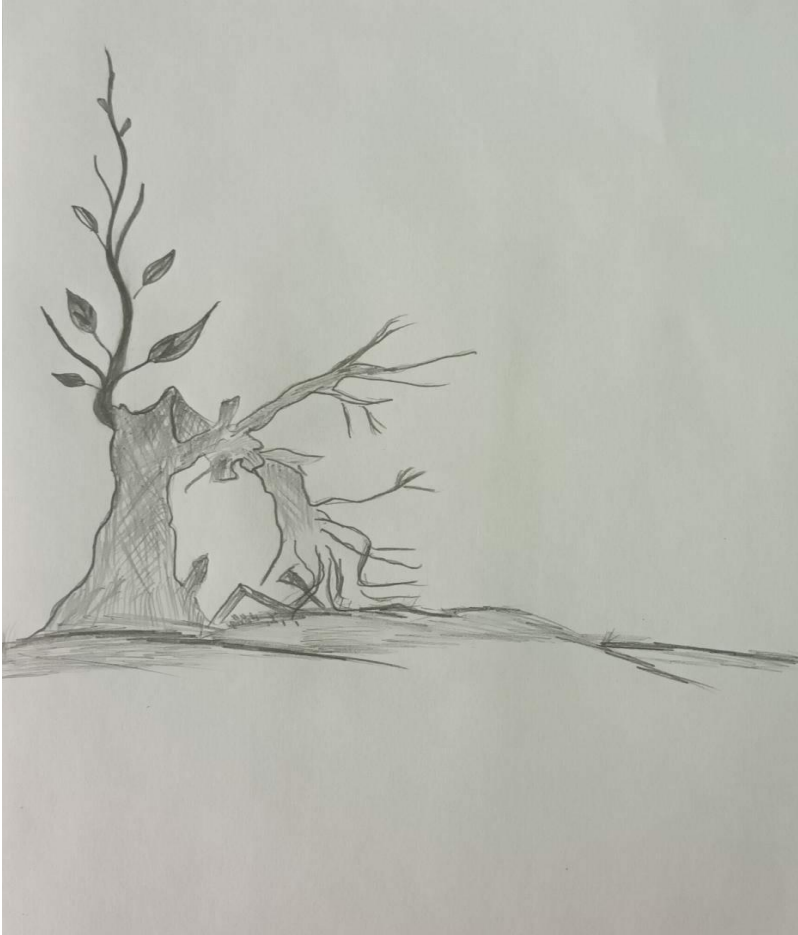


Image:2 This image communicates the message of hope in hopeless situation. It is an assurance that God can perform a miracle even when people think everything is over. Like the soil, water and sun that helped the plant sprout again, people around us can give us a ray of hope in our hopelessness.

Conclusion

As Christians, we cannot deny suffering and death, but we can focus on the resurrection of our Lord which makes us a people of hope and faith. It is important to see that Christian hope begins at the cross

of Jesus. Our faith allows us to connect our sufferings with Lord's suffering with hope of resurrection. In our suffering we are not alone, because our God is not only the God of the sufferers but also a God who suffers out of love (Wolterstorff, 1987:67-92).

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We believe hope can make meaning in our pain. This conviction and faith not only help us to be resilient on a personal level; it is also a step towards giving hope to the people who grieve in their loss.

I experienced support of many people who listened to me and stood with me in my suffering and pain. It was a great help in my grieving process. People around me made me to feel that I was not alone. Therefore, I feel the best step for pastoral care is to listen to people. Sometimes it is very difficult to listen to silent suffering and grief of others. For instance, often suffering results precisely because a person is in pain and unable to express himself or herself.

“In some instances, this inability to speak is an even greater suffering than the pain itself because the sufferer is acutely aware of her isolation and is unable to communicate it. In particular, the person in chronic pain finds often that the pain perpetually keeps the sufferer from speaking. Pain inhibits the sufferer from doing the only thing that the sufferer wants to do: communicate her pain (Keenan, 2016: 73).

Listening not only means to listen to their words but also to their silence and cries. It is very difficult to listen to silent suffering and grief of others; especially a person is in pain and unable to express himself or herself. Recalling the experience of our own suffering will help us to understand the depth of other's suffering; even when they are not able to express their

pain; we will be able to listen to them and to experience deep solidarity with them. When people are suffering the pain of loss, they are like people walking alone in the darkness of fear, sadness, anger, loss of hope and aimlessness.

“Hope is to have confidence for things not yet seen. Hope, too, is a gift. Sometimes people think of Christian hope as what we have in light of success. But Christian hope is our aid in the face of adversity. By hope, we believe we will attain what even now seems so unattainable. I think it is important to see that Christian hope begins at the cross of Jesus. We are not foolish in hope; rather, we are realists. We understand the challenges of life, but we believe that by hope we can meet and overcome those challenge (Keenan,2016:97).”

When we recognize, identify and stand with the sufferings of other who lost hope; we are giving them the hope that Jesus has given us. What they need is our presence which make them feel that they are not alone. Our presence can make a difference in their lives to make meaning in their suffering and to be resilient.

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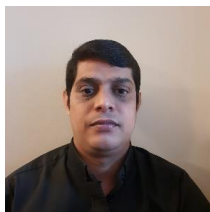
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