

THE POWER IN PAIN

Annie Nardone on the First-Hand
Experience of Pain

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I have been here before. This grief that crushes my soul like a black hole. I dream that I'm clawing at slippery, black walls as I slide farther down . . . to what? No bottom, because the grief is in layers, just like the layers of dark events of the past few months. Everything that has been impending is now concluding. Change plane reservations to NOW, not later, because hospice just called. She's in her final days . . . no, hours, they tell me. Tomorrow. Maybe. Or tonight.

Cancer has reared its ugly head in my family again. Dad's story ended in victory, so we know healing is possible. But how could this stupid disease come again, this time to my mother? Just one week ago we were in Minnesota, moving them into their new apartment, but now returned to

Virginia, I receive a call one day later from my dad to tell me “Mom has a tumor in her brain and it’s big. I have to drive behind the ambulance to Rochester now.” Dad, a quiet and capable man, sounds like a scared little boy. I’m calling their friends in Minnesota, trying to weave together a support system for him while he sits alone in a cold hospital waiting room, trying to absorb the idea that his wife of sixty years may die. A few hours later the surgeon calls, foregoing the time-consuming formality of permissions paperwork because “if they don’t operate now, she’s dead.”

She makes it through surgery, but there are still traces of cancer. No matter, we’ve been here before with Dad. We’ll win again. After all, there’s the first great grandchild due in April! It’s so easy to read God’s purpose into something, isn’t it? Surely, that baby will give mom hope and something to live for as she heals from surgery and endures radiation treatment.

Tonight, we meet the vet after hours to give him the kitten that my daughter has fed with a spoon and watered with a dropper hour-by-hour for days on end. We have to say goodbye, knowing that we are leaving him with the kindly vet, also knowing he’s not going to be here when we return home. Pack our bags and all of our school work

because we don't know when we will come home. Tumble out of the car at the airport in the middle of the night. **I feel hollow.** I read during the first flight because adrenaline and exhaustion prevent any rest. While we are running to catch our connecting flight, hospice calls. Mom slipped away peacefully at 6:30 a.m. Dad was with her, one arm in a cast and holding her hand with the other. We land in Minnesota with our sleep-deprived brains on autopilot. The vet calls. The kitten has died too.

Do we laugh at how ridiculous life seems at this point? I ask, "God, how is this a good idea?" I am overwhelmed. Drowning. Rapid-fire tragedy we cannot control, cannot fix, and certainly don't understand. I am numb and only reacting, fatigue so intense that my brain feels like I'm riding up in a sky-high elevator, just to plummet to the ground — over and over. I'm so dizzy and scattered, maybe I have a brain tumor too. Isn't that how it starts? No, now I'm being irrational; but nothing has made sense for months, so who knows.

My soul is imploding on itself, crumbling like a tower of cards, crushed.

It has to end. It doesn't end.

Death. And not just death of every sort, but the fallout from it all. The death of a parent and the disabling of the other in the same month; the death

of my daughter's beloved kitten at the same time we are planning my mother's funeral; the death of a friendship. I am not unaccustomed to sorrow, but to see my children crawling through it and wanting to save them, help them, and cushion the blows that came at us from every direction all at once is overwhelming.

Years ago, I had read C.S. Lewis's book *A Grief Observed*, but only from the perspective of curiosity and admiration of his writing. Lewis married Joy Davidman, knowing that she had cancer. Her death, though not a complete surprise, moved him to a place beyond simple explanation. His teaching on pain and grief, examined and systematically explained in his prior apologetic writing *The Problem of Pain*, was turned upside down. Anguish became personal. Death is a different matter entirely when you are coping with the passing of *your own* spouse. And now I find myself in the middle of my own grief.

I realize that all along the road of mom's cancer, God was taking care of us, not by fixing the cancer, but by remaining steadfast in the midst of the storm. Like Lewis, I cried out, "Where is God?"¹ In *A Grief Observed*, he identifies this question as "one of

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996) 5.

the most disquieting symptoms.”² It is all well and good to tell me that suffering is a part of life; reading the account of someone who has actually faced the death of a loved one or a broken relationship is where I can find credibility and deeper understanding. Even when I couldn’t see it in the moment, He cared for us from the periphery. Why is it so easy to forget that I have been here before? Joy’s son, Douglas H. Gresham, wrote about this idea in the introduction to his stepfather’s book *A Grief Observed*. We find ourselves back in the black hole of grief, but “what many of us discover in this outpouring of anguish is that we know exactly what [C.S. Lewis] is talking about. Those of us who have walked this same path, or are walking it as we read this book, find that we are not after all as alone as we thought.”³ God is faithful to place other people in our lives who understand our heartache and struggled through similar tragedy.

The Bible tells us that the night prior to his trial and crucifixion, Christ suffered deep anguish as he prayed in the garden of Gethsemane. Christ tells his disciples, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death;

² Ibid.

³ Ibid, xxxi.

remain here, and watch with me.”⁴ St. Luke describes Christ’s torment, writing, “And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground.”⁵ The very Son of God agonized here on earth; He is no stranger to affliction, but understands the pain of mere mortals like C.S. Lewis, like you, and like me. He has gone before us; he has been there too. We can find assurance through example.

Standing in the airport and waiting for our connecting flight, the idea of Jesus’s life comes to mind — not in an exceptionally theological moment, but more of a logical reset. Jesus was “a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”⁶ He knew bone-deep sorrow. What would earn me a pass from its grip if not even the Son of God was protected from it?

Then fragments of an old memory, another time and tragedy that left me nearly unable to breathe, come to my mind. I remember the times that I couldn’t stand up — I could only hug my knees and scream for God to pay attention to my

⁴ Matt. 26:38.

⁵ Luke 22:44.

⁶ Isaiah 53:3.

pleading. I demanded answers. I begged for them from a God who seemingly remained silent, watching me from some realm above. Like the grieving Lewis said, His silence felt like “a door slammed in your face.”⁷

He finally answered my pleas, but on His terms and not mine. Two years would pass before I started to understand. He didn’t rescue me out of the pain — He brought me through it . . . He can take the darkest suffering in our lives and turn it into something beautiful and useful. Now I use the experience of my pain and grief to minister to others who find themselves in circumstances that mirror mine. The difficult path that God helped me navigate became a map to guide others. Would we choose suffering? I doubt it. But look at what we would miss down the road if we chose the easy path — lessons learned that will in turn guide others. Suffering and sorrow led me to a deeper understanding of mercy and patience.

I have been here before. Even if this time it was trouble times three, I had the reminder that “Oh yes, I made it through.” In *A Grief Observed*, we note that Lewis gradually turned in his view of grief through a process. He reacted with anger on the

⁷ Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, xii.

first page of the book, writing with a rawness that is familiar to us. His realization, “No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid,”⁸ makes complete sense to me. That’s it. Lewis nailed it. He told me to “keep on swallowing”⁹ and that’s the best I can do.

An accident or illness may suddenly take the life of someone we love and we are crushed in spirit. But the danger lies in swirling in our anger without moving on. Lewis wrestled with his anger toward God, but later there is a glimmer of recognition that he might have been too focused on demanding answers from God instead of being still. He considered that “I have gradually been coming to feel that the door is no longer shut and bolted. Was it my own frantic need that slammed it in my face? . . . Perhaps your own reiterated cries deafen you to the voice you hoped to hear.”¹⁰ Lewis shares his struggle with deep grief in a completely honest way. Christians often put on a mask that covers the real questions in their hearts. It is good to go to our God and ask those questions, just like Lewis shows us in *A Grief Observed*. Inevitably, we will be

⁸ Ibid, 3.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 46.

confronted with a grieving person who will not shy away from asking us, and if we have not been honest with ourselves and God about our own battles, we have little to offer. Lewis's book presents a timeless and compelling example of a deeply Christian man who needed answers and found resolution. Consider how many lives were changed by his bold and honest writing. His was and remains an example of a Christian whose imaginative and reasoned responses explain difficult topics like pain and tribulation.

Many of us have a grief story that leaves us bruised and bloodied. As difficult as it may be, we can use our experience to walk other people through their pain. I made it through the valley in no small part from the comfort I gleaned by reading Lewis's story. So often when we are in the midst of the mess we feel that no one else could possibly know our pain or ever survive what we are currently suffering. We must remind ourselves to open our eyes and acknowledge that what we learn to endure becomes the great lesson we share with others. That is why stories are so powerful. Through the retelling of our experience and the writing of other people, we discover that we are not alone. Whatever difficulty that you are in right now, someone else has been there and lived to tell

the tale. There is strength, comfort, learning, and healing in shared stories.

“Could Beethoven have written that glorious paean of praise in the “Ninth Symphony” if he had not had to endure the dark closing in of deafness? As I look through his work chronologically, there’s no denying that it deepens and strengthens along with the deafness. Could Milton have seen all that he sees in *Paradise Lost* if he had not been blind? It is chastening to realize that those who have no physical flaw, who move through life in step with their peers, who are bright and beautiful, seldom become artists. The unending paradox is that we do learn through pain.”

—Madeline L'Engle, *Walking on Water*

Bibliography

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