

PAYING ATTENTION TO THE WISDOM OF OUR SORROWS

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THE WELL-KNOWN AUSTRIAN lyric poet and noted spiritual writer Rainer Maria Rilke wrote a collection of ten reflective poems between 1912 and 1922 entitled *Duino Elegies*. These are intensely religious, mystical poems that weigh beauty and existential suffering. At one point in this poem sequence, he encourages the reader not to be a ‘waster of sorrows’.¹ And in his more popular work *Letters to a Young Poet*, Rilke encourages his young friend to use his sorrows in a positive way as a means to help him grow in holiness.²

Is this not the challenge for all of us? It is not a gentle world. Everyone has sorrows in life of one kind or another. The important question is not whether we have sorrows or not, but what can we do with them so that we do not waste them? The reality is that what we do with our sorrows can have a tremendous impact on our growth as a person, both psychologically, emotionally and spiritually.

In over thirty years as a psychotherapist, I have listened to people’s stories about their lives. Often, a part of the story involve sorrows of one kind or another. How people handle them has truly been inspiring and in some cases amazing to me. Listening to my clients over the years, I have often wondered why some people become overwhelmed by their sorrows and seem to buckle beneath them while others learn to integrate them into their lives in a way that leads to growth. For each of us, the real question and challenge is—how do we do this? How do we use our suffering and sorrows in life to be a positive, growthful force so that we do not end up wasting them?

¹ Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies*, translated by J. B. Leishman and Stephen Spender (New York: Norton, 1963), 79.

² Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet*, translated by M. D. Herter Norton (New York: Norton, 1934), 63–67.

Jesus and His Sorrows

Jesus certainly experienced sorrows in his life. He wept on at least two occasions in the New Testament. We know that he cried when Lazarus died:

When Mary came where Jesus was and saw him, she knelt at his feet and said to him, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died'. When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved. He said, 'Where have you laid him?' They said to him, 'Lord, come and see'. Jesus began to weep. So the Jews said, 'See how he loved him!' (John 11:32–37)

Jesus allowed himself to cry over the loss of a good friend. He also experienced great sorrow in his agony in the garden. Luke says in his Gospel, 'In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground'. (Luke 22:44) All of

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And Jesus Wept, statue at the Oklahoma City National Memorial

us experience personal sorrows in life and sometimes we have to struggle not to allow those sorrows to cause something inside us to die. Our sorrow might be the death of a family member or friend, like Jesus' sorrow for Lazarus. It might be the failure of a relationship or the loss of a job. For others, it might be fighting an addiction or struggling with a physical, mental or emotional problem. No matter what the source of our sorrow, we certainly do not want to waste it.

There are also other kinds of sorrows that are larger than our own personal ones. These are rooted in communities, in societies, in countries, in the human condition. Sometimes, they are so overwhelming that

they are difficult to fathom. How do we understand the immense suffering of people in whole countries, in cities, in nations? And yet, these kinds of problems also created a great sorrow in Jesus and caused him to cry. In Luke's Gospel, we read that Jesus actually wept over the immense suffering in the city of Jerusalem. 'As he came near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, "If you, even you, had only recognized on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes."' (Luke 19:41–42) How can we respond to this kind of suffering? How do we react when we learn about the poverty of nations, children not having enough to eat, hurricanes and tornadoes killing thousands of people and destroying vast areas of land?

Pain in Things

In his 1943 novel *The Human Comedy*, William Saroyan tells the story of a teenager growing up in poverty in an inner city with crime all around him. He just cannot understand why life had to be so difficult. Why do people have to struggle so much? Why is there so much suffering and sorrow and violence all around him? As he ponders these questions, he gets on a bus and rides all night around the city, crying. His mother is panicking because he has not come home. Finally, in the morning, he returns home and begins talking to his mother about his feelings. After patiently listening to his questions, she responded with these words that I have never forgotten after all these years:

It was pity that made you cry—pity not just for this person or that person who is suffering, but for all things, for the very nature of things. Unless a person has pity, he is inhuman and not yet truly a person; for out of pity comes a bond that heals. Only good people weep There will always be pain in things, she said. Knowing this does not mean that a person shall despair. The good person will seek to take the pain out of things. The foolish person will not notice it except in himself and the evil person will drive the pain even deeper into things and spread it about wherever he goes.³

There is a great sadness in life when we ponder the immense tragedies that occur in the lives of other people every day. They appear to be so overwhelming that they can almost make us numb. Often, we are afraid to stay with these thoughts, wondering how these situations are ever

³ William Saroyan, *The Human Comedy* (New York: Dell, 1971 [1943]), 131.

going to change and become better. What can we do? How can we help? How can we 'seek to take the pain out of things'? How can we allow these realities not to kill our dreams about life? Can we do anything to avoid becoming a 'waster of sorrows'?

Finding Meaning

The struggle to find meaning in our sorrows can be very challenging. Usually, it does not require us to live differently; it requires us to see our lives differently. Many of us already live far more meaningful lives than we know. When we go beyond the superficial to the essential, things that are familiar and even commonplace are revealed in new ways. But discovering this takes time and patience. It requires a wisdom that often comes from living and struggling with our sorrows. If we can learn this wisdom about life, it will allow us never to waste those sorrows.

Finding meaning in our sorrows changes the way we see ourselves and the world. Through sorrows, people come to know themselves for the first time and recognise not only who they genuinely are but also what truly matters to them. As a psychotherapist, I have accompanied many people as they have discovered in themselves an unexpected strength, a courage beyond what they would have thought possible, an unsuspected sense of compassion or a capacity for love deeper than they had ever dreamed. I have watched people abandon values that they never questioned before and find courage to live in new ways.

Being Yourself

When I first met Kathy, her psychology practice was barely surviving. She shared offices with a group of physicians and, desperate to be accepted and to work under what she perceived as the umbrella of their credibility, she took whatever crumbs fell from their professional table. Hers was the smallest office in the complex and hers was the only name not listed on the office door. It was obvious from the beginning how dedicated and gifted she was as a therapist. Her lack of confidence troubled me, although I did not say anything about it at the time. But Kathy felt validated by the association and she was convinced that she needed referrals from the doctors in order to have patients.

Kathy was a shy person, a little apologetic and sometimes hesitant in trying to find the right words in a conversation. She was also just the slightest bit clumsy. However, all this actually made her very endearing. You felt somehow at home with her and safe. Her patients loved her.

One day she told me she was moving from her present office. Although I was pleased, I asked her why she had decided to leave. 'They don't have wheelchair access', she said. I guess I looked surprised, so she went on to say that she had not told me everything about herself. She said that years ago when she was young, she had a very serious stroke and was not expected to recover. I was astonished. 'I had no idea', I said. She replied, 'Nobody does'. I went on to ask her why she had kept this part of her life a secret. Almost in tears, she said that for years she had felt damaged and ashamed. 'I wanted to put it behind me', she said. 'I thought if I could be seen as normal I would be more than I was'. And so she had guarded her secret closely. Neither her colleagues nor her patients knew. She had felt certain that others would not refer to her or want to come to her for help if they knew. However, now she was no longer sure this was true.

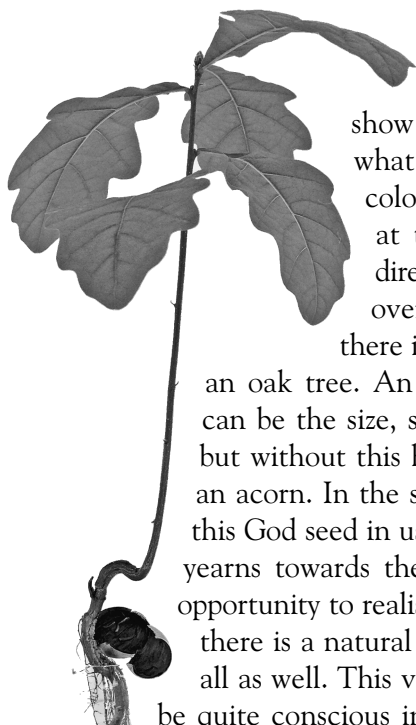
'So, what do you plan to do now?', I asked her. She looked down at her hands in her lap. 'I think I will just be myself', she told me. 'I will see people like myself. People who are not like others. People who have had strokes and other brain injuries. People who can never be normal again. I think I can help them to be whole.' Over the past five years, Kathy has become widely known for her work. She has been honoured by several community groups and interviewed in newspapers. She often speaks on these kinds of topics and consults for businesses and hospitals. The many people she has helped refer others to her. Her practice is thriving. Her own name is on the door. All Kathy needed in order to be whole was the courage to face her own vulnerability. She had gradually learnt to pay attention to the wisdom of her sorrow.

Life offers its wisdom generously to each of us. Everything in life teaches, but not everyone learns. Life invites us to *stay awake, pay attention*. But for most of us, paying attention is no simple matter. It requires us not to be distracted by expectations, past experiences, labels and masks. It asks that we not allow ourselves to draw conclusions too early and that we remain open to surprise. In fact, wisdom comes most easily to those who have the courage to embrace life without judgment. Sometimes, it will require us not to know, even for a long time. Moreover, it will also require us to be more fully and simply alive than we have been taught to be. It may often require us to suffer. But ultimately it will lead to wisdom and growth.

***The courage
to embrace
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The Seed of God

There is a 'seed' of greater wholeness in everyone. The great Christian mystic Meister Eckhart called this the 'seed of God'.⁴ Buddhists call it the Buddha seed. It is that part of everyone that has the capacity for wisdom. Wisdom is not simply something that we acquire; it is something that we may become over time. It involves a change in our basic nature, a deepening of our capacity for compassion, loving-kindness, forgiveness, and service. Life itself waters this seed within us.



Knowing that a God seed is present in everyone changes the way you see things. Many things are more than they seem. Many things do not show their true nature on the surface. For example, what you can see and touch about an acorn, its colour, its weight and its hardness, will never hint at the secret of its potential. This secret is not directly measurable, but given the proper conditions over time, it will become visible. Within an acorn, there is something waiting to unfold that will become an oak tree. An acorn is defined by this capacity. Something can be the size, shape, weight, texture and colour of an acorn, but without this hidden power to become an oak tree, it is not an acorn. In the same way, our essential humanity is defined by this God seed in us, this capacity to grow in wisdom. Every acorn yearns towards the full expression of its nature and uses every opportunity to realise its capacity to become an oak tree. Similarly, there is a natural yearning towards wholeness and wisdom in us all as well. This varies in strength from person to person. It may be quite conscious in some people and deeply buried in others. It may form the focus of one life and lie on the periphery of another, but it is always there. Wholeness is a basic human need.

Growing in Wisdom

None of us is born wise. Rather, becoming wise is a process and a struggle. Everyone and everything are caught up in this process of growing in

⁴ See Meister Eckhart, 'The Book of "Benedictus"', in *The Essential Sermons, Commentaries, Treatises and Defense*, translated by Edmund Colledge and Bernard McGinn (Mahwah: Paulist, 1981), 241: 'The seed of a pear tree grows into a pear tree, the seed of a nut tree grows to be a nut tree, the seed of God grows to be God'.

wisdom, of becoming more transparent to what is going on within us and all around us. The struggle is to become free from our illusions. This is not usually a graceful or a deliberate process. We stumble forward—often in the dark, like the acorn planted in the earth—to become more of who we are. In others it is clearly an effort worthy of our patience, our support, our compassion and our attention.

Possessing wisdom is very different from just having knowledge. Our life experiences can teach us this. When I was a graduate student, I studied very hard and learnt how to be a therapist. Although it might sound simplistic, I truly wanted to help people and be the best therapist I could possibly be. In class, I learnt many theories of counselling and even had the opportunity of practising them during my internships. I would meet clients, listen to them, establish a rapport, diagnose them, decide what counselling strategy would be most beneficial, and go to work. I was putting my knowledge to work. The model I was taught focused on what I as a therapist had learnt about the particular problem a person was experiencing, and supposedly gave me the tools, the strategies, to help that person. I was implementing my knowledge. But I did not have much wisdom then. I was young and did not have much life experience. What gave me some wisdom was the death of my son and my struggle through the years of trying to make sense of that reality. This experience enabled me gradually to understand so many things about loss, sorrow, life and healing. In the final analysis, I believe this type of struggle enabled me to become a wise and helpful grief counsellor for others. Even back then, I did not want to be a ‘waster of sorrows’.

Presence and Listening

Over the years, I have discovered that basically I do not know what is needed much of the time and, even more surprisingly, I do not need to know. But now I also know that if I listen attentively to people, to their essential self, their soul, as it were, I often find that at their deepest level, they can sense the direction of their own healing and wholeness. If I can remain open to that, without expectations about what someone is ‘supposed to do’, how he or she is supposed to change in order to ‘get better’, or even what that person’s wholeness looks like, what can happen is amazing. For me, this approach is much wiser and healthier than any way of fixing a person’s situation or easing pain and sorrow that I might devise on my own.

So, I no longer have many theories about people. I do not simply diagnose them or decide what their problem is. I do not even believe that I have to fix them. I simply meet them and listen. As we sit together, I do not have an agenda, but I know that something will emerge from our conversation over time that is a part of a larger coherent pattern that neither of us can fully see at this moment. So, I sit with them and wait.

James Redfield's *The Celestine Prophecy* offers a simple and helpful description of the possibility within all human relationships. It says that there is a way of relating to others that encourages a person deliberately to listen to the hidden beauty in themselves.⁵ The place of their beauty is often the place of their greatest integrity. When you listen, the integrity and wholeness in others move closer together. Your presence and attention strengthen that integrity and wholeness, and helps them to hear it in themselves. It has been my experience that presence and listening are a more powerful catalyst for change than analysis, and that we can know beyond doubt things we can never fully understand.

Many years ago, when I prepared for the final session with a client, I used to review in my mind the milestones and turning points in our work together that had led to that person's healing. I would come up with a list of these, in which I played a rather central role. Carefully, I would go through my notes and document the insightful interventions I had made. But when I asked my clients themselves to talk about their own experience of healing, they would rarely come up with more than half of my list. The rest of the time, they would share things that surprised me—chance remarks and facial expressions of mine that they had interpreted in ways that evoked in them some important and liberating insight. Then, they would give me examples of how they were able to use this insight to change their lives. Nodding sagely, I would often have no recollection of the event at all! Clearly, I had been used to delivering a message of healing to them that I did not fully understand at the time.

Turning Sorrow into Wisdom

Learning from life takes time. Becoming wise usually takes a lot of time. Most of us rarely recognise life's wisdom at the time it is given. Sometimes,

⁵ James Redfield, *The Celestine Prophecy* (London: Bantam, 1994), 232: 'Of course, the first step is to keep our own energy high, then we can start the flow of energy coming into us, through us, and into the other person. The more we appreciate their wholeness, their inner beauty, the more the energy flows into them, and naturally, the more that flows into us.'

we are too distracted by something else that has caught our wandering eye, and not every gift of wisdom comes nicely wrapped. I have often received such a gift only many years after it was offered. Sometimes, I needed to receive other things first, to live through other experiences in order to be ready. Much wisdom is like a hand-me-down ... it may be too big at the time it is given.

Similarly, gaining wisdom from our sorrows takes time. The writer and physician Rachel Remen invites us to look closely at the example of the oyster as a guide to seeking wisdom from hardships:

An oyster is soft, tender, and vulnerable. Without the sanctuary of its shell, it could not survive. But oysters must open their shells in order to 'breathe' water. Sometimes while an oyster is breathing, a grain of sand will enter its shell and become a part of its life from then on. Such grains of sand cause pain, but an oyster does not alter its soft nature because of this. It does not become hard and leathery in order not to feel. It continues to entrust itself to the ocean, to open and breathe in order to live. But it does respond. Slowly and patiently, the oyster wraps the grain of sand in thin translucent layers until, over time, it creates something of great value in the place where it was most vulnerable to its pain. A pearl might be thought of as an oyster's response to its pain and suffering. But not every oyster can do this. Oysters that do are far more valuable to people than oysters that do not. Sand is a way of life for an oyster. If you are soft and tender and must live on the sandy floor of the ocean, learning to make pearls becomes a necessity if you are to survive and live well.⁶

We are all invited to grow in wisdom and learn how to integrate our sorrows. As we each do this in our own way, we slowly become a blessing to those around us and a light in our world. We will not become a 'waster of sorrows'. Perhaps the final step in the healing of our sorrows is wisdom. Perhaps no sorrow really heals completely until the wisdom of its experience has been found and appreciated. We will not return from the journey into sorrow to the same house that we left. Like the oyster, something in us has changed and the house that we return to and live in will be different as well.

Disappointment, loss and sorrow were a part of the life of Jesus. They are a part of everyone's life. Sometimes, we can put these things behind us and get on with the rest of our lives. But not everything is amenable

⁶ Rachel Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings* (New York: Riverhead, 2000), 139–140.

to this approach. Some things are too big or buried too deep within us to do this, and we will have to leave important parts of ourselves behind if we treat them in this way. This is where wisdom begins to grow in us. It begins with the suffering and sorrow that we do not avoid or rationalise or put behind us. It continues with the realisation that our loss, our sorrow, whatever it is, has become a part of us and has altered our lives so profoundly that we cannot go back to the way it was before. Just as an oyster turns a grain of sand into a pearl, something in us can transform such loss and sorrow into wisdom. This process of turning sorrow into wisdom often looks like a sorting process. First, we experience everything. Then, one by one we let things go, the anger, the blame, the sense of injustice, and finally even the pain itself, until all we have left is a deeper sense of the value of life and a greater capacity to live it. The grain of sand has become a pearl in us.

After thirty years of accompanying people as they deal with their sorrows, I would say that the experience of sorrow and the wisdom we find there will belong completely to each person in their own way. Often, it will help us to live better. Sometimes, it may help us to die better as well.

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