

## **A PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING OF SUFFERING**

by Emöke Tapolyai\*

### **Death a personal reality**

As I sit by my notes from class I wonder, what is suffering? Loss. What is death? For many it is Tom and Jerry killing each other seventy times in sixty seconds and still living. It is a reality that we do not deal with until we have to.

For me, death and suffering were always a part of life. I remember my great-grandmother who died when I was four years old. Many times I have heard how she begged God for a little girl after the five boys, and how she loved me. I remember looking up at her, her dark, long dress, fragile small body, and sometimes I even think I remember her voice. Yet what is left from her is not memory of knowledge, but of feelings. I feel how she felt for me. I do miss that.

Then, as years passed one of my grandmothers died. She is more vivid in my memory. I recall the big family gathering at her funeral, and I remember crying, hurting though not fully comprehending what was happening.

I was nineteen years old when death, fully dressed, appeared at my door. At that time I was in the United States as a political refugee and was not allowed to go back to Hungary, my home country. My grandfather, with whom I had spent all my childhood summers, died. I talked to him on the phone a day or two before his death. I remember arguing with God: "I believe in miracles! I promise I will do better! Keep him, God! Are You there? Just say You'll do whatever You can!". Oh how I begged Him, and bargained with Him. I went as far as agreeing to his death as long as I had a chance to say good bye. And when my grandfather died, I thought it was because I could not pray well, because I did not pray hard enough. I should have fasted and knelt those days through. I was guilty. I was not allowed to return to bury him, so death was even harder to believe.

Two years later I pleaded for my grandmother's life. I was twenty-one and knew how to pray better, or at least I thought so. She was my role model. She was the one who taught me to pray and praise. I remember the times in my childhood when we knelt together by the bedside and, after finishing all my requests, she would smile and say: "Praise Him now! Thank Him now!" Even now, ten years later, tears are flowing down my face. I did not pray well. I did not fast long enough. I was guilty. She was gone to praise Him face to face. I was not allowed to go back and say good-bye to her. She died alone, and we

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prayed so far away from her - alone. I started to come to realize that physical presence has such an important part in suffering and in letting go.

God did not spare us from pain. Two years later, as if it were meant to happen every other year, my 36-year-old sister died. God gave me another chance to plead for a life I loved, but I failed again. She left me, my family, and her two little babies then six and eight years old. I was guilty to the third degree.

What is my understanding on suffering? What a question! How could anyone answer it without experiencing it first? How can anyone who has already experienced it answer it without reliving it? Is there really such a thing as understanding suffering? Death does not make sense.

The only one kind of pain that does make sense is birth. There at the shadows of life and death, there where everything is distant and only struggles are left, pain makes sense. It is accompanied by the hope of a new love, a new life. That is the only form of suffering and pain that seems to have a purpose. It is not only a time of physical pain, but a time when life is at its review. Everything from the past and present is at trial in the minutes that might take a life - mine, or his, or both of ours. Still, that makes sense because of hope.

Hope? What hope is left after the ones we love are gone? Many say there is no hope. What do they know? There is no comparable hope to that of the ones who have just lost someone. They believe in miracles like no other person ever before. They hope for the resurrection of the dead and they look for that. They hope for reconciliation with the one that filed for divorce. They hope for recovery. They hope day and night. All of them do. We, my family, we all did. I did.

And when hope fails, new feelings replace it. Yes, feelings that we do not ever admit, even to ourselves, because God might punish us with a loss of another loved one for feeling this way. It takes one loss to change the image of a loving God into a punishing, rebuking unfair power. It takes loss to turn a child of God into the accused offender whose sins and deficiencies are the cause of loss in God's courtroom. False understandings, and yet so real. They go through our minds and we are almost unable to control them. Who is there to blame? We find them!

Going through the loss of a loved one is always, truly a disappointment with God. "Because those who commit their lives to God, no matter what, instinctively expect something in return" (Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988], 37). I was so self-righteous and convinced that since I lived my life to the best I could meet His standards. I deserved to be heard. Oh, how I searched for meaning, and yet never found it. Even today I do not see reason or meaning in death.

**In Him all things are new - including our understandings and feelings**

Through the grace of God I have come to realize that life was created by God and death was chosen by man. Death is the nature that is in us. It is not a punishment for something I have done or missed doing. When Christians hear such statements concerning "nature," they tend to disregard them as secular thoughts. It all depends on how deeply we read and accept the Word.

When Adam sinned, sin entered the entire human race. Adam's sin brought death, so death spread to everyone, for everyone sinned. ... So just as sin ruled over all people and brought them to death, now God's Wonderful kindness rules instead, giving us right standing with God and resulting in eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Rom. 5: 12, 21)

These words tie in with much that has been mentioned in class. "People live more by promises than by explanations" (Douglas Little, class presentation in Biblical Themes in Pastoral Counseling, Oct. 30.1997). The 'whys' can never be answered since there are things that we cannot comprehend, but we have the promise that we shall meet again because of the grace of God. It is this hope that shall never fail us and the only hope that can bring change into our lives.

And even we Christians, although we have the Holy Spirit within us as a foretaste of future glory, also groan to be released from pain and suffering. We, too, wait anxiously for that day when God will give us our full rights as his children, including the new bodies he has promised. Now that we are saved, we eagerly look forward to this freedom. For if you already have something, you don't need to hope for it. **But if we look forward to something we don't have yet, we must wait patiently and confidently. And the Holy Spirit helps us in our distress. For we don't even know what we should pray for, nor how we should pray. But the Holy Spirit prays for us with groanings that cannot be expressed in words.** (Rom. 8:23-26)

What comforting words. In times of suffering, people do not know what to feel, what to say, and how to pray. But then, the Holy Spirit will help, and God the Father understands. What a relief it is to know that I can try to pray for relief of pain, for hope and a future perspective. And trying is enough, because I don't need to know everything and I don't have to live up

to expectations of behavior and feelings. God has no expectations at this point. His love understands. His love sends us his Spirit to work within us, to pray for what we are not even aware of. Oh, what a love! What a Gift! Yet we forget this and fight to feel what we supposed to feel and act as we and others think we should act. If we could just learn to relax in his arms, to trust him and let him work within us.

I am at peace now. ... No, it would sound nice, but I am not. I never will be. I let my emotions sleep and rest, but they can be awakened any time when I let that happen. The question, “do we ever fully recover?”, is answered. No, never. Not on this earth. I still find myself at times wanting to write my grandparents a letter. Sometimes I want to send them pictures of our children. Every time something good happens, I want to share it with them. I want to talk to my sister, to whom I came so close a few months before her death. I want to share my thoughts with her. And then I realize they are gone. For how long? Time is not a factor. They left us yesterday and that was *forever ago*.

I didn't before, but now I believe, that they do see us and are with us. Or is it just another false comforter? Even if it is, it does not hurt. It soothes the pain and brings them 10% back. How ridiculous it sounds: 10% back. After the loss of a loved one, everything matters about them. Everything counts. Every detail has a meaning, a memory, and has emotion attached to it. With time, it softens, but never disappears.

As the memories are playing hide-and-seek in my heart, I come to realize the importance of the present. It often takes us by surprise. Death never creeps up on us. It enters with the entire door in its hand. It bursts into life and does not care about the sounds that it makes. So what should we living do about it? Fear? Run? Some do fear throughout life. Some become slaves of fear and run. But Jesus' words shall encourage us, “I am leaving you with a gift - peace of mind and heart. And the peace I give isn't like the peace the world gives. So don't be troubled or afraid” (John 14: 27).

It is the living that we should focus on. It is I and my relationship with the Father that should be my focus. It is my relationship with those who are still here. For “He is the God of the living, not the dead” (Mark 12:27). God, help us not to worship the dead, but to manifest your love in the living! It is them on whom we should focus. It is they who should experience the love that was given to us to give. It is easy to forget about the living, but Jesus' second greatest commandment is valid even in times of suffering “Love your neighbor” (Mark 12:31). It is a commandment that requires moving on.

### **What can I do? The counselor at the residues of death**

So what is there after death? My husband had 38-40 funerals a year

in the church where he was pastoring in Hungary. Some of those were children, some mothers, others elderly. Some suicidal, some accidental. The families came to him, talked or sat quietly. I remember at times they would sit and talk for more than an hour, sometimes close to two hours. What was there then and what is there now to offer?

The world and the church are full of false comfort. They do not know what to say and how to act, or they think that they know it so well that they say everything theological but lose the person who is suffering and ignore the emotions.

I have found with others who often came to me that all they needed was someone to be present with them. They had talked to themselves and to God so much that they needed someone else to listen and to hear. They never asked what I thought. They never asked what I would advise them at this time of their life. They just sat, cried, talked or looked out the window in silence. Those were comforting moments of silence. How wonderful it was to watch as they stood up, wiped their tears away, and said, "thank you". All I needed to do was take time out for them. Listen: that is the first and most important role of a counselor in times of suffering. Empathy is not always verbal. It is ears and eyes that listen and are not afraid to look behind the tears.

One thing that I am very strongly against are the thoughtless words and expressions, the cliches that are like oil on fire. They deepen the wounds. It is hard to experience that even those whom we trust do not understand our agony. As a counselor, I would rather say: "I don't know what to say. I'm sorry" than throw foolish blankets on their pain to cover the emotions with which I cannot deal.

I also see their need for questions. They do like to remember and they need to do so. Often my husband would ask them to talk about the deceased member of their family, and they calmed down and found comfort in memories and in sharing those memories. It was these times of discovery that helped them in their counseling and in the sermon that my husband preached at the funeral. I think it is similar to what I want to do. I will want to explore what the lost person meant to them, and how they remember him. It could provide guidelines for me as the counselor in furthering steps in the counseling process, and could help them to recognize and organize their thoughts and emotions.

The more difficult part of counseling the suffering is that which focuses on the future. People in Hungary do not believe in counseling. They want to deal with their pain on their own. At least that is what they think. However, taking a closer look at them will show their openness and their desperate need for help. They talk at their garden gates, in the market, in the stores and on the streets. They talk to anyone and everyone, as long as it does

not look “official”. Many came to me bringing goods from their garden. They said they came to share what God had given them. They seemed ready to leave, but when I offered them a chair and my time, they talked with a speed beyond limits. It is during these times, after the funeral and when the newness of death has passed, when it is not the talk of the village anymore, when they need us most. It is then when they are the loneliest. It is then when they are ready for the future. They want to go on with life, but do not know how. It is good, therefore, to have an understanding of how to advise them. At these times they are thankful to hear someone else say that they are capable of doing things. They take showers that refreshen them in hearing that they have strengths and abilities. They are like little children who eagerly wait for incentives. They want to move on, but need that first push. This cannot be done without knowledge and understanding of the person and his loss. It is then that the time spent in listening and gentle questioning brings its fruit. The information that we are not aware of, and the answers and guidelines that we are not capable of giving, will be supplemented by the Holy Spirit. That is the difference between secular and pastoral counselors. We are strengthened and guided by the greatest Counselor.

These times of comforting, exploring, and searching can develop to the final stage of counseling, which is the belief in the future. That is a long process that takes time and energy. It takes acceptance that things will never be the same, yet still life has a purpose. We are called to help them focus on God and his calling for them. As they draw closer to God, they will experience the peace that only he can give and does give. They will then be able to move from the dead to the living and live for God and those who are left here.

I recall a young woman who lost her father. For two years she struggled and struggled, and felt like she would never recover. When she finally met Christ as the Love, the Comforter, the Redeemer, she slowly came to realize that she was called to live for action. She became one of the most supportive members in our church in children’s ministries, and is still the one who holds the young mothers’ group together. There was no magic ointment involved in her recovery. It was simply and yet most complexly the experience of the closeness of God and the hearing of his call that have changed her life. The absence of her father is still there. The pain still awakens at times. But she got up and is no longer crawling at the feet of death.

As I think through this, I remember one of Jesus’ healings: Bartimeus came to Jesus, although many tried to stop him. He was blind and wanted to see. Those who suffer want to see. They come to us, because they sense Jesus.

“What do you want me to do for you?” Jesus asked.  
“Teacher,” the blind man said, “I want to see!”  
And Jesus said to him, “Go your way. Your faith has healed you.” And instantly the blind man could see! Then he followed Jesus down the road. Mark 10:51-52

This is my desire as a counselor to those who are suffering, to bring them to Jesus so they might see. See the future as a way through the times of pain. See a road that they may step on to follow Jesus, to move on, to act, and to live.