

The Grace of Compassion

Grieving is a sober and serious affair, but not always a depressing one: “It is also consolation,” says Ignatius, “when one sheds tears which move to love of the Lord, either out of sorrow for sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord” [316]. We sometimes experience this kind of sorrow when we accompany a family that has lost a loved one. In that situation, we don’t want to be anywhere else in the world. We might also experience it while grieving over genocide in Rwanda or homelessness in Chicago. Grieving over the crosses of the world (not over a broken electric toothbrush!) gathers our fragmented selves, centers and heals us. When we share the sorrow of the crucified of the earth, we are no longer alone. This, too, is part of our vocation. We were made to share each other’s burdens.

One day (while in my own faith crisis)...I stumbled across the news report of the brutal murder of a child. It was an account like so many, but especially pathetic. As I took in the tragedy, grief swept over me, body and spirit. As I abandoned myself to this grief, my scattered and anxious energies collected themselves to focus on the calamity of a tender life snuffed out. For two days I experienced, in sorrow over that murder, a time of centering. Maybe I didn’t ordinarily allow things to “get to me” like this. Maybe this time my own crisis set me up. As the tragedy of this child worked on me, I began to feel less alone and more at peace. The bittersweet experience opened a new stage in my journey, driving home to me what is really important in life and where the center of gravity of the universe lies. It led me, slowly to a new vision and sense of purpose. It taught me that I could trust that kind of consolation to lead into the light.

Suffering dehumanizes those who inflict it. But it need not dehumanize all who endure it or those who let it move them. Just as our joy is incomplete until we share it with others, suffering is more tolerable when we bear each other’s burdens. Although that doesn’t take away the pain, it helps. Above all, it generates hope and love in those who share others’ suffering and in those who find their suffering is shared by others who care.

The Call to Discernment in Troubled Times by Dean Brackley, 174-175