

Grief Journal

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*Grief from parental attachment:*

I've recently been talking with my counselor about attachment styles and how they are learned from an incredibly early age but shape much of the rest of our lives. It's been interesting how this one, simple tool has opened up a window into the world of my childhood that I'd never noticed before. I've taken a lot of personality/strengths/motivations tests and, to my surprise, a lot of my results have tended to be ones that are common for people who grew up with trauma. For a long time, I was confused by that because I grew up in a Christian household with parents that I dearly love and enjoy. I would classify my childhood as "good" one and my life as relatively privileged. So, how could I have a personality or motives similar to those forged out of trauma? Attachment styles have begun to answer this question for me.

My family has an odd origin story. My mom was engaged to a guy who was tragically killed while helping a friend. My dad was a close friend of the man who was killed and my parents met through the friend group of this man. They began dating shortly after his death and their relationship was built on a mutual sadness that was never expressed or talked about. Without going into the stories of my parents, my mom has always lived as a person who was so consumed by her own inner struggles and suffering that, most of the time, she didn't have a lot extra emotional energy for anyone else. My dad, on the other hand, has no capacity for emotions and functions solely out of the logical part of his brain. During my earliest years, I was cared for and raised mainly by my dad because my mom was obsessively committed to her job and rarely home.

As I've opened up this new view on my childhood, I see a little girl whose heart was rarely seen. My parents knew what I liked to do, what my favorite food was, and what I physically needed for life, but they didn't know what fears were causing me deep anxiety, what sins I was wrestling with, or how alone I felt. I remember specific moments in my childhood where I longed to be known but didn't know if that was something a person ever got. I remember being crippled with fears and anxieties but having no words to express them, no one who cared to hear about them, and no one who wanted to help me figure it all out. Even at three years old, I remember feeling like the care and protection of my little sister was on me because if no one was there for me then no one was there for her either and I needed to step up to the plate. The drive to control and protect has been embedded in me way back when all I should have been thinking about was what imaginary game I wanted to play and which stuffed animal was my best friend (and likely even before that). As a parent now, I wonder if my parents saw signs of this inner life and need in me and chose not to engage or if their own stories and upbringings made them totally oblivious to my deep longing for connection. I have a hard time placing blame on my parents when I see them as products (or even victims) of their own upbringings that was likely even harder and lonelier than mine.

I see so much of myself in my three-year-old son and this has been a grace from God to help me process my upbringing. He has such a tender and sensitive heart and would always choose to be physically connected to me in some way if can. He has a lot of fears and needs a lot of reassurance from me but when I steward his heart well, he opens up to be the most caring and compassionate kid I know! I'm sure I was like him as a kid—needing a little more attention and TLC from my parents than most. Probably also a bit clingier and afraid. But, the heart underneath that is so beautiful! I see how my parents interact with my son and my heart breaks

both for him and for little Veronica. The deep desires and need for connection is not seen or engaged. Logic rules and if there isn't a physical need present than you're left to yourself to calm down or process alone. Tears and tantrums are met with demands or totally ignored. There is no pursuit of understanding what drives his behavior only the parental instinct to control it. There is always time for fun and learning, but never time for heart level conversation or questions.

To be honest, I sometimes still struggle to see the "sadness" in my story of mine. I know so many people with much more tragic upbringings. I work with refugees who have faced ten lifetimes worth of tragedy in a handful of years and know my story is nothing compared to theirs. But when I look at my son and see his fragile heart and imagine turning a blind eye or hardened heart to it, I cry. I hate picturing him alone in his room gripped with bedtime anxiety trying to wrestle how to control the emotions raging in him. I hate imagining him feeling deep compassion and worry about a friend in need and having no one to talk it through with. I hate imagining him hearing people talk about how he is shy and sensitive as if it were a negative thing and not hearing any adult step in to defend him or call out the good in him. And that's what happened to me. That's the trauma that I faced that is so subtle and so seemingly harmless but has caused me to have avoidant attachment—meaning I don't make friends well, or let my husband in, or share authentically in small group. It makes me anxious and feel alone and like I have nobody who understands me. It makes me look at group of friends and assume I could never have that, I could never be accepted or loved like that—something is different and wrong about me.

But, thank God who has given me friends who have made safe places for me to learn to attach healthier. Friends like Liz Potter who taught me that there is beauty in life besides just accomplishing tasks and that relationships can be meaningful and life-giving. Friends like Patti Thomas who taught me to value my emotions and sit with them to see what God might reveal to

me through them. Friends like Bekka Morgan who showed me that I can share even the worst parts of myself and still be accepted. Friends like my husband Craig Torgerson who has proven over and over again that I can fail in loving and still be loved. God is changing me and because of that I am a better friend, mother, and wife. I am so thankful that our stories don't limit who we can become and that God is a God who wants to see us healed. But, I still need so much more healing. Lord, come and heal this hurting child. Show me the safety of a Good Father. Teach me to connect and attach to others the way you meant me to. Help me to love and value my relationships as Jesus did. Grow me to be better parents than mine were.

*Grief from my first romantic relationship:*

My freshman year of high school started off with a senior girl on my cross country team telling me that her sophomore brother liked me and wanted to go homecoming with me. I had obviously had crushes on boys before but had never experienced the world of dating and guys and girls actually interacting with each other. This boy who liked me, Matt, was someone I had never had feelings for before but the second I heard that he liked me I instantly felt an attraction back—probably something to do with my lack of intimate connection with my parents and a desperation to be seen.

Well, my parents told me I couldn't go to the dance or date anyone so on and off for the next three years we flirted with each other while he dated other girls and my desire to be with him grew. Finally, my senior year, we went on a date and ended up head-over-heels in love. It was a relationship that present-day, adult Veronica rolls her eyes and shakes her head at. One full of misplaced, young love. Matt did not check any of the boxes of what I hoped for in a future spouse but my heart was totally and completely caught up in being seen and being pursued. I

loved how it felt and therefore I loved Matt. He bought me flower for no reason, he drove back from college every weekend just to see me, he was always there to listen to me and talk with me and although there were MAJOR boxes he didn't check, my heart didn't care. It just wanted to be loved. After two years of this intoxicating relationship and a mega-internal war between following my heart or following my mind, God finally strengthened me with courage through His Spirit and the conviction of His word to end the relationship.

I felt like the light had gone out of my life and I spent the next few weeks totally alone. But God blessed me with amazing new friends to walk together on this new path of following Jesus and since then my life has been one of growth in Jesus and obedience to Him. I would never change the decision to break up with Matt or follow Jesus—if I did, I wouldn't be married to my husband who I love deeply, have my amazing two kids, or be filled with the Spirit and doing His ministry work! But yet, there are periods in my life when I can't stop thinking about what it felt like to be a highschooler, head-over-heels in love with Matt. Mornings when I wake up after having a dream of holding Matt's hand. I feel ashamed about these thoughts and feelings because my husband is so much more godly, so much purer, so much more of what I want for the father of my children and I love him so much. But I grieve for the high-school Veronica that had to say no to what her heart wanted. That had to say no to the first person who ever pursued her heart. I grieve for the girl who finally felt seen, like her heart was known, and had to give it all up. I grieve both that I allowed there to be a connection so strong between Matt and I and that that connection had to be severed.

I wish my younger self could have known what goodness the Lord had in store for her future and that a much more real and unwavering love would come, but she didn't. I remember telling my mom after the breakup that I was afraid I would never feel love like that again and she

logically responded, “you might not.” I wish that Veronica knew that she would and that the heartache and loneliness and abandonment that she felt for a time would all be worth it because God would give her so much more than she gave up.