

Grief Paper

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7 Significant Losses

When considering the significant losses of my life, I have not experienced any significant deaths yet, but some of my most painful losses were losses of connections and ideals. I recounted the losses where my pain manifested as psychosomatic symptoms. While I was going through these experiences, I didn't feel the intensity of the emotions, but my body suffered.

Loss #1

At the end of my sophomore year of college, I decided to transfer from a small, private women's college (Smith College) to a public, state university (Rutgers University). Smith College did not provide enough financial aid, so I felt that the reasonable thing to do would be to transfer to a public school, with significantly lower tuition costs. I hesitated transferring schools because I did not want to disappoint my parents, especially my mom, and I also did not want to lose the new friends I made. During that summer, I wrestled with that decision and found myself switching back and forth between returning to Smith or transferring to Rutgers. In July, I applied to Rutgers at the spur of the moment, received an acceptance letter two weeks later, and finally made the decision to enroll for the fall in mid-August. Everything happened so quickly, and I felt that God answered my prayer. But I didn't tell my parents about my enrollment. I shared the news with my mom three days before move-in day. She was so angry with me for leaving a "prestigious school," and she didn't know how she could face her friends, so she stopped talking to me for several months.

Since I transferred to a state school, I used to go home every weekend. My mom would ignore me, and act like I wasn't even in the room. I experienced versions of her behavior growing up, but this experience still gives me a twinge of pain in my gut. I was surprised that I did not cry much during this first year at Rutgers, but I had some issues with sleep and health. I

slept a lot and ended up missing a lot of classes. I remember I used to get sleep paralysis at least once a week in the beginning. I kept falling asleep with my contacts on because I was so tired, and I developed an ulcer on my cornea. I kept having graphic nightmares about miscarriages and bleeding out. I gained extra weight, even though I ate my usual portions, maybe even less. I think what was most concerning was that I did not have my period for a full year.

I didn't realize how difficult this transition was for me until years later during an inner healing session. I lost connection with my mom because she felt ashamed and embarrassed that I transferred because of finances. I missed my friends from Boston who made me feel like I could be myself. For half a year, I felt sad, but couldn't cry. I remember the first time I cried about all this was when my mom started talking to me again. She texted me saying that she was sorry. It was still awkward between us for a few months, but things started to change after that. I started to leave my apartment to meet with people and make some new friends. By the following August, my period came back, and I started to feel more adjusted at Rutgers.

Loss #2

My second year of seminary was one of the most tumultuous years of my life. At the start of the school year, the youth pastor left abruptly for YWAM. The children's pastor I was interning filled in for the youth pastor position, and he put me in charge of the children's ministry. In the middle of the same school year, we lost our lead pastor. I was interning at a church plant of a megachurch in South Korea, so they had a system where the lead pastors rotated every 3 years. The church I was interning at wanted to become an independent church, but in order to become independent, we needed to instate a lead pastor, or vote in the current lead pastor. The church had some gripes about the lead pastor, and they rallied members who no longer attended the church to come and vote against him. I remember feeling so confused about

why everyone was so excited to come and vote, and saw some faces I had never seen before. At the end of the Sunday, we found out that we were short of 6 votes in order for our current lead pastor to become the official lead pastor.

During the next few months, we began to hear about a church starting down the street from us with the lead pastor who stepped down. Families started leaving our church. Some parents let us know that they were planning to leave to join that church plant, and other parents left quietly. We regularly had 70-75 children in the elementary group, but the numbers decreased to 45-50 over the span of 3 months. The children shed many tears and said their farewells, and they talked among themselves about who would or wouldn't show up the next Sunday. It was hard to watch them lose their friends. Eventually, my grades suffered and I made the difficult decision to step down from my role, too. I'll never forget when I made the announcement and the silence from the kids. One of the kids said, "Not you..." It broke my heart.

Throughout the entire school year, I kept having panic attacks. I lost drastic weight and hair. My friends were concerned for me. During the last month of my time at this church, I cried a lot. Sometimes, I cried so hard I would vomit or gag. My chest had this sharp pain that I couldn't describe to my friends. It was a tough year.

Loss #3

A few months later, during the same year I stepped down from children's ministry, my dad was hospitalized. He lost drastic amounts of weight and he kept vomiting. He also lost his sense of balance, and half of his body fell into gradual paralysis. The doctors found a mass on his brain stem. The neurosurgeon said that the mass was in a dangerous location, so we did not have the option for biopsy. From the images, it looked like a light brushstroke, so he tentatively concluded that it is highly unlikely that the mass is not cancerous, but they would continue to

monitor it. For the first time in my life, I considered what would happen if my dad were to pass. I remember he drafted his will, and jumped to the worst case scenario because of the uncertainty of his prognosis. I think what was so difficult about this situation was I still had a terrible relationship with my dad. My dad had been an unreliable figure in my life, so I took the responsibility to care for my family, show up when asked, and help out with my siblings. I always felt like I needed to parent my parents. It felt tremendously unfair, but I also felt relieved because I would have one less person to worry about.

In the midst of uncertainty, I felt like my dad was here, but he could be gone at any moment. It was a strange situation. One time, while he was hospitalized, the door to his was slightly open, and I overheard my mom weeping, telling my dad that if he dies, she's going to follow him and die too. I had a tough relationship with my mom too because I felt like she didn't have a good handle on her emotions, but that conversation broke me. I felt like I didn't have parents growing up, and God forbid if both of them were gone, it would reinforce everything I believed in growing up - that I don't matter to my parents. As my dad went through his losses of health, I lost the ideal of a father figure in my life, which I defined as a dependable person. I lost the healthy dad that I hoped to have.

Loss #4

During my last semester of seminary, a few months after my dad's hospitalization, I started having nightmares. I don't remember what triggered the dreams, but I kept having the same dream of a night I blocked from my memory when I was a child. I was around 6 or 7 years old, and my parents left me with a high school student to babysit me. I don't remember the relationship, but he was a family friend of my cousin. I remember there was a thunderstorm and I was scared. For some reason, the apartment was dark, but I went into the bedroom to see what

my babysitter was doing. He forced me to touch his genitals and lie down with him. I rarely talk about this encounter. I didn't know it was sexual abuse until a few years ago because I shared with a mentor and she named what it was. Since that last semester of seminary until now, I had several waves of counseling and inner healing sessions. It still feels uncomfortable to think about because I still don't know why my parents left me there by myself.

Loss #5

I attended seminary in Massachusetts, and I loved my time in Boston. I was working as a preschool teacher at the time, but I started to notice a longing to do children's ministry again. The church I attended (at the time) did not have a children's ministry because it consisted mainly of college students and young adults who chose to stay after graduating from their undergraduate studies. I lived in a house with church friends and we bonded immediately. My friend from seminary reached out to me about a children's director role in Philadelphia, and after speaking with my mentors and my friends, they encouraged me to take on the role. In faith, I packed up all my things and moved down to Pennsylvania.

This time, the sadness hit me immediately. I missed my friends so much. When I arrived in PA, it was not what I expected at all. I had a difficult time adjusting to the church housing provided because it was infested with mice. It was a three-story row home and I lived there alone. I was also expected to maintain the house. I had a difficult time adjusting to my neighborhood because I would hear gunshots from time to time. I consider myself to be pretty adaptable, but the church culture and dynamics came as a shock to me. The pastor did not support women leadership, but some church members believed in ordaining women pastors. I had a difficult time working with the pastoral staff as the lone woman on the team. I was hired as the children's director, but there were already two directors overseeing the children's ministry. I

ended up becoming the college pastor because the college pastor (my friend who invited me to come) left abruptly a couple months after I started my role.

Loss #6

I started my first full-time ministry role in May 2017 and it ended abruptly in August 2019. We came back from a leadership conference in California, and I received an email from the lead pastor to meet the following Monday. I met with him and the associate pastor. He asked me how things for college ministry were going. I shared with him honestly that it was difficult in the beginning, but I'm looking forward to this school year because the students I met in their sophomore year were now going to be seniors. I had great rapport with the college students. We had a lot of inside jokes, as well as deep conversations. We went from 10 students to 30 students who consistently attended Sunday services. The lead pastor and other church members noticed the changes happening in our college students, and God gave me an opportunity to be a part of what He wanted to do for them.

Without much transition, he stated that he was letting me go. The church did not have a leadership team of elders or deacons, so he made this decision on his own. He also did not discuss with the associate pastor separately, so the news came as a shock to him as well. The reasons he gave were vague, but he said that I wasn't a good fit at their church, and he referred to how he isn't good at working with women. He noticed that I looked shocked and he told me to go home to process. Before I left, he gave me a rough idea of how he would announce the news to the rest of the church, but that my termination was effective immediately.

A couple weeks later, he sent me an email of the tentative announcement. He wrote that I decided to step down from my position because I felt that it wasn't a fit and wanted to pursue another career. The environment I served in was toxic. I spent the last two years in therapy to

work through the church trauma, the two years of gaslighting, misogyny, and discrimination. A month after I was let go, my chest remained in a perpetual state of tightness. I had difficulty breathing. One day, I was at home alone, watching a Christine Caine sermon, and then I keeled over onto the floor from excruciating pain in my chest and arm. I thought I was going to die that day and nobody would find me because I was removed from the church community, and I didn't know anyone else in Philly outside of this church. It was a rude awakening for me to surround myself with community and trusted people, so I stayed in Philly until the end of 2019 and moved back home to NJ at the start of 2020.

Loss #7

During the pandemic lockdown, I lived at home with my parents and brothers. My sister moved to LA years ago, but it was the first time in years that my parents had all of us at home. I started having nightmares, breathing issues, and migraines during this time. I thought I had a good handle on how I felt about my time in Philly, so I joined the pastoral staff at my home church as one of the children's pastors. My lead pastors and the Session were aware of my background, but they still chose to hire me to fill this role. I had random triggers from different interactions and harmless comments by staff members, but because we were online, I had the safety of my room to distance myself from becoming overwhelmed.

More than the transition in this role, I had to face the reality of the painful experience growing up with my parents. I reacted strongly against their constant nagging and requests, and we fought a lot. As I prayed through some of the interactions, I realized that my parents never had the emotional maturity to parent their children. It wasn't until I started therapy that I felt that I needed to let go of whatever ideals I had of them to be my parents. It was really sad. I realized that my mom will never be the mom I wanted, needed, or hoped for. She is a critical mom, and I

can't expect her to change, especially if she is unaware and unwilling to. I shared with her and my dad that I felt like they treated me unfairly in comparison to my siblings. I confessed to them the tremendous pressure I felt from them and I told them that I can't meet their expectations. They didn't understand where I was coming from, nor did they apologize. But I'm proud of myself for speaking to them directly about my family experience.

Coping Strategies

My primary coping strategy is becoming very busy and overcommitted to doing. Some tasks are unnecessary, but I keep busy. I also tend to cry in secret, especially in my car, or I would suppress my feelings and the tears would explode randomly in unexpected public spaces. If I didn't want to cry but needed to cry, I would watch a sad movie, or a melodramatic Korean drama to give myself a reason to cry. I also resorted to binge-watching TV shows and movies and scrolling mindlessly through social media, as a way to numb my pain. When I'm stressed, I restrict eating, but when I'm sad, I lose my appetite. The negative emotions show in somatic symptoms for me.

When I was grieving over the proximity I lost with my friends, transferring to a new school, I made a lot of promises, both to myself and to my friends, to return back to Massachusetts, either to transfer back or to work there after graduation. I actually enjoyed my time at Rutgers and wasn't planning to go back to MA for seminary, but God had other plans for me. I also journal a lot when I'm stressed and feeling sad - I have so many logs of my time in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania. During seminary, I grew in my prayer life and I began to write out my prayers to God. I still use this coping mechanism when I'm going through hard times.

Family of Origin and Ethnicity Factors

My parents don't like showing weakness. If I cried in public, whether in a supermarket as a child, or at a grandparent's funeral, the repeated message was, "Don't cry, stop crying." Crying is seen as weak and laughable. My mom used to laugh at me and tell me to go look in the mirror whenever I cried because I look funny. As an adult, I brought it up to her to clear it up and told her how hurtful it was. Crying gave permission to my parents to lose respect for me. They did not treat my siblings the same way when they cried. But with me, my tears were laughable and insignificant. Last semester, I learned through the genogram project that my family does not process shame and embarrassment in a healthy way. Ethnically, I am Korean, but culturally I identify both as Korean, so I'm familiar with these tendencies, but as an American, I learned that crying happens and it's okay.

Growing up, my parents fought all the time. My siblings and I have talked about this, and we share the similar beliefs that we are not allowed to express any negative emotions with our parents. We have to deal with it on our own and not bother our parents, which led us to lean on each other. We also resort to numbing practices, and we've seen that with our dad and his addiction to cigarettes. All four of us have some levels of compulsivity. I would say that my sister and I are aware of this tendency in us, while my brothers are aware, but have become addicted to vaping and other recreational drugs.

Strengths and Deficits in Personal Mourning

When I consider my mourning process, I commend myself for crying things out. I tend to suppress when I feel negative emotions, but I relied on my journal to vent my feelings out. I still hesitate to talk it out with friends, but after experiences in therapy sessions, I have become more

open to sharing my processes out loud. Growing up, I did not know about counseling and therapy, but in my 20s, I learned more about the resources, so I have sought out help when things got bad. After my time in Philly, I developed some social anxiety and became fearful of going to grocery stores, not because of Covid-19, but because I was simply afraid of people and their perceptions. I wish I could be more proactive about coming out from numbing and withdrawing socially. When I am sad, I withdraw into my own space. I also have delayed reactions - it's like I procrastinate on processing my feelings. I don't readily process emotions, or admit hurt feelings. Some people are stubborn about being right, but I'm so stubborn about not being hurt. I used to tell myself that I'm invincible and highly tolerant of pain, but I'm human. Pain is a natural part of human experience.

Final Thoughts

At the start of this course, I felt disconnected with grief and it felt unfamiliar and uncomfortable. But I realize that it is unfamiliar and uncomfortable for many. Some of the losses we experience in life are often unexpected. It takes some time for it to register, it takes time to adjust to the changes caused by the loss, and it takes time to go through the process of mourning. Ambiguous loss spoke volumes into the subtle, vague things we lose, like connections, ideals, and even routines. It expanded the meaning of loss for me that losses aren't just the physical deaths we encounter in life, but the deaths that can happen inside of us, our circumstances, and the hopes and dreams. It justified a person's need to grieve and process their loss. Lastly, I learned that losses can be interrelated and intertwined with other people's losses. One person's loss can impact me too, even if I am a bystander. Even though it is painful, grief and loss develop our humanity to become people who are relatable and share connections with.

Reference

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