

Seven Significant Losses

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7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.” Philippians 3:7-10.

These are the wise words of Apostle Paul. ζῆμια (Zemia), or damage/loss/detriment, is the Greek word that Paul uses twice in the New Testament: once in Acts 27 and once in Philippians 3. Paul recounts his entire life as loss for the sake of simply knowing Jesus Christ. But loss is not understood in the traditional sense; loss is good, loss is valuable, loss is what led him to know the surpassing value of Jesus Christ. Gaining Christ comes at a cost; it comes at the loss of this world. And Paul writes this, not while he is in heaven, but while he is still on earth, experiencing the loss of the world. Yet he writes such a large portion of the New Testament because he continually encourages the churches to accept the righteousness that God gives and becomes like him in his death. Paul does not shy away from the topic of death but if anything, he steers us toward death. For in death, we experience a resurrection through Jesus Christ. Hence loss is a natural part of this world; not just through the lens of biological death but through the loss of the things, relationships, places, and people of the world.

With that in mind, I firmly hold truth to that definition of loss and the purpose of loss as Paul defines. It is also echoed in modern psychology. “We define loss broadly to include death losses as well as non death losses of jobs, relationships, capacities, and even the status quo. By

definition, any new state of being involves a break with—a loss of—the past. All change, for better or worse, involves loss. Normal maturational changes represent growth that is often celebrated in ritual, but we should not ignore the loss with which it is joined.” (McCoyd 2018).

Loss is not confined to death, which is in itself its own special kind of loss that has a seeming more permanence. Rather loss exists in the absence of whatever homeostasis there was. Essentially, any change in a season of life will undoubtedly lead to loss. I have had many changes in my life that led to various seasons of loss. My seven losses are not in any order of impact or devastation, or even in chronological order. But there were certainly various coping strategies I used to manage the pain of these losses. Not all were effective or even prescribed but it was a part of my journey in healing and adapting. And undoubtedly, there were family-of-origin and ethnicity factors that influenced how I understood, denied, and eventually processed grief. Through such factors, I recognized my own strengths and deficits in the mourning process. And undoubtedly, there are things I learned through this course that help me understand why grief therapy is essential in healing from these moments in life.

One of my first losses was a loss of shelter. In 8th grade, my father was going through a season of career transition where he would be forgoing a corporate job for the pursuit of ministry. Our family was never financially well-off to begin with but in that summer going into 8th grade, our family was moving again for the fourth time in 6 years. But this time, there was no specific place we were moving to; all I knew was that we were moving out of our house in Valley Stream, NY. We packed all of our belongings and moved them into a storage facility but unlike past moves, we didn't go straight to a new place. So my parents allowed me to sleep over at a friend's place for two weeks. I hadn't known at that time that this was because we still didn't have a place to live permanently; all I had thought was that I got to sleep over at my friend's

house longer than the usual sleepover. Eventually, we even stayed with a friend of my dad's for a week. That was when I knew that we were no longer in a stable housing situation. As a kid, you never really recognize the financial status of your family. But this was a loss of both shelter and innocence/naivete. I always assumed that the adults in my life would put a roof over my head and that would never be in question. But once we temporarily stayed in the living room of my parent's friend, I recognized that this was no longer a given. This loss was the first of many realizations that my parents did not have a strong financial foundation. In addition, I associated the loss of a home with my dad's start in ministry, forging the connection that ministry = instability. At that time, I was still too young to know how to cope in a healthy way. So I managed this instability by distracting myself with as much time with friends and staying over different friends' houses. I wouldn't ask my parents when we were going to move into the new house because I didn't want to hear an answer of uncertainty. So within my power, I knew I could arrange as many sleepovers with friends as possible in an effort to avoid the reality that we had housing instability. There were also ethnicity and cultural differences that made it more difficult for me to face my loss of shelter because as a child in a Korean household, I did not have the authority or position to speak in a way that would embarrass or question the leadership of the household. With that cultural barrier, it made me more avoidant to the issue of grief I had during this stage of development. I had no time to mourn the loss of shelter because I imagined that it was harder on my parents trying to figure out our living arrangements. Hence I thought that if I wasn't around them as much during this time of homelessness, they would worry less about me and have more time to focus on finding a new living arrangement for us.

My second loss is deeply tied to my first loss; it was the loss of church and community. As my father was now in the process of graduating seminary, he was ready to be called and lead

a church. That was one of the main reasons why my family moved from New York to New Jersey. Soon after graduating, he received a call to lead a church in Central New Jersey. At that time, all I knew was living in Long Island. And the only church I knew was the one we had attended for the past 9 years. My friends from church were the closest group of friends I had. Every Sunday we would have bible study, fool around during service time, play basketball, go to the store and buy candy, and simply build countless memories together. When my dad told the family that we would soon be leaving our home church in New York, that was almost more of a devastating shock than moving out of our house. Leaving New York I knew would eventually mean that I would lose my friends from church. Church was where I felt truly at home because I had friends that understood my Asian-American experience of growing up as one of the only Asian kids in a predominantly white neighborhood. When I was at my Korean church, it was more than just a place of worship; it was a place to feel culturally connected and understood. And my father's new church was a small church with very few kids my age. Thus this was a loss of my community and friend group. I did not cope with this well, at all. Surprisingly enough, I coped by simply not attending my dad's church on a consistent basis for the first two years. At the young age of 14 and 15, I would take an hour-long bus ride from NJ to Port Authority, walk down 10 blocks to Penn Station, and then take a 45 minute train on the Long Island Railroad every Sunday just so that I would remain connected to my church friends. This was in an effort to ignore the reality that we had officially moved to New Jersey and then moved to a different church. In regard to ethnicity issues, this was very counter cultural. Typically pastors' kids would always go to their parents' church, especially if they were still living at home. But my dad would allow me to go to my home church in Long Island, and even give me the money for the public transportation to go to the church. So even though I had apprehension about speaking to

my dad about our living arrangements, I was a rebellious pastor's kid and told my dad that I would not attend his church. I didn't mourn the loss of my home church well because I did it without the support and communication with my parents. I felt that since I lost so much, both shelter and church, I at least had the right to choose where I would go for church. This created a divide in my family for the two years I chose to make the long commute and attend the home church. I only eventually processed the loss of the church once I chose to go to my dad's church in my Junior year of High School. At that point, I was resentful towards my parents for making us move to New Jersey. Yet after some time, I found a new community amongst friends in my high school and did not miss the community of church as much.

My third loss could be characterized as less of loss and more of as a realization. In my senior year of high school, I applied to various colleges across the country. My top choice school that I was accepted into was New York University. I knew how much NYU costs so I figured I would need much financial aid to attend. As we were filling out the FAFSA, I recognized two things; 1) I learned that our family was well within the poverty line and 2) I learned that we did not have legal immigration status in the U.S. When my dad and I were putting the total gross income for our family, I had no idea that we had such little income. Even though it was just us two filling out the application, there was an inward reaction and feeling of shame and embarrassment. I thought to myself, "How could we make so little and survive?" But the bigger realization was that we did not have legal immigration status. This meant that we overstayed our initial visa into the country and while we applied for permanent residency, we had yet to receive it. Thus we were in a state of limbo, which meant I did not qualify for any kind of federal or state aid. I knew we weren't citizens but I did not know that we had an illegal status of being in the country. This was a loss where I could no longer hold back my tongue but actually speak

something critical towards my parents. As we were filling out the FAFSA, in my immature anger, I said the words that still haunt me to this day, “How could you be so irresponsible with our finances and our status? How could you be so irresponsible with our household?” I said this because I worked hard to get into a good school but realized I could not even have a chance of attending because of both finances and immigration status. It was also an accumulation of the previous two losses. I equated all of the losses with my father’s choice of going into ministry, which is one of the reasons why I delayed my calling into ministry for so long. I coped with this loss by blaming my parents for being irresponsible and giving myself a pity party. I thought I was the only one suffering through this time, when I had no idea of how much hurt my parents experienced as their son said these harmful words that they still remember to this day. In regard to family of origin, this was a unique circumstance because my brothers experienced the same thing yet they persevered and graduated college. However, for them, my father was still working a corporate job and was hence able to help them with their finances. For me, my father is now a minister and thus had less means to actually finance my education. This change in life circumstance bred resentment towards my father as well as my brothers for being able to live a life that I didn’t get to have. I mourned this loss by continuing to pity myself and would distance myself from my parents. It was not a healthy way to cope because I knew that I couldn’t go to college without my parents’ support but in my anger, I chose to distance myself from them, as well as not acknowledge the loss of peace in my life.

The fourth loss was truly the loss of innocence in regard to believing my parents were adults who always made right choices. After I graduated college, I moved back home to prepare for law school. And in the middle of one of my work days at a law firm, I received a call from my dad that my mom was arrested for grand larceny and at a local police station. When he told

me, I simply couldn't process what was happening. It didn't make sense at all. But in the moment, I knew I had to act because my dad was actually away and traveling. So I went to my house, got some bail money, and went over to the police station. As I began to make my way around the police station, I saw my mother handcuffed. When she saw me, she began weeping and wailing and kept saying how sorry she was. And while I was confused, angry, and upset, I simply had to remain calm, comfort my mom, and deal with the matter of getting my mom out of police custody. That was the day I felt like I no longer was a kid but a fellow adult in the household, having to deal with the mess-ups of my parents. In my mourning, I would wonder why my mom chose to shoplift \$1000s worth of clothes. I would wonder why my dad wasn't there to handle this matter and I had to pick up my mother from the police station. I would wonder why our family continually went through traumatic moments like this that never gave me stability. I had no time to use a coping strategy because at this point and time, I had to be the rock of the family. I was the one who had to contact a lawyer and figure out the legal defense for my mom. I was the one who had to figure out the legal implications of her being arrested while not having immigration status. There was no time to cope. There was only time for action. Hence I suppressed all of my anxiety and my anger. In regard to ethnicity influences, I am not sure if this happens in Asian households but one thing I do know is that in many immigrant families, the children are often the ones who have to handle legal and business matters because of their ability to speak English and know the American culture and customs. I hated that I was the one who had to deal with this matter. In regard to my mourning strengths and deficits, I saw this as one of the darkest seasons of my life where I grew an incredible amount of bitterness towards every member of my family. I was even bitter at my two older brothers who lived far away from us and

thus were not present to help deal with our parents' issues. My grief was the loss of innocence but also in the loss of faith I had in my family members.

My fifth loss was a breakup with a longtime girlfriend from college. She was the person I had dated the longest ever in my life (four and a half years). We went through so many ups and downs in our relationships and even broke up three times in between the relationship. But what I appreciated about her the most was that she and I challenged each other to grow. Ultimately, we broke up over a phone call. And while I certainly was sad that we broke up (she also initiated the break-up), I knew it was for the best because at that time in our lives, we weren't the right people for each other. My mourning over that loss of relationship is still going on to this day. It's not because I miss her but because I felt like I didn't have a proper way of saying goodbye to a person who was so significant in the formative years of my life in college. She was more than just a girlfriend; she was the person who helped me grow and mature. But without physically seeing each other for over a decade, it still feels unfinished. The immediate mourning process was filled with looking at old photographs, reading old messages and letters, and reminiscing about how good we once were and often forgetting how rough the relationship was. It was also filled with meeting a lot of friends to help me process the breakup and the new season of my life where I was in a reality without this person. In these ways, I was coping the best way I knew how but in reality, time was the thing that helped heal me the most. The strength of grieving this loss was in how I chose to be vulnerable with friends about how I was doing. They didn't speak empty words of encouragement but helped me gain perspective on what I can do moving forward in a future relationship. By not denying myself the time to process the feelings of loss, I was able to really listen to my own heart and move on from that time.

My sixth loss was when my aunt passed away from breast cancer. This happened after graduating college and I was actually at my college girlfriend's house when I heard the immediate news that my aunt had just passed away. My aunt had been struggling with breast cancer for some time and she was in hospice. When I received that call, I took a 1.5 hour drive from Connecticut to Memorial Sloan Kettering Hospital and was there to meet my mom who was grieving the loss of her oldest sister. My aunt was the only other family member who lived in the United States. My aunt had helped raise my brothers and me during times when my parents were in Korea. My aunt spoiled us with Air Jordans and basketball jerseys when my parents didn't have the means to buy us such things. My aunt showed us love and generosity, even up until her death bed. In her will, my aunt gave me the money to pay off the rest of my tuition for seminary. My aunt was far more than someone who gave us money or spoiled us with gifts; she showed what it means to love through presence and sacrifice. The hard part about coping through this loss was that my entire family was coping. My mom had the hardest time because she was so close to her sister. My oldest brother had a hard time because he was essentially raised by my aunt but he wasn't able to be at her funeral as he was in the Korean army at the time. And my cousin, my aunt's only daughter, was putting together all of the funeral arrangements and didn't have much time to process the grief and loss. I felt that I didn't have the right to grieve because everyone else was having a hard time. I did need to cope but I would share it with my girlfriend and other friends who were there for me. Sharing about my feelings about the loss was what helped me cope the most. In regard to ethnicity, Korean funerals are often filled with wailing and very emotional distraught family members. This was no different as my aunt's ex-husband showed up out of the blue and began weeping at her casket. In a twisted response, my cousin and I were laughing at the ex-husband because he was the one who

abandoned my aunt during the chemo treatment and was partially to blame for her second flare up of cancer because he always smoked around her. We knew he was playing the role of grieving ex-husband but in reality, he was a charlatan who simply wanted to look the part of a grieving widow. What was a strength about our mourning process was that we grieved as a family. We shared about all of the good times that we had with my aunt and we celebrated her life. We also visit her grave yearly to honor her life.

My final loss is actually at a current stage of my life. And it is the loss of my employment at a non-profit organization. I resigned from my job and am finishing 7.5 years of serving at this amazing ministry. This is a bittersweet loss because I am losing such significant relationships with all of the adult staff, as well as the teens in our program. I have learned so much on how to do community-based ministry and how to love beyond my comfort zones within culture. But it is also sweet to know that I am living out my calling in becoming a counselor and pastor. I am grieving this through having honest conversations with the key staff members that have shaped my time at New City Kids. I am sharing about what I will miss most and how I wish only the best for all of them. They have also been so generous in their words of encouragement in my journey. The strengths in this process is that I have been able to give myself at least a month to say goodbyes with all of the staff members. I have not shied away from conversations that need to be had. I have been honest about my assessments of the culture that need to be addressed within the company. And people have shared with me how they have been impacted, for the better and worse, through my time. It wasn't easy having these conversations but by having them, I am able to close this chapter of this season in my life.

Through these seven losses, as well as other losses in my life, I have learned various things about grief and grief therapy. First, I have learned the various tasks to mourning. I used to

assume that it was all one step but understanding it through four different tasks has definitely helped to understand the significance of each step. The first task is to accept the reality of the loss. “Part of the acceptance of this reality is coming to believe that reunion is impossible, at least in this life.” (Worden 2018) This seems like a given but in all of my losses, I now have learned what it means to begin the mourning process and it is to first accept the reality of the loss. When it came to the loss of the relationship with a long time girlfriend, I had to throw out the old pictures and letters and simply accept the fact that this is no longer our reality. The second task was probably the most significant, which is to process the pain of grief. The pain of grief varies with each loss and I know that this is what I struggled with most. If I anticipated that it would be an intense pain, I would often avoid the processing at all costs. But by avoiding the processing of pain, I would be stuck in mourning and I would be easily triggered by the loss through various incidents in life. The third and fourth tasks were more about the loss of a loved one but by adjusting to this new life and finding ways to remember the loss is still practical. The third task especially is helpful because in order to move on from the loss, I need to adjust to what this new reality is. Things can never be the same as the past but it doesn’t mean that I have to remain stuck in the past.

Another thing about grief that I learned was understanding the nature of attachment. The nature of the relationship between you and the loss is a big indicator of the intensity of grief (Worden 2018). When it came to my own loss of innocence as I had to bail out my mom, I realized that this was such a deep loss because of the closeness I had with my mom and the faith I had that she would never do such a thing. It was such an intense grief because of the level of trust I had built in my parents.

Also, it was important to learn why some people find it hard to grieve. Relational factors are often a reason why it is hard for people to grieve (Worden 2018). For my mom, it was so difficult for her to grieve the loss of my aunt because of how close they were. They were the only two children from the family who had moved to the United States. They only had each other. And because they were able to overcome so many obstacles in the United States, they relied on each other and helped raise each other's family.

All in all, grief is a natural and inevitable part of life. Loss is at the heart of every change that people encounter. The only way to not experience grief and loss is to distance yourself from people and relationships. That kind of isolation can only happen for so long before it has detrimental effects on our own identity. The only way to live a life that is bound to have loss and grief is to face it, process it, share it, mourn it, and adapt from it.

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