

Losing Faith vs. Gaining Perspective: How Trauma and Loss Can Create a More Spacious Form of Spiritual Awareness

Excerpted from
Turning the Corner on Grief Street
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Most people, when faced with trauma and loss, will use some aspect of religious functioning to cope (Schuster et al., 2001, qtd. in Harris), or will search for a way to understand the event based on cultural or religious assumptions. Reactions can vary widely on a spectrum that includes embracing closely-held religious ideas more fervently to abandoning spirituality altogether (Harris 2008, 17). Because trauma, grief and loss can fracture one's beliefs about good and evil, security, the nature of God and one's place in the universe, re-evaluation of these beliefs has the potential to produce tremendous personal growth, both psychologically and spiritually.

This essay will address the changes in spiritual perspective that can result from a traumatic experience, and the idea that "loss of faith" is not a loss at all, but a remarkable opportunity for spiritual and emotional expansion.

Ryan LaMothe (1999), in *Trauma and Development: A Faith Perspective*, explains, "The reality of belief, trust and loyalty always takes place in relation to their counterparts; disbelief, distrust, and infidelity... Even in the best of times and relationships there are moments and perceptions of broken promises, experiences of distrust, and thoughts of disbelief, requiring participants to make decisions towards restoring or abandoning trust and fidelity" (375).

LeMothe explains that a developing infant begins life with a sense that the world is made up of "me objects," and that the shift to recognizing "not me" objects is fraught with anxiety (Winnicott, 1971, qtd. in LeMothe). As the infant begins to recognize "not-me" objects, he/she discovers that a "global or undifferentiated environmental mother" cannot be relied upon to provide security, continuity, and cohesion (380). LeMothe equates this conflict to a "belief in omnipotence" that is ultimately challenged. If one's religious beliefs include a supernatural "parent" that is supposed to provide this type of security and protection, these beliefs cannot help but be shattered by traumatic or negative experiences.

Van der Kolk (1987, qtd. in Grame, 31) states, "The essence of psychological trauma is the loss of faith that there is order and continuity in life. Trauma occurs when one loses the sense of having a safe place to retreat within or outside oneself to deal with frightening emotions or experiences." When trauma survivors discover that the protective mother could not keep them from harm, a crisis of faith can present an opportunity to see the world in a new way.

Comparing Spiritual, Religious and Atheistic Views

If faith is defined by a belief that God rewards us for piousness by protecting us from harm, then that faith will certainly be challenged when harm occurs. By contrast, a more self-empowered form of spirituality might suggest that rather than being controlled by a God that acts as a

protector/punisher, we are instead, equal parts of a collective energy that IS God. This is an energy with which we work as co-creators, and in our role as co-creators, there is a reason and a purpose for every experience. In this view, illness, loss, trauma and death are not experiences to be avoided, but to be embraced with gratitude for the shifting of perceptions and gifts of growth they provide (Daniel 2010, 8).

These contrasting beliefs express the difference between spirituality and religion as defined by Tortorici (1993, qtd. in Grame, 223):

“Whereas religion responds to a wide variety of human needs -- belonging, security, moral responsibility, community -- in addition to being an organized institution concerned with standards of conduct, a theology, and worship of God, the spiritual... has to do with the soul, or fundamental essence of a person, the spiritual force or the very power and energy of a person's soul.”

Those who see God as a protector may feel deceived or punished by a traumatic experience, while someone with a non-religious, spiritual outlook may see the same experience as an opportunity to become more connected to the Divine. A Buddhist might interpret trauma as a way to overcome attachment, while an atheist may see it as an opportunity to review the important accomplishments in his life (Peteet, 2001, 188).

One widely-held conservative Christian view sees human experience as divided into a dualistic universe containing only God (good) and the Devil (evil), which suggests that all good experience comes from God and all bad experience comes from the Devil. In this view, trauma and pain do not come from God, and therefore have no purpose other than to support the agenda of the Devil. According to Christian pastor Patrick Kelly:

“Suffering is an instrument of Satan. For it is Satan who wants to see you fall. It is Satan who wants to see the drug addict use, the alcoholic drink, the weak fall down, and the ego-filled self implode. It is Satan who delights in the death of young and old, the crippling of the weak and strong and the destruction of the good or bad. It is not God's will that anyone should suffer” (Kelly, 2010).

From a less dualistic spiritual perspective, the "implosion of the ego-filled self" is actually a goal to which one might aspire rather than an experience to be avoided. Kelly's description of suffering suggests that breaking down the ego is the evil work of Satan, which implies that God *wants* us to live in the ego and that there is nothing to be gained -- spiritually or otherwise -- from our traumatic experiences.

One wonders how Christians like Kelly would counsel the survivors of the Haiti earthquake. If suffering is not part of God's will, then negative experience has no purpose. This belief suggests that Christians should be spared from all suffering and therefore live in a static condition where there are no emotional, intellectual or spiritual challenges.

By contrast, in Buddhism, egolessness *is* the goal, and a Buddhist perspective encourages the understanding of experience and impermanence as paths to awareness. Buddhist nun Pema Chodron says, "We always want to get rid of misery rather than see how it works with joy..."

Inspiration and wretchedness complement each other... With only inspiration we become arrogant. With only wretchedness, we lose our vision" (Chodron, 2000, 61).

Inspiration and wretchedness are *both* necessary for a balanced human experience. Pain, fear, loss and tragedy are very clear moments that shock us out of complacency into a more flexible state in which we can shift and grow if we're willing to allow our religious and culture definitions to be transformed into something that gives meaning and purpose to our lives.

In yet another view that includes neither Satan nor spiritual growth, an atheistic view says that suffering and experience are random and have no purpose at all, as explained by evolutionary biologist Stephen J. Gould:

"We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a 'higher' answer - but none exists" (qtd. in Grinbank, 2008, 1).

Positive and Negative Religious Coping Strategies

The perspectives described above (spiritual/non-religious, Christian, Buddhist and atheist), certainly do not define all practitioners of all these views, but they do express a wide range of possible responses to trauma. Pargament, Koenig, and Perez, 2000 (qtd. in Harris, 2008, 18), identified the following religious coping strategies that could be classed as "positive" or "negative" based on related mental and physical health outcomes:

Positive religious coping strategies included searching for spiritual purification, looking for a new religious direction, providing spiritual support for others, seeking spiritual support from others, using God as a partner in problem solving, using religion as a distraction from a stressor, actively giving God control of the situation, redefining the stressor as God's benevolence, seeking a stronger connection with God, and deliberately maintaining religious behavioral standards. These coping strategies have been related to stress-related growth and better religious outcomes

Negative religious coping strategies included feeling dissatisfied in one's relationship with God, attributing the stressor to the devil, passively waiting for God to change the situation, feeling dissatisfied with relationships with the clergy and others in one's faith group, redefining God as other than omnipotent, identifying the stressor as punishment from God, and asking God for a miracle or direct intercession. These coping strategies have been related to higher levels of distress, poorer physical health, PTSD, reduced quality of life, and poorer cognitive functioning.

As freethinking human beings, we have a choice as to how we perceive an experience or event. Bereaved parent Mark Ireland wrote about his young son's death in his book, *Soul Shift*, "I could feed it my grief and pain or I could feed it my wonder and faith. Once I changed my outlook, I

realized that my loss was not a meaningless accident. I woke up to a greater potential and gained a reference point from which I could contribute to the universe in new ways."

Ireland's statements exemplify what Dembo, Leviton and Wright describe as a redefinition of attachment in response to grief. When positive aspects of the lost relationship can be integrated into the suffering person's life, the event can be viewed with "tenderness rather than pain." A change in the relationship with the lost person begins to occur, and attachment is redefined rather than abandoned. Instead of complete detachment from the relationship, a new type of attachment is formed (qtd. in Archer, 2002, 117).

If an individual can choose to redefine attachment rather than to detach completely from a deceased love one, it can be argued that this choice can also apply to one's attachment to ideas and beliefs. Experiences that challenge religious ideals do not necessarily cause us to abandon the baby with the bathwater by rejecting spirituality completely. Rather than detaching from the world of faith, an experience that causes us to question our spiritual values has the potential to help us create new values and reattach to notions of the Divine in a new way.

The Mystic's View

I recently came across the work of a woman named Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941), a spiritual pioneer who talked about the "Five Mystical Stages of Development."⁸ These stages follow a mystic's journey from identifying solely with the physical world and the desires of the ego to an ultimate realization of oneness with the divine... a journey that is frequently triggered by trauma. As I studied this, I saw in these stages the potential for them to replace – or work alongside – the five stages of grief as defined by Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her 1969 book *On Death and Dying* (denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance). I've taken the liberty of assigning my interpretations to Underhill's stages as they might apply to turning the corner on Grief Street.

1. Awakening or Conversion

This is where the transition to a spiritual rather than a material understanding of experience can begin. It is commonly activated by a dramatic or tragic event, which could be a specific grief event, such as the death of a loved one or perhaps a divorce, job loss or an extreme personal violation of some kind, such as rape or other violent encounter. We can no longer live in a bubble. We can no longer be oblivious. We are no longer separate from the "other." Our sense of safety is shattered, and we become aware of our vulnerability and the fact that we cannot be protected from harm, despite what our beliefs and ideals may tell us. As an example, we believe our children are safe at school until a madman bursts in with an automatic weapon.

2. Purification (or Purging) of the Self

Extreme disillusionment. Ordinary reality is turned inside out, our familiar identities are stripped away, and we are completely exposed with nothing to cling to. There is nothing to rely on but our own inner wisdom, but at this stage, our wisdom is on trial. We don't know what to believe anymore. The ego is no longer in control, and eventually we will have the choice to either cling desperately to it or allow it to dissolve and render us formless and empty. But for now, we are a blank page. Using the example of the school shooting, we are numb and in shock. It is surreal. We are decomposing... in *purge-a-tory*.

3. Illumination

If we allow ourselves to accept and experience the "decomposition" of stage two, we may begin to allow our definitions of self, belief, habits, relationships, God and the universe to slowly shift. In this allowing, illumination can begin. We may be receiving messages, guidance and visions in dreams. This is also when many bereaved people start to explore alternative spiritual views by reading books about near-death experiences and questioning traditional notions of heaven vs. hell, or total annihilation vs. the presence of a soul that lives on after death.

4. Surrender (or the Dark Night of the Soul)

Even while the light of illumination beckons, a dark night of the soul is necessary. We have been stripped of all that is familiar, but now what? Former realities, relationships and structures no longer serve us. Friendships, marriages, physical health, financial resources and communities begin to shift and/or disappear, and despite our attempts at control, we can't stop it, because the momentum is too strong. The door has been opened to another way of looking at the journey.

5. Union

What does union with the divine look like? Because words cannot even begin to describe it, it is easier to describe what divine union is *not*. It is *not* a state of absolute non-conflict or ease. There will be still be conflict and pain, and life will go on. You'll still need to earn a living, manage relationships and clean the bathroom. But you'll do it *differently*. It is a state of grace in which we seek balance rather than control. We accept loss and tragedy as part of that balance rather than seeing it as random, meaningless or punitive. Everything is seen with a mystical, spiritual view rather than a material view. We forgive everything, always, without exception. Now, instead of being concerned about or afraid of the "other," we realize that there IS no other.

Conclusion

There is no more transformative experience in human life than trauma or tragic loss. Nothing can hurt us, scar us or heal us more, and nothing brings us more valuable growth lessons. The gift of trauma changes us permanently and profoundly. It may change us physically due to illness or injury, it may annihilate our sense of security and status quo, and it may rob us of relationships, habits and beliefs that made the world safe and logical to us. It may also wake us up, shake us loose, move us forward and cause us to think more clearly and more deeply than ever before (Daniel, 2010, 89).

Regardless of religious beliefs or affiliations, when faced with trauma or grief, we find ourselves at a crossroads where there are unlimited options, including a bitter rejection of spirituality. But we can also choose to allow the life-altering event to integrate with our personalities, alter our perspectives and help us to focus less on what happened and more on *why* it happened and the valuable lessons gained.

Therein lies the gift. Because when an experience cuts to the core of everything that defines us, we are forced out of our spiritual lethargy, and an opening is created that is highly receptive to

growth. If we nurture that opening, if we honor it and work with it, we can discover previously unimagined worlds of wisdom, and choose enlightenment over annihilation.

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