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# The Wound

In working with grieving persons, I have become aware that there is a great need for grief to be understood. This book is not meant to give instructions or advice. Instead it is a series of quotes, suggestions, affirmations, and explanations intended to console, to reassure, and especially to offer hope to anyone who is suffering from the agonizing loss of a loved one. Although every person grieves in an individual way, there are some common denominators. It is my hope to bring comfort to grieving persons by letting them know they are not alone in their experiences or feelings.

The death of a loved one is a mortal wound, difficult to grasp and impossible to understand. It is unasked for, unplanned for, and unwanted. It is one of the few events in life that is beyond human control. Because of the depth of the wound, even one's own self becomes unfamiliar. Time assumes a different meaning, and nothing that was once important matters any longer. One woman told me, "It may be six months since the death of my child, but to me it has been one long, ghastly day with no beginning and no end."

The "ghastly days" must somehow be survived, often with little help and no past frame of reference. Grief seems to be a

process that cannot be understood or explained unless one has personally experienced it.

Fay Angus in *How to Do Everything Right and Live to Regret* *It* says she had not reckoned on the sting of hurt that peels away the layers like leaves on an artichoke, being nibbled one by one until all that is exposed is the heart.<sup>1</sup>

Having our hearts exposed is an extremely vulnerable position to be in. It can make us feel persecuted and alone. *Why did this happen to me?* we ask.

It happened partly because we were fortunate enough to have loved someone. Without love there would be no grief. So we need to ask ourselves instead, *Would I be willing to exchange my disabling grief for never having known my lost loved one? Are the love and the happy memories we shared worth my current pain? If I had known I would eventually suffer this loss, would I have turned away from the love to avoid the pain?*

When a loss occurs to people who believe in God, we often ask for the reason he allowed such a horrendous thing to happen. If we pray for the healing of a loved one and it does not occur, we feel God has forsaken us. *Where was God when I needed him most?* we cry.

God never promised us a utopia on earth or a life free from pain. J.-Grant Swank, Jr., says,

Good folk and innocent people are not without their share of suffering—and often through no fault of their own. They are not immune to hard times. Indeed, believers can experience pain just as severely as nonbelievers. Being a child of God does not exempt one from anguish or from the heaviness of sorrow that bends the heart near the point of breaking.<sup>2</sup>

What God does promise is that he will never leave us during our times of trouble (Ps. 34:19).

I once heard about an elderly couple who had been married many years. The husband was driving along the highway when his wife spotted a young couple sitting very close together in the next car. She wistfully said to her husband, “Remember when we used to be like that?”

Her husband smiled at her and gently said, “Honey, I haven’t moved.”

Although we may feel farther from God in times of great need or sorrow, he is never the one who moves away. He never leaves the driver’s seat. He simply sits there, patiently waiting for us to move closer.

Grief is a heavy burden that can seem backbreaking, but a heavy load of any type will seem lighter when it is shared with a friend. I believe God has very large, strong shoulders. He will gladly help carry our load of grief if only we are willing to not clutch it so tightly.

## **The Symptoms of Grief**

In the process of holding tightly to our grief we may become forgetful and unable to make decisions. If we were previously quite organized we may suddenly become completely disorganized. We can get lost driving home from the neighborhood store where we have shopped for years. We might forget the ends of sentences or be unable to remember words or names. We do not care how we look, how we feel, or what we do. We feel sad, isolated, and alone.

We find ourselves crying over everything. When we least expect it, tears fill our eyes and make trails down our cheeks. We become afraid to go places or see people for fear these unpredictable tears will begin to flow again. We also cry as we never have before; our deep, wretched sobbing comes from the bottom of a black chasm that we never imagined existed.

In general the whole world seems to be turned upside down. A soft-spoken person might suddenly find himself shouting at his children. Or an extrovert may become fearful of attending a meeting. We are pulled in opposite directions. We are agitated but too tired to move; we are lonely but don't want to be with others; we feel unloved, unloving, and unlovable, yet we need love desperately. We feel as if we have been abandoned and as if our nerve endings are raw.

Physical symptoms may hit without warning—hot flashes, cold sweats, insomnia, loss of appetite, tightness in the chest, rapid breathing—and can be very distressing. A complete medical checkup can eliminate the possibility of these symptoms being caused by a legitimate ailment.

Many grieving persons ignore danger signs, assuming that the discomfort is merely part of their grief, and often their lack of energy prevents them from seeking medical care. Some minor ailments can become debilitating if they go untreated too long. With a proper diagnosis it may be possible to begin to feel physically stronger and thus make it easier to cope emotionally.

The survivor who has been involved in caring for a loved one during a lengthy terminal illness may have neglected self-care during that time. Dental and eye examinations may be needed in addition to a thorough physical.

Then a horrendous fear that cannot be identified sets in: *I feel as if I am going crazy*. This fear never seems to go away, and there is no way to reason with it while it nags and hovers; it may ease up a bit, but it never completely disappears.

These symptoms are all the unexplained, untalked about, misunderstood feelings of profound grief.

## Feelings of Guilt

Guilt is another unwelcome guest to the grieving. It creeps around the corners of our minds, especially in the middle of the night when we cannot sleep. *Why didn't I make John go to the doctor sooner? I should have made Bill stop smoking. I should have driven Susan to school that day.*

Phrases that begin with *Why didn't I* and *I should have* are never constructive. Although it is necessary to think everything through and go over the details after the death of a loved one before coming to any kind of acceptance, if the thoughts become mainly ones of guilt it may be time to apply "thought stopping" or "interruption."

This technique is done by using the command *Stop!*, then rethinking the situation using affirmations, such as *It's a good thing I did not nag Bill about smoking. It would have made him miserable.*

The past cannot be changed; it can only be accepted. With an acceptance of the past comes the possibility to plan the future. Torturing ourselves for things that can no longer be altered takes tremendous energy. A grieving person already has a low energy level, so it is foolish to waste the short supply. We must treat ourselves gently to allow the memories to heal.

## Forgiveness

*Forgiveness* is not a very big word. It is not difficult to pronounce or spell, but it can take control of our entire lives. Jesus spoke of forgiveness just prior to his death when he asked God to forgive the people who had crucified him.

I often speak with people who have had a loved one taken from them as the result of a drunk driver. They are seething with rage. Frequently the driver walks away from the acci-

dent unscathed. I cannot ask someone to forgive an assailant of this sort. Only with the grace of God and the support of family, therapy groups, and friends would it be thinkable.

However, unforgiveness will stand in the way of the normal healing of a severely wounded soul. Similar to a wound that is closed with the putrid infection inside, a wounded soul will continue to fester underneath until eventually it will spew hatred, anger, resentment, bitterness, and vengeance into every inch of a being. It will allow no room for goodness, joy, kindness, or love to flow through.

Unforgiveness can destroy the rest of our lives and the lives of everyone we touch. Holding a grudge hurts the bearer more than the recipient.

I have no pat answers for an unforgiving heart, but I do see the damage that can be done by cold, hard hearts. Each person must evaluate his or her specific situation and discover an appropriate solution, weighing the damage that will be done as hatred eats at the soul versus the doors that will be opened after forgiveness takes place.

Not long ago I had contact with two widows and their stepchildren; their contrasting actions reinforced this theory. One widow angrily told me she would not give one single item that had belonged to her husband to his sons. "They aren't *my* sons; they don't deserve a thing. I don't even plan to see them again," she said, her eyes flashing with hatred as she nursed ancient hurts.

The other widow, Ann, arrived one evening at our meeting with a big smile on her face. When asked about her unexpected happiness, she explained that the night before she had invited her two stepsons over for dinner. They had never been close, and she was not even sure they would come. Ann was pleased when they did. After dinner she provided each boy with a large empty box.

“I want you to have whatever you want of your father’s,” she told them. They walked through the house together while Ann opened desk drawers, closets, and even used a flashlight as they toured the backyard. The boys were hesitant at first, but she kept reassuring them she was serious.

Ann admitted that she did falter as one boy lifted his dad’s Western belt off the closet hook. The large silver buckle was worn smooth from years of wear. She said her heart gave a lurch and her face flushed with heat. But she forced herself to smile and nod her approval as she swallowed hard.

She told us she was pleased with her decisions. She thought about how happy this sharing would have made her husband. If she had selfishly hoarded the belt, it would have been sealed in a box and placed in storage.

The other widow will never experience the peace of mind that Ann will. Her attitude will only harm herself as it festers inside.

Forgiving ourselves is just as important as forgiving others. Guilt is a form of unforgiveness for our mistakes or omissions. To continue to agonize over matters we can no longer change is self-defeating. We can learn from those mistakes and not repeat them. Only then can we move forward, forgiving ourselves and others. When we no longer harbor hatred, seek revenge, or bear grudges, we no longer sap our energy and prevent progress.

## **The Duration of Grief**

Naturally, when we are feeling such torment we want to know when we will begin to feel better. We become quite accustomed to doing things according to schedule. We are told to allow six weeks to recover from gallbladder surgery and that it takes two hours to drive to the city.

In my work with the grieving the question I am most frequently asked is, "When will I stop hurting so much?" I wish there were a chart I could turn to for an answer. But even if there were such a chart it would be meaningless, because time now has an entirely new meaning.

A day is no longer a twenty-four-hour period. It is instead minute after minute filled with pain. There are no pills, no beverages, no magic formulas for the suffering. Trying to ease the pain with alcohol or drugs will only delay the normal grief process.

Recovering from the death of a loved one has been termed "grief work" by the experts. It is indeed work, work that takes time. Like any other job, it cannot be rushed, nor can it be gauged by anyone else's progress. Too many factors have to be calculated, too many details, too many experiences. The circumstances of the death can make a great difference in the grief period, as can the support systems the grieving person has available.

The loss of one's baby is completely different from the loss of one's parent. The loss of a teenaged child differs greatly from that of a spouse. But no matter what the loss has been, it takes time and heart-wrenching work for the wound to heal.

My psychologist friend compares grief to a body wound. He told me to suppose I received a large gash on my arm. At first I would not even want to look at it. It would be too painful. With grief also we will only glance at it briefly in the beginning and then quickly look away. The first week or so we experience shock and numbness, and the actual wound is not examined at all. At this time we are merely existing, marking time.

But then we are tempted to look at the wound more closely. We allow our thoughts to touch on the death just a tiny bit until the pain overwhelms us and we have to look

away again. However, each time we are able to look closer and for longer periods of time. After we become accustomed to looking, we will want to touch the wound ever so gently to see how it feels. As the pain diminishes we will touch it more frequently until at last we accept the fact that we have a wound or a loss. This acceptance begins the recovery period.

At this time it becomes possible to sometimes mention the lost loved one without even crying. We may now be able to begin sorting through clothing and personal items. These tasks may cause great pain, but the pain is a part of the healing process. If the grief is treated properly and worked through rather than sublimated, we will be able to touch, talk about, and accept the wound. At last all that will remain is a scar. This process takes time.

If the wound is covered too quickly or bandaged with tranquilizers or frantic activity, normal healing will not take place. The wound can become infected, festered, and cause physical and emotional problems. Nervous breakdowns, attempted suicides, eating disorders, and ulcers are just a few problems that can result from a loss that is treated improperly. Then the wound may have to be reopened in order for healing to take place.

Much has been written claiming that grief takes a year to run its full cycle. This limitation of time can be a very destructive idea. A widow who was beginning to feel better after six months told me she felt guilty that she did not miss her husband more—"Maybe I didn't love him enough," she said.

Likewise, a mother who was still actively grieving three years after the sudden death of her child was concerned that she was losing her mind. We reassured her that grief knows no time limits. These two women had been hearing too much about "it takes a year to get over the death of a loved

one.” No two wounds are identical, so the healing rates will differ. Each person’s emotional bandage is unique.

## **Dealing with Memories**

The theory that it takes one year to grieve the death of a loved one may have derived from the fact that the first year is especially difficult. Each event is dealt with for the first time. Holidays arrive on schedule as if part of the world had not just caved in. A major question may be how to survive until the first anniversary of the death is reached. This date is often one of the most difficult times. Wounds that were beginning to heal are again forced wide open. However, with a little advance preparation these times can be made more bearable.

People have shared with me a wide variety of methods that have worked successfully for them. Several persons said their families gathered on the anniversary of the death and attended a church service. Some preferred to be alone to walk along the beach or drive through the mountains for quiet reflection and meditation.

For other people projects performed in honor of the loved one and presented on the difficult days brought great comfort. One family grieving the death of a young child embroidered a picture of Jesus with the inscription “Suffer the Little Children to Come unto Me.” The picture was presented to their church on the child’s birthday and will hang in the nursery in loving memory. They told me that with each stitch they released little David a bit more until the picture was completed and they were ready to remember him with happiness instead of only heartbreaking grief.

The mother of a teenaged girl who was killed in a car accident sorted through her fabric remnants, took swatches of fabric from all the garments she had sewn for her daughter

over the years, and made a quilt from them. She called it her “loving memories” quilt. As she assembled it she remembered each article of clothing she had made and the happy occasions when her daughter had worn it. The mother would handle the quilt in times of sorrow and feel her spirits lift.

When we no longer have our loved one to touch, the tactile sense sometimes needs a replacement. My need to touch is so great that I sometimes find myself on my hands and knees at the cemetery, rubbing my dear friend’s grave marker. It is the only thing I have left of her to touch. I do not try to control this urge because it puts me in the perfect position to pray.

Making a picture collage is one way of remembering and expressing feelings as snapshots are collected and arranged. Filling a memorabilia box with favorite items that belonged to the loved one is another. Giving a memorial donation and buying flowers for the altar are additional ways in which people express feelings of love and remembrance on special days.

Planting a memorial garden with favorite flowers of the deceased is another therapeutic activity. Working in the garden seems to give great solace to many of us. Something about feeling the raw earth in our bare hands is comforting, and the planting of seeds or flowers has a way of renewing our closeness with nature. It reassures us that life does go on. No matter how barren the soil or how barren our souls, blossoms can be brought forth.

One September I held a daffodil bulb in my hand and thought it looked as dried up, ugly, and dead as I felt. However, I forced myself to sink it into the ground as I brooded over the news of my dad’s terminal cancer. The following spring I looked out my kitchen window at that perky yellow flower and remembered the lifeless bulb. *If a lovely flower*

*can appear from such an origin, I thought, I can try to produce something beautiful from my father's awful illness.*

Pets are another source of great comfort. They will usually give love unconditionally and rarely mind when their owners are depressed or cranky. Dogs are eager to go for a walk even at midnight. They will curl up in front of the television set for hours on end, no matter how boring the shows. The warmth and love of something living means much to people who are feeling barely alive.

I find that pet owners seem to begin their recovery sooner than other people, if for no other reason than that they feel needed. No matter how listless they are feeling, they are forced out of bed to feed the pets and let them outside. It causes a structuring of each and every day with some semblance of continuity. Getting a rambunctious puppy may be too energetic a project at this time, but animal shelters are filled with plenty of older, calmer pets that also need homes.

## **Holidays**

In addition to our own personal holidays, we must contend with other holidays as well. Thanksgiving Day arrives every single year in November whether we feel we have anything to be thankful for or not.

Immediately after Thanksgiving Day we are confronted full force with the Christmas season. It arrives with the traditional music, fragrances, and decorations. We cannot go anywhere without being made aware that the holiday season is here. Regardless of the way we are feeling, Bing Crosby sings "White Christmas," and the stockings are hung by the chimney with care. All around us the world is in a frenzy of shopping, baking, and activity. We feel as if we are the only ones at a complete standstill in the middle of an alien land.

The holiday season accentuates the fact that our loved ones are no longer with us.

To make matters worse, decisions are hurled at us daily. Do we send Christmas cards, put up a Christmas tree, accept dinner invitations? Do we go out of town or stay home? Do we ignore long-standing traditions, begin new ones, or bury our heads under the bedcovers as we want to do? Friends and relatives all have advice and expectations, only adding to the guilt and depression.

Advice, especially, is usually meaningless and empty at this time. Each griever has to work out the best solution for his or her needs. Possible solutions should be weighed carefully to see what fits most comfortably.

An awareness that we are not suffering alone may help somewhat. Many other people also feel isolated from the festivities and alone in a variety of ways. Families split by divorce and families separated by distance have a difficult time handling the holiday season. People with meager financial means who cannot afford to keep up with the demands of the season also struggle to survive. In many households there is sadness, often hidden behind a happy facade.

A season that began as the remembrance of the blessed birth has unfortunately evolved into a season of a high rate of suicides and heavy burdens.

Being aware of this fact and reaching out to help others during this season can often ease our own pain. Serving a holiday dinner at the local mission can help some of us look away from ourselves. Offering to fill in for coworkers on the holiday so they can be at home with their families is another way of reaching out.

Our best insurance is planning ahead instead of letting the holidays catch us unaware. We must think everything through very carefully, weighing all our options so that as we go into battle we have a full armor of protection, an armor

of faith, inner strength, happy memories from the past, and hope for the future.

It does not seem to matter so much what is actually done during the difficult days but rather that a plan is devised and carried out. The important part is the advance preparation and being physically rested. Fatigue leaves the emotions raw and makes us more vulnerable.

My gift for the holiday season is three little words: *Don't give up*. As bleak as the winter season of the soul may seem, never has a winter failed to be followed by springtime. Spring may begin with a few false starts or take a long time arriving, but each year, without fail, it does in fact appear. Our souls also experience cold, barren, desolate seasons, but spring will eventually arrive, and daffodils will emerge from dormant bulbs.

Along with the trying days that we can prepare for come some unexpected little events; these seem to be the most difficult. They creep up and take us by surprise because we cannot prepare for them in advance.

One widow told me she felt as if a bayonet had been thrust into her gut and that it was constantly being twisted and turned at strange times. I would describe my own feelings at these moments as similar to being hit in the stomach with a baseball. It knocked the wind out of me and made me gasp aloud.

A mother whose son had been very patriotic felt devastated after seeing the flags lined up on Main Street on Flag Day. Another woman said she cried every Sunday. When questioned about it she flatly stated, "I guess I cry because Sunday is as good a day for crying as any." Grief does not know about rhyme or reason; it simply happens.

## The Sense of Loss

C.-S. Lewis states in *A Grief Observed* that one will get over grief but will never be the same. “To say the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he’s had his leg [cut] off is quite another.”<sup>3</sup> In the beginning, the gaping wound or the stump will be tremendously painful. Stitches of love, support, happy memories, and faith in God will pull the wound together to make it hurt less.

As the pain subsides, the patient may be given a prosthesis and learn to walk quite efficiently with it. He may even compensate for his loss by going on to experience greater feats than he would have before the amputation. However, he will never forget that he once had two legs. One man told me he would rather have had his right arm amputated than have lost his wife.

With enough time only the scar will remain. The scar can serve as a reminder of the intense healing that once occurred. Eventually, looking at the scar will bring about a slight feeling of satisfaction, and we may be able to say, *Yes, I did survive this horrendous wound, and I am still intact.*

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