

Mourning as an Initiation

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Death and loss, like the season of winter, can send us recoiling in bitter, numb retreat from the external world. But as surely as the spring emerges from under the muddy mess of defrosted winter, so we will re-emerge from our grief, hopefully positively transformed to some degree by the awesome initiation. This was my experience, and as I have discovered, this positive transformation is not a rare occurrence.

Some take many seasons to feel the warmth of the sun again after keeping company with death, while others miraculously manage to be nourished by the winter sun despite the chill of their reality. What is certainly true for me is that facing death head on at the time it happened, without burying, hiding or escaping from the intense feelings, offered me the gift of a much more vivid experience of life and living. The pain became a crucible through which I felt reborn.

In February 1992 my five-year-old my son, Benjaya, who was one of the first babies to be born in water in England in 1986, slipped down a riverbank and drowned, shattering my life in an instant. I had been immersed in the personal transformation movement for 15 years and yet this meeting with loss became my greatest teacher.

It was a harrowing time and, added to the inevitable suffering, I also found myself deeply lonely in my attitude to his passing. Together with the awful agony, as if it resided in the same space, I felt an awe-filled wonder at the great mystery of death, and deep gratitude for this life-changing event that was causing me to feel more alive, more compassionate and more fully human. The language I wished to speak was one that few could understand because the deeply conditioned response of our society to pain, trauma and death (even among the more enlightened) is that it is 'bad' and to be avoided at all costs. Lao Tsu said, "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the master calls the butterfly." I craved to talk butterfly-speak and to become masterful in the face of anguish.

I found myself describing Benjaya's death, as I had done his birth, as 'an initiation,' and when I came upon this piece by Mircea Eliade my description was confirmed.

An initiation:

1. May or may not be voluntary
2. Experienced in person
3. Is witnessed
4. Includes chaos
5. Requires courage
6. Requires symbolic or real blood sacrifice
7. Requires a period of isolation
8. Includes the death of an aspect of self
9. Changes the initiate's consciousness forever

What was uncommon about my experience of Benjaya's death was that from the first moment I heard that he had drowned, I accepted it. Although I was in a living hell, I had been well trained in the attitude of 'What is, is. To resist causes pain.' I believed in the perfection of the bigger picture and had always trusted that death will come to us when the time is right. All the leaves don't fall off the trees at the same time do they? So why should my son's early departure be wrong? Part of me was at peace in his passing and was totally convinced that for

him this was a rebirth. I remember in those early days experiencing a defiant inner response when I had been told for the umpteenth time what a waste of life it was and what a tragedy. I wrote in very large letters in my journal ‘MY SON IS SHINING STILL AS HE DID UPON THE EARTH, BREAKING THE MOURNING WITH HIS LIGHT!’

This is also how the children who knew Benjaya saw his journey. We chose to have Benjaya’s body in an open coffin on stage behind curtains at the funeral/celebration of his life, which was held in our local village hall. It was the children who scampered up the steps to see him, encouraging their frightened parents to follow their lead. They were fearless in their innocence and showed no inhibitions at all. They showered his body with flowers, asked teems of curious questions, and three of them described seeing him in the light standing with me when I spoke. “Good-bye Benjaya, tell me in my dreams how it is in heaven,” one little boy said to him.

Co-writing a book with my mother, called *Benjaya’s Gifts*, about the extraordinary impact of Benjaya’s birth, life and death on our family, satisfied my need to address the ‘tragedy-consciousness’ I had experienced around his death and to break the taboo of silence around the subject. However, I still yearned to connect with others who, like myself, had broken through rather than broken down after experiencing the initiation of severe trauma.

This yearning became a quest. For five years I conducted a research and writing project to discover and document the common keys to positive transformation through trauma. I found others from all walks of life, ethnic backgrounds and religious/spiritual persuasions, who had not just survived but had raised a phoenix from the ashes of their pain. I interviewed them in-depth, secretly hoping to confirm my theory that those who suffer the most deeply have the greatest opportunity to wake up from automatic pilot and discover their innate resilience. My second book, *MOURNING HAS BROKEN: Learning from the Wisdom of Adversity* was the outcome.

I discovered that each person I interviewed had taken most of the practical steps advised by the ‘experts’ on healing trauma. However, those who had truly broken through and now felt stronger and wiser had also either experienced a paradigm shift in thinking because of their challenge, or had already been living in that same paradigm before their immersion in pain. A paradigm is a specific way of thinking, seeing and experiencing our reality; a lens through which we perceive and frame our world. The paradigm I discovered to be common to almost all my storytellers was one that I had spent 15 years discovering and attempting to live by before my son’s death.

Let me be more specific about some of the common threads that make the tapestry of this way of thinking and being. In my book I have called these threads the ‘eight keys to handling adversity’ and have used them as chapter headings. They are named: Find the Bigger Picture, Trust and Surrender Control, Share Your Pain and Choose Life, Reassess Relationships, Identify and Release Life-long Patterns, Cultivate Compassion: Silence the Judge, Reclaim Your Heart and Spirit, and Find the Hidden Gifts.

As a taster of this paradigm, the holding of which eases the experience of grief, let me take the first key, Find the Bigger Picture, and expand on it.

When the chaos of crisis hits, our first need is self-preservation. We become lost for a while on the roller coaster of emotion and the effects of shock, and we need to make sure our physical and practical needs are met. It is appropriate to be ‘out of our minds,’ experiencing the impact of the events at hand.

“The eyes experience less stress when they look upon a wider horizon,” said Philosopher, R.D. Chin. And so it is that when we are ready and able to at last lift our heavy eyes to a wider horizon we begin to see sense, even wisdom, in the adversity that had initially been missed in the fog of intense emotion. However, if we are used to a scientific worldview, the wider picture may be limited. Individual events and synchronicities (defined as meaningful coincidence) do seem unconnected and senseless if we are using the medical

model – diagnosing only the meaning of the symptoms of the parts. When we shift our perspective to more of an overview and question how the parts might fit within the context of our whole life pattern, then our relationship with those parts, especially the painful parts, has the opportunity to transform.

Several of the stories in *Mourning Has Broken* show the profound level of educative information available to all of us in the welter of life's everyday activities. The pieces connect together to create a picture far larger than we are used to seeing and the premonitions, which are often present before major life challenges, call into question the nature of accidents. For example, a woman whose daughter, Linnaea, was 'accidentally' shot and killed by a young boy playing with a gun told me, "As a child I read a story by a man who had accidentally shot his best friend. His tragedy touched me so deeply that I knew I never wanted to have guns in my life or in my house. So we didn't. It's like Sleeping Beauty where you isolate all of the spinning wheels and yet somehow that spinning wheel needs to be found." Linnaea bought her Christmas presents the month she died -- in July, and after her death a video was found of her pantomiming being shot and falling to the ground as if dead. Coincidence or part of a bigger picture?

When gathering the surrounding details to numerous different traumas, including my own, it became increasingly impossible for me to deny that there is a mystery intelligence, also described by some interviewees as a plan or purpose, behind these 'tragic' happenings. Is that so for all such events? And, if we knew this to be so, would we grieve differently for that which we have 'lost'? Those I interviewed did.

"Should you shield the canyons from the windstorms, you would never see the beauty of their carvings," was one of the mottos of death and dying worker, Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. This is the message that emerges through all the stories in *Mourning Has Broken*. But do we each need shocking personal trauma to etch and sculpt its lessons into our being before we become mature in our beauty? Despite the remarkable transformation of those whose stories I have gathered, I think not. Although all of us will inevitably encounter some adversity in our lives, perhaps there are other ways of stepping into the fullness of who we are. I have come to use the term 'Osmotic Learning' to describe the conscious process of absorbing useful messages from the stories of others, thereby accelerating our own rate of personal transformation. I firmly believe that it is possible to imprint ourselves so deeply with an understanding of certain life lessons that we will no longer need to encounter such events face to face to teach us those lessons. And, if trauma does perchance come our way, having consciously absorbed the positive learning from the life challenges of others, it will have less destructive impact, and we will be more prepared to be opened, moved and deepened by the grief so that its inherent wisdom has the freedom to emerge taking us to a new level of consciousness.

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