



*I walked a mile with Pleasure,
She chattered all the way;
But left me none the wiser,
For all she had to say.
I walked a mile with Sorrow
And ne'er a word said she;
But, oh, the things I learned from her
When Sorrow walked with me!*

...Robert Browning

Sorrow Walks With Me

by Nan Zastrow, Wausau, Wisconsin

Sorrow is the soul's way of expressing need. This raw emotion is both simple and complex at the same time. Simple because it is innate and human; everyone will experience it at some time in their lives; complex when it carves its way deep into our hearts and souls, changing who we were and challenging us to emerge as someone different. It can be a beast or a blessing. Yet, we seldom talk about grief and sorrow. We treat it privately and personally, as though only we can own it.

Sorrow creeps into our lives when someone loved dies. We recognize the all-encompassing emotion before and after the funeral. It speaks to the dramatic life change that awaits us and shatters our security in the world we once knew. We fear its tenacious grip and quiver at its humbleness. Instinctively, we know, sorrow can be a destructive force if we allow it to be our companion for too long, and ignoring it will only create greater problems. Therein lies the dilemma...how can we move beyond sorrow to find the peace and joy that can empower us and move us to transforming destinies?

The important thing about sorrow

Even when we have sorrow, we still can have a glimmer of hope. Our lives are a series of events. We have layer upon layer of experiences. Some repeated, but all contribute to make us who we are. These layers are a composite of our challenges, our achievements, our disappointments, our successes and our failures. Each molds the foundation for the wisdom that comes with time and a life-lived. We can look to our past and recognize that we have transitioned through other changes.

Looking back, Gary and I recognize how much we have changed by the experiences of significant loss. And even though we've been involved in grief education and support for nearly two decades, sorrow still finds a way to impact us. It's comforting to help others through those first difficult months and years; it reminds us about the road we once traveled and how far we've come. In our groups, we bond with others who hurt. And when one of us hurts, we all hurt together. Sorrow walks with me.

Some people come to our groups with deep sorrow and great hope of finding something magical that will erase the pain and restore them to the "old me." Although this is not likely to happen in so short a time, what they do find is hope in the stories of others. Sorrow is part of the process of grieving that requires accepting the pain and learning to live with it. Shakespeare says,

“Give sorrow words.” When we speak of our sorrow, we begin to heal the pain and relieve the burden we carry with us. Such camaraderie in groups allows us to recognize that we are not alone.

With sorrow, comes tears. Tears tell a story that words can’t describe. Tears don’t cure sorrow, but they do begin the process that helps us heal the pain. Tears help us express our emotions. Tears will come and go, often at the most inconvenient times! A fleeting memory, a poignant song, a familiar face can bring the onset of the not-forgotten, but bravely suppressed emotions. I find value in tears that say we have not become bitter at the world, intolerable of others, insensitive to misfortune, or oblivious to human suffering. Tears are little blessings of cherished moments, treasured memories, and tokens of unconditional love.

Sorrow *must* walk with each of us for a period of time in grief. It is the price we pay for love. It pays homage to a relationship that has fed our souls and lightened our spirits. It signifies the battle that has begun and is yet to be won.

Is There A cure for sorrow?

We are often asked this familiar question: “How long before I am over my grief and I can quit crying?” I don’t believe there is a time limit on expressing emotion through tears. Gary and I still find moments of tears and bursts of sadness.

There is an old Chinese tale about a woman whose only son died. In her grief, she went to the holy man and said, “What prayers, what magical incantations do you have to bring my son back to life?”

Instead of sending her away or reasoning with her, he said to her, “Fetch me a mustard seed from a home that has never known sorrow. We will use it to drive the sorrow out of your life.” The woman went off at once in search of that magical mustard seed.

She came first to a splendid mansion, knocked at the door, and said, “I am looking for a home that has never known sorrow. Is this such a place? It is very important to me.” They told her, “You’ve certainly come to the wrong place,” and began to describe all the tragic things that recently had befallen them.

The woman said to herself, “Who is better able to help these poor, unfortunate people than I, who have had misfortune of my own?” She stayed to comfort them, then went on in search of a home that had never known sorrow. But wherever she turned, in hovels and in other places, she found one tale after another of sadness and misfortune. She became so involved in ministering to other people’s grief that ultimately she forgot about her quest for the magical mustard seed, never realizing that it had, in fact, driven the sorrow out of her life.

Each of us who walks on this journey through grief reaches the fork in the road. A fork where the decision must be made: Will I heal my grief, or will I forever be angry, bitter and miserable because of my loss?

If we chose to knock on the doors of our neighbors, our co-workers, and our friends, it is unlikely we would be able to

fetch a mustard seed from a home that has not known sorrow. Sorrow thrives in various disguises such as divorce, physical illness, family dysfunction, job stress and personal emptiness.

How to cure sorrow

There is a valuable lesson from the Chinese tale, one that speaks to each of us as a way to cure our own sorrow. The greatest cure for sorrow is recognizing and seeking out someone who has a greater cause for sorrow than your own. By sharing their burden, listening to their story, or helping them face their sorrow, you can discover peace and overcome the misery you are experiencing.

How do we do this? Everyone has a story. Many stories lead to life changes and transformed lives. Ask. Listen. Then, give your own sorrow words.

Healing your grief and sorrow involves validating your true feelings. You run the risk of remembering sad times in your life—times you may not have honored until this moment. You run the risk of being deeply moved, understanding the need for compassion and facing the fact that you care deeply about the loss you’ve experienced. You may cry. You may laugh. You may even get angry, because it hurts when you feel life has treated you unfairly. You may wish to hold onto your past, but recognize that there is no happy future there. You may think about things you never thought about before. You may evaluate your life today and rethink your future. You will know what it means to love and have been loved. Sorrow teaches us the ultimate lessons in life.

Though sorrow may walk with you, she need not become your constant companion. She will lead you to the fork in the road where it will be your choice to be bitter or better. Which will you choose?

