

## Battling Grief

I read the obituaries. Not often, but sometimes. I see a life I knew, or knew of, that ended and I ache for those who are obligated to carry on. I see the commercials on television that warn us, "Make death wait." But sometimes death won't wait, death just is. Then grief crashes into the room.

Grief is a brutal adversary. It sneaks up when you least expect it, pounces on you before you can plan for escape. But even when you see it coming, Grief fools with your vision and seems further off than it is and then when it is too close for you to react and jump out of the way, Grief gets you and is just as cruel, just as heartless, just as debilitating, had you no readiness, no warning at all.

Grief wrestles you to the ground and stands on your chest until you can't breathe. It tumbles you around at night, from left to right and up and down, until sleep is only an imagined comfort. It ties your stomach in knots so even a sip of water seems too much. It takes your shoulders and pulls them forward, your neck collapsing between them so you can barely see where you are or where you are going. Grief paralyzes you, by pushing on your heart with so much force, that lifting your arms or the corners of your mouth would consume the little bit of energy you may have left. Grief gets you on the ropes and you look away, turn your head so you won't see the blow coming.

You can fight back, you can run with the ball and try a stiff arm defense against Grief. You can drag Grief under water and try to hold your breath longer. You can shake yourself off and keep running, but Grief will bring you down, eventually, will hit you behind the knees and fold you in half. It will outrun you in the open, and outwit you in the crowd.

But just when you have had more beating than a soul can take, you will reach inside and find the strength to straighten up and Grief's final blow will glance off your chin, just about missing you entirely. You start with small things to show Grief who's in charge: tying your shoes, brushing your teeth, crawling out of your pajamas. Or sometimes just moving your legs to the side of the bed is enough for one effort and has Grief leaning back on its heels.

Tiny steps. Your head still falls between your shoulders; your chest has yet to re-inflate from Grief's heavy boots crushing your sternum. Sometimes it feels like one step forward and a few back, but that's just Grief whispering lies, trying to trick you, nodding its head, saying, "Come this way". One step forward may not be measurable by many standards, the advance just barely discernible, but it is indeed forward and represents hope creeping back in. This single one step does represent light at the horizon.

I think having taken on Grief and battled back is it a bit like earning a Victoria Cross, or any Medal of Honour. It reminds you that you have strength you didn't know you had, that you witnessed loss and death and are still here. You may be bruised and scarred having been knocked around. You may not carry the same carefree manners you once had but you are stronger for it. Pain is the souvenir you receive for having loved someone that has gone ahead of you.

You belong to a private exclusive club now. You passed the initiation test and are allowed in. You are a certified member. You may look no different on the outside, but your step has changed. You carry yourself like someone who knows, someone who has been to the edge and is back.

Now you can take the hand of another who is new to this game and though your words may not feel as though they do any good, you know they do. You know that muttering a simple, "I'm so sorry" changes nothing, but it does divide the grief, makes it smaller and easier to carry and easier to fling off when you start to stand up once again, to right yourself and to push on.

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