

## Good Grief: The Other Curve

As I remarked to a close colleague the other day, grief is exhausting. His mother had just died in a Care Home. It was not unexpected, and in some ways, a mercy. But bereavement or loss have ‘form’, and like a virus, live inside our heads and hearts, and freely stroll around the highways and byways of our conscious and subconscious. There is no vaccine for grief.

Rather like Judith Kerr’s *The Tiger That Came to Tea*, grief involves entertaining an intrusive guest that settles down for a lengthy stay. It helps itself to our time and energy, distracts us when we are trying to concentrate on more important things, and stops us finishing even the most basic tasks. It tends to be untidy. It messes us up on the inside. Tasks that once took us no time at all now take forever. Energy levels drop. We are always tired; yet we cannot properly sleep.

Grief is normal. It is one price we pay for love. It is part of what it is to be a person – because we cannot be a person unless we are in communion with others, so we are always bonded. Even when alone, in our own heads, so to speak, we are connected. When bereaved, then, the mind plays around with a whole range of “What If...?” and “If Only...” scenarios. “What if I had spent more time with her?”. “If only I had more time with him...”. Even seasoned practitioners of mindfulness will struggle to rein in the range of loves, losses, regrets, wistful hopes and memories when grief goes viral. And then there is a long list of things that actually need to be done. The death to register. A funeral to plan. People to notify.

One of the most striking aspects of this pandemic has been the enormous and shared levels of exhaustion we experience. For some, the causes are obvious. Working for the NHS, as keyworker, or in any kind of frontline care and services, has never been more demanding. Teachers and lecturers have had to pull out all the stops to put resources on-line. Those caught in an endless cycle of Zoom meetings, or on Microsoft Teams, Skype or other platforms that connect us, are discovering that these are far more demanding than meeting in the flesh.

Parents who have never taught in schools (frankly, that is most of us) have suddenly discovered just how much energy it takes to occupy their children with meaningful learning. Others are wearied by economic uncertainty, trying to manage their panic. Or exhausted by hostile and abusive home situations. Our space for socialisation has been shut down by this pandemic. And our space for rationalisation is dominated by maths: flattening the curve; keeping two metres apart; maintaining social distance. When everything becomes enumerated and measured in figures, we wince. We all have names; we are not numbers. But somehow, the Covid-19 crisis has subjected our existence to some pretty ruthless number-crunching.

But there is another hidden curve at work in society at the moment, and it is one which will be with us for much longer than this pandemic endures. Whilst we work hard to flatten one curve, this other, veiled viral phenomenon, is actually a *natural* feature of human existence: grief. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross was a Swiss-American psychiatrist (1926–2004) who researched near-death studies, but is probably best-known for her best-selling book, *On Death and Dying* (1969). Kübler-Ross observed that grief typically went through a trajectory that had a kind of ‘curve’. She outlined her theory as “the five stages of grief”.

The first stage was shock or denial at the tragic news or loss: “I can't believe it” or “this can't be happening to me” would be typical reactions. Denial is a temporary psychological defence-mechanism that gives us time to absorb news of change. It entertains a slim hope: if we continue to deny reality, or at least challenge it, this all might go away. The news we just heard could all be “a big mistake”.

The second stage was anger, with those bereaved typically wailing “why me...it’s just not fair”. Anger allows us to blame someone or something else for this happening to us. Public Inquiries after tragedies are frequently exercises in anger management and social catharsis. Individuals, senior management, the economy, health and safety, a hospital – all can be blamed for negligence.

Kübler-Ross’ third stage was bargaining. This is the inner conversation we have in the foothills of bereavement. “I’ll give my all to be at my daughter’s wedding or son’s graduation. I need more time...” This is the natural reaction of those who are dying – an attempt to postpone the inevitable. We bargain to shelve the change. If there is more time, maybe – just maybe – we can find a way out of this.

Depression was Kübler-Ross’ fourth stage. With the first three stages passed, the reality of change sets in. It is at this point we start to become aware of losses and with the changes we face. This has the potential to push us into a gloomy state – depressed and demotivated. Ennui kicks in when we reach a point of uncertainty about our future. “What's the point of trying?” is a typical sentiment.

The fifth stage was acceptance. The curve is downwards now, and towards flattening. As we realize that fighting the change was not going to make it go away, we move into stages of acceptance. This is not always a contented space, but it can be one of cheerful resilience. It can be stoic (a kind of weary resignation in the face of what must be), but is not necessarily joyous.

Acceptance is the end of the curve, and you might assume that at that point, you are on the home strait. Acceptance can indeed be a creative space that presses us to explore afresh and look for new possibilities. Indeed, this may be why the Kübler-Ross Five Stage Model has been extensively used by management consultants and workplace psychologists to explain how organisations cope with failure or trauma.

Simply stated, consultants have adapted these stages in order to explain other kinds of ‘Change Curves’. So when companies or institutions go through any major restructuring or redundancies, or for that matter governments and societies suffer a significant failure in their delivery of health or social care, the curve only flattens when a majority of people affected begin to arrive at consensus and acceptance. Until then, there is *un-rest*. Like grief, this time is tiring, and utterly un-settled.

We are still in this ‘Curve of *Un-rest*’. Ours is civil, personal, emotional and social. Our collective and individual exhaustion is symptomatic of the emotion and energy expended, as we try to comprehend and cope with the changes taking place all around us, and face up to the trauma of all that is being lost. We shift uneasily between Kübler-Ross’ first four stages for the time being, in a cyclical motion we can barely manage, let alone control. In grief, people will often report one day merges into another; they lose all sense of time. No wonder we are all so exhausted.

So is there anything to look forward to beyond weariness and stoic acceptance, and a yearning for the Old Normal? Apart, that is, from regaining some work-life balance, and a proper night of rest after a full day of work? Or perhaps a weekend that actually feels like it once used to? I have a couple observations.

First, we mostly associate viruses with terms such as ‘disease’, ‘infection’, ‘suffering’, or ‘life-threatening’. We immediately think of HIV, Ebola, Zika or old-fashioned influenza. However, not all viruses are bad. As many virologists will testify, some viruses are good. They kill harmful bacteria, for example, whilst others live peaceably in the human body and exist to fight against more dangerous viruses. Just like protective bacteria (i.e., probiotics) that live inside us, we also have several protective viruses within our bodies (e.g., phages). Not all viruses are detrimental to human health. Some viruses have beneficial properties for our bodies, and they work within us forming a symbiotic relationship.

Second, David Kessler – also an expert on grief and collaborator with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross – suggested that there might be something *good* to emerge from our grief. Kessler proposed a sixth stage: meaning. Now, finding meaning is not about shoehorning a crisis into a moral or spiritual interpretative straightjacket. That would demean the very real suffering and loss of so many, which for everyone is profoundly personal. Sometimes, the search for meaning can be glib: a classic means of evading cold reality and some blunt home-truths.

Our reality is stark. So much has stopped – work, sport, enterprise, travel and entertainment – we find ourselves living in a kind of Universal Lent. To emphasize this moment, public religious life ceased too. This enforced ‘perpetual pause’ has brought a halt to our frenetic pace of life and our breathless race to squeeze more and more out of each minute of every day. Indeed, the virus has replaced that breathlessness with another kind of gasping. Plans and projects are all on hold.

So might there be some signs of *good* meaning emerging from this crisis? Perhaps. Adjusting to a different pace, and finding some deep stillness can regenerate our core sense of purpose. A core no longer geared towards frenetic busyness, or self-fulfilment, can become more fulsome and self-aware. This can make us more mindful of others – especially those who continually live in perpetual states of exile or with all manner of serious social restrictions. We only understand the gift of our freedoms when we experience their loss. The simpler way of life that is currently forced upon us may actually help us become more discerning – re-founding our purpose, communities and society on the essentials rather than the merely expedient.

This is all about perspective; learning to see the difficulties of the here and now as potentially part and parcel of a much bigger canvas. At times of concern and worry, some sage counsel by a much-loved Jewish preacher-cum-teacher is suggestive:

“Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life, or a single cubit to your height? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith?”  
(Matthew 6: 26-30)

Jesus’ exhortation to avoid worrying would have seemed as curious to his original audience as it might to us now. After all, a Galilean Rabbi suggesting that a region dominated by an occupying army, where freedoms were restricted, and life and death hinged on fickle decisions made by unaccountable authorities, must have seemed like blind optimism to most. They had plagues too. Yet the Gospels record Jesus saying “do not worry” or “do not be afraid” over seventy times. Yes, seventy. He says it a lot. Don’t be afraid of the storm, or of sinking. Don’t worry about lack of food or clothes. Don’t worry about death. *“Do not be afraid...I am with you”*.

So what of faith and fear in a time like this? Our English word ‘worry’ was originally derived from the word *wyrgean*, meaning to ‘strangle’, and of Germanic origin. In Middle English the verb gave rise to the meaning ‘seize by the throat and tear’, and later to our word ‘harass’, meaning ‘to cause anxiety’. It is ironic that one aspect of coronavirus is that it takes the breath away. It is, literally, a ‘worrying virus’.

Jesus’ summons is simple: consider the world around you; become attuned to the cycles of life in all their depletion and abundance. We are being bidden towards a more contemplative perspective. This is not a call to adopt some kind of supine passivity. It is just that there is little point in worrying about things we can’t control. The birds of the air and lilies of the field are instructive.

Unwelcome as this may sound, grief can be good. It prunes and pares us back to our core. That is why so many who experience bereavement will testify to feeling ‘raw’ in the early stages. Rawness and exposure are not states we readily seek. But grief normally strips away the peripheral to make way for the essential. In fact, grief prepares us for growth. So, just as death is an inevitable part of all our lives, we should prepare for it. For our own, as well as those who are our nearest and dearest.

Remember that death is just nature’s way of slowing us down. It stops us in our tracks, whether we are the bereaved – or the deceased. Like some of the good viruses that live within the human body, there is a goodness in grief. It helps us cope with trauma. Processing our loss percolates through our personhood, and what begins as an experience of exposure will often mature into one of enrichment.

Processing grief also changes our personal and social landscapes. Lives are now more cherished more than livelihoods. Care becomes more essential than cash. We re-learn to live as generously as we hope to receive. Compassion and empathy become our daily bread, and we learn to share this with others who are hungry for this. Prayer moves from frantic pleading to perspectives more contemplative. Faith, hope and love can cast out fear. The realisation of our mortality slowly sinks in, soaking our souls. Yet this does not sink us. As Harriet Beecher Stowe said, “the bitterest tears shed over graves are for words unsaid and deeds left undone”. Grief *re-minds* us to pay attention, here and now, to who and what matters: do not prevaricate.

There was an advertising poster for the NHS some years ago, which sought to recruit new nurses. The advert pictured a nurse cradling a new-born baby, and the caption read: “the first few minutes of life can be critical”. Someone, however, had daubed some graffiti underneath, adding: “...and the last few can be a bit dicey too”. Quite. This is tender, liminal moment in our nation and communities. But cradling, holding and caring for others at the beginning and end of life – and for all that bit we call ‘the middle’ (the bulk of our lives) – is where our attention must return to.

As we progress through our Curve of Grief, our challenge is to progress beyond mere stoicism, and discover worthier ways to work and live. As a nation, I hope and pray we will get past our shock, anger and denial. I hope and pray we will get past our instinct for blaming and retribution. I hope and pray we shall not just ask “what went wrong, then?”, but take courage and ask “how then, shall we live?”.

In this, I harbour some hope for our future. As Schulz’s Lucy might once have said to Charlie Brown, “good grief is better than bad grief.” Can we permit our grief to become the foundation of new, good and generative futures? I believe so. It is in fully facing the ordeal of loss that we have the hope of realising life-giving gain.

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