

Emotionally Healthy Spirituality*

Week 5—Enlarge Your Soul through Grief and Loss (surrendering to our limits)

Key Principle: Grief and loss are inevitable but can also be highly formative. It is important to embrace it when it comes and use it for our growth, otherwise it could derail us or stunt us.

This week we're going to take some time to chart some past losses and disappointments and analyze some of the ways we try to protect ourselves from the hurt/pain associated with grief and loss. (see exercises below) But first, let's give some consideration to grief and loss.

There is no greater disaster in the spiritual life than to be immersed in unreality. In fact the true spiritual life is not an escape from reality but an absolute commitment to it. Loss marks the place where self-knowledge and powerful transformation happen—if we have the courage to participate fully in the process. Loss and grief, however, cannot be separated from the issue of our limits as human beings.

Limits are behind all loss. We cannot do or be anything we want. God has placed enormous limits around even the most gifted of us. Why? To keep us grounded, to keep us humble. In fact, the very meaning of the word *humility* has its root in the Latin *humus*, meaning "of the earth."

Our culture routinely interprets losses as alien invasions that interrupt our "normal" lives. We numb our pain through denial, blaming, rationalizations, addictions, and avoidance. We search for spiritual shortcuts around our wounds. We demand others take away our pain. Yet we all face many deaths within our lives. The choice is whether these deaths will be terminal (crushing our spirit and life) or open us up to new possibilities and depths of transformation in Christ.

In our culture, addiction has become the most common way to deal with pain. We watch television incessantly. We keep busy, running from one activity to another. We work seventy hours a week, indulge in pornography, overeat, drink, take pills—anything to help us avoid the pain. Some of us demand that someone or something (a marriage, sexual partner, an ideal family, children, an achievement, a career, or a church) take our loneliness away.

Sadly, the result of denying and minimizing our wounds over many years is that we become less and less human, empty Christian shells with painted smiley faces. For some, a dull, low-level depression descends upon us, making us nearly unresponsive to all reality.

Much of contemporary Christian culture has added to this inhuman and unbiblical avoidance of pain and loss. We feel guilty for not obeying Scripture's commands to "*rejoice in the Lord always*" (Philippians 4:4) and to "*come before him with joyful songs*" (Psalm 100:2).

Turning toward our pain is counterintuitive. But in fact, the heart of Christianity is that the way to life is through death, the pathway to resurrection is through crucifixion. Of course, it preaches easier than it lives.

When we are children, creating a defensive wall to shield us from pain can serve as one of God's great gifts to us. If someone suffers emotional or sexual abuse as a young child, for example, denial of the assault on his or her exposed humanity serves as a healthy survival mechanism. Blocking out the pain enables him or her to endure such painful circumstances. It is

healthy to not fully experience painful realities when we are that young so that we survive emotionally.

The transition into adulthood, however, requires that we mature through our “defense mechanisms” of denial in favor of honestly looking at what is true—at reality. Unconsciously, however, we carry many defensive maneuvers into adulthood to protect ourselves from pain. And in adulthood, they block us from growing up spiritually and emotionally.

The following are a few common defenses:

- *Denial* (or selective forgetting). We refuse to acknowledge some painful aspect of reality externally or internally. For example: “I feel just fine. It didn’t bother me a bit that my boss belittled me...and that I got fired. I’m not worried in the least.”
- *Minimizing*. We admit something is wrong, but in such a way that it appears less serious than it actually is: “My son is doing okay with God. He’s just drinking once in a while,” when in reality he is drinking heavily and rarely sleeping at home.
- *Blaming others*. We deny responsibility for our behavior and project it “out there” upon another: “The reason my brother is sick in the hospital is because the doctors messed up his medications!”
- *Blaming yourself*. We inwardly take on the fault: “It’s my fault Mom doesn’t take care of me and drinks all the time. It’s because I’m not worth it.”
- *Rationalizing*. We offer excuses, justifications, alibis to provide an inaccurate explanation of what is going on: “Did you know that John has a genetic disposition toward rage that runs in his family? That’s why the meetings aren’t helping him.”
- *Intellectualizing*. We give analysis, theories, and generalities to avoid personal awareness and difficult feelings: “My situation is not that bad compared to how others are suffering in the world. What do I have to cry about?”
- *Distracting*. We change the subject or engage in humor to avoid threatening topics: “Why are you so focused on the negative? Look at the great time we had as a family last Christmas.”
- *Becoming hostile*. We get angry or irritable when reference is made to certain subjects: “Don’t talk about Joe. He’s dead. It’s not going to bring him back.”

There are 5 phases/stages of grieving (see below). Notice, they are not pleasant nor intuitive. But they do form a pathway for helping us deal with, and grow from, grief and loss.

1. Pay Attention (to what you’re feeling, and to God)
2. Wait in the Confusing In-Between (pain, hurt, and confusion won’t go away overnight...there are no quick fixes to grief and loss)
3. Embrace the Gift of Limits (we are not impervious or indestructible; there is much that is outside our control...we cannot keep harm from touching us or those we love...we must accept that we have limits.)
4. Climb the Ladder of Humility (below is an adaptation of St. Benedict’s Ladder of Humility)

St. Benedict's Ladder of Humility

STEP 1: *Fear of God and Mindfulness of Him.* We often forget the presence of God,



acting as if he were not present.

STEP 2: *Doing God's Will (Not Our Own or Other People's).* We recognize that surrendering our self-will to God's will for our lives touches the very heart of spiritual transformation.

STEP 3: *Willing to Subject Ourselves to the Direction of Others.* We are free to give up our arrogance and all-powerfulness and are open to accepting God's will as it comes through others. This may be a manager at work, or directions from a friend. And we do it without grumbling or an attitude.

STEP 4: *Patient to Accept the Difficulties of Others.* Life with others, especially when living in community, is full of aggravations. This requires we give others a chance to figure out their weakness in their own way in their own time.

STEP 5: *Radical Honesty to Others about Our Weaknesses/Faults.* We quit pretending to be something we are not. We admit our weaknesses and limitations to a friend, spouse, parent, or someone else who cares about our development.

STEP 6: *Deeply Aware of Being "Chief of All Sinners."* We see ourselves as potentially weaker and more sinful than anyone around us. We are the chief of all sinners. This is not self-hate or an invitation to abuse, but is meant to make us kind and gentle.

STEP 7: *Purposeful to Speak Less (with More Restraint).* This is near the top of the ladder, because it is seen as the outcome of a life that seeks God and is filled with

wisdom. As the Rule of St. Benedict states: “The wise are known for their few words.”

- STEP 8: *Transformed into the Love of God.*** Here, there is no haughtiness, no sarcasm, no putdowns, no airs of importance. We are able to embrace our limits and those of others. We are fully aware of how fragile we are and are under no illusions. We are at home with ourselves and content to rely on the mercy of God. Everything is a gift.
5. Let the Old Birth the New . . . *in his time* (trust that God can and will use the losses in our lives to bring about new life/transformation.)

Q. One of the central messages of Christianity is that suffering and death bring resurrection and new life. Are there any losses you have not yet embraced where new life is still waiting to be birthed? (Explain/describe)

Q. What do you think of St. Benedict’s “Ladder of Humility”?

*****HG Leaders—This might be a good week to have an extended time of prayer...not only for the heavy topic of grief and loss, but also due to all that our Emotionally Healthy Spirituality series may be churning up in people*****

Exercise: Below is a list of common defenses we often use to protect ourselves from grief and loss. Checkmark the common defenses that you sometimes use:

- Denial
- Minimizing (admitting something is wrong but in such a way that it appears less serious than it actually is.)
- Blaming others (or even God)
- “Over-spiritualizing”
- Blaming oneself
- Rationalizing (offering excuses and justifications)
- Intellectualizing (giving analysis and theories to avoid personal awareness or difficult feelings)
- Distraction (busy yourself with other things so as to avoid thinking/feeling about it)
- Becoming hostile
- Medicating (with unhealthy addictions or attachments to numb the pain)

(If you’re comfortable, share with your group the common defenses you use.)

Exercise: Use the chart below and write down any significant losses you endured during the noted age ranges. If you're comfortable share a significant loss/disappointment you experienced and how it affected you (then and now)

Grief Chart

Age	Losses/Disappointments Experienced	Your response at the time	Effect on your life presently
<i>3-12</i>			
<i>13-18</i>			
<i>19-25</i>			
<i>26-40</i>			
<i>41+</i>			

* The majority of this document is excerpts from the book “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” by Peter Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-34857-0), and the “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality Workbook” by Peter & Geri Scazzero (ISBN 978-0-310-08519-5)