Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired · About 4 minutes

A Lighter Hour With the Loss Still Here

Allowing ordinary life and missing someone to share a day

The laugh is out before you remember who has died. Then you hear yourself wondering whether you were allowed to laugh at all.

For a few minutes, something held your attention. Then the absence returns, and the pleasure seems to demand an explanation. How could you have forgotten, even briefly? If you loved them as much as you say, wouldn't you feel the loss all the time?

Many grieving people recognize some version of that question. It asks continuous sorrow to serve as evidence of love. Yet attention moves. A child needs help with a shoe. Something burns on the stove. A friend's story catches you off guard, and you laugh. The person you miss has not become less important because the day reached you in another way.

Imagine Esme, whose husband died earlier in the year. She is helping a neighbor assemble a table. A leg keeps ending up in the wrong place, and the instructions become increasingly unhelpful. They laugh. Walking home, Esme misses her husband and feels ashamed of having enjoyed herself.

The neighbor hasn't taken his place. Nothing has been resolved by the table. What happened is smaller and more ordinary: Esme was occupied, she enjoyed some company, and afterward she felt the absence again. Calling the afternoon disloyal adds a judgment that the events themselves do not establish.

This fictional scene illustrates a movement described in Stroebe and Schut's dual process model of bereavement: people turn toward the loss and toward the demands of an altered life, sometimes finding respite from either.[1] The model offers a way to understand that movement. It supplies no correct ratio of sorrow to activity and no schedule Esme needs to follow.

Guilt may also concern something specific. Perhaps a promise was broken or a regret remains. Those matters deserve their own hearing. A general accusation that enjoyment betrays the person who died is different from remembering a particular action you wish had been different.

Other people may hurry to interpret your enjoyment. “It's wonderful to see you yourself again,” someone says. You may appreciate their happiness and still feel uneasy. Will sadness be less welcome now? Have you accidentally announced that you are better?

You can keep the account close to what happened: “I enjoyed today. I'm still having a hard time.” That gives the other person something truthful without making the afternoon a forecast.

If Esme were to describe her day more fully, she could include the laughter and the lonely walk home. Neither needs to cancel the other. There is no exercise she must complete to make this possible; even recognizing how quickly she put herself on trial may be useful.

Ordinary needs continue during grief. Sometimes attending to them is a relief. Sometimes busyness leaves a person with no company for the loss at all. The question is what this particular life needs, including food, sleep, practical help, and someone willing to listen.

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The companion makes space for grief that has no neat resolution. Here, laughter makes a brief appearance in the middle of a life still carrying the loss.

A hard hour may follow this one. If you remember the sound of your own laughter, you can let it remain part of the day you had.

Companion reading · The Conversation That May Never Come

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Stroebe, M., & Schut, H. (1999). The dual process model of coping with bereavement: Rationale and description. Death Studies, 23(3), 197–224. Source.

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