

From Sorrow To Joy

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*It is writers rather than boyscouts who must investigate the
culture of knots, learn
to pitch words by the sea, to make
fire with less than two vowels rubbed together
and name it other than the groan of despair.*

—Janet Frame, “Beach”

Being

In her poem “Beach,” Janet Frame alludes to the capacity of writers to create and produce meaningful texts that might then be interpreted by a reader as a form of meaning, nourishment and inspiration. What appeals to me about the gospel of John is that the writer ultimately presents a contemporary reader with something beyond the “groan of despair” even though despair has been audible throughout many of his stories.

The earlier chapters of this book have highlighted a number of Jesus’ encounters and stories marked by longing and loss. As an academic with a background in literature and communication, my recent research has taken me into the area of medical humanities where I have an interest in what storytelling can offer people in crisis. From this context,

I come to the stories narrated by John and what they might say about the grief we experience when someone we love dies.

It is significant that in the opening verses of this gospel there is an assertion of ultimate healing and hope through Christ: "What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (1:4, 5). Importantly, the reader is reassured from the outset that whatever "darkness" they will navigate in the stories that follow and in the wider context of their own lived reality, those who believe in and receive Christ can become children of God. However, to be a child of God does not mean being exempt from tragedy, but it does mean physical or psychic suffering is not all we will ultimately experience.

Biblical scholar René Kieffer suggests the gospel of John is framed around a series of binary oppositions: "The Johannine presentation is permeated with contrasts between light and darkness, life and death, truth and falsehood, heaven above and earth below."¹ Reading this particular gospel from my 21st-century perspective, these core tensions present some of the most difficult thematic challenges in the text. The particular contrasts that Kieffer refers to raise the seemingly insurmountable questions: *How do we patiently wait for the promise of heaven while experiencing and witnessing acute suffering on earth? How do we embrace life to the full when we are shadowed by death?*

Because there are no easy or evident answers, it becomes a structural priority for the writer of this gospel to make a key distinction in the first chapter that the children of God are "born not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). This affirmation works in part as a preparatory reassurance that to be born of God is to be afforded something more than human fragility and mortality. It is a bidding to live consciously *now* with the certain prospect of eternal life in the future. Yet the assurance of future longevity does not protect against the harrowing impact of present losses.

The writer of John intuitively knows our temporality will be traced by the sorrow that comes from being physically separated by the death of someone we love. So we are tasked with navigating the paradoxical promise of future life in the midst of present death/s. Such a promise might moderate a long-term grief trajectory, but might

not readily alleviate an original experience of intense suffering. In order to help us understand that reactions to loss are multifaceted, Therese Rando explains: "Grief is experienced in each of three major ways—psychologically (through your feelings, thoughts and attitudes), socially (through your behaviour with others) and physically (through your health and bodily symptoms)."² In this sense, grief can be all encompassing.

This kind of consuming response to losing someone we love can be made even more problematic because it is rare for us today to see the instantaneous intervention and healing such as that given by Jesus to the official's son, to the cripple at the pool or to a person born blind. Instead, more frequent are the desperate prayers offered in doctors' surgeries as someone waits for confirmation of a terminal diagnosis gleaned from a biopsy; exhausted prayers offered beside hospital beds as machines beep and breathe for a patient who is no longer cognisant; and prayers gradually weakened by a perceived silence from God. And, when we finally stand at a graveside, a stark contrast forms between the miracle offered to a family in Capernaum—"Go; your son will live" (4:50)—and our own bereavement occasioned by an unhalted death. During such times, we are easily returned to a familiar scene in Lamentations where "the joy of our hearts has ceased; [and] our dancing has been turned to mourning" (Lamentations 5:15).

Waiting

In his presentation of stories, it is as if John understood that while narratives of instant healing might encourage and promote spiritual belief for some people, such narratives can also be potentially discouraging when we find Jesus not enacting the same speedy cure for a life-threatening illness when we pray for the same kind of divine sign. Why doesn't it happen to us? While the writer of this gospel signals Jesus' desire to stop and heal those in physical and emotional crisis, the story of Lazarus offers me most insight about dealing with loss and grief when a prayer for healing is not immediately answered.

Along with the account of Lazarus' death are references to attempts of the Pharisees to undermine Jesus' authority (see John 5:18; 6:52; 7:32; 8:48; 9:16; 10:33) and the distressing prediction of his death

(see John 5:20; 6:71; 8:21; 11:53; 12:7, 8; 13:27; 13:33–36). However, the darker elements of such betrayals sit alongside Jesus' robust claim: "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life" (8:12). Declarations like this no doubt prompted Mary and Martha's unflagging belief that the dire message sent to Jesus about their brother's illness would be met with an astonishing sign of curing.

Their message is made all the more moving by the fact that Lazarus has a deep connection with Jesus: "Lord, he whom you love is ill" (11:3). These simple words form a pressing lacuna for Jesus' power to fill, a gap where his authority can readily disperse darkness. These words function as an invitation for Jesus to perform again the instant miracle of recuperation and restoration. His capacity for performing wondrous signs throughout his ministry is already common knowledge to the sisters (11:21, 32) and even the larger community (11:37). Jesus' ability to restore bodily deficit has become one of the features of his ministry. Mary and Martha are keenly aware that a key motivation in Jesus healing someone is to reverse the stigmatised position of the ill or disabled person within a prejudicial cultural context.³

We are told that, when Jesus had received the sisters' message, he replied with the ambiguous words: "This illness does not lead to death; rather it is for God's glory, so that the son of God may be glorified through it" (11:4). Jesus signals an optimism not evident to any other onlooker. He does not seem troubled by the urgency of the medical crisis being played out in Bethany. Most perplexing for Mary and Martha is that, after he hears about the ominous situation, Jesus stays where he is for another two days. On a first reading, one might think Jesus has not comprehended the gravity of the situation and is strategically using the situation of a personal catastrophe to underscore a religious point.

Unsurprising to the reader though, Lazarus dies, the anticipated moment of possible healing is denied by the plot and Jesus' absence is duly noted. At this point, the inconsolable mourners waiting in Bethany are not privy to the intentions Jesus reveals to his disciples: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going to waken him" (11:11). The word "sleep" is interpreted literally by the disciples who fail to read it as a euphemism for death, so Jesus needs to speak plainly to them in a way

that removes any obscurity: "Lazarus is dead. For your sake I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe. But let us go to him" (11:14, 15).

It is easy to construct an initial reading of this scene as Jesus' calculated decision to delay so a resurrection miracle will dispel any doubt about his identity as the Son of God. Juxtaposed with this more triumphant reading is what might also appear to some readers as a lack of any strong empathic engagement with the trauma Mary and Martha face. While they are consumed by personal grief, Jesus seems to be working systematically and collectively toward a proof of his divinity.

The reader knows Lazarus had already been buried for four days when Jesus arrives in Bethany. Lazarus is not asleep; he is now a corpse. This is such a confronting image because a corpse is one of the most alienating and abject figurations from which we naturally recoil. In her influential essay *Powers of Horror*, Julia Kristeva explains that her reading of the abject is linked to the human reaction a person has when meaning is threatened by the loss of distinguishable boundaries between the self (subject) and other (object). Her principal illustration of this is the horror a person experiences when first looking at a corpse. In such an encounter, the trauma of directly confronting human materiality heightens a person's feeling of vulnerability. As Kristeva notes, "The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject."⁴

What we have in Bethany is this breakdown of boundaries. The neat demarcations between the oppositional states of health/disease and life/death are now conflated, if not feared. Death has infected life. Feeling the physical absence of a redemptive healer, it would have been difficult for Mary and Martha to process what Lazarus has now so quickly and irreversibly become.

Hoping

Jesus' absence at this crisis becomes even more pronounced when John records the comparative presence of others who have come to acknowledge the sisters' loss: "Many of the Jews had come to Mary and Martha to console them about their brother" (11:19). It can be troubling for a reader to find the Jews there but see no active evidence of Jesus comforting them at a time of such intense grief.

When Martha leaves the house to meet Jesus in transit, her first words to him carry the weight of our own questions: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:21). By addressing him as "Lord," her first act is to acknowledge his divinity and her second act is to point out—because of his power over darkness—that he could have preserved Lazarus' life. However, it is not an embittered comment because she says that even now, in the present moment of encounter, God will give Jesus "whatever you ask of him" (11:22).

Jesus' reply to Martha is unwaveringly assured: "Your brother will rise again" (11:23). As a contemporary reader of the New Testament, these words transport me to an evocation in 1 Thessalonians which resonates with similar reassurance: "For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first" (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

Martha understands an eschatology that includes a future resurrection. She quickly responds: "I know that he will rise in the resurrection on the last day" (11:24). She already declares knowledge of some future hope, but what matters most to Jesus in this conversation is to bring the concept of something delayed and far off into a contemporaneous meeting with the source of light: "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die" (11:25, 26).

Jesus then moves from the general to the specific, asking Martha whether she believes in this redemptive prospect: "Do you believe this?" (11:26, emphasis mine). His question is also a call to the reader to reflect on his or her own belief about the transience of human life and whether—like Martha—we can imagine the option of something beyond human extinction. Martha bears witness to a faith that appears to help her deal with her grief: "Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world" (11:27).

After this declaration, Martha returns home to Mary to pass on a private message that Jesus wants to see her. Mary quickly goes to where Jesus has just met with Martha and, in an act I simultaneously read as both worship and despair, she kneels at his feet and echoes her sister's initial consternation: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died" (11:32). Her present grief has been complicated by the fact

she knows Jesus had the power to prevent this family tragedy.

Like Martha's, Mary's response to him is one of perplexed distress. Her opening sentence works as a potent re-echoing of Martha's first words of human encounter with the divine: "If you had been here . . ." the catastrophe could have been averted. "If you . . ."—the One who can turn water into wine, heal a dying son, rescue a chronically ill man by a pool in Bethesda, feed 5000 people with nothing more than five barley loaves and two fish, walk across raging water to comfort the disciples in a storm, restore a blind man's sight—"If only you had been there . . ."

Readers can easily identify with her unsaid interrogation: *Where were you when I needed you to save my*

brother? When Mary weeps words for Jesus' perceived absence, she weeps for the cavern between the promise of a forthcoming resurrection and the current severing of a familial bond. She weeps because, despite his claims of omnipotence, Jesus seems to have been deliberately tardy. He knew how sick Lazarus was. They got the message to him. So where had he been? How could he do nothing? Why would he stay away when he is most needed? What could be more important

than preventing their loss? Even "the Jews" have made an effort to come and sit with her—and Jesus is only turning up now, days too late.

What is powerfully affecting is the way that John has sequenced this story: Martha's testimony that she believes wholeheartedly in Christ—the Son of God, who promises victory over death—is followed by the heart-wrenching encounter Jesus has with Mary. What is encouraging is that even though there is an overarching assurance in Martha's affirmation that Jesus can conquer death, we are also brought into the sacred place of a truly human grief reaction so palpably portrayed through Mary's sense of abandonment. In this haunting posture of part exhaustion and part prayer, she presents Jesus with her unassuaged sorrow.

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Jesus, who until this point in the narrative appears to have been more theologically focused, models to us what I consider to be one of the most profound reactions to bereavement in the Bible. The writer of John captures the moment this way: "When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jews coming with her also weeping, he was greatly disturbed in spirit and deeply moved" (11:33). Instead of offering Mary glib platitudes about God's ultimate will, Jesus understands the impact and magnitude of an immediate loss—both theirs and his. Jesus' response helps perform the important work of normalising human grief. The authors of *The Grief Recovery Handbook* write of the importance of acknowledging the appropriateness of grief when reacting to loss:

Grief is the normal reaction to loss of any kind. . . . While grief is normal and natural, and clearly the most powerful of all emotions, it is also the most neglected and misunderstood experience, often by both the griever and those around them.⁵

Becoming

While Jesus' impulse is to rectify the situation by asking where Lazarus' tomb is, what is most significant is the writer highlighting the importance of expressing feelings of his extreme sadness: "Jesus began to weep" (11:35). Jesus well knows that resurrections are not only possible but assured, but is still affected deeply by the gravity of death. He allows himself to feel the pain of what it means relationally for a human life to have tangibly disappeared from view, and what it feels like to no longer be able to talk to or touch the embodied presence of love. In that weeping pause between death and resurrection, Jesus demonstrates the importance of stopping to contemplate and share our own and others' grief. Even with a sense of future hope, human reactions to loss are valid.

In recounting Jesus' weeping reaction to loss, I am reminded of the moving observation Dr H Norman Wright makes about Jesus' desire to alleviate physical and psychic distress:

The compassion he felt was obviously quite different from superficial or passing feelings of sorrow or sympathy. Rather,

it extended to the most vulnerable part of his being. It related to the Hebrew word *rachamin*, which refers to the womb of Yahweh. . . . He became lost with the lost, hungry with the hungry, and sick with the sick. In him, all suffering was sensed with a perfect sensitivity.⁶

The writer of John highlights this kind of sensitivity when he depicts Jesus, again, being “greatly disturbed” (11:38) by what confronts him when he goes to Lazarus’ tomb—a cave with a stone covering the entrance. The burden of death is literally and metaphorically represented by the intransigent rock covering access to their loved one. What is beautifully rendered at the close of this particular story is Jesus’ calling Lazarus to life, inviting him to walk out of the dark cave and into light. Jesus says to those passively witnessing the resurrection: “Unbind him, and let him go” (11:44).

What I imagine also happening here is a symbolic invitation to Martha and Mary to unbind their grief and embrace the prospect of a new life, most immediately their brother’s, and ultimately the inheritance of eternal life offered to all who believe in the risen Christ. Later he uttered the memorable assurance: “Very truly I tell you, you

will weep and mourn . . . you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy” (16:20). These words function as prelude and preparation for the grief the disciples are about to experience. They form the narrative trajectory of the gospel of John, moving from the harrowing experience of Lazarus dying to the betrayal, arrest, crucifixion and burial of Jesus. The resurrection of both Lazarus and Jesus testify to the promise and lived experience of re-connection after death.

We are told that Mary Magdalene stood “weeping outside the tomb” (20:11). In her state of deep grief, she is unable to recognise the risen Christ standing before her. Jesus asks her, “Woman, why are you weeping? Whom are you looking for?” (20:15) With her perception clouded by unremitting sorrow, Mary has not yet apprehended the

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reality that Jesus has finally conquered death. When she does recognise him as her Messiah and not a gardener at the site of the tomb, she completes the important mission of announcing his resurrection to the disciples: "I have seen the Lord" (20:18).

It is vital that Jesus then appears to his disciples so they, too, can experience a personal reunion and testify to Jesus' claim that there is ultimate victory over death for those who believe in the Son of God. In fact, the writer of John reveals the main reason the stories have been recorded in the gospel is "so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you might have life in his name" (20:31).

When I read this verse through an interdisciplinary lens it forms a stark and poignant contrast with some of the final remarks made by French philosopher and writer Jacques Derrida. In the last interview he gave before his death, Derrida confessed:

I never learned-to-live. In fact not at all! Learning to live should mean learning to die, learning to take into account, so as to accept, absolute mortality that is without salvation, resurrection or redemption—neither for oneself nor for the other.⁷

The writer of John's gospel offers an alternative view. He demonstrates that learning to live will involve the painful process of learning to see death as a destructive part of human life, but the prospect of salvation and resurrection offers us joy beyond grief. However, if we are tempted to see such a promise as an easy fix to the demanding and important work of mourning loss, William Worden's research on current theories of how grief is processed provides a useful insight. He sees the work of mourning involving the following challenging tasks: (1) to accept the reality of the loss; (2) to process the pain of grief; and (3) to adjust to a world without the deceased.⁸

This kind of protracted emotional work and the demanding process of responding to the "changed world" and re-creating a new one after the death of a loved one is something I believe the gospel of John identifies with. In partly answering the important question—*How do the bereaved overcome their loss?*⁹—we find in this gospel that Jesus' actions are motivated by the importance of building a kinship of people who are

prepared to recognise and share in each other's suffering. In each of the stories that pivot around loss, Jesus finds a way to directly connect with people, rather than leaving them distressed and isolated.

Belonging

From my reading, the writer of John is deeply interested in strategies that enable us to work through grief in a way that helps us find a "path into the future."¹⁰ The empathic way Jesus listened to people whose faith and philosophical systems were being challenged by physical and psychological pain is a reminder of one of the fundamental ways to helpfully respond to grief, which is to validate it. In Darian Leader's work on mourning, he makes these important points: "As humans, don't we need others to authenticate our losses? To recognise them as losses rather than to pass over them in silence?"¹¹

Jesus went about the work of recognising losses, modelling a form of healing ministry to us—to stop and acknowledge another person's suffering rather than swiftly offer trite and condescending clichés. His actions show that the true work of community involves being present to the stories of others, valuing and recognising the role that listening to and creating narratives can play. In her work on how sharing each other's stories can be a transformative and healing act, Louise de Salvo writes of the social rituals we have for supporting people through the process of grieving and loss: "As we come together to mourn, we assert our need for community, for having others recognise the magnitude of what we've experienced, the emotional journey we've traversed."¹²

Through the stories of Lazarus' death and Jesus' own crucifixion, Jesus is saying something important about traversing human geography: "I know what darkness looks like, I have been there myself and have wept." He wept because he wanted to show us something of the depth of grief and perhaps to give us permission to simultaneously feel the kind of sorrow that can coexist with hope—or, in his words, "light." I think he wept to signify the complex nature of grief, as if to remind us there are no easy theological solutions to a primal reaction to loss. And we know from current practitioners who work in this field that there are patterns of grief that need to be more carefully understood when we are ministering to ourselves and other people. The three patterns

of grief might be described in the following way:

The first, called *common* grief, is marked by an initial increase in distress following a death; the distress abates slowly with time. The second pattern, *chronic* grief, is marked by high distress following a death, and this distress remains high over time. And the third pattern, *delayed* grief, is marked by low distress after a death, with a rise in distress at some later point.¹³

By appreciating the different kinds of distress and patterns of grief when listening to other people's stories, Jesus asks us to take part in the kind of healing that only comes into being through community.

The key questions remain: *How do we patiently wait for the promise of a heaven while experiencing and witnessing acute suffering on earth? How do we embrace life to the full when we are shadowed by death?* While we may find that we do not always wait with complete answers, we can wait with and comfort each other. In the liminal spaces between darkness and full light, between cemeteries and resurrections, Jesus invites us to participate in his ethic of care, which enacts one of the most extraordinary miracles of all: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you should also love one another" (13:34).

1. René Kieffer in John Muddiman and John Barton (editors), *The Gospels*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, page 186.

2. Therese Rando, *How to Go On Living When Someone You Loves Dies*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991, page 12.

3. Comparatively speaking, Arthur Kleinman's work on reading the ill body demonstrates some of the perceptions that still persist today: "Stigma often carries a religious significance—the afflicted person is viewed as sinful or evil—or a moral connotation of weakness and dishonour." He argues that the "stigmatised person" can often be "defined as alien other, upon whose persona are projected the attributes the group regards as opposite to the ones it values." See Arthur Kleinman, *The Illness Narratives: Suffering, Healing and the Human Condition*, Basic Books, 1998, page 159.

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4. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (translated Leon S Roudiez), New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, page 4.
 5. John W James and Russell Friedman, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, New York: William Morrow, 2009, page 3.
 6. H Norman Wright, *The Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling: What to Do and Say When It Matters Most*, California: Regal, 2011, page 18.
 7. Jacques Derrida, *Learning to Live Finally: The Last Interview* (translated Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas), Hoboken, NJ: Melville House Publishing, 2007, page 24.
 8. J William Worden, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner* (Fourth Edition), New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2009, page 37.
 9. Wright, op cit, page 248.
 10. ibid.
 11. Darian Leader, *The New Black: Mourning, Melancholia and Depression*, London: Penguin Books, 2008, page 85.
 12. Louise De Salvo, *Writing as a Way of Healing: How Telling Our Stories Transforms Our Lives*, New York: Harper Collins, 1999, page 209.
 13. Melissa M Kelley, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, MN: Fortress Press, 2010, page 16.

