

On grief, and not theologizing about it

My son's death did not evoke in me an interest in the problem of suffering.

by [Nicholas Wolterstorff](#) in the [January 16, 2019](#) issue



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On Sunday afternoon, June 12, 1983, I received a phone call that shattered my comfortable life and divided it into before and after. The call was from our son Eric's landlady in Munich, Germany, where Eric was doing research for his doctoral dissertation in architectural history.

"Mr. Wolterstorff, I must give you some bad news."

“Yes.”

“Eric has been climbing in the mountains and has had an accident.”

“Yes.”

“Eric has had a serious accident.”

“Yes.”

“Mr. Wolterstorff, I must tell you, Eric is dead. Mr. Wolterstorff, are you there? You must come at once! Mr. Wolterstorff, Eric is dead.” It took a couple of seconds for the reality of what I had heard to sink in.

I composed *Lament for a Son* over the course of the following year. It consists of fragments—with lots of space between the fragments. Rather early in the process of writing I tried to join the fragments into a continuous flow, but it didn’t work. My life had been fragmented, so my lament would have to be fragmented as well. I think of the white space between the fragments as silence. In the face of death, we should not talk much.

It occurred to me that it might be helpful to read some books about grief, so I went to the library and took out a few books by theologians about grief and a few books by psychologists about the grief process. I could not read them. I found it impossible to read and think about an abstract thing called Grief. Not only impossible, but repellent, a distraction from what I so urgently needed to do, namely, shape a way of life from which Eric was absent and I was in grief. *Lament for a Son* is not a book about Grief—it’s a *cry of grief*. I took the books back to the library, unread.

Lament for a Son is in a style completely different from anything I had written previously, and from anything I have written since. Not only is it fragmentary, it is also highly metaphorical. At one point I wrote, for example: “Sorrow is no longer the islands but the sea.” I had the sense that the words were given to me: I did not search for words to express my grief; words came to me and I took them in.

A friend called attention to the fact that the book asks lots of questions, dozens and dozens of them. He quoted a passage that he interpreted as explaining all the questions: “I am not angry [at God] but baffled and hurt. My wound is an unanswered question. The wounds of all humanity are an unanswered question.”

Shortly after publication, a review in a religious periodical sharply criticized the book for what the reviewer regarded as its heretical theology. Five or six readers of the review wrote to me in stern tones, taking it upon themselves to chastise me for my heretical theology. From what they said, it was clear to me that they had not themselves read the book, only that review. When I sat down to reply to those letters, I found myself paralyzed. There is, to be sure, theology in the book—implicit in my expression of grief. I am willing to defend that theology, even though much of it was blurted out rather than thought out at the time I wrote it. But I found myself incapable of arguing theology with these critics—my grief got in the way. I did not reply.

When I was writing *Lament for a Son*, I understood nothing about grief, other than that I would not be grieving over Eric's death had I not loved him. Grief was the price I was paying for love. More than that, I did not understand—nor did I try to understand. Now I understand more.

Love comes in different forms. There is the love that consists of seeking to promote or sustain the good of some person or living thing: call it *love as beneficence*. There is the love that consists of being drawn to someone or something because of their excellence: call it *love as attraction*. It is love as attraction that one expresses when one says, for example, "I love Beethoven's late string quartets" or "I loved last night's display of the northern lights." There is the love that consists of finding enjoyment in some activity, for example, loving to play the piano, loving gardening, loving woodworking, and so on: call such love *activity-love*. And there is the love that consists of being attached to someone or something: to one's children, one's spouse, one's pet, one's house: call this *love as attachment*. These different forms of love are often combined, for example, in friendship.

Love as attachment is mysterious. I may acknowledge that your cat is finer than ours, but ours is the one I found huddled on our doorstep one cold winter morning, meowing piteously. I took it in and became attached—bonded. Of course, when we become attached to someone or something, we begin to discern good and excellent things that we had previously overlooked. Attachment opens our eyes to what is praiseworthy.

It is love as attachment that makes us vulnerable to grief. When our attempts at beneficence fail for some reason, we feel frustration, disappointment, regret—not grief. When the object of our love as attraction changes, so that we are no longer

attracted, we feel regret and disappointment—not grief. Grief comes when the object of our attachment dies or is destroyed, or is no longer accessible.

Attachment manifests itself in desires and commitments with respect to the one loved. Some of those are desires for some benefit that comes to the lover; we delight, for instance, in the company of a child. Many are desires and commitments for the well-being of the beloved. We want our *children* to flourish; we don't just prize their contributions to *our* flourishing. So we invest ourselves in them, doing what we can to promote their flourishing, rejoicing with them over their attainments and the good things that come their way, sorrowing with them over their failures, their disappointments, their broken bones. These desires and endeavors change as our children mature.

When Eric died, a big part of my own self was ripped out. My desires with respect to him, my commitments, my hopes, my expectations—they were no more. My expectation that he would be home for the summer was no more; my plan to attend his graduation was no more. For a month or so I caught myself still planning to do things with him, still expecting him to call. Eventually, the realization sunk in, all the way down, that he was dead. I had to learn to live around that gaping wound and with that grief. Grief was not just an additional component in my life. I had to live a new kind of life, one for which I had no practice.

When someone to whom we are attached dies or is destroyed, we are cast into grief. That tells us when grief befalls us, not what the thing itself is. Grief, I have come to think, is *wanting the death or destruction of the loved one to be undone, while at the same time knowing it cannot be undone*. Grief is wanting the loved one back when one knows he can't come back. Tears and agitation are typical expressions of grief, but they are not the thing itself. My grief was wanting intensely for Eric to be alive when I knew that could not be.

It has to be *wanting*, not wishing. When I was a teenager, I wished to become a major-league baseball pitcher—one of the very best, a 20-game winner. I fantasized about it. But the fact that I have not become a baseball pitcher has caused me no grief whatsoever, since it wasn't something I really *wanted*. I had no talent for baseball, and I took no steps toward becoming a pitcher. I wished, but I did not want. And one has to know, or be convinced, that what one wants is impossible. Otherwise, it is hope rather than grief that one experiences—perhaps worried, anxious hope, perhaps hope against hope, but hope. Grief is wanting with all your

heart what you know or believe is impossible. The more intense the wanting, the more intense the grief.

In grief, wanting collides with knowing. I desperately wanted Eric to be alive, but I knew he was dead and could not be brought back to life. Grief is banging your head against the wall. If you are frightened, you can run away or hide; if you are angry, you can vent your rage. When you are in grief, there is nothing you can do, other than altering yourself by getting rid of the frustrated want or by repressing your awareness of it.

By virtue of wanting what you know or believe to be impossible, grief is irrational: it makes no sense to want what you know cannot be. In this way, too, grief is different from fear and anger. Some fear is irrational, as is some anger; but fear and anger are not inherently irrational. It makes good sense to be fearful when you are in danger; it makes good sense to be angry when you are insulted. Grief, by contrast, is inherently irrational.

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It is this irrationality at the heart of grief that leads people who are not personally acquainted with grief to say to the person in grief such things as, "No use crying over spilt milk." "You can't bring him back." It is this same irrationality at the heart of grief that leads many in our society to regard the person in grief as needing therapy or counseling. Some grieving persons do need therapy because their grief is pathological. But grief is not pathological as such. If you are attached to your child, you will feel grief upon learning of his or her death. This is not pathology; this is human nature.

How was I to live with this strange and painful intruder—grief? I was well aware that a common way of dealing with grief in our society, perhaps the most common way, is to try to disown one's grief. Note the language we use: "putting it behind you," "getting over it," "getting on with things," "getting on with your life." This is the language of disowning. The aim is to get to the point where one doesn't think of mentioning it when asked to identify the significant events in one's life.

"But I think I remember hearing that you lost a six-year-old son."

"Oh yes, that's true. I had forgotten."

That is disowned grief.

I felt intuitively that to disown my grief would be to live a lie. It would be to declare, implicitly, that Eric's death was not an evil, or that my love of him was not a good. But his death was an evil, a great evil, and my love for him was a good, a great good. My grief spoke the truth. It was an existential shout of "No" to the evil of Eric's death and an existential shout of "Yes" to the good of my love for him.

I would own my grief. When tears came, I would let them flow. When telling about significant events in my life, I would tell about my love for Eric, and about his death, and about my grief over his death. I would preserve the memories, and I would live with the disturbances and disruptions in my life that those memories created.

A rabbi friend, Phillip Sigal, who participated in Eric's funeral by reading a passage from the Hebrew Bible, remarked afterward that what he had witnessed was the endurance of faith. He was right: my faith endured. But it would become a different kind of faith, a faith that incorporated Eric's death and my grief. And that would reveal to me a different kind of God, more mysterious. My relationship with my fellow human beings also changed: I felt an emotional affinity, often unspoken, with those whom I knew were also in grief.

Faith involves cognition of some sort, be it belief or something else; but faith, at its core, is not belief but trust. After Eric's death, my trust in God became more wary, more cautious, more guarded, more qualified. I pray that God will protect the members of my family. But I had prayed that for Eric. I still trust God; but I no longer trust God to protect me and my family from harm and grief.

Lament had been a minor part of my religious life; praise and thanksgiving dominated. Now, in this dark place, I found myself drawn to the psalms of lament. They spoke to me. Or rather, they spoke *for* me. Their words became my words.

Some who have lost a child are angry with God. "God, how could you do this to me? I have loved and served you faithfully these many years." It was not anger I felt but hurt—hurt and bafflement. How could I fit together my son's untimely death with the God I worshiped? I knew the traditional strategies for doing so, but I found I could not accept them.

God did it, some say: it's part of God's plan. That made no sense to me. Scripture speaks of God overcoming death, bringing about a new day when death shall be no

more. Saint Paul calls death the last great enemy to be overcome. If death is God's enemy, how could Eric's death be something God did? God may have permitted Eric's foot to slip, but God did not make it slip.

Some say that tragedy is part of God's strategy for soul-making—part of God's strategy for bringing about moral and religious improvement in people. This view, which goes far back in Christian history, is the "solution" C. S. Lewis proposed in *The Problem of Pain*. But Eric was dead. The tragedy of his untimely death did nothing for his soul. And as for the souls of those who loved him: I found the very idea repulsive, that God would use Eric's death as a device for making me, and the others who knew and loved him, better persons.

God is more mysterious to me now.

Others echo Job's friends, arguing that tragedy is God's way of punishing us for our wrongdoing. John Calvin was inclined toward that view, adding that we must patiently accept the punishment and not rail against it. I joined Job in rejecting the idea that God used Eric's early death as a way of punishing me—or anyone else. Jesus healed the infirm and raised the dead. He did not declare that infirmity and untimely death are God's just punishment for sin, and then walk on. I shall continue to rail against Eric's untimely death. This should not be.

Then there are those who argue that God is as pained by tragedy as you and I are, but that there is nothing God can do about it. This is the position defended by Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. I found this position nonsensical. Was the God who created this vast and intricate cosmos not capable of forestalling Eric's death?

Finally, there are those who hold that the untimely death of a child is a price to be paid for some greater good that God is bringing about for human beings in general. All such views seemed to me oblivious to the each-and-every theme sounded in scripture: God desires that each and every human being flourish until she or he is full of years. I could not accept that Eric's death was a tradeoff for some greater good God was bringing about for humanity at large.

I did not think long and hard about these proposals for making sense of it all. Neither, after rejecting them, did I try to think up a new and better theodicy. God has not told us why there is natural and moral evil in the world, has not explained to us why we do not all flourish until full of years. I live with that. What we are told is

that God is engaged in a battle with evil and will eventually win the battle. Rather than embracing some traditional theodicy, or trying to construct a new one, I have argued in some essays that if God is indeed engaged in a battle with evil, we should reject the traditional doctrine of divine impassibility, which says that God surveys what transpires in the world with undisturbed bliss. Our suffering disturbs God.

Something else in me was steering me away from the so-called problem of evil. I think I might have been interested in the problem of evil had Eric not died. His death, and my grief over his death, held me back. I would begin reading some new treatment of the problem of evil and find I had to put it down. I did not understand then—nor do I understand now—why that was, nor why it remains the case to this day. Why did Eric's death, and my grief over his death, not intensify my desire to make sense of it all?

I did not shy away from taking note of the gaping void in me that his death caused. I did not shy away from voicing my lament over his death. But I could not bring myself to try to figure out what God was up to in Eric's death. I joined the psalmist in lamenting without explaining. Things have gone awry in God's world. I do not understand why, nor do I understand why God puts up with it for so long. Rather than Eric's death evoking in me an interest in theodicy, it had the effect of making God more mysterious. I live with the mystery.

If I cannot make sense of it, why not give up on God? I cannot. When I consider the stupendous immensity and astonishing intricacy of the cosmos, and the miracle of human consciousness and intelligence, I find that I cannot believe it all just happened. A being of incomprehensible wisdom, imagination, and power must have brought it about—or rather, *is bringing* it about. I have come to think of God as performing the cosmos. I look out the window of my study on this autumn day in western Michigan, at the deep blue sky and the gorgeous colors of the leaves. This is a brief but glorious passage in God's performance of the cosmos.

The words *wisdom*, *imagination*, and *power* do not describe; they point. They're the best we can do. Something like our wisdom, something like our imagination, something like our power—yet infinitely beyond. The God who became more mysterious to me has also become more awesome, awesome beyond comprehension.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Grief speaks the truth." It was excerpted from In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life in Learning,

published by Eerdmans.