

Blessing Life's Losses

Letting Go and Moving On

Joan Guntzelman



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Introduction



“Blessed Are Those Who Grieve...”

Several years ago, ferocious winds felled groves of lodge-pole pines in one of the most beautiful sections of Grand Teton National Park. The Forest Service erected a sign explaining: “In order for a living forest to continue to exist, we depend on three things: blowdowns, like the one that occurred here, when wind speed reaches such a degree that old, weak, unhealthy, and even some strong and healthy trees are uprooted or felled; a type of beetle infestation that destroys trees; and forest fires.” That sign captured the pattern of our universe—in order for life to continue, we *need* loss and death.

Losses are constant. We do not live long in this world without loss and its attendant hurt. Of course, we are also continually surrounded by beauty and goodness, if we have the eyes to see them. However, unless we have a painful loss or an ecstatic moment, we tend to give little or no thought to the pattern of the universe: loss and

growth, death and life. Loss and growth are partners. Death and life are two sides of the same coin. As Job exclaimed: “Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?” (2:10, NRSV).

Not all loss is of the same magnitude or kind. It comes in an infinite variety of ways—sometimes it is barely noticeable; at other times, it is overwhelmingly apparent. All loss can be the groundwork for new life and growth. Nature supplies abundant examples. For instance, the loss of the limy greenness of the aspen leaf makes way for the shimmering gold of a brilliant fall. The caterpillar that goes into the darkness and silence of the cocoon must stop being a caterpillar in order to become a brilliant butterfly. Our bodies are steadily repairing and re-creating themselves. New cells constantly replace dead cells. Within each human body, the processes of death and life, loss and growth, continue.

Stages of Human Loss and Growth

Loss and growth proceed in each season of life. Our first loss comes when we pass out of the protecting womb and into the world. When we venture into the tumult of school, the simplicity of a world of family gives way to lessons, performance, and getting along with other people.

Growth in the form of experience and learning propels us out of childhood and into adolescence. People begin to expect us to act grown up. With the loss of our child body, most of us also lose our child innocence. We discover that we are capable of evil, and we vacillate between childhood dependence and the adult demand

REFLECTION 1

Aging



“Who is that old person in the mirror?...”

Opening prayer: Eternal yet ageless God, you love me with an eternal and unconditional love. Help me to look at myself and my life with your eyes. You love me at every stage of my life. Grant that I may openly trust in you and willingly change and grow through all the days of my life.

Story

“Every once in a while I can’t believe it when I look in the mirror,” Betty said. “I don’t feel any particular age inside, but when I see myself in the mirror, I’m shocked! I can’t help but think, ‘Who *is* that old person?’”

Betty prided herself on staying active and involved in life. She battled to maintain a relative slimness and worked at living a fairly healthy lifestyle. Except for minor aches and pains, she had no history of serious

illness. Even so, Betty grew increasingly aware of and amazed at the changes in her body as she aged. She tried to block out this recognition much of the time, but then she would be surprised at the aging person who stared back in dismay from her mirror.

Comparing notes with one of her friends, Betty remarked, "I joined an aerobics class, and I like it a lot. It just took me a little longer to work up to the pace of everybody else. But I look around at all the others who are younger than I am, and I can really see where I used to be. All those firm, strong bodies!"

Betty knew the changes that had gradually crept up on her were still happening. Her light hair and clear skin had always been her best features. Now she noted gray hair, wrinkles, and age spots, even though the deeper smile lines on her face did offset some of the effects of aging.

Because she read a lot, Betty kept her bifocals hanging around her neck, and she wondered how she had ever gotten along without them. They went with her now to restaurants so she could read the menu and to church for reading the hymnal. Reading street signs became a challenge, and the last time she renewed her driver's license, she had to use her glasses to read the eye chart. She could not play as much tennis as she used to or zip through a whole day of hard housecleaning without taking a break. When she was younger, she had always dived in, stayed with it, and just felt pleasantly tired at the end.

Recently a cashier at the movies asked Betty and her husband, Jim, if they were eligible for the "senior citizen" discount. While they liked the decreased price, the

question was a blow to both of them. “Do we *look* that old?” they asked each other.

Betty acknowledged that she was better at many things now than she had ever been. She read avidly, was an adventuresome cook, and had taken up watercolor painting. In some ways, she had greater self-confidence. She appreciated many aspects of her life more than ever before.

At times, though, sadness would creep in and Betty would think about who and where she was in life, how so many people and so much that she’d known and loved were already gone, and that her life was probably more than half over. The fact that she would probably never do all the things she would like to do hit her hard. She would never again be the person she used to be. “How hard it is,” Betty thought, “to grow older.”

Commentary

Until we move into midlife, we act as though aging has nothing to do with us. We have a sense that aging creeps up on us and captures us when we aren’t looking, somewhere around the age of forty. Even after that we do not really believe it for a while. We stay active and keep ourselves looking good. Nobody knows—especially us. Besides, we are still important to our families, and we have lots to do at work.

Every once in a while, however, the truth breaks through and reminds us that we are moving along. Life is doing what it does for every living creature—flowing without cessation until death. The awesome sense of our life’s inexorable movement to the end begins to scare us.

Losses happen in our early years, but we blithely overlook them because so many new things come into our life. We relish growing up. During these early years, we know that death happens. Perhaps our grandparents die. People die in tornadoes, fires, and accidents. We might have to bury our deceased canary or beloved cat. But concern about our own death seldom surfaces.

Somewhere in the middle of our life, the fact of our own death sneaks—or sometimes storms—out of the closet. We have a hard time looking past the ways we are changing. We see wrinkling skin, graying hair, sagging muscles, and rapidly diminishing energy. We are horrified and, deep down, we are scared.

Confronted with our own demise, we want to rebel. Fortysomething men and women suddenly start aerobics, brisk walks, and low-fat diets. While maintaining strength, good health, and a clean and attractive appearance is wise at any age, we might go to great lengths to maintain the illusion of youth even as it passes—sometimes even after it is long gone. This is denial.

Having grown up in a culture that glorifies youth, we may have unconsciously and consciously adopted cultural values about the aging process. When we at midlife begin to pine for youth, we devalue who we are, as we are. Some of us become almost apologetic for our age.

By the middle of our life, losses come at an increasingly faster pace. Friends and family move off or are taken in death. Jobs change and retirement looms. Long-held dreams and hopes begin to lose any possibility of fulfillment. Our body gradually gives way to chronic ailments and conditions that we used to think only afflicted our elders. We are encountering our own vulnerability.

Too often, we spend our energy trying to make the losses of aging unreal. We gain nothing by pretending that aging is easy. In youth, change almost automatically meant gain. The formula was built into our developing body. In middle age and beyond, however, growth and gain are up to us. The first step in growing through our aging is to acknowledge the losses.

We open ourselves to opportunity when we are willing to look at the losses involved in our aging and to allow and accept all of the accompanying feelings. Nothing pushes us to try to make sense of life like aging, trying to find growth through diminishment.



Reflection Exercises

◆ As you settle yourself into a comfortable position, relax. Take some deep breaths and call on the Holy Spirit to be with you in your meditation. Imagine that you are watching a videotape recorded at all stages of your life, from baby pictures to pictures taken today. You control the speed of the video, so you advance it slowly. At key moments, you push the mental pause button and ponder how you looked, what you could do, how you felt.

When you turn off the mental video, write a list of all that you have gained and lost as you have aged. Check those losses that have been especially hard for you. Be aware of the emotions that arise with these thoughts and let them flow.

◆ Consider the images you have of beauty and goodness. How close are they to Madison Avenue types? Are