

Grief and Sorrow for Highly Sensitive People: Inspired by Francis Weller's 5 Gates of Grief

We are all familiar with the evolving skies of grief, yet, we cannot fully articulate the complexity and depth of grief's ever-changing landscape. Grief evokes emotions that reverberate through the vast space of our souls - it is more than a series of emotions or a process that we need to 'fix' or 'get over'. Grief is an intrinsic and fundamental aspect of the human experience that connects us deeply to the sacred and the soul. We live an intricate and close relationship with grief, and, despite attempts to deny this, we are collectively being drawn towards the inevitable need to come into relationship with the parts of ourselves that are submerged in the grief and trauma of our past and present.

Grief and sorrow accumulate and entangle themselves in the depths of our being. Many of us are familiar with a soul longing for authentic connection and deep belonging, which can never be fulfilled by the accrual of material possessions or through the attempt to meet the societal expectations of what we 'should' be. There is a deep sorrow related to our severance with soul, and paradoxically, it is the depth of this sorrow that also enables us to hold a deep reverence for life, and brings awareness to the necessity of working with the emotions and energy of our shadow.

One of the gifts of sensitivity is not only our ability to experience the rapture of awe, gratitude and profound appreciation for life, but to feel into the depth of our individual and collective pain and suffering. In times of crisis we recognise that our intimacy with grief is also deeply related to the temperament of sensitivity. We feel an intense visceral urgency to turn towards and come into compassionate union with the grief and sorrow of the world, rather than trying to deny it, push it away or 'fix' it. There is a need for us to stop and really listen to the collective grief, sorrow and trauma and connect with it from the space of our hearts. This takes a huge amount of courage and an ability to recognise our shadow as well as embrace the parts which we may find it easier to turn away from.

When we hear of grief - we usually relate it to bereavement or the loss of a relationship or significant other. Losing a loved one is a type of initiation into the world of the unbearable that changes us forever, and it's important we learn how to give space to grieve these losses. We also need to explore the many forms of grief that lay hidden in the shadow - the grief we are not even aware of. This includes grieving the parts of ourselves we have disowned, processing the collective grief and sorrow for the loss and destruction of our world and grieving a pervasive loss of connection and belonging to our ancestors and the sacred.

I have been deeply inspired by the work of Francis Weller and the concept of the five gates of grief (Weller, 2015). The five gates of grief are as follows:

- Everything we love, we will lose
- The places that have not known love
- The sorrows of the world
- What we expected and did not receive
- Ancestral grief

These five gates offer language and a framework to make sense of the various grievances which are unexpressed and unacknowledged in our culture and society. They give voice to the grievances we may have experienced but haven't been able to label in the past.

The First Gate: Everything we Love we will Lose

The first gate speaks to the importance of us embracing and embodying the concept of impermanence and the inevitable cycles of life and death. We live in a society that clings to life and the desire to constantly maintain a state of positivity. We are expected to always be okay, thriving, growing and expanding ourselves and our place in the world. We enter into relationships, careers and a way of life with the false assumption that it will be this way forever. We rarely wake up each day with the awareness that everything will inevitably end. This inability to connect with the concept of impermanence results in us lacking appreciation for what we have in the moment - unable to embrace gratitude for the essence of life or fully grieve when something comes to an end. It is said that gratitude and grief go hand in hand (Welwood, 2013).

The Second Gate: The Places that have not known Love

The second gate is the places that have not known love and relates to a grief that we carry because of the parts of ourselves we have denied or pushed into the shadow and exiled. These parts are often our inner child, wounded and shamed, which we attempt to hide or suppress out of fear of disapproval or rejection. We unconsciously grieve the loss of these parts of ourselves daily. This is one of the unspoken types of grief at the core of our individual and collective suffering - when we are disconnected from parts of ourselves, we are also in a state of disconnect from others and the world. Highly Sensitive People have often exiled the sensitive and intuitive parts of themselves. These are the parts which experience other ways of knowing, for example, through intuition, their sixth sense or numinous dream, and often feel overwhelmed by this depth of awareness. These parts often become shamed or exiled because they have not been deemed socially acceptable or have not had the opportunity to be held in safety.

This gate also relates to the experience of individual and collective trauma. Traumatic experiences are common in highly sensitive people because it is common for us to have experienced events that we were unable to process, and this resulted our psyche needing to split off parts of ourselves as a way to cope or handle the experience effectively. There is wisdom in the trauma response (Van der Kolk, 2005). However; in the long-term, it results in what is referred to in shamanism as soul loss (Ingerman, 2006)

Soul loss is the belief in shamanic and indigenous traditions that trauma or difficult life events cause parts of our soul to be lost, and it is important that we engage in rituals to retrieve these lost soul parts. These parts often carry aspects of our life force and power; we must bring them back to reach a more integrated and whole sense of self. We need to learn how to embrace, nourish and extend compassion to the lost parts of ourselves; we cannot grieve what we feel is beyond our capacity to love and it is through our grieving that we can begin to forgive and welcome home these lost souls.

The Third Gate: The Sorrows of the World

The third gate is related to the sorrows of the world and is about turning towards the grief we feel in regards to the loss of species, habitats, culture and tradition. This grief is continuing to accumulate and shared by all of us - in particular those of us are highly sensitive. It is a grief we

cannot simply ignore - there is a soul longing to live in relationship to the world, however; we are collectively moving further away from this way of being and it is this severance from soul which is causing this ache and sorrow.

Carl Jung (1875-1961) and indigenous traditions speak of a worldview in which everything consists of soul, we live inside of soul - the anima mundi of the world. The greatest grief of our time is the fact that we have lost connection with this awareness and knowing - we think we are separate from the world and from soul. We extract and utilise the resources of the Earth as if it is something we can use merely for our own growth and development and we do not live in relationship to the world in the way that our indigenous cultures did. I have spent time in particular areas of the world where I have experienced a type of grief, that's been difficult to put into words, but relates to a sense of numbness and emptiness that stems from the apparent disconnect from soul. For a while I was perplexed at this numbness and pain that would infiltrate my entire body, yet, what if this is an example of the soul of the world weeping through us?

The Fourth Gate: What we Expected and did not Receive

The fourth gate refers to the grief of what we expected and did not receive - it relates to a longing to belong. It is a grief we feel for what we may not have even come into contact with; therefore, it often occurs on a cellular or unconscious level. This grief relates to an innate need to come into this world and be met by the container of community, tribe or intimate connection to a group in which we feel we belong. Unfortunately, many of us come into this world without the experience of being met by a community of others, or we grow up in an environment in which there is isolation and disconnect. For many of us who are highly sensitive, we often experience that we don't quite belong or fit in with our community - we feel different or isolated.

It is difficult to articulate a grief for something that we have never known or received. However, many of us experience it as a visceral discomfort or feeling that something is 'missing'. This is often internalised and perceived as a lack, emptiness or flaw within the self and leads to so many people attempting to fill this absence through drugs, alcohol or an overconsumption of material possessions. It is often only when we are granted support or connection with a community that we begin to understand what is missing and what we are really searching for. When we turn towards this gate of grief, we are often confronted with an unfathomable sense of emptiness and loneliness. It takes a huge amount of courage to turn towards this emotional

vacuum - this is where we need community and a strong vessel to be able to surrender to the vast grief contained within this space.

The Fifth Gate: Ancestral Grief

The fifth gate is related to ancestral grief. This is also a grief that is carried viscerally through our bodies and relates to intergenerational trauma. Often we carry around a sadness or sorrow that is hard to identify, yet it relates to our family lineage. There are memories, emotions and experiences which exist on a cellular level in our bodies and are passed from generation to generation. These emotions exist on a subconscious level, and it takes a particular awareness from an individual to recognise what trauma and grief is present within the family lineage. It then takes a huge amount of courage and calling to turn towards it so it can finally be healed or transformed.

Ancestral grief also relates to the collective weight we carry from the loss, abuse or pain of millions who have experienced genocide, slavery or war; the loss of a culture, tradition and lives because of these atrocities. Another level of ancestral grief relates to the fact that we are disconnected from the lineage of our ancestors, which means we have also lost connection to our land, language, imagination, rituals, songs and stories, which leads to a lack of belonging or connection to something greater than. This grief requires us to reconnect with our forgotten lineage and the sacred connection that comes from our ancestors. Even if we don't know the exact lineage of our ancestors, we can energetically seek to connect with those who came before us.

It is likely that we can all relate to the five gates of grief and it's incredibly helpful to give language to the types of grief we are experiencing - to make sense of the visceral sensations in our bodies. Giving language to the various forms of grief is particularly important for those who often feel overwhelmed by the depth and diversity of their emotional experience. Instead of feeling overwhelmed or confused by these emotions, we can learn to connect more deeply with these forms of grief and hold space for our individual and collective suffering. I have experienced that those of us who are particularly sensitive and empathetic often have a soul calling and are somehow bridges between the conscious and unconscious realms - we are gatekeepers that can facilitate a turning towards our own and other people's grief.

References

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