Grief is the Signature of Loss.

Anne Lastman

With the issue of abortion found on many political agendas and elections there are many aspects which are either not permitted to be heard and listened to, and to this I would like to offer some insights about two types of grief which remain taboo even in this day of chaos. There are moments in life which help to change our understanding of how easy it is to dismiss or suppress grief without really understanding the complexities of grief, I hope this is one of those moments.

*Example:*

At the time of the death of my son about four years ago, I, as a grief counsellor, thought I understood all that there is to know about grief. I know about complicated grief, disenfranchised grief, anticipatory grief, abortion grief, sexual abuse grief, child loss grief, pet loss grief. I felt quite knowledgeable about this topic. Or so I thought, and then later I realised that I didn’t know much at all about two particular types of grief, disenfranchised grief. A grief which cannot be spoken about, that is, grief after suicide and abortion grief which still have a stigma attached to them and so it’s this death that continues to be whispered about. When asked about the death of the loved one by suicide the response is invariably “my son tragically died 4 years ago” and left at that. This both for the inquirer not to be made to feel uneasy and for the responder not to have to explain. When discussion about abortion is heard and abortive woman goes into silence.

I have attended many conferences on grief, seminars on grief, discussions on grief, youth grief, I have given workshops and presentations on grief, therefore I knew about grief. But grief has many twists and turns especially around corners, and various kinds of shock responses and different kinds for management. grief indeed has a 'mind of its own.’

Grief is the response to the loss of someone or something precious to each human being and the pain this loss causes. Grief is something our body expresses both internally and externally and it’s a way of keeping that person’s life story alive.

Grief is the response to the loss of everything we knew about the relationship with the one who has died. All the good things and even not good things. It’s in-built into the humanity of each individual. *Grief is the signature of loss* which never really goes away but lies quietly in the caverns of our hearts and minds. It's covered over so that it’s not always before our eyes, but it’s there. And so, it happened in my own life. And from this experience a new understanding. Each suicide or abortion of a human being with its hundreds of trillion cells making up its body means that each suicide or abortion is experienced not only by the griever but by each of us, that is, all humanity has experienced a loss, not only the suicide’s loved ones or a woman’s unborn baby’s death, but all of humanity. One like us has died violently.

I remember when my son Mark passed violently away, at first not believing it. I can still see myself running around, as fast as I could, all around the apartment just saying NO until I stopped. Exhausted. Then dealing with the coroner and still saying NO, and his report and still saying NO. Two funeral services, a secular one for his work colleagues and non-religious friends and when the body returned to us 3 weeks later a private catholic ceremony just for family, and then cremation. I still said NO it’s not Mark, and yet when I saw the coffin going down, I placed a single red rose on it and in my mind, I kept saying “it’s okay Mark you can go now. Look ahead there’s Jesus waiting for you. Go ahead don’t look back. We’ll be Ok, so now go”.

A part of me was saying, NO death didn’t happen, and yet another part of me was saying final goodbye and throughout all the time since the call about his death not one tear came. I remember, after the call, running around the apartment saying NO. I must have said NO hundreds of times. During all the paperwork. Preparation for services. Choosing of urn, no tears. I also remember at the wake for his colleagues and friends I was going around saying to people “there there it’s Okay” and “yes, he’s gone” Not using word “dead” and “I know he’s gone” no just NO. Likewise at the small service for family during coffee and biscuits still being the good hostess and comforter of others but no tears.

After funeral each went back to their own lives, and I went back to mine and still NO he’s not gone and no tears.

I immediately returned to work counselling grieving women. Being very professional and still no tears. This went on and on but eventually it felt better and put on the back burner. I’d look at his photo at home as I walked around and said nothing. Everything went back to normal.

*That is until:*

In the beginning of 2023 (3years after funeral) I was asked to get both birth and death certificates for estate purposes. As his executor apparently it was my job, but I kept putting it off until eventually it had to be done. At registry office I was handed two certificates one birth one death, and his name was on both of them. And then it happened. I looked at the young lady and said, “Mark’s dead, isn’t he?” and the dam burst its banks. Again, I started running around the office but this time wailing. I was taken into a “grief room” and given water, tea, but it didn’t want anything I wanted Mark. (I realised running for me is related to trauma, as if running away from the memory of the trauma or a remembrance of running from onslaught of trauma).

Why have I shared such intimacy with you? Not to elicit sympathy but to explain how this is similar to abortion grief. Both are types of disenfranchised grief. Bothbodies (usually suicides and abortions) are unseen in death. Both bodies not held one last time and crying over their beautiful body which a mother gives to her child. I/we couldn’t see Mark’s body because of the condition it was found in. My last encounter face to face with him was about 4 months earlier when he took me out to dinner, gave me a silver chain with a heart which had the words “*I love my Mum”* (he was 45 years old)written within the heart andhe said he was giving this to me because he thought he would be away on the day of my birthday. So, the last image I have of him was in a Korean restaurant and him giving me a silver chain with a heart and the words “*I love my mum*” So remembering him in this way and not seeing him laid out in death and the usual funeral preparations I could not accept that he had died.

With abortion whether early stages or late term or any gestational age, there is no body to see no body to hold. No body to hold tight, To look into the face. To whisper words of love and goodbye. One minute the baby is lying safely in the mother’s body, the next minute it’s gone. There is no image to remember, no words spoken.

When we encounter someone who has had an abortion either recently or long past and is able to say “I’ve had 1-2-4-6 abortions and I feel okay” I now understand what they are saying. That there is a door they don’t want to open because if they do the pain will be unbearable. Even those who shout loud words, defiant words, about not caring about abortion that they had, an abortion and its pain which they are hiding by running around saying that they are OK “I’m Okay” “don’t believe those who say you won’t be OK, they’re pro-lifer protestors, they’re lying to you. see I’m Okay.”

No woman is ever okay permitting the killing of her own child, or contributing to the death of her child, or seeing her child in death, she is shocked into denial and emotional shutdown so she believes that she is OK. We also know that seeing her own child in death would then make her actually “see” what has happened and the image is permanently imprinted never to be forgotten. Perhaps this is why images of abortions and dismembered aborted infants or, disfigured suicides, are not permitted on screens or in newsprint, or (though social media has taken liberties in this matter. Thoughtless liberties.) Even in Parliaments when abortion laws are being discussed, fought over, no images shown because it’s the seeing of the humanity which surfaces the embedded mother love would sway decisions. Unseeing leaves no images*.* The seeing (as in a funeral facility or chapel) allows a final kiss on a cold forehead. A word in the unhearing ear. A tear to fall on love, which surely, they must feel. Unseeing, leaves that empty hole which nothing seems to fill because it was supposedly nothing that happened. “It” wasn’t a little human baby but nothing. Cells. Tissue. Product of conception. Embryo. All imageless.

Throughout all of this I have been able to see clearly that these two types of death (suicide and abortion) have same responses, that is, shame as a hidden factor which forbids open expression of sorrow, regret. Deaths which cannot be openly acknowledged. Suicide because of shame. Abortion because shame. I also realised how important are the final rites (where possible and whatever the culture determines) which closes the person’s life on earth. This is so important that when a body is missing, the words “you never forget” or “I’ve remembered him every day of my life,” (miscarriage) or “I went in pregnant, and I came out empty, there’s just a hole in my heart and a yearning to see her” are heard. This, I believe, is why even adopted children, no matter how happy their adoptive family life has been, there is that need to “see” who and where “I come from”. Where there is nothing then there is a lifelong blank space, a need to keep looking backwards and to see and know.

We understand that suicides and abortions and even murdered and unfound bodies are topics of pain, and we steer clear of pain by suppressing it until another day when the pain can be coped with it. This, we know is inscribed within the human being, Our soul. A need to know and see and hold and when the time comes to let go.

Love finds it difficult to look at son/daughter who has chosen to leave too soon, or a mother who has chosen not to carry her infant to life, but imprinted love cannot forget. Love never forgets but at times temporarily runs from the chaos that has visited, it runs deeply into itself where it’s safe.

A further moment of deep learning for me and a new understanding of words of my clients is the manner of the dying. Prior to abortion it is not considered what happens in an abortion (and now believed that child experiences pain during its immolation) but after the abortion information is sought by its mother. Google responds to the question about abortion. And so, the mother learns that her baby’s body is subjected to the different methods used to kill an in-utero child. The mother then begins her ritual of remembering. Focussing on the manner of the dying. The most painful aspect of her child’s death and cannot stop thinking about the pain her child endured and this becomes almost an obsession. The need to revisit the manner of the dying. This is the punishment she inflicts on herself to suffer as her baby suffered.

With the suicide issue there is also a different understanding about the death. Again, the manner of the dying. Did he suffer? Was his torment so much? What were his last thought? Did it hurt him? What was his last memory before he completely left? but mostly was he in pain? Did it hurt him (physically). Did he change his mind? Did he remember us? And we (and me especially) I have been stuck in the manner of the dying “did it hurt you. What were your last thoughts?” For me the manner of the dying and not the dying, as with abortion, this becomes the pain. The manner, because we don’t want our loved one to go in and through pain.