

Grief and Loss

By Michaelle Mary

In today's modern world nobody has time for anything. People schedule "quality time" for kids, schedule "date nights" with their mates, and trade time at home for overtime at work. They hardly have time to think, to feel, to deal with messy emotions. That's why they invent. They invent everything from the microwave to synthetic fibers to super highways; anything to make life a little easier and comfortable, faster and better. Mankind has revolutionized, industrialized, globalized, and compartmentalized. But people don't just stop at compartmentalizing goods and things; they stuff anything and everything in neat little boxes, in square things, within cube-like receptacles, on rectangular pieces of paper. They stuff them in the drawers of their hearts and minds and souls. They stick them in there until they are ready to deal with them. Some immediately peruse them, thumb through the feelings that they either didn't have the time to feel or didn't want to feel. Some keep them locked away or at least try to keep them away. This scenario becomes especially true when feelings of grief or loss are experienced.

Yet, in order to move on, a meditation on the events and on the emotions therein are required. Without meditation, people are lost in a sea of emotions bound to swallow them up. So each one finds their way of dealing with that mass of feeling hidden in that drawer – they organize and compartmentalize. In three books read in the second semester Core program we can find three people who found a way to handle their grief. Each of them in their own way put their emotions in a square container, a book. They found a way to make their intangible, a tangible and a confusion of thoughts into coherence. The process is varied and it is never the same with each person. Elizabeth Kübler Ross put it into five stages: denial, anger, bargaining, depression,

and acceptance (healing). Some may go through these stages methodically and almost by-the-book, but many others will not. They may pass through stages rather quickly or skip them all together. Or they may linger at one stage for ages caught in the fathom of their loss. Readers don't get that with C. S. Lewis and Tim O'Brien authors of *A Grief Observed* and *The Things They Carried* respectively. We find them in the aftermath or rather the final stage of emotions after the loss of loved ones, because you see, the pain never really goes away. Instead, they just find ways to deal with it. They just found a nice drawer to put it in, nice and neat. It's there for them to pull out and look at.

C. S. Lewis writes on the loss of his soul mate, his beloved wife, whom he refers to only as H. He writes in stream of consciousness. It is a recording of events in chronological order. It's what he feels at that moment in the best way he can describe. For many it is difficult to understand, hard to follow, as it should be. Who of you can step into the shoes of a fellow man and step without skipping a beat? No one feels the same or thinks the same. This book was not written for outsiders, it was written for him, for *his* drawer of grief. His stepson appropriately forewarns that the book is "*one* man's studied attempts to come to grips with and in the end defeat the emotional paralysis of the most shattering grief of his life" (Lewis XXI). Often his feelings contradict themselves or seem to at least. He starts off talking about the affect the loss has had on him – a "fear", a "drunkenness", a laziness. He goes on to describe that the memory is so strong that it forces him to have fits of sobs and anguish. He feels disconnected with the world as if there were an "invisible blanket" between him and everyone else (Lewis 3).

He begins to think outwardly now. He thinks about where his love is and what she is. He wonders if she is in God's hands and then begins to wonder and think about God. Lewis begins to have doubts and questions like: "What reason have we, except by our own desperate wishes,

to believe that God is, by any standard we can conceive, 'good'?" (Lewis 29). Lewis even compares him to a dentist. But eventually he moves on and begins to lose the picture of his wife, his perfect memory. He eventually comes to grip with that and also comes to grip with God "trying" him. He even compares his loss to losing a leg and the pain and adjustment after the surgery. He finally ends the book with the discovery that "passionate grief" cuts him off from the dead and he no longer has the depressing feelings he had at the beginning. So this book has just taken the reader on a journey. It is a journey that began with a plunging into deep sorrow and sense of loss, to a rising to the top of consciousness once again. What I've noticed is that Lewis makes an astute use of metaphors and similes and it is through these instruments that organizes his drawer of pain and loss. They are his compartments.

Tim O'Brien takes a different approach organizing his thoughts and feelings. In the same way that Lewis uses similes and metaphors, O'Brien uses characters and people. They act out his frustrations and confusion. The people in the book may be real people or they are partly fictionalized amalgamations of O'Brien's take on the war. He even comes up with rules for telling a story. He sets parameters on his stories. He creates a compartment for his feelings. First rule, a war story cannot be believed. Second, it can never end. Third, if it has a moral than it has to deep and make the listener go "Oh." Fourth, a war story never generalizes. Fifth, if there's a point, you won't get it until twenty years later. Finally, a war story is tested by the questions it raises (O'Brien 71-83). These rules are the walls of the box that puts his views and opinions in. For the most part he follows these rules and it is within these set parameters that O'Brien shares his experiences of the war and the loss and grief that ultimately followed. He is on the other side of the grieving process. I would say that he's at the end, but as I said earlier, the grieving never ends, at least not in this world.

Through each story he tells we learn a little about Tim's grieving process, from the story of the water buffalo, to Linda, his first girlfriend, to the story of the man he killed. Like Lewis, he is unable to fully grasp the feelings that he has while he's in combat or when he's in the moment of loss, pain, and numbness. He is like Norman Bowker who drives around the lake. He is the father trying to explain the war to his daughter. He is all of these people in the book coming to terms with the loss almost twenty years later in the form of stories in a book. He writes outwardly, not inwardly like Lewis does. He wants to show others how he felt during the war with all that death around him. It's his grieving process.

People have their own ways of dealing with their grief. C. S. Lewis and Tim O'Brien chose to use their words. They chose to share their pain and heartache with others in order to deal with it within themselves. With grammar and syntax and punctuation they put their loss into words that elucidate the issues and matters within the corners of their boxes, of their compartments. It's in these drawers that we see these passionate emotions put away, not locked away, rather, tucked safely in a vessel for future use and meditation. For some, like O'Brien and Lewis it is words that convey their grief. For others it is pictures, recordings, paintings, pieces of clothing, the love they show for their remaining loved ones, the memories held onto in their hearts that show their loss. In their mind's eye they take them out from time to time and hold them, cherish them, throw them, caress them, hate them, and love them. These are their compartments.