

Grief is a reflection of wealth

The first gateway to be crossed, after the immediate awareness of loss, is the realisation that there has been something of great value present in one's life. This immediate insight in the face of tragedy already contains a grain of consolation. One's life has not been empty – one has not languished in solitude. One has lived in relationship with others, and the most interesting of these relationships have been ones of love. It is good to remind oneself of this and to reaffirm it.

Why is it good? Another important realisation: we humans have a problematic tendency to take wealth for granted – even inner wealth. As soon as someone precious enters into our life: a romantic partner, a friend, or a child, we get used to treating them as a possession to which we have an automatic right. Soon, we no longer even notice how much our existence is enriched and intensified by these people

to whom we are bound. We only remember their value and significance when they have departed. Grief puts a red pencil through all these absurd ideas of entitlement. Everything is on loan, everything is a gift – life itself is a gift up to the moment of death – this is what is written in the place of all our deleted fantasies of possession. But grief also tells us: Look! You were one of the lucky recipients. These gifts were bestowed upon you for years. Now this is the price you have to pay. The more intimate your love, the happier you were, the more bitterly you will weep over the loss of the joy you were granted.

Once, at a scientific conference in Dallas, I took part in a sightseeing tour for foreign speakers. The bus tour took us past some of the most magnificent gardens and the most expensive houses in America. The tour guide told us how many millions of dollars had been invested in each of them. When he enthused about a particularly impressive mansion with gutters made of pure gold, I made the succinct remark:

"But this is all just on loan." The tour guide looked at me with annoyance: "Are you trying to scare me?"

It was not at all my intention to scare him. But I felt sorry for him that he was so shaken by this comment. Life will eventually run its red pencil through his fantasies as well...

Wealth does not consist of an overabundance of things that will have to be left behind. True wealth consists of a full life – a life of devotion to many wonderful treasures. The loss of these treasures will have to be grieved when they are taken away. Grief is a reflection of wealth.

Those who are truly poor are those who have nothing to grieve over. They have nothing to lose because there is nothing that quickens their heart. These are the poorest people of all.