

Chapter 6 – Loss

Introduction--

Journalists, the good ones, advise, “Don’t bury the lead.” And, with this chapter I am following their advice with the lead: “Losses may be the most significant shapers of who we are and who we are becoming of anything we experience in life.”

As I have said that line in a multitude of presentations, I get a variety of responses. There are those who are puzzled, offering the reply that they had never thought of the informing and forming influence of losses. Or, they relate that from their rearing until that point in their lives, they’ve been taught to get over their losses in life and move on. Or, they’ve never considered that they are beings who are always in process, being shaped in how they think, how they feel, how they relate—and losses are involved in all those matters. So, what they consider to be a static condition must have to be recognized as a fluid reality.

With those replies I ask for individuals to think of losses they have experienced. Join me in your own list of losses you’ve experienced. There are kinds of losses that are universal among human beings. There are some of these universal experiences that are shaped by the cultural context in which they happen. Perhaps in the next section you will recognize some which you have not consciously experienced, but realize these losses have had some poignant effect on your character, sense of well-being, and relationships. As well, you will make some associations from losses listed. That is, the list names the general area of loss, but your experience has been more of a specific part of the general area. So, just possibly anything that follows as a name of a loss is really representative of a continuum, if you please, of potential impact on this or that person.

The Losses We Experience

The loss of home can stay with us for a number of years. People who grew up moving around a lot. Maybe their parents were in the military, or in the ministry. When asked, “Where’s home?” they may reply with either, “No where, really. We moved around a lot;” or, “Wherever I’m living.” Certainly, some people reply that they’ve never really felt at home anywhere. There are different degrees of allegiance to a place, different degrees of being able to be at ease.

There are those persons who are forced to move away from where they feel at ease, at home, because of financial conditions (the jobs went away), because of conflict—whether it is intracultural or cross-cultural, because of being evicted, because of a family breakup. The level of trauma can be different on persons.

The loss of face is one of those dynamics that is more visible in Asian cultures than North American ones. Loss of face means embarrassment, a lack of showing respect, and can be identified as the result of shaming. All of these dynamics are those which Americans can identify. The one experiencing the loss of face may absorb the loss because of a slight, a rudeness, an abridgment of manners, even bullying.

The effects of losses have scale to them. One major loss coming as the death of a loved one can in and of itself be more significant than an abridgment of etiquette. The saying, “death by a thousand cuts,” refers to a form of capital punishment used during the mid and late Chinese imperial dynasties. It can also refer to those who experience slights over and over, small in and of themselves, but cumulatively put a drain on one’s composure, emotional strength, and even physical well-being.

The loss of mobility can happen at a number of levels and in a number of contexts. The results of an injury or surgery leave one incapacitated to the degree that movement about is limited or impossible. The loss of free movement can affect one's personality.

The loss of security comes upon us if we are attacked, burglarized, or abandoned, or sense that we have been left. And abandonment, getting left, takes many forms.

Losing one's mind has many expressions—dementia, emotional illness, for example—but, the sense of loss expressed by those who suffer from these kinds of losses gives rise to fear, anger, a lack of direction, unable to find a way out of the incarcerating effect of some of these maladies.

Identity theft strikes us at points we don't realize exist perhaps. Still, the initial shock of knowing someone has taken over the power of your credit cards, for example, lingers as we enter the long path necessary for getting our identity back.

The loss of a patriarchal or matriarchal figure leaves some people without a sense of moral compass for life. They describe their days as not having any topography. The horizons slip away. Reference points for direction disappear.

There are the relationships that come apart—maybe quickly, or maybe the parting of ways is the result of a long decline happening day by day almost imperceptibly. Friendships that have gone along for years fade. Romances that promised a lot in the beginning, but crash like Humpty Dumpty.

“Don't lose sleep over. . .” and any of us can fill in the noun or pronoun in the advice from a friend. The point usually is don't spend time worrying over things that can't be changed. The larger sphere for the statement gives advice literally about sleep, however. All sorts of vocations call upon their practitioners to schedule hours that put them behind on the average number of

hours of sleep their age range, or them as individuals, should have. First and second year university students are some of the most noticeable in my experience. Sleep deprivation caused by studying too late, staying out enjoying their new found independence, or working at a part time, even full time, job to be able to pay for their education eventually catches up. All sorts of emotional and physical maladies begin to take root, with accompanying losses of some kind.

The list can continue. Have you noticed so far these losses are what we would call personal losses? We experience them personally, perhaps with others, but in ways that are unique to ourselves. There is resource in empathizing with one another as we find common elements in some of these personal elements.

What about those losses that can be considered social losses? Think about those cataclysmic events in your lifetime. For some generations, all one has to do is say, “November 22, 1963,” and all those will be able to tell you where they were and what they were doing the day that John Kennedy was assassinated. Or, the days the space shuttles, Challenger and Columbia, each disintegrated. Or, those natural disasters like hurricanes which devastate hundreds of square miles, force thousands of people to evacuate—and in some cases never able to return—and reshape a regional economy. Other examples can be raised. Every generation has a date or dates marking losses on a community, state, regional, and beyond level. The impact becomes a part of the narrative of the area, but also a part of the social psychology and character shape of the demographics affected both directly and indirectly

Some losses seem to fit the certain chapters of life. But there are losses in every chapter of life. They could be considered inevitable and constant. That thought is new for too many people. We tend to shape life and make decisions around whatever it takes to experience no losses. Whole industries are alive and well to help us not to experience any loss.

Not only are losses at some scale inevitable, but their impact can be deep and ongoing.

The Bible and Losses—

Too many sermons, Sunday School lessons, and testimonies have been given toward the matter of living a victorious life. At best, these have to be labeled near heretical, at best pseudo-triumphal meanderings. Rather than giving models for overcoming losses, they add to the loss list as they maintain that if one is not experiencing the “victorious” life, then that one must question her or his faith. These diatribes develop from cherry picking verses here and there from Scripture.

But, the larger perspective of Christian scripture is that losses are a part of life experience. Further, we not only should take notice of losses, but realize these are opportunities for broader and deeper perspectives on life with the losses we experience. As with so many facets of life, Scripture has narratives about loss.

One set of narratives that usually doesn't consider the loss experienced by the star character is that of Joseph. One would not need much investment of time to gather those experiences of loss about him. In fact, one might come up with a clearer biographical study of Joseph built around his losses. He was sold by his brothers and reported to his father, Jacob, as dead. Life apparently went very well for Joseph for a time in Egypt, but then he was accused of acts he did not do. To a fellow prisoner he related that his story should be straightened out, and that person did tell a better story about Joseph, sometime later.

The events surrounding the death of Jacob give in a few verses the impact of the death of a patriarch on the whole group of Hebrews. There are periods of time described for the embalming process of Jacob's body. The trip to the Cave of Machpelah, with a stop at a harvesting location

that involved loud wailing—likely very much like mourning in Middle Eastern funerals contemporarily. One can't really get an accurate figure of the number of days that have to be characterized as days of mourning. But, that time frame was considerably longer than a time of mourning, expressing a sense of loss, in our own time.

Especially the Joseph story reminds us that we should think about our own mortality. Not incidentally, those who articulate the pseudotriumphal approach to life are trying to cover the inevitability of our mortality. Scripture, though, is teaching us how to live well and how to die well. To think about our own mortality, though, means we have to give consideration to matters coming through scripture. That is, we have a responsibility, an accountability, over the time we do have living the life that is ours.

The Joseph story is cast as part of the longer, to that point, patriarchal story of the Hebrews. That story was essentially the relating of where the Hebrews had come from, but moreover, where they were headed. To consider our losses, our mortality, should cause us to examine those same ideas. What is our heritage? What are the losses people in our heritage have experienced?

Dealing with Losses

How did they deal with those? Are any of the positives or negatives of those dealings still being dealt with by my and your generation?

These loss narratives point us in the direction to where we are headed. It is quite likely that losses will cause us to look down, literally. Watch people's body language as they are experiencing loss in their lives. Some tend to become more stooped, haggardly drawn, slower

moving. Implicitly, first maybe, then explicitly in losses lie the potential of moving toward a more transcendent view of life in the here and now, and the there and then.

For the here and now, from the Apostle Paul we have passages that talk about a kind of moving sidewalk, a ladder, movement from one state of being, one noticeable virtue to another. In both cases these early apostles contended that suffering could be perceived as having potentially a positive influence on our character shape. Paul said to the Romans (5:3-4 NRSV): “. . . we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope. . . .” These verses are not proof texts for us to go looking for suffering. Rather, here is something of a map toward how we view sufferings—and, any kind of suffering is another way to say “loss”—and if there is any possibility of good coming from the suffering, whether that is personal or corporate.

In that time and our own time, however, there are losses that some people do not get over—perhaps because no one helps them process the loss that has happened. A message coming through loud and clear is that too often we do not help people experience loss and be able to filter through the pain at so many levels that accompanies those losses. And, one of the best filters is time, and time with people who care about how we are.

Likely the Apostle Paul, again, had in mind those losses that people experience when he advised to the Corinthian Christians to comfort one another, out of the comfort they had experienced from God. One of the results of worship is that losses can be put into perspective. Some healing can occur. The well being growing within us gives us perspective to have sympathy, empathy, and encouragement toward others who experience similar or the same kinds of losses.

The point must be made that any Christian congregation, or other faith tradition for that matter, are at their best as they deal regularly, continuously, and well with losses, of whatever kind or scale.

Conclusion: Why wait until now in this little book to bring up losses, if they are so influential in shaping who we are and who we are becoming? Certainly, losses could have been treated first as one of the integrity wheel's spokes. And, here it is, now represented on the Integrity Wheel image as being at the 8 o'clock spoke. But, by now, if you have followed the movement around the wheel, you will see that losses are affected by everyone of the other spokes—calling, heroes/heroines, memory-hope, and place. Once recognized and reflected upon, losses are connected to the spheres, the context, the realm of each and all these. It may take reflection on our losses to explain something about place. We may recognize, for example, someone has been a hero/heroine, only when they die. Let us be alert to the losses we experience, not ignore them, not take the offhand, even dismissive “buck up and get on with life” reply to someone who has experienced loss. Rather, identify these matters, no matter how big or small, meet them head on and dissect them as to the damage we feel they are doing to us, and others. This meeting head on can be done best with friends, family, whether biological or faith tradition in base, drawing on the resources meant to help us deal with losses. For, after all, if you agree now with the lead statement in the introduction, we are understanding and responding to some of the most meaningful character formation dynamics we can know.