

The Birds and Five Stages of Grieving

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Amelia Island, Atlantic Ocean, 2020

It is the fall of 2020, in the midst of a global pandemic. My mother died just one year before— not because of the pandemic, but before it even started. Leukaemia killed her. It happened in the most unexpected way, so inexorably unanticipated and unavoidable that it shook everyone who ever knew her and, at least for a short while, had the privilege to live close to her. The sudden death of my mother struck me with a traumatising shock of pain that caused the deepest and most profound grieving span of time I could have ever imagined, for months and years to follow. It was the experience of losing not only the being that was closest to me as a person, but the closest to my essence, my ethics, my morals. Somebody dies and an ideal you shared seems to go with them. Something you mostly had in common, some deep aspect of yourself you subtly feel only that person could understand and nobody else ever will— an idea you both believed in, an attitude, a value system, a cause... A significant aspect of yourself feels lost when the person who mostly shared it with you is lost to life.

The sundeck of our beach house faces the ocean. On the coast of Amelia Island, in North America, we have a breathtaking direct view of the Atlantic Ocean and the feeling of living on the ocean front is usually fantastic. The wooden patio chair I like to sit in, on the deck, is an old-fashioned oak-made rocker, smoothly swinging in a gentle, slow, rocking motion when weight is

shifted or the wind is blowing. It gives a sense of nostalgia and invites relaxation and silent meditation. In my days of serenity, I used to sit in my soothing rocking chair and peacefully contemplate the horizon above the sea, watching the birds in the sky— the seagulls, the pigeons, even the eagles sometimes showing up above the sea line... I enjoyed reflecting on their phenomenal flight pattern, on their unbroken discipline, remarkably unmatched sense of direction and the dazzling rhythm of their flight. Everything was right, balanced, conscious, precisely designed in its elegant unfolding. Over time, I admired their self-awareness, the equilibrium of their daily life, their commitment to the discipline of the flock. It became a form of meditation. Somehow, I felt the connection. The birds have always been a presence in my life and, one way or another, they never failed to make their presence felt. Now, in the agony of my grieving, I stay confined to the indoors space of my home, and the isolation of the lockdown doesn't feel isolated enough for a withdrawal from the world. I don't even feel like stepping out on the deck anymore. For the time being, nothing out there looks appealing— not the sunshine, not the skyline meeting the ocean, not the breeze. I think of my old meditation routine, and I miss it. But the world looks gloomy and I don't see the light at the horizon. Not for now...

For months to come, as I go through excruciating grief and sorrow — in the middle of a world pandemic — I contemplate the depth of my existence, I survey the memory of the past, I glance at my deepest, most prized ethical concepts, which I debate with myself. I observe the inner quintessence of who I truly am. And, for the entire extent of this process, my mother's legacy of truth and righteousness firmly and enduringly stays with me.

For thirty years in my grown-up age, I persevered in the pursuit of finding my purpose in life, my place in a modern society, in academia, in a corporate career, taking on a challenging journalistic experience, and, finally, exploring spirituality. Already disappointed with the dissolute state of the world and society at a very young age, I firmly set about my quest to seek answers on my spiritual path, driven by genuine enthusiasm and hopeful expectations. I attended numerous schools of thought and meditation centres. I followed my hopes for an awakened human environment where abounding virtues and spiritual attitudes would thrive and flourish. I have vastly taught and mentored students in such communities and I envisioned a community life where spiritual undertakings would bring about honesty, truthfulness and kindness in the relationships between people, would foster a righteous, unhypocritical safe space for people's self-fulfillment and self-realization. I have sincerely brought my contribution to the realm of philosophy and spiritual wisdom teachings— as a traveling teacher, writer, straightforward journalist and cutting-edge researcher. Nevertheless, the reality I found was worrisome and controversial. While some of these schools and communities have remained a lasting memory of uplifting positive impact and nurturing advancement on my own spiritual path, quite a few of them remained a lasting source of disappointment, disconcerting memories and distress. Above all, what I found most unsettling were the alarming acts of unkindness, unethical attitudes, wrongful behaviours, prejudice and harassment I have witnessed over the years, revealing a severe lack of understanding of the essential role that truth, ethics and righteousness play on the path towards spiritual enlightenment, as well as on one's overarching wholesome development and self-actualization in life overall.

As I reflect on the bewildering experiences of these years, on the many disappointments and sour memories I brought back with me, the pain, the suffering, the agony of grief come back to me

unceasingly, again and again. Grieving is not solely heart-breaking about losing a person. It can likewise be about losing an idea. About losing a belief you held dear, an ideal you lived by, a profound trust system that was part of you, and grew with you, and guided you through life — like a bright candle in the darkness of the night — and losing that ideal can feel like a part of you is going... When that happens, experiencing grief is inevitable and profoundly distressful. Grief is our universal response to dealing with significant loss. Although mostly recognized as being caused by losing someone close, in like manner, we also grieve for losing something we treasured and relied upon— may it be a circumstance, a privilege or, exceptionally, even the collapse of a strong mindset we deeply valued as being rooted in the depth of our being. Furthermore, when this experience of loss is coupled and cumulative — more precisely, when losing someone close comes together with losing the ideal that held us connected, the values that we long identified with the person — we simultaneously grieve for the death of the loved one and for the apparent invalidation of a complex system of principles and ethics on which years of cherished shared experiences were grounded. The complex mix of painful thoughts, confusion, tearing emotions and erratic coping behaviours can be so overwhelming, simply incapacitating, challenging to the core of our existence and testing every layer of the self for a confirmation of who we really are and what we stand for.

What I feel is more than a heartbreak, it is the unmatched feeling of loss that goes beyond life and death, beyond the material world, the human nature; it is the kind of complex abstract feeling that triggers grieving for the loved one and the common cause, alike... I find a book that discusses the five commonly defined stages of grief, and I hope that reading through it would sooth my pain. The Kübler-Ross model takes me to another dimension as I try to process my feelings and make sense of the whole of it. The first glimpse I get is that, even though not experienced by everyone in the same way or in the same order, it generally defines the phases of grief as: denial (the initial phase of refusal to accept the reality of the loss), anger (which surfaces when reality sinks in), bargaining (the intricate stage of dwelling on what could have been done differently and exploring ways to undo the loss), depression (the phase of profound sadness and withdrawal), and finally acceptance (the stage of coming to terms with the loss and finding ways to move forward). It is my time to look for a powerful way to find my path out of the darkness and back into the light...

Denial. Depression. Anger

Denial, as I first-hand have the chance to experience it, is the period of grieving during which one refuses to accept the reality of the situation, a defence mechanism as we struggle to process the change, the loss, the departure— meant to protect us from the emotional pain. For all that — as I work through the shock, the disbelief, as the sense of reality distressfully sets in — the depression that follows, with feelings of sadness, isolation, hopelessness, and guilt is quite unavoidable. As the days go by, I lose sleep. I lack my usual energy and I lose interest in activities I normally enjoyed in my daily life. I'm stuck in the moment and can't move on.

I look in the mirror and I see dark circles under my eyes... The day is long and hard and it feels like it will never end. At last, it's dusk. The last fading colours of the twilight melt away and I find myself in the darkness of my room. Anger, rage, catharsis... Strangely, I am feeling angry with myself. I feel like screaming... and this is, surprisingly, a new discovery. When denial no longer

works and we are forced to accept the reality of the death and the inner loss that comes with it, that awareness of the change gives rise to feelings of anger. This anger grows in me every day and unceasingly haunts my sleep. The book about grief teaches me it is a natural response, but I find it hard to take it in, as anger strikes in such a multitude of ways, controlling and undefeated, and it directs itself towards a multitude of targets... I alternately aim my anger towards myself, towards my family, towards my departed mother herself, towards my lost ideal, my life situation so unsettlingly changed...

As we age, we learn that life alternates between the ups and downs in our growth and fulfillment. There are stages of personal development, when subtle stages of alchemic 'Nigredo' and 'Albedo' follow us in our inner transformation and take turns. There are moments when we feel like drowning and moments when we make a new leap. Carl Jung's understanding of 'Nigredo' was the moment of maximum despair that was the prerequisite to personal development—the moment when one would turn toward the search for self-knowledge. The confrontation with the inner reality can be painful, but once one reaches the depth of the darkness, the light is born, the 'Albedo', the whiteness, and — according to Jung — this is the alchemic phase when insight into shadow is realised. Nevertheless, alchemical work always begins with 'Nigredo', the blackness, the essence of spiritual alchemy; without the journey into darkness, the individual would remain only at the superficial level of social existence and rational thinking. As I have learnt myself in subsequent stages of my transformation as a person, over the years, I sometimes felt the darkness of desperation, of anguish, as of my current resentment of death could surprisingly lead me to a new awakening, to instantaneous moments of pure awareness— like a quantum leap between the bottom and the top of my existence. This recollection gives me a spark of hope... Reflecting on it truly feels like contemplating the sun at midnight, the void where the absolute darkness is actually a mystifying mix of inner light and dark. This regenerative energy of the darkness makes itself felt like an essential fuel that charges the human being during the night, providing the vitality and liveliness we need in wakefulness and daily life. The night becomes the expression of eternity, regeneration, dissolution, enabling contemplation and centeredness. When reflection brings the quietness of the mind, the peace that results is revealed.

All of a sudden, I feel my mother's presence... I feel her unbroken existence in my room, in my thoughts, I feel her strength is with me, in my struggle. I feel she holds my hand, as she always did at my times of sorrow, and she whispers to me to stay strong. I know she wanted me to be strong and I made it my mantra. Strong in my beliefs, strong in my deeds, strong in my karma... I am never to lose trust and hope and I know that. Confident. I feel her righteousness makes me resilient and I know I can go through this, as I always did. I can make it to dawn again. I can break through. Another day.

Bargaining

The birds are crowding on our sun deck today... My husband calls me to see the gathering of the flock and he seems amused. We watch the birds through the large, clear glass windows of our open-space living room, overlooking the ocean. As nobody steps out there these days, they find their way floating elegantly in circles, downwards, and land undisturbed on our spacious deck. It is late

afternoon and a whole pack of them is down there, congregating, close to our sizeable observation point.

The birds that often settle onto our deck are Eurasian Collared-Doves— a sort of pigeons easy to recognise by their black half-collar at the nape of the neck, the main feature that gives their name, together with some white tail feathers and dark-tipped wings. Relatives of the Mourning Doves, the Collared-Doves made their way to this part of the world within the past half a century and seem to be rapidly spreading throughout most of North America. As they originally came from Europe and Asia, I was quite accustomed to seeing them around in my childhood home town in Europe, all along while growing up. I became comfortable with hearing their rhythmic, typical coo call, as well.

Nevertheless, it looks quite unusual today how the entire deck is covered by this frolic pack of collared pigeons, roaming around and chirping in their distinct rhythmic way. The three-part mournful koo-koo-kook is unmistakable and comes with a flashback of profound memories. Out of the blue, my husband makes a joke about the mess they are going to leave on our deck. That brings me back with my feet on the ground. I realise he is right and I try to utter a short laugh. A shy smile. The scene is amusing, indeed, and I try to show it. Sadly, it doesn't come out quite right, cause I am torn inside. As the birds walk towards the window, in tranquility, the way they look straight at us seems utterly striking. I quietly watch the assembly of this impressive flock, and I feel how empathy transcends species.

“Look at that! Your chair!” he suddenly exclaims. His face is shining and I can see a big smile. “They made your chair look like a throne!” he laughs. “It’s majestic...” He points his finger to the window, towards the end side of the deck.

Framing my chair, there are the birds indeed, poised, still, serene. At the top of the backrest of the chair, on each side, two birds are standing tall on each corner, one bird on the left, one bird on the right, gazing straight ahead and bordering the panel like two dignified Greek statues. On the armrests, alike, two birds are standing on the edges, at the end of each arm panel, one bird on the left and one on the right, posing tall and dignified. Similarly, they gaze ahead, into the distance, with an air of confidence and contentment.

I laugh, and this time it's real! I am actually laughing. “I can picture you in that chair now,” he says, “it's like a framed canvas.” He looks at me and he adds, hearteningly— “They are holding the space for you...” The birds look frozen in time. Undisturbed, relaxed, and really majestic. “How long will they stay there, do you think?” my husband asks in amusement, as he walks away to resume his daily routine.

Long after, I am still standing there, at the window, in reverie... Surprisingly, the sky looks shinier, the blue is warmer, and the air outside is calling for a deep long breath. I feel my chest filling with a sense of warmth and vibration, and a shy gust of happiness. I feel a spark of fire in my chest, the spark that lights up the amber of the heart, as a Sufi mystic would say, igniting the alchemic energising and reawakening of the heart. It feels unquestionably beyond doubt that I am ready to start over. A new beginning, a new hope, a new challenge. I feel the invitation to resume my place on the deck. Everything looks inviting and I am strongly drawn to step outside. But I don't dare. I don't dare to disturb the stillness of these birds, their poise, their composure. I sit by the window and stare at the flock, I don't know for how long, till the sky embraces the sunset and the twilight turns into dusk.

It is dark again. I move away like being transported and I go to sleep in that state of awe and reverence. I know, in my heart, that my usual, familiar, long time recurring Eagle dream will come to me again, unapologetic, unbroken, unchanged. I invite it and I welcome it as I drift to sleep.

The next day, I step out on the deck. The ocean is still, the sky is blue, the air is filled with peaceful chirps and mild blows of the breeze. Weathered by the salty air and humid atmosphere, long-exposed to the ocean breeze and burning sun rays, my wooden rocker looks rustic, slightly weather-beaten in the shining morning light... For all that, as before, I feel it looks welcoming and reassuring, with its soothing rocking motion — always suited for quiet contemplation — that never allows the chair, or the person, to wander excessively out of stillness. Once more, my sundeck looks like home. I am at home. I feel confidence, trust, hope. I know I am back into my realm of inspiration and it will never leave me again. I sit on my chair and I gaze, again, at the line where the sea meets the sky and the birds fade away into the horizon. I'm back and I'm meditating...

During the bargaining stage of grief, we often attempt to negotiate possible ways to undo the loss, to have different outcomes of the situation. We strongly make our case in the process, we make agreements with ourselves, we even try to deal with a higher power for what should be different or could be undone. In my grieving, being faced with the impending voiding of a strong belief, debating my cause — in meditation — is the best thing I can do in the painful attempt to counter the obliteration of a life-long purpose. While I am certainly aware that the death of my mother could not be undone, I can keep my hopes up that disputing, arguing the causes of the troublesome 'status quo' in the world today has the potential to validate the ideal, the values, the principles, the ethics we both cherished, to re-establish a trust system we shared, to advocate for the authentic attitudes we stood for. I contemplate the dignity and beauty of nature, and I reflect on the essential role that truth, ethics, and righteousness should play in the true development of humanity...

In deep thought, my mind and my heart are advocating, united in harmony, for how the right living could allow happiness in the world to be more stable, enduring, and long-lasting. By cultivating authentic virtues, people could live ethically in their surroundings, they could live in the heart with the understanding that an open heart and a clear mind are inter-related and can only manifest as one. This is a way to reassure that heart openness is joined with mind clarity in manifesting our thoughts, emotions, motivations, and purpose. Living with mind clarity could allow people to more often engage in actions that lead to positive outcomes. In this view, why not try to work towards preventing the negative outcomes? Why not try to cultivate those attitudes that would, eventually, lead humanity to that state of clarity where there is enough conscious action, pure speech, pure intention, lucid thought and discernment that would allow people to transcend the realms of suffering and reach the liberation they so vividly hope for? Moreover, to educate people about the power of speech and how we should use it with discernment, with ethical and moral conduct, with authentic, pure intention— that should be a priority. To build a better world without gossip, rigmarole, deceitful speech and abusive assertions— that should be a purpose. Wisdom across many cultures teaches that intent is not just a passive state of mind or an inertial spiritual attitude. Pure intent, on that account, is a creative power that — if maintained with vigilance — has the potential to build, develop, generate a positive vision with the inner force to manifest itself and propagate in chains of positive outcomes and consequences for self and the world. While requiring some effort and personal discipline, the positive outcomes of this transformation are far higher than individual

growth. They have the potential to crucially contribute to the elevation of society to a new level of awareness, clarity, and discernment, to reduce the bias and prejudice between groups and different populations, to trigger a significant leap in the evolution of humanity.

Hours have passed... Deep into my thoughts, deep into my heart, bringing them together in contemplation, I conclude debating with myself. Defending my purpose, advocating for my cause to the higher realms of conscious awareness has proven to be a significant force in dwelling on my loss, in paving my way out of the heartbreak, despair, solitude... It now enables me to feel less hopeless and overwhelmed; it surely brings me peace.

Acceptance. Peace

The fifth and last stage in the manifestation of grief, the book teaches me, is the acceptance—when one no longer struggles against suffering. When we reach this stage, we can finally come to terms with accepting the reality of the loss. It becomes possible to fully celebrate the life of our loved one, to reinforce the beliefs and ideals we once stood for, and to cherish the memories that we shared. We can now focus our energy on working towards new goals, and we make plans for moving forward. Finding joy in sustaining the path we have long walked on — in a way that is meaningful and impactful — is living with a purpose.

...It is night again, and the daylight has faded into darkness. Undeniably, the darkness doesn't seem so dark anymore. It is unequivocally a feeling of regaining the domain of the night as purely the space and the time for rest and relaxation. I calmly aim to fall asleep, and I drift into the serene abyss... The Eagle dream and the memory of its first occurrence come back in a flash... I am very young and I'm meditating. Deeply, profoundly, transcendent. In reverie, the vision of the eagle finds its way into my field of awareness. The magnificent bird in the sky flies at high altitude, above the peaks of the mountains, making large circles in the clear air as it floats undisturbed with its impressive wings wide open. The wings and the body are encircled with a luminous contour, a contour of light that traces the entire figure of the eagle and it gives the appearance of a glow. Unexpectedly, I feel I am the bird. I feel my body, my wings, my heart beating, my breath, my essence. I feel the floating sensation. I slowly move my wings and I find the joy of the flight. I can see through the bird's eyes. I watch the clear sky in front of me, the peaks of the mountains, the clouds way beneath. Then I turn my attention to myself. I notice the light contour surrounding my body and its radiance. Somehow, simultaneously, I can see the bird, and I feel I am the bird. In a snapshot, my conscious perception alternates between watching the bird and being the bird. I am at the same time the observer and the observed. I integrate this awareness of unification and unity. Then I see the light.

In the morning, I am back on my wooden chair on the familiar sundeck and I contemplate. The ocean. The horizon. My life. And I smile...

Some people — most people — find happiness in being included, in belonging to a group, in finding themselves at the centre of society. And to secure that, quite often, they sacrifice beliefs and inner values, profound aspects of who they really are— they feel they could leave those aside for a while for the sake of inclusion and acknowledgement. Some rare people find joy in staying who they are and reaffirming what they stand for— at the biting cost of not being included, popular,

acknowledged, at the chance of becoming outsiders or even martyrs. Undoubtedly, for some people, rather than the craving for social status and illusory life pleasures, the dedication to righteousness makes life satisfying. Over and above, people with commitment to pure intention and righteousness tend to refuse to compromise, and manifest behaviour patterns that progressively and persistently counteract any attempt to limit or block their freedom of choice— in practical life, in their career, in their relationships with people, in spirituality and religion. They cannot be persuaded, influenced, corrupted or forced to do anything they don't want to do, anything that doesn't agree with their principles, their value system and authenticity, even at the cost of losing material possessions, status or recognition. Nevertheless, the joy of being true to oneself, to one's core values and ideals, to honesty and truth, is worth the sacrifice.

Once more, I found the confirmation that being loyal to one's purpose is what brings joy and contentment in my life. I am undoubtedly one of those people, and my mother was too. She stayed true to herself, authentic, loyal to who she always was. She was happy that way. I know she is happy for me now. Years will pass, and I'll remember the agony and the struggle, the ultimate reawakening, the rebirth. I'll remember how it feels to find the way back into the light, into the non-conceptual bliss that one so vividly longs for. I'll remember the victory over pain, over the feeling of loss, over the fear of being lost, and the triumph of nature— proving, time and again, its enduring dignity and amazing grace.

And every time I look at the birds in the sky, I'll remember to spread my wings and fly high...