

Marathon as metaphor

Metaphors are everywhere we look. Some can be helpful and some, especially if pushed too far, can distort. "My love is like a red, red rose" tells us something about one's love—that there is beauty, depth, intensity, tenderness and the risk of pain (with the thorns) there. We do not, of course, expect one's love to have leaves, stem and roots. "My love" is something, but not everything, like a red, red rose. But what is true is understood in a real and nuanced way with the comparison.

Metaphors can be found in the grief world, too. When loss comes, we are heartbroken. Our physical heart still beats and may work just as well as it did before, but in some true way it is broken. Death comes like a thief in the night, and in the most difficult times of our grieving, our darkest times, we sometimes describe it as "the dark night of the soul." And continuing with the themes of light and dark, many a mourner has connected to the ancient words speaking of walking through the "valley of the shadow of death." All these images, and more, tell us something important and often profound about this experience of grief which can cut like a knife and whose edges eventually soften but do not disappear.

After years of participating in the shorter races—5K, 10K and half marathon—this year I registered for and completed the Little Rock Marathon, the whole thing. It took a long time and there was much time to think in the preparation, the race itself and the days afterward when I was moving very slowly. All this time presented opportunities to reflect and in some important ways, our experience of grief is like a marathon.

First of all, it is a long journey—really long for some of us. Here in Little Rock part of the marathon weekend is an event called the Little Rockers Kids Marathon. In this event, children ages 7-12 complete 25.2 miles of the 26.2 miles of the marathon before the marathon weekend. They walk or run their miles or partial miles over a period of weeks or months and then on race day they complete the last mile of their marathon. Hundreds of children line up for the final mile and when it starts, many children sprint, running with all their might and reckless abandon. But no matter their motivation, no matter how much they want to finish it quickly, they inevitably

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slow down because it's too long to maintain their top speed. Even with the final mile, it's not a sprint, it's a marathon, and it's important to pace yourself. In order to do the whole distance, many runners (including this runner) purposely plan to walk part of the race. The method of running for a set number of minutes and then walking for a minute or more is a practical strategy of endurance and survival. It is the only way many of us can make it to the finish line.

Another thing that about marathons and marathoners is that one can't tell how fast one runs is by outward appearance. I was passed by young and old, short and tall, thin and not so thin. And periodically, I did a little passing myself. Many of us not so fleet of foot are tempted by the running shirts with the message on the back: "Please let there be someone behind me to read this" as opposed to the t-shirt once seen in a race with the message on the back: "If you're seeing mine, I'm kicking yours." I only saw that one for a little while. In a marathon, everyone has their own style and pace and comparisons are helpful in very limited ways. All runners are challenged to run their own race, and much like the grief world, all have their own stories about how they ended up there.

While running a marathon is in many ways an individual experience, it is also a community experience and the company of others makes a difference—many times a significant difference. There is an energy found in a group moving in the same direction that is not found alone. While everyone has a different story and set of motivations, all have a common challenge to endure and persevere. I met a friend at mile 10 and we ran (and walked every fifth minute) together for 10 miles. Having the company and support of a friend made a huge difference, especially in the long inclines in the middle of the course. We picked up another runner—a stranger who quickly felt like a friend—around mile 18 and we all ran together for camaraderie and support. At mile 20 our differing needs for walking caused us to part ways after offering mutual encouragement. Like all other runners that day, we ran the same course but our own individual races.

And then there's pain. I've not met anyone who has experienced a marathon without pain and I certainly did not break that pattern. Somewhere between mile 21 and 22, the strides really started to hurt. A friend and fellow runner that day expressed that around mile 20 she began "to fall apart." Some runners describe it as "hitting the

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wall" where it is just as much, or more, a matter of will than of body. One's energy is spent and it becomes a mental, and perhaps spiritual, challenge to keep putting foot in front of the other, to find some way of continuing on. Marathon training generally doesn't take you the whole distance—the last miles are a mental thing, it is said, no matter your training. Pain is part of the package and part of the unavoidable price to pay no matter your preparation. It is difficult to imagine or believe a marathon without fatigue and pain. And grief without fatigue and pain doesn't seem believable either.

Perhaps a major place where the metaphor of grief as marathon breaks down is in the matter of choice. Most do not choose to run a marathon and so its trials (and rewards) can be avoided. Grief cannot be ultimately be avoided, however we do have some amount of choice in the matter. When we open ourselves to love and attachment, we have chosen the pain of grief when loss eventually comes. Why love and attach when we know that loss and grief will follow? Why run a marathon when we know that pain is part of the experience? In this way, love and grief are like marathons: there is worth there—we know it deep inside—but it can be hard to explain.

Sorting through

Attended a weekend family gathering at my dad's house recently. It's been almost six years since my mom died, and my dad is selling the old family house on four acres and moving to a newer, smaller house on a small lot where yard maintenance is provided. It's been 35 years in this present house and things accumulate despite periodic efforts to clean out, throw away and give away. I left with two boxes of cards, notes and letters to go through for the family. One box is from my parents' 50th anniversary in 2006 and the other from my mom's death in 2008. The task is to sort through and decide which things to throw away and which things to keep. It will be a bittersweet task and one where there will need to be sufficient time and a particular frame of (heart and) mind. I doubt it will happen all in one sitting and just thinking about it makes me tired. Yet, I also find myself drawn to these cards and notes as there is something there of my mom that calls to me.

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It's like this after someone dies. We're left with all this stuff to sort through. Pictures, cards, clothes, dishes, books, tools, and jewelry. Keepsakes all. And it's not just the physical stuff left behind. There are memories, feelings, issues, unfinished business, words said and unsaid. They, too, need sorting. Some things we treasure and put away for safekeeping. Other things we want close to us where they can be seen, touched, smelled or heard. Still other things will go to special people—a particular thing to a particular person. There may be a pile to give away to anyone who could use them. But there is likely another pile too, for things to be thrown away, or maybe even burned. These are items with negligible meaning or painful meanings and we need to be rid of them (if possible). Of course, sorting through is rarely simple. It's not always clear what to give and what to keep or what to display and what to store. There are some items that we keep for now, knowing that there will come a time when we can let them go. But today is not yet that day, although we sense that day will come.

Maybe it's a room or maybe it's a closet, box or cedar chest. Often there is something that we know we need to open and sort through, but it will be hard and we wait for the strength to begin. It may be a task best done alone, or it may be one where a supporting companion (at least one) is needed. We open the door or lift the lid, take out an item and remember. The first time we hold it in our hands is usually the most powerful and potentially the most painful. When we pick it up again it may not be as heavy, as loaded with emotion, as at first. It's best if we do this in a time of our own choosing, yet sometimes circumstances force our hand as practical considerations prevail. Perhaps that room is needed for someone else or maybe we have other things to store in that closet. We know that some healing is only possible after this task is done. It waits for us with a promise of both pain and comfort, and of possible liberation from the past to a bigger present and more wide-open future.

Sorting through is one way to think of what we do to find our way after someone important dies. With each person and relationship comes its own collection of stuff through which to sort. Remembering is part of sorting but it is more than that. It is also reflecting on what is remembered. A wise person (John Dewey) said that "we don't learn from experience; we learn from reflecting on experience." It's work we do intuitively much of the time—we know this sorting through, of everything,

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eventually needs to be done. And when we have a room or closet or box that holds important things that need our sorting and we continually avoid, that unsorted container can be an anchor holding us to the past and keeping us from the fullness of the present and future. We lighten our loads not just by throwing and giving things away but by releasing the pent-up feelings and memories. We need not and cannot take everything with us into the future, so we open the box, lay everything out and decide what to take and how we will carry it. In the sorting we learn again what truly holds value.

When I go through the cards and notes, there will be some that I will quickly put in the trash pile. A card with no note or a card from a name I don't recognize. Some other notes and cards I will read and smile as they will bring my mom to life once again. Some I will hand to my wife and say, "Read this one," and she too will have a sad smile. Time has given the opportunity for memories to offer more comfort than pain, and I will expect that. I also expect that I will make different sorting decisions now than I would have soon after the events of anniversary and death. I will feel more selective than I would have been in the beginning when I may have been reluctant to let go of anything connected to my mom. I understand now, more than I could have before, that the most important things are sorted and kept on the inside and not in closets and boxes.

Thoughts from the Pick and Pull salvage yard

The spring of this year brought a new experience. The sun visor on my old car had rotted on the sunny side and needed to be replaced. My mechanic suggested that I go to the "Pick and Pull" salvage yard to see if there might be a used sun visor in better shape that could be found and obtained. I had never heard of the "Pick and Pull" and had never visited a salvage yard. On a sunny Saturday, I took my place in line to pay my fee and get a computer printout of the location of cars of similar make and model where I might find a suitable sun visor replacement. I needed the printout as the salvage yard was huge, rows and rows of wrecked vehicles in various states of being picked over. I had taken a picture of my present sun visors with my smartphone to help me identify what I needed, and with printout and screwdriver in hand, I set off down the rows of an above-ground automobile graveyard.

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Looking at the mangled car bodies, I wondered about the drivers and former owners. What had happened to them? I expected that some had walked away from their accidents, some had been seriously injured and some had bodies which had ended up in human graveyards. In some ways it was an overwhelming place. It was not only large and contained hundreds of damaged vehicles, it also represented the lives of even more people as it wasn't just the individual drivers who were impacted by these accidents. Each had families and friends and insurance adjusters.

But in another way, it was a hopeful, if somewhat sobering, place. Here people came to salvage—to pick among the wreckage of cars (and lives) and save (or pull) what was valuable for current living. Isn't this what we do in grief? We experience some tragic and devastating loss which wrecks the lives that we were living and sometimes our initial assessment is that it is a total loss. How can we go on? How can we continue to live after such an event? Yet on some level we survived, so the challenge to live remains. Perhaps we were able to walk away and look back at the twisted remains and wonder how we survived. Or we may have limped away or been carried away and gone on to places of care and rehabilitation. But if it's at all possible, we first take some things with us: Belongings that were in the passenger seat, items from the glove compartment (did we ever use this for gloves?), the music we played in the stereo and any valuables from the trunk. From in the beginning of our loss our instincts are to salvage what we can, even in "total" losses. At both the body shop for the car and for our own bodies and lives, the questions are often the same: Is repair possible? What are the costs? How do we literally and figuratively move from here? What can be saved or salvaged?

We are a stubborn lot, we people of the pick and pull. Even when our losses are "total" and the shattered remains are carted off to the final disposition, it's not really final. We go back again and again looking for what is valuable, for what we don't have to leave behind, for what we can take with us from our past lives even though much will be left behind. The salvage yard is a place of realism and hope. The wrecks and reminders of our pain are all around us, but we have screwdrivers and wrenches and we will look up and down the rows and can leave with more than we brought with us. Sometimes it is just what we hoped to find and other times it may be different but just what we needed. Of course, other times we leave frustrated and

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disappointed as what we seek cannot be found. It's worth the effort to search, however, although there may come a time where we realize that what desire can never be found and we'll have to find other ways to live and to move.

I was fortunate in my automotive searching. For a few dollars and a little time, I left with unrotted sun visors (self-installed) and a feeling of small accomplishment. But that's not the end of the story. A few months later, my old car was hit by an Avalanche (I'm not making this up). My car had actually been "totaled" two past times, but each time it was able to be repaired, receive a new paint job and driven again. This time was different and the car, with its recently installed new/used sun visors, was truly totaled, never to be driven again. I was again fortunate, able to walk away from the wreckage and return later to gather my few valuables. I expect that my old car is somewhere on some salvage yard row waiting for someone who needs a set of unrotted sun visors and maybe a few other parts to be picked and pulled. And I've got some more things to think about.

Grieving Harry Potter

I miss Harry Potter.

Can you miss someone who isn't real? Oh, I think so. We miss a good book when it finishes, a favorite TV series when it's over, and a good movie when the credits roll. Many adults felt concern when the seventh and last Harry Potter book, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, came out as they worried about their children's reactions when characters died. The author, J.K. Rowling, had promised that some significant characters would not survive to the end of the story and the possibility of Harry's death hung close and heavy as lines were long around the country and the world to buy the book as soon as it went on sale. Did it matter if a fictional character died? All one had to do was see the faces and listen to the conversations of those in line to see that it mattered a great deal.

The Harry Potter books were appealing for many reasons. Harry was an unloved, neglected and abused boy who had been told all his life that he was both disappointment and embarrassment just by being who he was. At age 11 he discovered otherwise--not only was he a special boy, in some ways he was the most

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special person in a magical world of wonders where he belonged and was desperately wanted and valued. What an appealing message for children (and adults)—that we are more important and valuable than we have ever known or experienced. Add to this great imagination, clever humor, overflowing adventure, layers of mystery, the "joys" of puberty, and good triumphing over evil and you've got a heck of a story.

But the Harry Potter story was something even more. It was and is the grief story for this current generation of young people. Harry was an orphan who never knew his parents and his story was filled with wisdom about loss, grief and living. Insights into grief begin in the first book as Harry discovers a magical mirror that shows the viewer's greatest desire. When Harry looks in the mirror, he doesn't see himself rich or powerful or winning accolades from adoring crowds—he sees himself with the parents he never knew. Eventually the wise father-figure wizard, Professor Dumbledore, finds him sitting again in front of the mirror gazing at what he will never have. With gentleness, Dumbledore tells Harry that "It does not do to dwell on dreams and forget to live..."

Throughout the books Harry is threatened by foes who call themselves "Death Eaters" as if by their power and skill they could conquer and move beyond death itself. Harry's task, however, is never to conquer or vanquish death but to find ways to live fully with the reality of death in his life. His parents are dead and some friends die, too, but Harry lives on and must discover meaning both in his life and in the deaths he experiences. There is even the concept of growth in the midst of loss: In Harry's world, there are magical creatures called thestrals that only those who have seen death can see. Midway through the books Harry finally sees these creatures who have been present all along and he is then able to use this new vision and insight in a heroic effort to help someone else—all because he can see something in his life that he didn't see before.

As the stories continue, Harry experiences more danger and threats on his life. Repeatedly in the midst of the most threatening times, he has some experience of his parents which brings strength and comfort. In one particular scene where Harry seems trapped and all seems lost, his mother's spirit (?) comes to him from his enemy's wand and encourages him to hold on for his father is coming—and both

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parents protect and guide Harry to his survival. In another brush with death Harry thinks he sees his father but then realizes he has only seen himself instead. Embarrassingly, he reports his mistake to Dumbledore who replies... "You think the dead we loved ever truly leave us? You think that we don't recall them more clearly than ever in times of great trouble?... You know, Harry, in a way, you did see your father last night... You found him inside yourself." In some ways this is the strongest grief lesson of the book—that those we love can still be present with us even when they are physically gone from our lives. Their presence with us after their death is not the same as before, but it is significant, and in the end, it is enough... enough for us to live again.

I miss Harry Potter, boy wizard and grief tutor for the masses. Can we miss a character who is not real? Perhaps the old wizard Dumbledore deserves the last word: When asked by Harry in the final book if his presence with Harry is real or happening inside Harry's head, Dumbledore responds, "Of course it is happening inside your head, Harry, but why on earth should that mean that it is not real?"