

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT

The River of Grief

When I think about grief, words don't really come to mind. What I do get is the visceral feeling of being too deep underwater. I imagine the sudden stab of fear that accompanies a realisation that you've dived deeper than you first thought: your trapped breath like a weight in your chest, the glimmer of oxygen perpetually too many arm lengths away.

Grief is more than a feeling. It's really an environment, a new condition to your life that you have to meet with your whole self. No amount of swimming against the current, or scrambling up the banks, will make it easier to navigate. Most importantly, it is not a puzzle you can think your way out of. It's something more bodily than that, like the mammalian diving instinct.

At first contact with water, an infant's heart rate slows, oxygen moves more slowly, and the glottis spontaneously blocks access to the lungs, all before the conscious mind can react at all. Living with grief is an animal experience, and surviving it requires the action of a body that knows how to keep being when the mind couldn't possibly go on.

Your body knows how to keep you safe, not just before your conscious mind, but instead of it. You just have to be in it, and it has to be lived as a part of you.

The bad news is, no amount of time in rivers of grief will prepare you for a new one. The good news is, you didn't drown then and you're not drowning now. Your body is carrying you through the experience on instinct. Take a deep breath and listen to yourself from the toes up. Feelings are hard, inconvenient and unpredictable, but the less time you spend fighting your body's messages, the more you can learn from them.

Survival is, in the end, a game of trust, and not of thought. You have to trust that you can survive your own emotions. You have to feel, even if it's overwhelming. The most important thing to remember about the river of grief is you're not surviving it wrong. It's not taking too long. You're not moving too quickly. The river you are in is just the river you are in, without moral resonance. Trust that you can manage with doing what you need.

It's easier to think of grief as something of a redemption arc, starting with pain and ending with the wellbeing you knew before. But mourning exists without narrative; it's not something you can itemise in a eulogy. The river's current will stick with you for longer than you expect, and you'll emerge and re-emerge from the worst parts of it feeling as shocked by the ways you've stayed the same as you are by the way you've changed.

Like a new-born in a swimming pool, trying to analyse your progress is only going to make the water feel heavier around you. Your body knows what it's doing.

In the moments that you feel yourself entirely submerged, trust that your heart rate may slow, your throat may close and the pressure may build, but your body knows how to navigate this space, even if your mind does not. Every fibre of you is already working slowly and carefully to navigate this new emotional landscape, if you let it. That's how survival happens—by gentle instinct, not by achievement or analysis. Take the time to be in your body, listen to every soft and hurting part of yourself whenever you feel the urge: beat to beat, without scrutiny, until you can resurface.

However you're going, you're going okay.

(Jini Maxwell is a writer, comic's artist and feelings enthusiast based in Melbourne. See more of her work at jinimaxwell.com.au)

<http://www.dumbofeather.com/the-river-of-grief-and-how-to-keep-being/>

*“Death does not end
our story...
Death does not end
our relationships”*



*“May you welcome
the tears you shed as
friends of your soul,
gifting you with an
opening to release
your pain”*

Joyce Rupp

*Life is changed
not ended*