

## MEN AND GRIEF

By Rob Jones

*In January this year, my son Luke (22) was tragically killed in an industrial accident. As I write this article I am very much in the midst of grief. Some days I am quite fine but others I am in an emotional turmoil and not very productive. But that's ok! I now know that I need to stay with the pain until it has taught me what it needs to teach me. This is not the way I had previously been taught to deal with grief and pain. Let me explain:*

Some time ago, I watched a father play with his two young children on the oval near my home. They were practising hurdling, and clearly dad was excited. His son did a marvellous job on the first two hurdles but fell at the third and badly grazed his knees. His father immediately came to his aid. "It's not that bad. Stop crying. Pull yourself together. Come on, you're not going to cry like a baby?" His son's face said it all. What he wanted from his father was his masculine embrace and assurance, but what he received was a lesson in pain and grief that most of us were also taught. He was learning that it is not safe to show or express one's feelings and pain—especially with other men. He was being taught to suppress and push down his feelings and emotions and put on a brave face. What's more, he was being taught to disassociate from his pain and not invest in a vocabulary to articulate it. Now please hear me. I do not believe for a moment that his father did not love him. His father merely communicated what he was taught and how he deals with his pain and grief. This is how most men today are taught to cope with pain and grief.

It was very interesting to watch what the father did later on when his daughter also fell over and hurt herself. The father ran to her aid, picked her up and asked her where it hurt. "Let daddy kiss it better."

Society says it's acceptable for a girl to show feelings and express her pain, but men are somehow required to just get over it!

Richard Rohr says, "A young man who cannot cry is a savage, and an old man who cannot laugh is a fool." Richard's words provide a healthy spiritual framework for men's grief work. This is essential for the ongoing growth and transformation of our men.

I have been a pastor and counsellor of men long enough to know that much of men's work is grief and shadow work. Much of men's anger is really unprocessed pain and grief. What is unresolved and suppressed is transmitted, usually onto the ones we love the most. They can't fix it, change it, and they hate it. What worked before, no longer does the job. In fact the more they try to solve the problem, the more the grieving process falters. Eventually after much struggling and collateral damage, men just shut down and go numb. Men go into their caves and sit by themselves, lost for words.

Only when men reach the end of their own resources are they free to move towards the next step in grief work—the weeping mode. This is a place where the sheer magnitude of what has happened starts to come home. The sadness. The loss. The thought of not seeing a son again this side of heaven. Our feelings and emotions run amuck. Depression, rage, thoughts of suicide, the futility of life.

This is a normal part of the grief process and is greatly facilitated in a safe non-judgmental/sacred/liminal space where men can be encouraged to stay with the pain. For many men, after a lifetime of solving problems, to just sit with it all and not fix it is very

counter intuitive. Most want the pain fixed *now*. Wise counsel is always to sit with it until it has taught you what it wants to teach you. Healthy grief work, in most cases, will usher men in to a deeper walk with themselves, God, and others. They develop a vocabulary for their feelings, pain, and emotions and learn not to transmit them. Grief work has done its work when men don't have to blame anyone anymore- even themselves.

Luke 11:29-30 says the only sign that would be given us is “the sign of the prophet Jonah”—that sooner or later life will lead us into a dark place, into the belly of the whale, to something we can't fix, that we can't control and we can't even understand. And when we have received what He is trying to show us, we will be spat out for the next part of the journey.

I miss my son terribly, and the pain is at times unbearable. Nothing will bring him back. So this side of Heaven, I hold onto the One who is faithful and all-knowing, and I keep connected to my loving faith community. Today is dark, but one day the sun will shine again.

Here is a poem that I have found very helpful.

When the heart  
Is cut or cracked or broken  
Do not clutch it  
Let the wound lie open  
Let the wind  
From the good old sea blow in  
To bathe the wound with salt  
And let it sting.  
Let a stray dog lick it  
Let a bird lean in the hole and sing  
A simple song like a tiny bell  
And let it ring  
Let it go.  
Let it out.  
Let it all unravel.  
Let it free and it can be  
A path on which to travel.

~ Michael Leunig.

*Poem: “When the heart...” from The Prayer Tree by Michael Leunig, copyright © 1980 Michael Leunig 1990. HarperCollinsPublishers.*

*Pastor Rob Jones is the founding director of Men Transforming Men Australia. MTM is a not for profit charity that provides counseling, spiritual direction, facilitated groups and Men's Rites of Passage for men and their families in Brisbane Australia. In August 2010, MTM will hold the 4th Australian Men's Rites Of Passage (MROP) at Camp Somerset Queensland.*

***Every man is a Beloved Son of God.***