

ENTRY ON A GRIEF OBSERVED

Few would deny that the death of a loved one, particularly a spouse or a child, is one of the most shattering experiences that we humans are required to endure, and psychologists have described several stages in the typical grieving process: shock and numbness at the beginning, an intermediate period of intense mourning and great anger, and finally a sense of healing and restoration. As his highly personal journal, *A Grief Observed*, illustrates, moreover, C. S. Lewis passed through similar stages after his beloved wife, Joy Davidman, died from cancer. But the journal is not so much an *account* of Lewis' grief as it is a *manifestation* of it: a record of his immediate thoughts and feelings as he searches, seemingly in vain at first, for some consolation in the death of his wife and the separation it entailed.

The thoughts and feelings recorded here reveal, perhaps better than anything else Lewis wrote, his solidarity with the rest of humanity. He wanted desperately for his earthly life with Joy Davidman to continue and to continue in the form he had come to know it. Had she been transported magically to a wondrous life in another galaxy, he would have been no less grieved by the separation. He thus wrote: "You tell me 'she goes on'. But my heart and body are crying out, come back, come back." It is not her past *suffering*, in other words, but his own need—his attachment to the life he had known—that here occupied his attention: "I know that the thing I want is exactly the thing I can never get. The old life, the jokes, the drinks, the arguments, the love-making, the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace." But even in the depth of his despair, Lewis seemed incapable of deluding himself. "I never even raised the question," he confessed a little later, "whether such a return, if it were possible, would be good for her. I want her back as an ingredient in the restoration of *my* past." And once he began to recover some from his grief and anger, he emphatically declared in his final paragraph: "How wicked it would be, if we could, to call the dead back!"

In his darkest hours, however, Lewis still had to confront the depth of his despair, and his journal records a fascinating dialectic between his intense feelings, on the one hand, and his theological reasonings, on the other. Towards the end of Part II, for example, a distraught Lewis in effect blames God for having choked "every prayer and every hope" with "false diagnoses," "strange remissions," and the like. "Time after time," Lewis lamented, "when He seemed most gracious He was preparing the next torture." But Lewis then reprimanded himself almost immediately: "I wrote that last night. It was a yell rather than a thought. Let me try it over again. Is it rational to believe in a bad God?... The Cosmic Sadist, the spiteful imbecile?" To this his intellect answered: No, this is not rational. A Cosmic Sadist could never "create or govern anything" and could never have thought of "love, or laughter, or daffodils, or a frosty sunset." But the war within continued; and after rejecting the view that God's standards of goodness are radically different from ours, Lewis again plunged into despair: "Why do I make room in my mind for such filth and nonsense? Do I hope that if feeling disguises itself as thought I shall feel less?" Still later, when his despair subsided again, he countered: "All that stuff about the Cosmic Sadist was not so much an expression of thought as of hatred. I was getting from it the only pleasure a man in anguish can get; the pleasure of hitting back."

Clearly, then, Lewis was fully conscious of the internal war raging between his intellect and his feelings. At the beginning of Part III, he thus exclaims: “Feelings, and feelings, and feelings. Let me try thinking instead. From the rational point of view, what new factor has [my wife’s] death introduced into the problem of the universe?” The obvious answer: None whatsoever. “I knew already that these things, and worse, happened daily. . . . We were even promised sufferings. They were part of the programme.” Indeed, Lewis himself had known tragedy before and had experienced the death of loved ones before. So why, he asked, did this particular death precipitate such a crisis for him? Never one to spare himself, he concluded that his faith had been “a house of cards”—not in the sense that his beliefs were false, but in the sense that he had not been as secure in them as he should have been. “If I really cared, as I thought I did, about the sorrows of the world, I should not have been so overwhelmed when my own sorrow came.”

Now some have found the honesty in *A Grief Observed* disturbing; some, such as George Musacchio, have found it impossible to believe that their hero, C. S. Lewis—this “rational and insightful Christian writer”—should have been “so shattered by his wife’s death” or “plunged so near to despair.” They have therefore invented the fiction that *A Grief Observed* is itself a work of fiction. But it is simply naive to suppose that Lewis could not have experienced his own “mad midnight moments” or even, in response to great trauma and sleep deprivation, have experienced an emotional breakdown of sorts. You might as well suppose that a “rational and insightful Christian writer” could never develop a brain tumor or Alzheimer’s disease. And besides, why should Lewis have been any different from the prophet Habakkuk, whose complaints against God are every bit as heartfelt as Lewis’ own?

Others, especially Lewis’ critics, have gone to the opposite extreme and have supposed that Lewis spoke most wisely when overcome by grief and plagued by doubts. But as usual, Lewis was wiser than his critics. “You can’t see anything properly,” he observed, “when your eyes are blurred with tears.” And only a week after recording some of his blackest thoughts, he asked: “why should the thoughts I had a week ago be any more trustworthy than the better thoughts I have now? I am surely, in general, a saner man than I was then.”

The remarkable thing about Lewis’ blackest thoughts, moreover, is how consistent they are with the theology he expressed elsewhere. In *The Problem of Pain*, for example, he spoke of God’s “loving us, in the deepest, most tragic, most inexorable sense,” and he calls this an “intolerable compliment” because, on his view, the sufferings we endure in the present are a means by which God eventually perfects us and secures our blessedness in the future. So did Lewis simply forget this point during his own period of testing and trial? Not at all. Throughout *A Grief Observed*, he consistently expressed exactly the same point. But with this difference: He now wrote from the perspective of a *sufferer*—of someone who has, so to speak, *received* this “intolerable compliment.” So now it is from a troubled heart that he asked: “What do people mean when they say, ‘I am not afraid of God because I know He is good?’ Have they never been to a dentist?” Likening God to “a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good,” Lewis also pointed out that the “kinder and more conscientious” a surgeon is, “the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If...he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless.” And that is why, given our normal human weaknesses, “a perfectly good God” who seeks our perfection may indeed seem no “less formidable than a Cosmic Sadist.”

But in time Lewis' heavy heart began to lighten and mourning gave way, gradually, to a sense of restoration and peace. He then discovered that, even as he began to accept his wife's departure, his sense of her continued reality and presence increased—as did his sense that “all manner of thing shall be well” in the end.

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FOR FURTHER READING:

Dorsett, Lyle W., *And God Came In* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1983), especially Chapter 4.

Kubler-Ross, Elizabeth, *On Death and Dying* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969), Chapter IX.

Lindskoog, Kathryn, *Light in the Shadowlands* (Sisters: Multnomah Books, 1994), especially Chapter VI.

MacDonald, George, “The Consuming Fire,” reprinted in Rolland Hein (ed.), *Creation in Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), pp. 157-166.

Meilander, Gilbert, *The Taste for the Other* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), Chapter III.

Musacchio, George, “Fiction in *A Grief Observed*,” *VII: An Anglo-American Literary Review*, Vol. 8, 1987, pp. 73-83.

Vanauken, Sheldon, *A Severe Mercy* (San Francisco: Harper and Rowe, 1977), especially Chapters VIII and IX.