

In today's reading from Job, he imagines two kinds of relief: one would be simply to hide away in the land of the dead until God forgets to be angry with him. The other is to have his lamentation written down, not on paper but on a rock so that his words would last forever. This suggests that even simple recognition of the injustice done him and his suffering would help—to have his condition denied or ignored compounds the pain. Job appeals to the ancient Hebrew idea of the go'el, or redeemer, a family member who functions to protect vulnerable individuals from undue physical and economic violence. He is positive that anyone who takes a clear-eyed look at him will exonerate him of any charges—and of course he's right. He didn't do anything to deserve this.

I've been admiring the Dallas police chief, David Brown, these last ten days. It seems like under his administration the Dallas police force has become a particularly skillful law enforcement agency, improving relations and reducing distrust between the police department and the city's minority residents. He has pushed for reducing the use of force, and discouraged chasing suspects in cars and even by foot, since such chases often lead to fatalities. When Dallas residents marched after the horrific shootings of black men in Baton Rouge and Falcon Heights, the Dallas police kept them safe and even posed for selfies with marchers. Then a deranged young man opened fire and killed five officers, and Dallas was plunged into a world of hurt.

I learned that David Brown himself has survived hauntingly similar tragedies. In 1991 his younger brother Kevin was shot and killed by drug dealers. In 2010, his son David Jr., under the influence of PCP, fatally shot a man in a random attack and

then shot and killed the police officer who responded. He was shot to death when more officers responded. Chief Brown met with the families of both victims to offer his condolences.

He kept on being police chief and trying to improve his force, and then this latest tragedy happened. And while I know that all this is not about him, he's one of the people it's happening to, and there is no way he deserves this, any more than Job deserved his suffering. I don't know how he expresses himself in private, but he could justifiably utter a lament like Job's. This is a man carrying deep grief.

Last month Krista Tippett interviewed a psychology professor named Pauline Boss about her work on grief. Krista Tippett's introduction is what made me follow through on the whole interview; she said, "[Boss] says closure is a myth that leads us astray. We can soften the stress of our own grief and that of others by opening to the ambiguity of reality." Closure is a myth. We can soften the stress of grief by opening to the *ambiguity of reality*.

Krista Tippett pointed out that our vocabulary of grief has been much influenced by the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross on the stages of grief for people who are dying. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance are the stages she delineated, though people may loop back and repeat a stage or otherwise resist being linear; but we've appropriated that concept of stages of grief, ending with acceptance, and we've sort of prescribed it for everyone who grieves. That fits our culture of mastery, in which pain is a problem to be solved. However, Kubler-Ross was describing stages of grief for *dying people*, not for everybody who grieves. When we grieve someone else's death, or the loss of a future for a very impaired

infant, Pauline Boss says that we do not reach “acceptance” in the sense of no longer grieving. She says, “human beings live with grief and, in fact, are able to live with grief. They don't have to get over it. They don't obsess with it five years down the road, but they occasionally remember and are sad, or go to the grave, or have some thoughts about the person who died. And this is normal. So, we now know that living with grief is more oscillations of up and down. And those ups and downs get farther apart over time, but they never completely go away, the downs of feeling blue, of feeling sad.” Reality is ambiguous.

She tells the story of a young couple who had a very sick baby, and who experienced what she calls “ambiguous grief” because the baby herself did not die, but could not have the life they had expected for her. She asked the couple how they understood what was happening to them, and after reflection, the father said, “Sometimes awful things happen to people for no reason.” He had let go of the “why” questions and had moved on to how they would live their life and care for their child. This, I think, is what David Brown must have done after he lost his brother, and after he lost his son who had committed a horrific crime. Sometimes awful things happen to people for no reason, and it is not a problem in need of a solution or a question in need of an answer. You feel sad, which is deeply painful—and you are right to feel sad. It will not disappear, but it will get better.

Viktor Frankl, who survived the concentration camps and wrote *Man's Search for Meaning*, said “Without meaning there is no hope, but without hope there is no meaning.” You could have hope in the concentration camp if the experience had a meaning for you, even a horrific meaning. Pauline Boss says that even

meaninglessness is a a kind of meaning:

For example, if a child dies, or if a child commits suicide, or is murdered, or if a loved one disappears at sea — it's nonsensical. But my point is that, too, is a meaning. The fact that it's meaningless is a meaning, and it always will be meaningless.

If something is nonsensical, totally without logic, without meaning, as many of these terrible events are, then I think we have to leave it there. But I think we have to label it as it's meaningless.

And I can live with something meaningless, someone might say, . . . as long as I have something else in my life that is meaningful.

http://www.onbeing.org/program/pauline-boss-the-myth-of-closure/transcript/8761#main_content

I would like to think that Chief Brown is a model for us of living through tragedy. I don't really know, because I'm not a friend of his, but I look at his steady and wise work to improve policing in Dallas, which he's been doing *since* his own personal tragedies, and I imagine that he can function so well and so wisely because he has lived with the pain and found meaning perhaps in doing good policing. The fact is that he lives in a tragic world in which dreadful things will surely happen— but that doesn't diminish the importance of making the Dallas police department the most professional and progressive department it can be. The meaning of the tragedy is *not* that he should give up.

The book of Job is patently fiction—nobody pretends it's a biography of a real person—but all of us have felt like Job at one time or another. We can resonate with his cry for recognition, to have his words engraved on a rock forever, so that there would be an eternal witness to the fact that his undeserved suffering mattered. The beauty of the story is that his words *are* as good as engraved on a rock; we can

appropriate those words ourselves as evidence that *our* undeserved suffering matters. Clearly it does; the book of Job is in the Bible because undeserved suffering matters.

I think he is crying out for meaning too; he is in the midst of the misery and cannot see a way to integrate it into his life. But that is the first sign of hope—that he looks for meaning—because like the parents of the sick baby, like Chief Brown as I imagine him, he will uncover meaning eventually, and he will be able to incorporate it and keep going, doing what only he can do having lived the life that only he lives.

I'll close with a poem by Donna Carnes, whose husband Jim went sailing one day and disappeared. It's called "Walk On," and it's addressed to her absent, probably dead, husband.

"You walk on still beside me, eyes shadowed in dusk. You're the lingering question at each day's end. I have to laugh at how open-ended you remain, still with me after all these years of being lost. I carry you like my own personal time machine, as I put on my lipstick, smile, and head out to the party."

Let us pray:

God, when we feel that we may not survive our own pain, give us enough juice to keep going one more day. When we feel forgotten or invisible, send us a friend. When we are broken, mend us with golden glue so that our breakage is visible, but beautiful, and becomes part of the gift we offer to the world. Amen.