

Along the track

Sadness

Winners are grinners and losers can make their own arrangements... or so the saying goes. Winning is considered to be very important in our culture, as is success in work-life, achieving some sort of importance or status. We tell our children they can be anything they want but sadly (pardon the pun) that isn't true. Emotions like sadness don't have much place in our culture today because there is so much focus on beauty and success, light and happiness. Sadness is sometimes labelled in self-help books as a problem emotion that needs to be kept at bay. Self-help books promote the benefits of positive thinking, positive attitude, and positive behaviours. That is all helpful but disappointments are part of everyone's life. We won't always succeed, we won't always get everything we want. Even from a very early age, learning to handle sadness and disappointments is important. We all face trials, losses, difficulties – how we handle them is important in our growth all the way through life. The apostle James wrote: Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds. (James 1:2)

Pure joy? Why? He was, perhaps, reflecting on that rather strange book in the Bible, the trials of poor old Job. Job's problem was that 'he was righteous in his own eyes' and that 'he justified himself rather than God' (Job 32:1-2). He was pretty happy with himself and his lot in life, a bit smug about it all really. He was wealthy, happily married with children, a wide circle of friends – what more could one want? Job endured some dreadful trials, disappointments and losses and, as a result (and Job deserves much praise for this), he emerged out of deep sadness a far more humble and compassionate man. He loses just about everything, including his health. His wife even tells him to curse God and commit suicide. Job's friends give him plenty of bad advice. Ultimately Job developed a much deeper understanding of himself and his own human nature, of true friendship and a far deeper understanding of God as well. He would not have arrived at such deep spiritual maturity without some reflection on his life – sadness and loss were ultimately the key to his success.

Sadness is not the same as depression, although depression contains times of sadness. Normally none of us likes feeling sad. We tend to run from those feelings inside us that sadden or frighten us and sometimes we do everything we can to keep sadness at bay. When sadness comes, it is usually brought about by regret perhaps or feelings of loss, it can arise because we fear that we have missed out on something or perhaps that we have failed to measure up.

So how do we look at periods of sadness in our lives? What do we do, for example, when our children are sad? Lots of children's books include times of sadness – do we just ignore that or do we teach our children that sadness is part of life, a growth point? We can try to distract ourselves when it comes and some people even indulge in sadness but our spirit is trying to tell us something and we need to listen. We are happy to listen in times of joy and happiness so why not now?

Sadness is not unhealthy. It is a perfectly normal reaction. Sadness is a normal part of life. Sadness can teach us about ourselves and life, it can lead us to feel deeper empathy with others and promotes a much greater understanding of ourselves and others if we reflect on it. It helps us to appreciate more the good things of life, the blessings we have, the times of joy and satisfaction. At times like these our spirit is asking us to question - why am I feeling sad, gloomy, why do I have this feeling of nostalgia, or loss, or regret? Do I have a sense of missing out on life? Of course there are times when happiness does not reign supreme – we are disappointed, frustrated, jealous, anxious but it is what we do with those emotions that is important, how we reflect on them, how we handle them that counts. And what decisions we make because of them.

Job also discovered something about the nature of relationship with God. Like Job, our strength, our salvation as it were, lies not in our capacity to be strong enough never to be broken, to set no limits on what we can do or achieve but in the opposite, to realise that although we are gifted and talented by a loving God, we are fragile and at times, quite helpless to do what we think we want. We are finite creatures in both our life span and what we can do. There are times when we need to open ourselves up to God, to realise that we don't have to do all this alone, by ourselves. There are times when we need to surrender our helplessness to God who can fill in all those places where we are helpless, perhaps jealous, feeling inadequate and broken, feeling that we may have failed. It took some time but ultimately that is what Job discovered.

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