

Grief, Spiritual Crisis, and CS Lewis

by Merle Meyers

You never know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It is easy to say you believe a rope to be strong and sound as long as you are merely using it to cord a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?
— C.S. Lewis

Oxford don, Christian apologist and bestselling author CS “Jack” Lewis was no stranger to death and loss from an early age. At 9 he lost his mother. Following that he lost the security of family altogether. In WWI he lost 4 of the 5 officers he trained with.

With the death of his mother the young Jack felt all hope for happiness was gone. His father, possibly through his grief, became detached from Jack and his older brother Warren (“Warnie”) and sent them off to boarding school. Warnie later wrote, “*With his uncanny flair for making the wrong decision, my father had given us helpless children into the hands of a madman.*” The sadistic headmaster whom they called “Oldie” was later declared insane and the school was closed. The boys lost their mother, their father, and their environment of safety. They lost their childhood, with no one to support them through the wilderness of grief. Life was chaotic and for a time he was separated from Warnie as well; there were constant changes.

As an adult after the death of his officer friends, the atheistic Lewis returned to Oxford and buried himself in academia, not looking back. If he was experiencing profound grief, he did not acknowledge it. Academia proved to be a safe place where you don’t have to risk being “vulnerable.” Being a confirmed bachelor, Jack removed himself from the outside world and flourished.

Jack enjoyed frequent and vigorous conversations with fellow Oxford friends including JRR Tolkien. As the topic turned to matters of faith, He gave considerable thought to the arguments and eventually became a believer in Christ 1931. Middle aged by then, Lewis and Tolkien were each the “midwives” to the other’s works, ***The Chronicles of Narnia*** and ***The Lord of The Rings*** respectively.

Lewis’ outstanding writings such as ***The Screwtape Letters***, ***Mere Christianity***, and my personal favorite ***The Abolition of Man*** are timeless works that continue to fascinate readers. One book Lewis wrote was titled ***The Problem of Pain***. This is a book about pain after significant life losses. This book was a 30,000 foot view of grief and was spiritually theoretical. It was a theological treatise, lofty and conceptual.

Jack, with nicotine stained fingers and teeth, and brother Warnie (Major Warren H. Lewis), also a confirmed bachelor, shared a cottage on the estate called The Kilns. They drank beer whenever they wanted and chain smoked. When the ashtray was full, it would be dumped over on the carpet and blended in with a slipper. There was no woman around to civilize them domestically. It was bachelor paradise.

Jack, being labeled a misogynist by some jealous critics, was actually well known locally for treating women delightfully and with due respect. Then through a common friend in New York, Joy (Helen) Davidman-Gresham began to correspond with Lewis. Joy was a Jewish-American divorcée with two young sons. Intellectually, she was Jack's superior, and an accomplished writer herself. She became a believer on Christ after reading ***Mere Christianity*** and corresponding with Jack.

Joy moved over to England with her boys, and shortly after was diagnosed with terminal cancer. Her health declined quickly. Jack married Joy on her deathbed. Miraculously, her cancer went into remission, giving Joy three more years of drawing Jack out of his cloistered life in academia before she became ill a second time.

When the cancer returned it quickly claimed her life. By this time Jack, fully vulnerable due to the love for his wife, experienced a grief that knew no bounds and he spiraled into spiritual crisis.

Not that I am (I think) in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'So there's no God after all,' but 'So this is what God's really like. Deceive yourself no longer.'
— C.S. Lewis

Under the pseudonym N.W. Clerk, Jack wrote another book on the spiritual and emotional effects of separation and loss titled ***A Grief Observed***. After his death in 1963, Lewis' name replaced that of N.W. Clerk on the book's cover. This work was not another theological offering from the bubble of academia like his earlier ***The Problem of Pain***, rather, it was a personal grief journal where he reached out and embraced the pain and suffering that can accompany the death of someone you love.

*How often -- will it be for always? How often will the vast emptiness astonish me like a complete novelty and make me say, "I never realized my loss till this moment."
The same leg is cut off time after time."*
— C.S. Lewis

The book charts the wilderness journey of getting hit with tsunamis of intense sadness followed by smaller waves in between. Lewis discusses the rage at the God he thought he knew, calling Him "a cosmic sadist." Lewis goes inward describing the extreme emptiness and hopelessness.

*He always knew that my temple was a house of cards.
His only way of making me realize the fact was to knock it down.*
— C.S. Lewis



Lewis, still in grief's wilderness, began to become familiar with the wilderness. He started to see glimmers of light (hope) in the wilderness.

*Something quite unexpected has happened. It came this morning early.
For various reasons, not in themselves at all mysterious, my heart was lighter
than it had been for many weeks.*
— C.S. Lewis

After embracing and processing the emotional pain within, the pendulum rocks back and forth from focusing on the pain of his loss (the numbness, anger and sadness) to focusing on restoration. The book goes on to describe Lewis acknowledging that the physical relationship with his wife is *over*; the continuing bond is *permanent*.

*But I know this is impossible. 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 lovemaking,
the tiny, heartbreaking commonplace.*
— C.S. Lewis

Then his thoughts turn to God, whom he thought he fully understood, only to arrive at his conclusion that we will never be able to fully comprehend God. And why the pain?

But suppose that what you are up against is a surgeon whose intentions are wholly good. The kinder and more conscientious he is, the more inexorably he will go on cutting. If he yielded to your entreaties, if he stopped before the operation was complete, all the pain up to that point would have been useless.

— C.S. Lewis

The pain is commensurate with the love and represents God's love. And what Lewis learned from God is that when you choose love, you choose the pain.

*To see, in some measure, like God.
His love and His knowledge are not distinct from one another, nor from Him.
We could almost say He sees because He loves,
and therefore loves although He sees.*

— C.S. Lewis