

An Apprenticeship with Sorrow

By Francis Weller

From his book -

In the Absence of the Ordinary

This night will pass, then we have work to do.

- Rumi

Grief and loss touch us all, arriving at our door in many ways. It comes swirling on the winds of divorce, the death of someone dear, as an illness that alters the course of a life. For many of us, grief is tied intimately to the ravages we witness daily to watersheds and forests, the extinction of species, the collapse of democracy and the fading of civilization. Left unattended, these sorrows can seep underground, darkening our days.

It is our unexpressed sorrows, the congested stories of loss that, when left untouched, block our access to the vitality of the soul. To be able to freely move in and out of the soul's inner chambers, we must first clear the way. This requires finding meaningful ways to speak of sorrow. It requires that we take up an *apprenticeship with sorrow*. Learning to welcome, hold and metabolize sorrow is the work of a lifetime.

Our apprenticeship begins when we come to understand that grief is ever-present in our lives. This is a difficult realization, but one that has the opportunity of opening our heart to a deeper love for our singular life and for the wind-swept world of which we are a part. We begin with the simple gesture of picking up the shards of grief that lie littered on the floor of our house. Nothing special. Nothing heroic.

Not unlike the young novices entering their apprenticeship with the master teacher, we begin humbly—sweeping the shavings, mixing the pigments, cleaning the brushes, tending the fires. We begin the process by building our capacity to hold sorrow in the womb of the heart. Through this practice, we become able to welcome the pervasive and encompassing presence of grief.

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Grief works us in profound ways, reshaping us moment by moment in the heat of loss. We are also asked to work grief and to take up our apprenticeship with fidelity and love.

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Grief is more than an emotion; it is also a *faculty of being human*. It is a skill that must be developed, or we will find ourselves migrating to the margins of our lives in hopes of avoiding the inevitable entanglements with loss. It is through the rites of grief that we are ripened as human beings. Grief invites gravity and depth into our world. We possess the profound capacity

to metabolize sorrow into something medicinal for our soul and the soul of the community. The skill of grieving well enables us to become *current*—to live in the present moment and be available to the electricity of life.

We gradually turn our attention to what is here, now, and less on our need to repair history. We remember we are more verb than noun, more a jumpy rhythm, a wild song, a fluid leap than a fixed thing in space. As Spanish poet Jaime Gil de Biedma said, “I believed I wanted to be a poet, but deep down I just wanted to be a poem.”