

## NAMING OUR LOSSES

Psalm 137:1-6,  
August 7<sup>th</sup>, 2008

Last week, our family gathered in Michigan for the annual Mulholland reunion. It's a week of canoeing, swimming at the beach, playing cards, sitting around the campfire, eating too much food and reminiscing. I've attended the reunion 43 times in my 47 years. When I drive through the tunnel of trees leading to our cabins, it's entering a cathedral. I get the shivers. I feel religious.

And, like any good religion, our reunion has its rituals. On the final day of the reunion, we share in a common meal and gather for the family reports. Each of my grandfather's children and grandchildren chronicle the events of the past year – births, marriages, graduations and new jobs. Every report ends with gratitude and thanksgiving. Indeed, until this year, we've seldom dealt with any great losses. We've been a blessed family.

This year was different.

Last year, when our families met, my Uncle Dick had a cough. By September, the doctors discovered his body was full of cancer. We buried him in October. This summer, after 47 years of being with Uncle Dick, I discovered the depth of our loss. His son, Roy – my cousin – stood in his father's place to give their family report. With a quiver in his voice, he began, "We really miss Dad."

Though his words pierced my heart, they also brought relief. So many of us had felt the loss and not named it. I felt it when Roy and I couldn't challenge our father's to our annual game of Rook. I experienced it when we realized none of us knew how to open and close the cabins – a task my Uncle had done for years. I was aware of the loss when my cousins took two hours to install a screen door – a task my Uncle could have done in fifteen minutes. How many times in one week did my Uncle's name catch in our throats? How often did we try to ignore our loss?

My cousin said, "We really miss Dad. And we want you to know that we want to talk about him, even if doing so brings tears. We want to remember and to hear your memories." I don't know what others did, but I took my cousin at his word. I spent the following hour seeking out my aunt and my cousins and telling them that I missed him too. We remembered our joys even as we named our loss.

There is power in naming our losses.

I experienced this in Washington DC in June. Over those four days, whether we realized it or not, we were constantly reminded of our losses. We walked

between monuments to the wars our country has fought, statues of heroes long dead, and walls covered with names. On the final day, we visited the Holocaust Museum and remembered one of the most horrible losses in human history. Written across the entrance to that museum were the words, “Never forget.”

Jessica Hoffman asked several of us to watch the video from Amber’s funeral at the end of that day. It was fitting. We’d all experienced – but not named – our loss. We’d all sensed Amber’s absence, knowing what she would have said or done, imagining her walking with us. How could we walk amongst those memorials and not name our losses as well? Only after we’d talked about our losses could we rest.

This is the irony of naming our losses. In so doing, we remember joys and experience pain. For loss is a product of joy. Only those people and experiences that bring us great joy can create great loss. The greater the joy, the more potential there is for pain. This pain tempts us to ignore the loss, to leave it unnamed, to pretend our lives are unaltered. Yet forgetting the loss means cutting ourselves off from the joy.

There is danger in ignoring our losses.

Too often, Christianity has suggested our losses aren’t real, that mourning is unnecessary, that death has no sting. We talk of heavenly reunions. We celebrate resurrection. Though we may not ignore losses, we often seem to diminish them. We tell people their loved ones are in a better place.

I wonder about that. It is hard for me to imagine any place on heaven or earth that my Uncle Dick would rather be than sitting around a campfire at the Mulholland family reunion with his wife, children, and grandchildren. Regardless of where my Uncle may be and what he may be experiencing, I am certain of this – my cousin Roy would have rather had him on earth than in heaven.

When Christianity diminishes loss, we forget that even though the Bible says Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead, it also says Jesus wept when he lost his friend.

There is also danger in wallowing in our loss.

The Psalm we heard this evening illustrates this extreme. It comes from a time when the people of Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians. Thousands of Israelites had been carried off into slavery. They’d become servants to the nobility of Babylon. Apparently, some of them had been asked to play the music of Zion to entertain their new masters. The psalmist lamented the

callousness of the request. He asked, “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?”

I understand being in a foreign land. Back in May, several of us traveled to Michigan to open the cabins and make some improvements. When we opened my Uncle Dick’s cabin, we discovered a pipe had burst. So, after my brother repaired the line, he asked me to repair the wall. It was a painful hour. It felt wrong for me to be doing a task that my Uncle should have been done. It felt foreign, almost blasphemous.

It was also necessary. Without repairing the pipe, the cabin would have been unusable. Without repairing the wall, the hole would have dishonored my Uncle, who loved working with his hands; maintaining and improving his cabin. Remembering his joy in such things brought me pain. Yet doing his job allowed me to name my loss.

The Psalmist was wrong to hang up his harp and refuse to sing of Zion. Just as wrong as it would have been for us to leave the pipe burst and the wall broken. We cannot ignore or wallow in our losses. We must name them. We must pick up hammer or harp, name our loss, and remember the joys behind them.

Naming our losses is the key to finding that middle ground between ignoring them and wallowing in them. In celebrating joys lost, we discover joys gained. As I was nailing the last of the drywall to Uncle Dick’s wall, I experienced that reality. Only in his death was I able to do him this service. If he’d been alive, he would have made the repair. If he’d been impaired, he’d have been too proud to ask for my help. Fixing his wall was painful, but it was my gift to him. I was able to give back what he had given to me a dozen times.

I hope the psalmist eventually sang those songs. I hope he endured the pain of loss in order to remember the joys he’d experienced. In remembering, I hope he began to seek those joys again, to look for restoration and new beginnings. I think someone began to sing the songs of Zion.

Eventually the Israelites in Babylon were allowed to go home. A new king – Cyrus – arose and freed the Israelites. Perhaps it was a purely political move. But I have to wonder if Cyrus had heard some of the Israelites singing, if he was moved by their loss, and inspired by their memories of past joys.

This is another reason we must name our losses. In so doing, we allow others to remember their losses. We are reminded that loss is a human condition, one we all experience. Others have felt what we are feeling. They have continued to live, even to thrive. Losses are real, but life has an incredible capacity renewal and rebirth. The end of the story is not “by the rivers of Babylon, we

sat and wept.” If we pick up our harps and hammers, we eventually discover new joys.

Often, in the midst of loss, I hear people say, “There is a hole in me that will never be filled.” I don’t think that’s true. Eventually, painfully, as we name our losses and remember our joys, we seek out what we’ve lost. Children are born, the widow marries, and new people enter our lives. Doing so does not dishonor our losses. Indeed, the greater the loss, the more incentive we should have to seek the joys those losses represent.

When I said we’d seldom dealt with great losses at our family reunion, I should probably admit the last great loss before my Uncle’s death. It was over twenty five years ago, when my mother died. That summer was one of the years I missed the reunion. I never thought the hole her death left would be filled. Yet I now realize that one of my favorite persons at the reunion is my step-mother, Sarah. She brings me and my children great joy. That joy is so complete that if I were to have to choose between spending the reunion with her or my mother, I could not choose.

Over the next couple of weeks, we’re going to talk about our losses. We’re going to name them, respect them, learn from them, and move beyond them. This is important and appropriate. Our meeting has endured several significant losses this past year whether we’ve named them or not.

Losing Amber impacted us all. Our whole meeting grieved. Seeing Lyman and Harriet enter assisted living was upsetting. For weeks, no one sat in their row. This summer has been bittersweet. We bid good-bye to Kelly and her family right when Anna was becoming a bright light. We were excited for Valerie’s new opportunity even as we wondered how we’d replace her tenderness. In a few weeks, Mike Fallahay leaves for the Virgin Islands. My jealousy is only exceeded by my sadness. These are all losses that need to be named.

Yet behind each of those losses are so many joys.

When I think of Amber, I remember the joys this meeting experienced in welcoming her and her sisters, of caring for and supporting their family. Amidst the loss, that joy remains. I’ve experienced it again in welcoming three more girls – Kaylyn, Clara and Katy Boss.

When I think of Lyman and Harriet, I remember the joys this meeting has experienced because of their spiritual sensitivity and leadership. Though their seats are often empty now, that joy remains. I see it blossoming in so many others in this meeting – men and women who are following in Lyman and Harriet’s footsteps.

When I think of the loss of Kelly and her family, I remember Jeff and Beth Small are pregnant, that my grandson, Liam, will be crawling around the meetinghouse this time next year. Amidst the loss, joy remains. The holes left by Valerie and Mike are not forever. The joys they brought will eventually be brought by others.

Naming our losses means remembering our joys – the ones in the past and those in the future.