

Now and Then

By John Jacobson

A car slows as it passes. The driver and passenger turn to look at me. They are probably wondering if I am ok. It is nearly dark and there is snow. I am parked by the sign for Emmons' Pond Bog, just lacing my boots to go down the path.

I walk across the field through wiry golden rod and Queen Anne's lace. I step across sagging planks over the spring run. Water is flowing over top of the boards and they are slippery. Woven branches of nannyberries and willows reach upward, black against the sky. Past the tangle of willows my boots crack through ice among sedges and rushes.

In the 1980s when I studied psychology in college I learned Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. We talked about these in classes on death and dying. The textbooks made it all seem understandable. When someone dies, you struggle through stages of grief. After a while you begin to build a new life and go on. I experienced that when I lost my grandparents, aunts, uncles and several friends.

Caregiver grief is different. I was forty-seven years old when my wife Claudia first became ill. The onset was sudden. On April 4, 2007 she was working as a Registered Nurse. On April 5 she was disabled. I remember feeling numb as I sat beside her bed in an Intensive Care Unit for months. Once she was home, I busied myself with her care and my work. I still felt numb. I was suspended in that state for years. I didn't recognize numbness as grief.

We lived with losses. For years Claudia laid in a hospital bed in our living room. There was no more lovemaking, dancing or walking together. There was no going out or travelling except to doctors and hospitals. I missed the parts of Claudia that were not there.

I still had wants of my own. I just couldn't fulfill them. I longed for Claudia to be able hug me standing up. I wanted to go out with her. I wanted

her help in the kitchen, but now I did everything alone. I both had Claudia and didn't have her. Deep loneliness crept into my life.

While Claudia was in the hospital I sold my 1965 Riviera with a Nailhead V8 and dual carburetors too cheap to get some fast money. I remembered the humiliation of our bankruptcy that happened later. The canoe we both loved gathered a thick layer of dust. My fly rods did not see water for years.

As regrets and losses piled up I found myself swimming in a stew of anger, despair and guilt. When my caregiver grief had gone on for eleven years, I realized I was not moving through stages. I was stuck having never reached acceptance. I said, "I'm sorry" when I woke up in the morning. At every discomfort Claudia felt I said, "I'm sorry." I said, "I'm sorry" again and again throughout the day. I was sorry for living.

Darkness seems to seep out of the woods as if exhaled by tree roots. Gray poplars at the edge of dark pines look nearly white. Beavers have taken some down leaving pointed stumps. Three ghostly white poplars felled recently lie across the path. I climb over them and walk on toward the pond.

"So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head. Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself and sat among the ashes."

Job 2.7-8

I found that the potsherd of caregiver grief is envy. I always thought of myself as the least envious, but that was when I felt successful. Back then most of my wants were fulfilled. Now I spend too much time counting losses.

I have been passed over for promotions at my job for years. It has hurt to watch newer employees get promoted to positions I used to think I would have. I know it is because I am a caregiver. I am always calling in late or sick with an emergency. I use my vacation time as soon as I get it for Claudia's doctor appointments. This has made me a less valuable employee. I need to take care of Claudia's complicated needs though and I don't know how else to do it. I'm left feeling envious.

I have grown distant from many of my old friends. I want their company, but I don't want to hear about their latest vacations or career advances. I don't want to see how they have renovated their homes. For twelve years Claudia's illness has taken away the things most people measure success by. I'm angry over that. I wonder, am I childish?

When one of my friends told me about their European vacation I became angry.

“While you were away I emptied bedpans!” I spat. It was an impulse. Later I felt guilty. I wondered, when had I become so bad-tempered?

I want this envy to go away. No good can come from it.

As I walk in the dark toward the pond I listen for birds. There are none. It is cloudy. There are no stars. I find my way by faint reflected light on the snow. I remember coming here with Claudia holding hands as we walked this path. I feel guilty to say it but I wish I had someone holding my hand now. But here I am by myself.

“In early times in Japan, bamboo and paper lanterns were used with candles inside. A blind man visiting a friend one night, was offered a lantern to carry home with him.

‘I do not need a lantern,’ he said. ‘Darkness or light is all the same to me.’

‘I know you do not need a lantern to find your way,’ his friend replied, ‘But if you don’t have one, someone else may run into you. So you must take it.’

The blind man started off with the lantern and before he had walked very far someone ran squarely into him.

‘Look out where you are going!’ he exclaimed to the stranger. ‘Can’t you see this lantern?’

‘Your candle has blown out brother,’ replied the stranger.”

Zen Buddhist Koan

I feel so much like the blind man with the lantern. Before Claudia’s illness I had faith that if I did the right things I would be successful and live a good life. We were doing the right things though. We did everything to be healthy. We ate good foods. We got exercise and had fun. We didn’t drink a lot or smoke. Still she got sick. It is ironic that Claudia was a Registered Nurse. Now I am the one counting pills, changing catheters, emptying bedpans, scheduling doctor appointments and everything else.

Yesterday morning I was in the kitchen measuring coffee into our coffeemaker. Soon I would have to leave for work. Already, I was tired. Half asleep I carefully counted each tablespoon.

“Honey! I need help!” Claudia called impatiently from her bed. I rushed to the living room.

“I need to turn. I need help with the pillows.”

“I’m sorry. I was making coffee,” I said.

I helped her roll onto her side and stuffed two pillows behind her. When I was back in the kitchen I stood by the counter and stared at the coffee. Where had I left off?

In Being and Nothingness, Sartre said, “...my possibles are the meaning of what I am.” I struggle to do my best with care for Claudia, but other possibilities are diminished by her illness. My anger rises from loss of freedom to choose how we spend our time. I want our good times back. It can’t be changed though. It’s a want I have to let go of. I wonder if then I can begin to find acceptance.

I try to imagine what acceptance might feel like. Life has not spared us of other difficulties while Claudia has been ill. We have both lost friends and relatives. We had to put a beloved cat down. There has been financial distress. Computers and cars have broken down. Without Claudia’s illness these things would have been hard. With it they were overwhelming. Acceptance does not make life easy.

I don’t expect this grief to ever really go away. The loss of who Claudia was is too great. Acceptance, after all is just another phase. There will be times when I may fall back and feel anger or despair.

I think I will know acceptance when I count my successes even when they are much smaller than I hoped for. I hope that then I will pay less attention to my losses. I don’t expect it to be a dramatic change. I think it will happen by degrees. Acceptance will be when a friend tells me about their vacation and my envy feels less sharp and I share their joy like I used to. It will be when I feel less empty and more fulfilled. I hope to feel less exhausted. I imagine feeling anticipation of what comes next instead of dread.

Now I kneel in the dark at the spot by the pond where Claudia and I were married. Tears stream down my face. I feel the cold seep into my knees. I pray that I can accept both now and then. I pray that I can work through this grief and that the potsherd of envy will become dull. When I rise again, an owl flutters out from branches and flies on silent wings over white ice on the pond.

John Jacobson lives in the Catskill Mountains of New York. His writing has appeared in Nature Writing, About Place Journal, Aji Magazine and The Curlew. His essay “Fly” was nominated for the “Best of the Net, 2018” anthology. For the past eleven years he has been a caregiver for his wife Claudia. He is working on a memoir about that experience.