



Drawing Water From the Well

*I have thrown away my lantern,
and I can see the dark.*

Wendell Berry

MOST PEOPLE WOULD NO DOUBT be surprised to learn that the word *sadness* comes from the Latin *satis*, meaning enough, adequate, or sufficient—the same source, for example, for our words *satiate* or *satisfy*.

The reason for this apparent incongruity is that the meaning of ‘sadness’ has changed subtly over the years. It once meant not simply misery or grief, but a feeling of being full—as in ‘full to the brim’ with the intensity of some experience, or perhaps, simply the experience of being alive.

Being sad suggested not unhappiness but an acute awareness of the fleeting and mysterious nature of life, in which joy and grief are intimately bound together.

Rather than denoting a state of depression, feeling sadness implied that one cared enough about someone or something in the world to allow its loss to affect one deeply, knowing in the heart that gratitude and grief were just two sides of the same coin.

It is only possible, of course, to mourn something that once brought one great joy, and the gift of having had that experience can still be appreciated even in its absence—in fact, perhaps even more deeply.

For example, as searingly painful as the loss of someone dear to us can be, the experience is also imbued with a certain beauty, because the sadness we feel is a consequence of our willingness to love and to let ourselves be vulnerable in doing so.

If we seek instead to avoid that which is painful, we will inevitably miss out also on that which is most rich and meaningful in life, as ultimately, the two are inseparable.

From a Buddhist point of view, there is little difference between tears of joy and tears of sadness: both joy and pain are reminders of the impermanence of everything that is manifest into the world, and ultimately are a lesson in non-attachment.

By recognizing and honoring this fact, every loss we experience can not only protect us from withdrawing from our emotions, but can deepen our ability to love.

Curiously, the Sanskrit word *sinvá*—meaning *satisfied*—shares a similar meaning to the Latin *satis*, with its antonym *asinva* denoting *insatiable*. At times, having experienced a particularly difficult and painful loss, our grief can indeed seem overwhelming, like diving into an ocean of pain and fearing that we may drown in it.

Even in times of happiness, however, we all carry within us a deep well of grief. It may not be identified with any particular experience, but is more the sum total of all our unrecognized, unexpressed sadness—sadness for our neglected relationships, for our unfulfilled dreams, for the injuries routinely done to nature and other living beings, or just sadness for the world itself.

This well of grief lingers just below the surface of our everyday lives, like a deep, underground aquifer. Most of the time, of course, we simply ignore it, as dredging up pain unnecessarily can seem self-indulgent, frightening, or even overpowering.

But every now and then something may happen which causes us to inadvertently tap into this reservoir, and rather than retreat from whatever feelings should arise in that manner, we should instead welcome them.

By allowing our body to release whatever unacknowledged feelings we have stored up over time, we can experience the relief and joy that is always waiting on the other side.

Buddhism teaches that “all griefs are one,” so working with any particular, identifiable grief is the same as working with them all, in the way that pulling on any single thread in a tangled ball of yarn will unravel it all.

Of course, acknowledging our feelings does not mean indulging them, and when we suffer a particularly painful loss, we must be careful to avoid becoming consumed by grief, allowing it to interfere with our daily life and our enjoyment of the many positive things we still have in our lives. Instead, we can approach it gradually, letting it pass through us in waves rather than allowing it to overwhelm us.

Most of all, we should remember that it takes time to heal from loss. Once again, the derivation of the word is telling: *heal* stems from the Old Germanic *hailijanq*, meaning *to make whole*. It is something that happens in its own time and can’t be rushed.

Thinking of grief and sadness as a kind of reservoir can allow us to tap into our deep-seated feelings at any time we wish, in a safe, appropriate setting, and with as much kindness for ourselves as we can muster.

This kind of ‘grief work’ will not make our grief go away entirely, nor should it. The inevitable losses we incur over the course of our lives will, in fact, accumulate and, like gently falling rain, will only add to the reservoir as we grow older. If our love continues, the loss and grief will continue as well, but by acknowledging and honoring it, we can integrate it into our lives and allow it to inspire us to greater humility and love.

“Feeling is healing,” and the more often and more deeply we have the courage to follow this practice, the stronger and more fearless we will become, and the more we will be capable of fully experiencing life, with all its inevitable joy and sadness. ■