



Sharing Not Comparing

Tammy Wiens

It Kinda Makes Me Wonder

After completing the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius I had the privilege of meeting for several days with the others who made the retreat with me. The opportunity to talk with those who had also gone through the Exercises provided a helpful transition from the 30 days of silence back to the routine of the life we'd temporarily left behind. One important piece of advice we were given before talking about our experience with each other was to keep the focus on sharing, not comparing. The great benefit in hearing one another's stories would be lost if we were to evaluate our experience of prayer in light of the experiences of others.

The advice of "sharing, not comparing" applies to stories of grief for similar reasons. Each of us knows what it means to weep for a child. Some tears flow from our inability to rescue a child from sickness or tragedy. Some tears are for an unborn child. Or perhaps we weep in solidarity with parents who cannot provide adequate food or housing for their children. And these days that we weep more than ever before for the children we send to war. The source of our tears is

as countless as the shapes of a snowflake, but it is not the purpose of this publication to name every grief. The purpose is sharing, not comparing.

Since I have no biological children you might guess that my story is one of infertility. Words cannot express the depths of despair I endured or the destructive path I chose before finally making peace with God— and later with my barrenness. A dear friend who lost her five-year-old to a drunk driver said she would rather have never had a child than to lose her son like this. She cannot forgive God for taking him and she cannot forgive the driver of the car. She resents the concept of a Hungryhearts issue that lumps my grief over never having a child into the same discussion with her devastating and violent loss. Her point may be valid and strong at one level—but perhaps simply sharing rather than comparing our grief better serves us both.

I have a half brother whom I will never meet because he was gone even before I knew he existed. I met my birth mother four years after his death. The provincial government (I was born in Canada) made a change in laws concerning adoption. Social Services set up a registration process permitting birth families to access records that had been previously sealed. Not long after the system was in place, my birth mother and I were talking on the phone. She told me that the day after she delivered me to adoption services she regretted her decision and came back to the hospital to reclaim me. It was too late. I'd already been set up in a new home. Over the years she tried several times to find me, but without success. But the tears she cried over losing me should not be compared to the tears she cried over losing her only son at the age of 38. She'd had a lifetime of

knowing him and caring for him and finding his lifeless body on the sofa of his apartment wrought indescribable agony. Should her grief over losing him diminish in anyway her grief over losing me?

It does no one any good to compare one story of grief to another. What can be gained in setting the grief of losing a child to cancer over and against the grief of losing a child to street violence? And, yet we lapse into this kind of comparison all too easily. Usually it is unintentional. Inadvertent. We hear of someone who miscarried and we immediately ask, "How far along was she?" As though it matters less if the child were in her womb 10 weeks rather than 30 weeks.

We (I speak here of the Church) kick into high gear with plans to help out the family grieving the loss of an aging parent, but we are eerily absent when the family loses a child to suicide. We compare one person's loss to another's and then wonder why some people recover from their grief more quickly than others. Might it be because we unwittingly give more support to some than to others? We never speak about it, and yet we too easily subscribe to an invisible scale of social acceptability for suffering, sickness, and death. Cancer is a prime example. Moles and small tumors that can be quickly removed without long drawn out treatments are at one end of the comfort scale; terminal and aggressive forms of HIV/AIDS are at the opposite end of the scale.

Our spiritual directors of the Ignatian Exercises knew that sharing our stories could help validate all we'd learned in prayer and lead us to greater understanding, satisfaction, and depth of love. If the conversation fell prey to

comparing stories, however, it could lead to anger, guilt, or despair. Whether it is in prayer, or in grief, Christ meets each of us. It shouldn't matter how it happens, or when, or why... but simply *that* it happens. We find hope and affirmation from sharing how Christ is present to us. We grow weary and soul-sick if we start comparing stories. We start to wonder why one person's grief outlasts the grief of another. Why one person recovers from a loss while another seems never to move beyond it. Why God heaps suffering on one family and while other families prosper. Why his faith seems strong, but her faith fails. Comparisons such as these only breed bitterness.

It kinda makes me wonder. . .

If we could set aside the comparisons and simply listen to the stories, what might you and I learn from each other? What would we learn about faith? About the soul's journey toward hope and forgiveness? About God's wisdom and work in the world? As a community of faith we should know that it's not up to us to evaluate, or to manage, or even to heal anyone's pain... we simply offer a presence; a tangible reminder of the spiritual reality of Christ's presence.