

The Grieving Tree: A Reflection

by Laura Weaver

A day after a dear friend's memorial, I left for a twelve-day wilderness quest in the Abajo mountains of Utah. Having walked intimately with this friend through her illness and death over a six-month period, the experience was raw and fresh, deeply imprinted into my body and soul. And so, as we set up camp at 9000 feet in a remote wilderness of pines and aspens, I found myself in a strange and potent altered state—one foot in this world, one foot still across the threshold.

Our campsite was located on the edge of a recent burn. The wildfire left swaths of freestanding skeletal snags and a few live ponderosas blackened and scarred by the flames. As soon as we arrived, I found myself avoiding the burn areas, turning my eyes away from that which had been taken. I set up my tent in a lupine filled meadow overlooking scrub-oaks, and I consistently oriented to the parts of the forest where no fire had touched in decades. I found solace here in the returning life, the birdsong and wildflowers, the vibrant pine needles shimmering against celadon sky.

But on the third day of our trip, I began to hear a persistent call that seemed to come from the heart of the burn area itself. At first, I resisted, wanting only to drink in the green, the budding, the sweet breath of late spring. I felt repulsed by the black seared trunks and bare branches. But that morning, some internal voice compelled me to go towards the call and against the tide of disgust and fear. Walking into the dark, burned forest, I was drawn inexorably towards an enormous live ponderosa that stood in the midst of a grove of dead trees. As I drew close to this grandmother tree, she seemed to reach out and pull me to her with such force that I found myself belly to her trunk in seconds, without knowing how I had actually traveled the 100 yards between us. She was ancient, towering—one side of her trunk seared, hollowed out, scarred. The other side fragrant and alive—the bark exhaling an intoxicating scent of butterscotch and vanilla. Pressing my face to her trunk, I breathed in the full essence of her being.

Then, without warning, I was pulled forcefully to my knees, into the pine needle carpet at her roots. My body began to convulse and shake, wracking with a fierce grief I did not understand. I was being sounded, moved, filled by a wailing that was coming through me, but was clearly not *originating* from me. The swell of this grief contained my own loss, my own losses—I felt the spirit of my friend, I felt the space where her body had lived in this world. But this personal loss was held in some larger field—where my grief touched every other grief—where I felt the losses of every mother, of every father, of every human, and of nature and the wild itself. Lying belly to the earth, I sensed the miraculous courage of the human heart that risks opening to love again and again, when this kind of loss is inevitable.

My wailing and keening came to a close, just as rain subsides after a storm. Wrung out and reborn, I rolled over on my back and breathed deeply, giving thanks to this grandmother tree for catalyzing this passage, for helping me to remember how we naturally heal and recalibrate. This grief is ours and more than ours. And when we

dance with our grief, we touch joy. And when we dance with our joy, we touch grief. And when we surrender to this dance of joy and grief, we discover a profound intimacy with the world, with each other, and with life itself.

In many cultures in Asia and Africa and the Middle East, women *keen* or sing the *death wail* to honor the dead and enact grief in visceral and embodied ways. We are not built to suffer grief silently, stoically, in solitude and isolation. When we express and move grief—our own, each other's, when we recognize collective loss, the whole of the community is renewed. When we repress grief, or refuse to acknowledge the presence of death (literal or metaphorical), our ensuing numbness blocks our capacity to access and embody the potency of the life force itself. What would be possible, for ourselves, for generations to come, if we liberated the shadow of unexpressed grief?

Circling the trunk of the grandmother tree, I slid my hands along the burned bark, then rubbed the black ash onto my own face. In the midst of this passage, I needed to mark myself—I needed to be marked. Death had touched me, and I had touched death. And in this moment, I knew I was not alone in this—that in fact, we are all touched by death every day. And it is in this communion, this acknowledgement, that we are offered the sweet waters from the well of grief—waters of mercy, waters of grace.

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The Well of Grief

Those who will not slip beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning down to its black water
to the place that we can not breathe

will never know
the source from which we drink
the secret water cold and clear
nor find in the darkness
the small gold coins
thrown by those who wished for something else.

~ David Whyte