

The Cure for Fear, Grief, and Death

What is the cure for exceptional suffering?

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When Anne Morrow Lindbergh's infant son was kidnapped and murdered, only the story of the mustard seed helped her. A woman who has lost her baby asks a holy man if there is a cure for her grief. "Yes," he replies. "You must find a house that has never known sorrow, take a mustard seed from that house, and then you will be cured." The woman spent the rest of her life looking, but could never find a house that had not known sorrow.

I was young when I first heard this story and it made no sense to me. Suffering is not democratic. If you were to go house-to-house observing sorrow, you would not necessarily conclude that, oh, gee, you didn't have it so bad after all. On my block, for example, there is no house where a mother lost her infant to kidnapping and murder, nothing so terrible as that.

Today, I understand that the mustard seed story is not about comparing your fate to the fate of others. Cycles of comparisons require attention to differences—like comparing your child's SAT scores to her classmates. The mustard seed story invites us to appreciate the commonality of suffering in the human family. It tells us that suffering defines the human condition, that when we sign on to living there is no possibility of escaping fear and grief.

Indeed, the "cure" for fear and grief comes only in recognizing that there is no cure. You may consider your suffering "exceptional," but it is always part of the greater human condition.

Since Anne Morrow said that the parable of the mustard seed was all that helped her, I imagine the story allowed her to understand that the burden of grief is carried by the entire human family, that fear and suffering define the human condition as much, if not more, as happiness and joy. In our most difficult moments, sometimes the most empowering thing we can do is to recognize our common powerlessness.

We all die someday. Despite our culture's emphasis on "control and mastery" we don't choose when we die or how—lightning, a tiger attack, a car accident, violence, disease, the natural failures of the body, or simply being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

By letting go of our desire to control the course of the universe, we get back a sense of our place in it. Control is an illusion—a fact you will learn very fast if you become ill, or have things fall apart in some other way. When we understand vulnerability and suffering as an essential part of being human, our individual fate can be easier to manage.