

Grief—Suppressing or Expressing It
A. Maurice Cheadle
Grandville, Michigan

“A few days in the hospital” had stretched into weeks. My wife lay imprisoned there with all the medical attachments available, including the vent tube. The diagnosis and prognosis became more serious. Ruth suffered from restricted pulmonary capacity and resultant cardiac taxation. The consequence was cardiomyopathy, or congestive heart failure.

The scenario was devastation for my wife as she lay there suffering, and for me as I maintained my male ego. Each day I came to the intensive care unit portraying my façade of confidence and even humor. Struggling with my emotions, I denied the seriousness of her illness. Instead of empathy, I conjured the message, “Everything’s going to be all right.” The resulting tension building up in my emotions was obvious to my wife of thirty-seven years; she often seemed to know me better than I knew myself. Later, I would find out that she had said to our children, “Dad’s going through tough times.”

We went home for Christmas. Three days before Christmas, Ruth had provided the necessary strength by strolling the corridors on my arm. While giving her a wheelchair tour of the hospital, I sang, “I’ll be home for Christmas.” We made the celebration drive home, and I walked my wife through the front door. I watched with joy as she once more sat at the piano, even for just a few chords. She would get stronger, I knew, and once again would be filling the house with music.

But our celebration was doomed to be short-lived. Christmas afternoon, while my wife again struggled for breath, I was forced to call the ambulance. Because of the seriousness, we returned to the emergency room where the staff recognized the need for re-admission. Once again, we found ourselves in intensive care dealing with the same devastating breathlessness, I experienced a feeling of defeat from which there seemed to be no escape. The subsequent collapse of emotions brought a well of tears I had been strong for weeks. In retrospect, I can see this emotional experience as preparation for a final loss.

We did go home again on New Year’s Eve, but for less than twenty-four hours. That New Year’s afternoon in our home, while a storm raged outside, my wife left my arms for sunnier shores. I was not prepared for the loss; I was prepared to cry. Mary, the hospice nurse, had given the countdown on Ruth’s heartbeat as she was slipping away. After kissing the lips that never again would utter the words I treasured, tears flowed uncontrollably.

For two days, we stood by her casket. And then after sitting in a pew and singing several favorite hymns and listening to a eulogy and message from Psalm 23, we made the trip across town and up the hill to the cemetery to commit that dear body. I indulged in more tears, only to muster my male resources again the next day in the squelching of painful memories. In the trauma of that loss, my mode of existence was denial. The grief I was living was a bad dream.

After a few weeks of suppressed feelings and squelched memories, Bob, a hospice grief therapist, pointed out to me the value of hanging on to those memories and of the emotional release of tears and their chemical value. He pointed out that because tears of grief have a different chemistry, they have a clinical value.

It was then that I could arrange a memorial on the dining room wall, a floral arrangement ringed with memorial tributes and centered with a picture of my departed treasure. And it was then that I could stand before that memorial and let the tears flow. It was then that I could stand at the grave, sometimes daily, with my hands in my pockets, and cry. I could go to the hospice support group, yearning to go, and lean on shared feelings.

After a little over a year, after having shed buckets of tears, I awoke to a profound realization—the tears had slowed down. Now, I found myself pre-occupied with the sorrows of others. I shared this reflection with a prayer group friend. He said, “You know what that means? It means you are getting better!”