

PIETA

Theology for those who have lost a child to substance addiction.

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I don't know what Michelangelo was thinking when he carved that magnificent image of Mary holding her dead son in her lap. I just know that no one could have made such a masterpiece like that without delving deeply into the spirit of grief of a mourning parent.

This essay is dedicated to all those who have lost a son or a daughter to drug addiction. It is a special kind of loss. It not only involves the horror of having to bury one of your own children. This is often described as the worst nightmare a parent can have. The pain is intensified because of the stigma attached. If a child dies due to a sickness such as cancer or from a freak accident, the community rallies around, the deceased is remembered as angelic.

When a child dies after an overdose or in some confrontation related to dealing, or after a successful suicide attempt, well the community is at a loss as to what can be said about the deceased. Of all the thoughts that might come to mind, "Angel", is not one of them.

Mothers and Fathers are left with the haunting memory of that telephone call from the Coroner's office, that Police visit, walking in and finding her or him and realizing that their worst fears have come to pass. Could they have done something else to have prevented this? Will their neighbors and friends now suddenly treat them differently, secretly wondering if this so-called respectable family was bad? Guilt over anger, accusations made during family arguments, feelings of disappointment, even hatred from time to time well up. What can be done now, with no chance to reconcile and ask for forgiveness? Did he or she know how much despite it all, we loved them?

It is so hard to talk about it. The subject is just too raw for all but a very few who can compassionately listen. Two Biblical persons come to mind who might relate to this situation. The first is King David. David had a lot of children. However, with one of his sons he had a very troubled relationship. Absalom was the kind of young man who acted on instinct rather than on reason. Perhaps for all the right reasons he took the law into his own hands. His behavior made his father furious. We can only imagine the explosive arguments that went on between them and polluted the royal palace. The relationship disintegrated to such an extent that Absalom, now estranged, finally not only wished his father dead but led a coup to assassinate him. In the escalated violence Absalom ended up dead. Was David glad? Not in the least. He, like a baby wept. "O, my son Absalom, my son, my son Absalom! Would I had died instead of you, O Absalom, my son, my son!" he said. (II Samuel 13-18) This is an emotion a father of an addict might well understand.

Mary, the mother of Jesus is the other one who can understand. Her son, though sinless, caused her enormous distress. From the unexpected pregnancy, to giving birth while homeless, to the refugee flight into Egypt, to losing track of him as an independently minded adolescent, Mary must have been stressed. Then after her husband's death, when a Palestinian mother would expect her eldest son to take over the home and the family business, he up and left and became an itinerant. As Jesus' notoriety began to spread Mary worried. He became politically and religiously a nonconformist. She embarrassed

him by going out publicly and asking him to stop. Which, of course, he didn't, even appearing to ignore her presence. Finally, he was arrested, beaten, and executed as a traitor, a criminal, a laughing stock. Crucifixion carried with it the worst kind of stigma. How did people judge her back in Nazareth?

But Michelangelo's Pieta depicts Mary cradling the body of her executed son with the same tenderness and compassion she had for him when she cradled him in Bethlehem. This is an emotion Mary and a mother of an addict might well have in common. Let us meditate for a moment on that body on her lap. Here begins the mystery that lifts up hope for grieving parents.

We know from the Biblical accounts that Jesus had power. He had the power to heal all sorts of diseases and often time did. We also know that he did this because he had compassion for those who were suffering. However, there are several accounts that report that he did not always come when others were in a panic because their loved one was dying. (Luke 8:40-49, John 11:1-14). Jesus' delayed response at first seems troubling. Why didn't he drop everything and go running? Why did he appear to be hesitant about responding? Why, you may be asking, didn't God answer my constant prayer when my child was on the brink? Now that he or she has died isn't it too late?

Those Biblical stories are there, I believe, to teach us some very important things: IT IS NEVER TOO LATE FOR GOD! Death is not a barrier to the one who brought all life from the beginning. The stories of Lazarus and the raising of Jarius' daughter teach that Christ has the power to make life even on the other side of the grave.

Perhaps you are also concerned that all the love you gave, all the efforts you made, all the prayers you prayed were but wasted energy. No, they were not. Not in the least. All love, if it is true love, comes from the love of God. The closest thing most of us can ever experience in this world to the perfect one-sided, sacrificial love of God is that love you as a parent first felt for your infant, when but a few days old was just so helpless. When we love with that kind of love we are sharing in that force that binds us directly with God's Spirit. God is eternal. Even if faith and hope were to fade, there is no way to squander that love. (I Corinthians 13:7-8)

They sin who tell us love can die. With life all other passions fly. All others are but vanity.

In heaven ambition cannot dwell; nor avarice in the vaults of hell. Earthly, these passions of the earth,

they perish where they have their birth. BUT LOVE IS INDESTRUCTABLE (Robert Southbey)

Jesus had all the flaws and limitations that come with being human and living in the flesh. His body, like any of our bodies could only withstand a certain amount of abuse perpetrated onto it. Once that abuse became too much his heart necessarily stopped and he was gone. But Jesus, Christians believe, was also the only begotten Son of God. He was sent from above explicitly because of his parent's great love. He came voluntarily in order to fuse himself with the broken, despondent and lost. At a table the day before he died Jesus offered up his body to God and to each and every one of us. That oneness became complete when he expired on the cross. Out of that mangled body God would bring a new life. Out of that body birthed by Mary, God created life purified. The human fused with the divine would live on.

Lots of people today believe in some sort of resurrection. Much of the popular ideas are about some sort of permanent vacation. I don't know about that. What we do know as Christians is that heaven is a

real place made ready for us by Mary's first born, Jesus. Heaven is God's domain where he will unite all those who belong to him. Does that describe your kid? Is there fear in that? So many people today try to rationalize their loved one's acceptance into heaven by creating a mental list of that person's goodness. Don't do that. It's not about that. Heaven is not a club for "fine upstanding citizens." But it is a home for all God's children.

What do we know about God and His will for his kingdom? We know he loved the world so much he gave up his Son so all who believe in him can have salvation. (John 3:16). We know that he invited all those who were weary and heavily burdened to come on to him. (Matthew 11:28) We know that the two most unique aspects of our God which separate us from Him is his ability to create life out of nothing and his ability to forgive sins. Get that. That's our God. That's what we know God does best.

So, if He can create life out of nothing, surely, he can create life out of death. Your child does not pose a threat to God's greatness. God can make your child whole again.

And if you are worried about his or her earthly actions, so many, perhaps that you had a hard time forgiving them, offer them over to God. Forgiveness doesn't mean God doesn't mind if we are bad. Forgiveness doesn't mean God doesn't care about those we have hurt in the past. Forgiveness doesn't mean sin has no consequences. Forgiveness means God overpowers evil with his righteousness. In God evil doesn't have a chance. God's love will return to heal, comfort, and restore all evil's victims.

We say in the Apostles' Creed that we believe in the resurrection of the body. What does that mean? Well, of course we are not talking about the sorry corpse or ashes we saw thrown to the wind or buried. But we do believe that natural form of personhood that brought us together originally, that made you who you are despite your age, flaws, and frailties, that character that made your child identifiable despite change, will be absorbed and included in God's realm of grace. Because God cherishes love, that love we shared will not be erased. We will see our beloved again somehow face to face. The child born from your body will continue to be. Your body, your DNA! Perhaps that is a parent's most privately comforting image.

Even the bad memories the ones that might haunt you in your sleep will disappear. Don't expect to go to even to settle scores, relive old traumas or be vindictive. Since God forgives sin he will redeem the trouble of the past and wipe every tear away.

These are the treasured truths of our Christian theology that are given in order to bring comfort to you who grieve. Your grief, of course, is only right and necessary. If you hadn't loved you wouldn't grieve. Grief is love's byproduct. But do not abandon hope along with your grief. Long for your missing child, of course, but do not lament. He or she is in the embrace of our God of love. There is no better place a parent would want their child to be.