



You Only Cry For Yourself

understanding why crying is necessary

It was so funny, we had tears in our eyes. Crying as a consequence of laughing would seem contradictory, until you consider that this is typically human. Here is one of those reactions which seem to be the overflow of a person's innermost feelings, but it can easily be misinterpreted because the real reason for this peculiar behaviour is in the mind of the weeper. There can be tears of sadness, joy and pain, both physical and mental. Dust, pollen and foreign objects excite the tear ducts. Peeling onions can make eyes stream, a result sometimes used by actors to produce the effect of crying artificially. The really dedicated ones, however, can bring it on by simply recalling something from their past appropriate to the scene they are playing at the time. They make it so real that the eyes of the audience begin to mist as they too become emotionally involved, perhaps being reminded of a similar situation in their own lives or, as at the end of a feel-good movie, wishing to be blessed with that same resolution themselves; sometime, somewhere.

So, what is crying and why do we do it? I heard tell that there are different kinds of tears. Analysis found that the chemical composition of tears resulting from the introduction of an irritant, or from being struck on the nose, wasn't the same as that in self-induced emotional crying. I don't know if there are variations between tears that come from negative as opposed to positive feelings, but that's for the researchers to worry about. For us as individuals, the fact remains that we seem to cry even when there is no apparent tangible or physical reason for it. Or is there? I'd like to share a few personal experiences with you which you may be able to relate to. I hope they will help and perhaps be of some comfort.

My family originated in the UK, and when my sister emigrated to Australia, I felt a sense of betrayal. The disappointment, even bitterness, eventually subsided to be replaced by a sense of rejection. Being considerably younger than her, we had never moved in the same circles and after her marriage we saw each other only occasionally. So, her leaving shouldn't have had much impact, but it did. Suddenly it dawned on me that her presence in my life was more important than I had realised, and when it had gone I might never see her again. I cried for that loss. Although I had a wife and children with me along with both parents and the same friends I'd grown up with, there was still a vacant space that was my sister's and it was immense. In my self-pity I guess I must have crawled into it for comfort and to be as close as I could to where she had once been. I think the solitude in that terrible emptiness helped me focus on myself and gave me the time to discover a remedy for my sadness, along with the courage to put things right. The decision I made then to join my sister in her new country banished my dark thoughts, and the crying stopped.

Tears of sadness are arguably the easiest to understand. The day my mother died, I didn't shed a tear. In fact, when the paramedics arrived they probably thought me a very heartless son because I was cheerful and flippant. At the time, however, I had no reason to be mournful. Mum died peacefully in her sleep the way most of us would like to go. Although her life had been mainly good, the few months prior to her passing had not been so fulfilling and I truly believe she had decided to call it quits in favour of something new and more challenging. At that point she had all I ever wanted for her - peace and contentment, a just reward for the trials and achievements of a long, meaningful life. How could I be sad about that? It wasn't until the family was casting her ashes into the sea along with those of my father's that I broke down. Then I cried: for the emptiness their passing had left in my life; for the times I could no longer share with

them; for the words of love and gratitude I hadn't thought to say when I was with them. I cried for my loss, my loneliness, my shortcomings. They were in a better place, while I cried for myself.

Grief is a most natural part of life, one I had faced before, but not as emotionally. Trying to rationalise it was too objective and clinical. That was for psychiatrists and strangers. After all, I was mourning real people who were extremely important to me. It seems that the closer we are to someone, the harder we take their loss. Eventually, the pain did ease and the tears dried, enabling me to see more clearly. It was then that I found a way, not just to honour my parents and what they had done for me, but to justify their being by carrying on the work they had started. A father in my own right, I had a duty to be strong for the sake of the family. I would be to them what my parents were to me - ever-caring and always there for them. The time for crying was over for now. I knew, however, that it would come again, as it did, but in a different way.

Living next door to us in Western Australia, Mum used to make an annual trip across the country to visit my sister's family in Victoria. After her death, that pilgrimage became my responsibility. Actually, I should say 'our' because I didn't go alone. My wife accompanied me, as my soul-mate, a sister-in-law, an auntie to the children of the Victorian branch of the tribe, and something more. Before her passing, Mum had handed over some treasured heirlooms to my wife, along with a profound, somewhat intimidating declaration: "You are now Head of the Family." This seemed strange at the time because my sister was eleven years my senior and should have been the one to receive this honour. As the only male heir, I was not even considered. But the saying "Mum knows" would be born out. She obviously knew us better than we knew ourselves, and she knew what would be best for the family in general. We eventually came to understand her reasoning soon enough.

Some years previously my sister had been diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. Within months, her husband was told he had Parkinson's Disease. The advancement of both illnesses was the slower kind, giving us all time to enjoy our reunions while accepting the inevitable. My brother-in-law went first and it hurt, surprisingly more so than when my parents had died. You see, he had always been distant, focussing mainly on business, but in those last few years we had drawn very close. The annual visit became so important for both of us, and when he died I felt both relief and regret. Whereas he was free of the suffering, mine had just begun. The chapel was packed with family and friends, all mourning his passing in their own way. They had their closure at last, whereas all I could feel was that we had been cheated by circumstances and an incurable disease. It seemed we had only just started really getting to know each other and the bonding was nowhere near complete. I remember the sadness which is rekindled as I write this, a tearful farewell to my brother-in-law and my very dear friend. This is my reminder of the influence he had on my life and the good times we shared in it. I will continue to weep for his passing, but only because I miss his company. The rest is just a thought away, brought to life each time I play the kind of music we enjoyed together, when I reminisce on games of cards and golf, and chat about the past with his children. When I cry now it is still for myself, but the tears I shed are in deep gratitude for the simple privilege of having known him.

My sister followed him eighteen months later. By then I thought my past experiences would help me to cope better, and they did. I was less consumed by thoughts of dying than I was philosophical about life and how it has a way of making everything right in the end. My sister was free of the pain and would be, in her belief, reunited with her husband. As for my wife and I, Mum's handing over of the reins suddenly made sense. We had little time to express grief - that would come later - because we had my sister's family to consider. With both parents gone, it seemed we had been adopted as surrogates. We were able to give them support, comfort and reassurance, all thanks to our past sadness and what it had revealed to us in terms of understanding how to take positive motivation from a seemingly negative reaction.

Many situations bring on bouts of crying. Perhaps the hardest to cope with are those periods of introverted depression, the overwhelming conviction that life no longer has anything to offer.

Rather than being the final straw, I am convinced this is the mind's plea for selfish consideration. It was for me. Having a nervous breakdown was bewildering and frightening. I didn't know why I felt the way I did, why I was unable to see beyond the self-pity. There were no answers that I was prepared to listen to and I pushed away anyone who tried to help. Once again, I was in that all-consuming darkness, haunted by my own thoughts and fears, and I continued to feed on misery that was fast becoming a necessity. My nearest and dearest, however, didn't give up on me, and once I'd cried to the point of exhaustion I found myself in a place of quiet and simplicity. It was so weird - one minute plagued by ghosts of past and present, the next seeing the soft glow of a new future set out before me, a warm pleasant world just waiting for me to fill it with my heart's desires. Then I responded to those who had stuck by me. I asked what I could do, where I could go and how to start living again. It worked for me. What I built from that awful experience was in respect of my personal needs, and although I couldn't see it at the time, I now know those elements were mainly unselfish. Maybe that was my problem after all, the reason I had the breakdown - I had become so self-centred that I was neglecting my responsibilities to the people in my life who really counted. Without those tears of loneliness and despondency, I might never have realised that. Certainly the crying was painful, but it was also a revitalisation and I'm truly glad of it.

I hope I have not bored you with all of this, and I can understand if you believe that, despite my confessions, I still can't appreciate what you may be going through. It's perfectly true - I can't. I am not you, as you are not me. We each have our own reasons for feeling the way we do, our own need for crying. But please bear in mind that crying can be both a result of your problems and a solution to them. When you cry for yourself it is over something that really matters to you. Make the conscious effort to discover what that something is, put it to rights, and those tears will have been worthwhile.

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