

You can't play on broken strings; you can't feel anything, that your heart don't want to feel...

blares James Morrison and Nelly Furtado singing the words of one my favourite 'sad songs' as I write. There are times in all of our lives where we feel that our strings have been utterly broken...that the music of our lives is at best discordant... at worst stopped...silent. There are many situations where this can be so, but none as acute as a fractured/ broken relationship (as in the song) or in the death of a loved one. *When we lose someone we have loved deeply* we are left with a grief that can paralyse us emotionally for a long time. *People we love become part of us. Our thinking, feeling and acting are co-determined by them. Our fathers, our mothers, our husbands, our wives, our lovers, our children, our friends ... they are all living in our hearts. When they or the relationship dies ... a part of us dies too. That is what grief is about: it is about that slow and painful departure of someone who has become an intimate part of us.*

As a priest I am no stranger to such situations ministering to people whose strings have been painfully, sometimes cruelly, yanked from their souls. For me personally: the broken relationships, the death of relatives including my mother in my teenage years and the illness and death of some of my closest friends. In such days, it is often incredibly challenging to see anything of God at all. Easier to wonder why he allowed the beautiful music of our loves and lives to be wrecked; to end. Why God... why?

The answers we'd like are rarely forthcoming. The music we long for no longer possible because those strings have been broken. Such periods of time can be immensely difficult both for those grieving and for those who love them. In times of great loss, it is so, so important simply to be there for your friends or family. My favourite spiritual writer Fr Henri Nouwen writes, "The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing... not healing, not curing...that is a friend who

cares.” I urge you not to worry about what to do - just be there for those you love and care for. It is more valuable to them than ever you may appreciate.

Many biblical Hebrew words for grieving, weeping and lamentation actually mean “to distil”, which is to separate and change from one substance (or one tune) to another. This beautifully describes God’s renewing work in the midst of our tears. God created us so that the glorious tune of our lives echoes, as one of our beautiful Eucharistic prayers says, the silent (underpinning) music of creation in praise of God. God the great conductor and great instrument maker wants us ever to be in harmony with the great rhythms of his creation. He wants us to be making the most beautiful music. God knows that music can’t be played on broken strings and that the best music cannot be when our hearts won’t feel and don’t want to feel. But slowly his inexhaustible and unconditional love opens up our hearts to feel again. Gently he mends or adds in new strings, sometimes of a higher pitch, sometimes lower than before, and he creates a new song... a new rhythm in our hearts and lives. The old tune remains forever beautiful and eternally invaluable but the new tune is also precious and wonderful. With new or mended strings, God enables you once more to live a life to the full... albeit different to before.

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