

“Griefspeare”

(William Shakespeare on “Grief”)



Selected and annotated by
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William Shakespeare on "Grief"

Selections and annotations by Dr Lionel Hartley

Quotations from William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

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Introduction

Grief is our very personal and individualised response to a real or an imagined loss.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) had much to say about grief - much of which was cynical. However, from his pen came some startling revelations of the way that he understood human nature. We can sense his own personal hurts coming through the words of many of his characters.

In the preparation of this booklet I have carefully selected some of the more practical things that the centuries have not changed - words of wisdom and understanding.

Relax, read on, and be encouraged.

- Lionel Hartley, Christchurch, 1974

Macbeth, 1606

If we are grieving, it really helps to share with another person how we feel. Verbalising our feelings helps us, and helps them to understand - which in turn helps them to be able to best help us.

“What, man! Ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;
Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'erfraught heart, and bids it break.”
- Prince Malcolm of Scotland (Act 4 Scene 3)

Also

“Be plain, Queen Margaret, and tell thy grief;
It shall be eas'd, (and) yield relief.

- (Lewis, King Henry VI Part 3, Act 3, Scene 3)

Much Ado About Nothing, 1598

Often others cannot help, not because they are insensitive, but simply that they do not understand.

“Every one can master a grief but he that has it.”

- Lord Benedict of Padua (Act 3 Scene 2)

(Romeo said,

“He jests at scars that never felt a wound.”

- Romeo and Juliet, Act 2, Scene 2)

Reminding ourselves of God's wisdom and the little snippets of wisdom we have learned from others in the past can help prevent us from making rash decisions when we are grieving. (Immediately following a loss is the worst time to decide upon anything major.) Ponder these words from the Governor of Messina:

“Patch grief with proverbs.”

- Leonato (Much Ado About Nothing, Act 5 Scene 1)

Othello, 1604

Sometimes it seems as though our particular grief is unique to us and that is why no-one understands. The Venetian Senator felt this way when he said,

“My particular grief
Is of so flood-gate and o’erbearing nature
That it engluts and swallows other sorrows,
And it is still itself.”

- Senator Brabantio (Act 1 Scene 3)

Pericles, 1608

Helecanus recognised the greatest depth of grief we experience over the loss of one who is closest to us:

“ ’Twould be too tedious to repeat;
But the main grief springs from the loss
Of a beloved daughter and a wife.”

- Lord Helicanus of Tyre (Act 5 Scene 1)

Romeo and Juliet, 1595

Sometimes soothing music can be a consolation to one who is grieving, as a musician in Romeo and Juliet observed:

“When griping grief the heart doth wound,
And doleful dumps the mind oppress,
Then music with her silver sound ...
With speedy help doth lend redress”

-Simon Catling (2nd Musician, Act 4 Scene 5)

We cannot hurry over our grieving. Never be ashamed to grieve in your own way. You grieve a lot — you hurt a lot — because you have loved a lot. Note the contrast in these

heartless words from the Lady-in-waiting:

“Evermore weeping for your cousin’s death?
What, wilt thou wash him from his grave with tears?
And if thou couldst, thou couldst not make him live.
Therefore have done. Some grief shows much of love;
But much of grief shows still some want of wit”

- (Act 3 Scene 5)

Boldly I personally challenge that and exclaim,

“... Some grief shows much of love;
(And) much of grief shows still (more love)”

(And needs more love too!)

Often our own grief weighs so heavy upon us that we become insensitive to others’ grief. The word ‘grief’ comes from the very old word, ‘gravis’, meaning ‘heavy’ (“The depth of grief.” **Richard, Henry VI Part 3, Act 2 Scene 1**) Also, when we are (and because we are) grieving it is difficult for us to accept or to comprehend the offering of love and comfort by others.

“Griefs of mine own lie heavy in my breast,
Which thou wilt propagate, to have it prest
With more of thine. This love that thou hast shown
Doth add more grief to too much of mine own.

Love is a smoke rais’d with the fume of sighs;
Being purg’d, a fire sparkling in lovers’ eyes;
Being vex’d, a sea nourish’d with lovers’ tears.
What is it else? A madness most discreet,
A choking gall, and a preserving sweet.”

- **Romeo of the House of Montague (Act 1 Scene 1)**

However, helping another when we are, ourselves, grieving can be a wonderful form of therapy.

“Tut, man, one fire burns out another’s burning;
One pain is lessoned by another’s anguish;
Turn giddy, and be help by backward turning;
One desperate grief cures with another’s languish.

Take thou some new infection to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old will die.”

- Romeo’s friend Benvolio (Act 1 Scene 2)

Julius Caesar, 1599

Brutus’ servant reminds us that it is no shame to cry when one is grieving:

“Now is that noble vessel full of grief,
That it runs over even at his eyes.”

- Clitus (Act 5 Scene 5)

Henry VI Part 2, 1592

This same observation was made by King Henry:

“Ay, Margaret; my heart is drown’d with grief,
Whose flood begins to flow within mine eyes.”

- (Act 3 Scene 1)

Henry VI Part 3, 1591

Richard, (later to become the Earl of Gloucester), also recognises the healing power of tears.

“To weep is to make less the depth of grief.”
- Richard (Act 2 Scene 1)

Compare the phrase

“Grief would have tears”
- The Countess of Rousillon in
All's Well That Ends Well, 1602, Act 3, Scene 4)

With

“Indeed the tears live in an onion that
should water this sorrow.”
- Domitius Enobarbus (Antony and Cleopatra,
Act 1 Scene 2).

Titus Andronicus, 1594

Shakespeare brings out an interesting point in “Titus Andronicus”, when he makes reference to the danger of suppressing (killing) grief. Suppressed grief causes physical maladies.

“Here, Tamora; though griev'd with killing grief.”
- Saturninus (Act 3, Scene 2)

King Lear, 1605

The Earl of Gloucester is quick to remind us that when we are grieving it seems as if we are going mad:

“Grief hath craz’d my wits.”

- Gloucester (Act 3 Scene 4)

Likewise,

“I knew of this before; but, to speak truth,
This present grief had wip’d it from my mind.”

- Northumberland (King Henry IV part 2,
Act 1, Scene 1)

“Sorrow and grief have vanquish’d all my powers.”

- Duke of Gloucester, (King Henry VI Part 2,
Act 2 Scene 1)

“Alas, poor man! grief has so wrought on him,
He takes false shadows for true substances.”

- Marcus (Titus Andronicus, Act 3 Scene 2)

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark

Grief is our response to loss and just as losses come in many different forms, grief also manifests itself in many different ways. Each person grieves differently. Our grief also changes according to its depth and to our response — the way we grieve today may well be different from the way we grieved over the same thing yesterday. (It is be-

cause of this that there is no such thing as "typical" grief. The Prince recognises this:

"Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief..."
- Hamlet (Act 1 Scene 2)

The Rape of Lucrece, 1594

Grief is the most confusing of all emotions, as highlighted in these lines from latter part of the poem, The Rape of Lucrece:

"Sometime her grief is dumb and hath no words;
Sometime 'tis mad and too much talk affords."

King Richard II, 1595

Grief also has an effect on our sense of time — the lonely hours seem to drag. The Duke of Hereford rightly observed,

"Grief makes one hour ten."
- Henry Bolingbroke (Act 1 Scene 3)

The King also made an interesting observation in regard to grief. Sometimes, when we see someone grieving, we falsely assume we know both the extent of and cause for their grieving. However, we all interpret loss differently and no-one else can really fully understand how we feel.

“The shadow of my sorrow? Ha! let’s see.
'Tis very true: my grief lies all within;
And these external manner of laments
Are merely shadows to the unseen grief
That swells with silence in the tortur’d soul.
There lies the substance.”

- King Richard (Act 4 Scene 1)

If you are comforting someone who is grieving, it is better to say that you don’t understand but that you still care, than to tritely say, “I understand” when you cannot.

Love’s Labour’s Lost, 1594

Being honest with one who is grieving is usually the best way to help them.

“Honest plain words best pierce the ear of grief.”

- Lord Berowne (attendant to King Ferdinand of Navarre, Act 5 Scene 2)

As You Like It

Silvius reminds us that it is still possible to sympathise and empathise even if we don’t understand.

“Wherever sorrow is, relief would be.
If you do sorrow at my grief in love,
By giving love, your sorrow and my grief

Were both extermin'd.”

- (Act 3 Scene 5)

We can really appreciate the support of friends as the son of the Earl of Gloucester said in King Lear:

“When we (others) see bearing our woes,
We scarcely think our miseries our foes.
Who alone suffers suffers most i' th' mind,
Leaving free things and happy shows behind;
But then the mind much sufferance doth o'erskip
**When grief hath mates, and bearing fellowship.
How light and portable my pain seems now.”**

- Edgar (King Lear, Act 3, Scene 6 Emphasis added)

Antony and Cleopatra, 1607

Finally, there is hope for those who are grieving, as a friend of Antony said (in a different context),

“Grief is crown'd with consolation:
(An) old smock brings forth a new petticoat.”

- Domitius Enobarbus (Act 1 Scene 2)

The Passionate Pilgrim, 1609

And even your God can be of comfort - to reassign the lines in Shakespeare's poem:

“Thus of every grief in heart
He (God) with thee doth bear a part!”

- Stanza 20