

BLACK HOLES AND HEARTBREAK

by Mike Finley

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excerpted from a book in progress, **THE CLEVER & THE GOOD**

The biggest obstacle of all for clever people is something good people have a hard time understanding, which is that hearts do break. Cleverness is in part a defense mechanism to keep a broken heart from breaking further.

Years ago, when I was just out of college, I had a friend named Sy, an ex-catholic like myself who edited a newsletter for some nonprofit group. Sy was a very snarky fellow – always with the wise-guy quips. He seemed to talk out of the side of his face, like a comedian. I found him very beguiling. As they say of a fighter, “He leads with his left,” Sy led with his wit, and it was invariably scalding and bitterly funny. He was lead singer in a rock group called the Black Holes. “No light escapes,” was the band’s motto.

Sy hated all authority figures. He hated the Vietnam War. He hated his Catholic upbringing. He hated ministers and religious leaders generally. In a few words he could sum up someone he didn’t like, like Nixon, or Billy Graham, in such a way that you could never think of them apart from his insult. For a time I saw him as a kind of role model for me – a guy who could live in the modern world without flinching.

One day, we were kidding around, and I used the word cynical with him, and to my surprise, he recoiled. Suddenly, gone was the sly act. Instead, Sy was angry and hurt. Worse than hurt, he was betrayed “I’m not a cynic,” he said to me.

I withdrew the characterization, unsure what the gig was. Only later did I learn that Sy had experienced a grievous loss as a young boy, when his mother, older brother, and toddler sister were killed at a railroad crossing.

I realized that the young man I thought I knew, the fire-breathing Sy, was not the real Sy at all, but an extremely wounded version of that suburban boy. Somewhere under all that cheeky disrespect was a boy smoldering in rage at losing his family. He had suffered a huge loss, and not knowing what else to do, reacted by becoming funny. The

abrasive personality he put forward was just his way of limiting future hurt. Sy really wasn't a cynic. His newsletter work for a crippled children foundation was evidence of that. He was something else. He was heartbroken. Indeed, he once told me, over a pitcher of beer, that spelled his name *Sigh*.

Not everyone in life has experienced deep loss. A death in the family, by itself, is not enough to cause this kind of rupture. The loss must be more terrible than not having people around that you love. It must be a loss that closes certain doors forever, that forecloses on certain possibilities. In short, the loss must be so profound that it causes permanent damage to the soul.

Ordinary, good people often have a hard time understanding this level of hurt. Indeed, one reason it is easy for them to be good is they have never experienced this particularly wrenching type of loss, like Sy experienced. They never had to walk through life wondering why they were allowed to live, when the truly innocent were swept away.

And so good people are challenged to understand the hurt that is buried in some clever persons. It doesn't help that, for all their hurt, these clever ones never act any better than complete bastards. Their lives feel over to them, so why not live out the duration in bitterness and rage? Good people never get that the target of their wrath is not them, or Nixon, or Billy Graham – it's God himself.

Not long ago I was canvassing a neighborhood for John Kerry. Most people who came to the door were very nice, whether they were Democrats or Republicans. But I will never forget one young man, about 30, who opened the door with a prosthetic hand, took one look at my leaflets and muttered this bitter word: "Unforgivable."

C. S. Lewis wrote somewhere that it is better to shake one's fist at God than to ignore him altogether – that a connection with rage is better than no connection at all. But that is small solace to those whose hearts are broken and who cannot imagine that there is purpose to the horrors they have experienced, indeed that their loss is in some sense a blessing.

Indeed, how is a human being who has suffered so terrible a loss to forgive God? And until this happens, how can this person ever let down his guard and see that other

people, far from being naïve or thick or something out of a Hallmark card, have only goodness in their hearts?

There are enough stories to break our hearts every day of our lives, if we pay attention. Pick up the paper and go to the B section. Any time a child dies, it seems so wrong. Every time an innocent is taken, or children are left alone when something happens to their mother, or both parents.

Every time we suffer a grievous injury or loss, and we know we will have to live with it every day for the rest of our lives.

Unless you're fantastically, improbably good, it's impossible to stay friends with God. God let this happen; therefore God is to blame. Even if you strive against all odds not to be damaged by the loss, and to escape the sentence of pain it levies, you are anyway.

Even if you refuse to be damaged, and devise elaborate defense mechanisms for the rest of your life, as Sy did, you are still destroyed.

Pain is the end of innocence, and in many cases the end of joy. Tragedy makes us bitter, and bitterness makes us hard inside.

That's a stump whose roots go down forever.

The last century was so fraught with cruelty – with killing fields, manipulated famines, campaigns against populations, whole factories of death – that we witnessed the “death of God” movement. It was just not possible for many people to survive all that they had survived, and envision a kind and loving God on the other side.

Too many people were burned and cut down.

This prejudice against God – or is it a punishment of him – is our defense against our agony. We want never to get our hopes up again, because we want at all costs to keep our hearts from breaking again.

People turn to drugs and alcohol and other compulsions for many reasons. But a major one is to have a way to talk back to the grief that nags us on an everyday basis.

Why are you still alive?

We throw our despair up against the gloom and anger that never leaves us, as a kind of sad shield. Like a child with its hands on its ears crying, “I can’t hear you.”

God, for his part, has to take it on the chin. Try telling Sy that “God never throws anything at you that you can’t handle.” Of course God does, Sy would say. If experience proves anything it is that people can be mangled beyond recognition, and God will not swoop in on a winged horse to save you. People are swept away routinely. Walk into any clinic waiting room and the evidence is on people’s faces. Depression, anxiety, and finally despair overtake us, and the people in our charge.

Heartbreak is to be distinguished from depression. Heartbreak is an attitude we decide to have. Depression is a clinical condition – the #1 cause of suicide. Heartbreak can be a root cause of depression, but they are not to be confused. Heartbreak is something you may be able to do something about yourself. For depression, you will need intervention.

There is a room at an old restored plantation near Natchez, Mississippi. In this room a woman, the mistress of the house, spent twenty-eight years. She had given birth to five healthy children, but her sixth child was born dead, and the woman slid into profound postpartum depression.

No one had words for it in those days. The people in town said she “took sick.” But the truth was, her heart had broken, and that in turn broke her health.

Think of her misery, staring out that second story window for twenty-eight years. Think of the misery of her family, unable to reach through the gloom to her.

We are lucky today. We have a rich pharmacopoeia for depression. If one drug doesn’t work, another very well may. Keep trying till you get a good one.

But we face the same problem as the woman of Natchez. A common tragedy can jolt us out of our life. And in our anger and grief, we help keep death alive.

“God never throws anything at you” is a wrenchingly insipid thought to the heartbroken, adding fresh injury to old. It caps a lifetime of grievances against the good. “God has a personal plan for your life” likewise rings hollow to the parents of a starving infant.

Indeed, one may ask why anyone would try to evangelize the broken-hearted. Don't good people know there is no soul in there to save? That the very act of trying refreshes the horror, makes it vivid and awful again?

So what can a person do? Heartbreak seems so terminal. What leverage allows a person to live again once they are lost? Where does the lever come from? And where does a person stand when the lever is prying out your heart?

One place to start is the part that hurts least: your mind. People are really only good for one thing, learning. This, the undoing of catastrophic pain, is one of the ultimate lessons we can learn. People in this kind of pain are hanging by a tiny root over an immense abyss. But they still have reason. Indeed, it is reason that fires that anger at God: How could you let this happen? And their anger at the good: How can you pretend life is not vicious? How can you sing with joy when you can plainly see all my limbs have been ripped off?

Self-pity gets a bad name in our culture because it sounds like we are indulging in our weakness. It sounds narcissistic. But sometimes we don't pity ourselves enough, or we don't do it directly enough. Instead we let it bleed out as background noise. Maybe we need to move it to the foreground and face it square. Maybe we need to step outside ourselves and see our plight the way a sympathetic outsider might.

And when we see ourselves that way, we are likely to be overcome with love for ourselves. See how we are struggling. See how we rise each day and go to work though we our hearts are still broken. See how we do our best to put on a bright face for the people we love.

This is a little like God sees us every day. We enjoy the benefit of every doubt. He focuses on what little courage we bring to the table. He sees us trying despite our heartache and he loves us for it.

At AA, they say you will never get free of your alcoholism until you name your sorrow and tell it how much it hurts. Problem is, it hurts to even contemplate doing that.

What can you do? Instead of feeling your sadness on an everyday low level, you summon it from the deep and feel it its full misery. Expose yourself to the pathos. Go for

broke. Remember every detail. Re-experience the unfairness. Let it hurt you. Call your pain by name. Indulge.

The boy whose sister died grows up. Gets married. Has children of his own. But deep down he is still sad. At night he dreams of the life cut short. Of his sister slipping away, her hands on her scapular. Of the boyfriends she never had. The kisses she never got, the kisses she never gave. The joy of work, and raising a family.

Not even, because she was sick all her life, the joy of running in an open field.

Bring it all back up, until you are sobbing, until tears sting your eyes and roll down your cheeks.

And when the storm has passed, and you have shed bitter tears, and you touch bottom, that is when you ask for help.

And when you have asked, wait.

And be prepared to wait a long time.

Because life is not a box of chocolates. Sometimes you cry out for something sweet, and it is so long in coming, you forget you ever asked for it.

Entertain this thought: Everyone dies. Everyone's heart is broken. No matter what the family in the life insurance commercial looks like. No one gets off light. There are no get-out-of-jail-free cards. Everyone pays full price.

If your argument with God is comprehensive – no one should die or suffer – good luck.

And if it is less than that – I shouldn't suffer, my child shouldn't suffer – you are asking to be exempted from the pain of life.

Even at its most excruciating, tragedy is normal.

A comedian once said he hated that the Greeks separated the two masks of comedy and tragedy.

“There's only one mask,” he said. “Pain, laughter, they cycle on one another. They're a continuum.”

Ever notice that the best comedians come from groups that have suffered the most? Ever wonder why? What do comedians do? All humor is embedded with pain – perplexity, embarrassment, disappointment, injustice.

A joke stands outside pain, and reframes it. Dark comics like Sy are philosophers of pain. Think of it this way, they say, expanding the frame so you see more of the picture. Now think of it this way, and expand it still more.

Perhaps the way to healing after heartbreak is to identify things we still love. A pet. A friend. The warm breeze in our face on a summer night.

Make snapshots of those loves. Then expand the frame.

Keep expanding, this time like healing ripples on a pond.

Perhaps your assumption is that every good life follows an enviable arc of birth, growth, mission, completion, retirement, death.

Why would you assume that?

Christians like saying that God has a personal plan for everyone. And you try to square that with a child lying dead in the road from a hit and run, or cholera wiping out thousands in Bangladesh, or Alzheimer's stealing the soul of someone you love.

But maybe the assumption is wrong.

Maybe God's plan doesn't follow our enviable arc. Maybe every life is not guaranteed fulfillment and completion, like a signed contract. Maybe it's messier than that. Maybe the arc you think of is not for individuals but for groups of people. That we live our lives together, teaching one another lessons.

And sometimes it is the child's turn to do the teaching.

Carlos Fuentes has a recurring line in his novel *Nuestra Terra*: "A destiny may require many lifetimes." Maybe other lives do live on – in you. In your grief, you may be missing an opportunity.

Maybe the tragedy isn't about the person you lost. After all, they are gone. They don't weep for themselves in the hereafter. The only one weeping is you.

Maybe the “plan” is about you, and whether you’re going to be able to figure this thing out.

“The Lord giveth and the lord taketh away.” Does he ever.

Maybe the plan is for you to dig deeper and find sweetness even in the face of terrible loss. Maybe it’s for you to close the book on those who have departed, and turn your attention and your love to those who remain behind.

Why should they be victimized by your definition of tragedy? If life is precious and you are sad it ended, why not show it by devoting yourself to those who are still living?

Including yourself. Why should you be the tabernacle of all this suffering? Who made you the ritual sacrifice for the world?

Isn’t that supposed to be someone else’s job?

If you’re going to be mad at God, be really mad at him. Raise your fist and give him hell. Shame him, if it makes you feel better. Accuse him of abandoning you, of letting your loved one die. Call him names. Let him have it. Here’s an idea: guarantee retribution. If you let me down, I’ll do *this*. It’s a bargaining chip. That’ll get his attention.

Anything, just don’t jam the feelings deep down into yourself the way people do. If you call God out, that’s the beginning of a conversation. Maybe he’ll step forward and explain himself. Maybe he’ll say he’s sorry. Maybe he’ll make it all better. Maybe he wasn’t actually behind the wheel of that locomotive. Maybe it all makes sense if you just cock your head a certain way.

Calling God out takes nerve. You have to stand toe to toe with the man. But at least you are talking. At least you are calling a spade a spade. Which beats God-is-dead all to hell.

You know it, too, or you wouldn’t be reading this. There is no satisfaction in hating God. And continuing to pummel ourselves and him and everybody with grief is another kind of sin.

But it is what you have left. So you must learn what you can coax your reason to do. Ponder your assumptions. Challenge them. And when you answer them, think about what your allegiances are.

Say your family died in a train crash, and that was what broke your heart. When it happened you formed a syllogism that went something like this.

I loved my family.

My family is gone.

I have no family now.

I lay this at the foot of God.

First the obvious question. *Did God kill your child?* Or did the universe behave as it always does, with random upheavals of evil that kill people and permanently scar their survivors. Often the people who die are the most innocent of all. Collateral damage, they call it.

Rabbi Harold Kushner in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* reminds us that God's love of us doesn't mean that the laws of nature are suspended. The fact that a child dies is not evidence of his malevolence, but of the dangerousness of a fallen world. God isn't Superman, catching us every time we tumble.

Remember, everything dies. That is the way this world works. We are put in it not to live forever but to make a puddle of meaning with the time we have. And there is no "right" time. There is no "deserved" death. If every instant is an act of grace, every instant is also fraught with danger. Every so often, at the wrong instant, a train comes along.

Second, why do you look at an innocent life ended so soon, and conclude that it had no purpose, that it was snuffed out, that that life was without meaning, that its destiny was thwarted? Sy's family was killed on the tracks when he was 11 years old, while he was home watching the Three Stooges. Their death destroyed his family. His father never spoke of the event, and turned to drink. Sy retreated into a dark chasm of humor and judgment. Even the community around them, full of perfectly good people, was damaged by the accident. A few gathered to console them, but everyone was so afraid. The feeble

consolation did no good, and actually triggered more of Sy's anger: "If you can't give me something I can use, leave me alone."

It wasn't just the blasted lives of his mom, brother, and little sister, he thought. It wasn't just his own. But a whole town of blasted lives. The hurt hit everyone. A true tragedy, that takes everyone down with it. The wound was like a splash in a pond. One family, five families, a hundred families across the town, across the country. Everyone stricken, everyone damaged. The pain rippled outward, touching everyone.

And for what purpose? Perhaps the purpose is to understand what happened. And that life is like this sometimes. But it requires such courage to rise up against the pain.

It's not going to stop hurting overnight. Like the Beatles said, "You're going to carry that weight a long time."

But at the end of all this weeping and reframing, there is the prospect of healing. Of letting it go. Ask, why do I choose to hold onto this hatred? Is it fear of being able to live? Is this hatred what my loved ones would have wanted? Is this feeling doing me, or anyone, any good? Or do I like the wall I have created with my grief, my special island? Have I won a contest against God, by painting him as the big bully, and against decent people, by making them accomplices in your pain?

Imagine, if you thought your most precious gift were taken away, that you have been given another one. Imagine. If you thought your heart was broken, to discover that it can be pieced back together, bit by bit. That the black hole can be made lighter, and relaxed, and light penetrate though to its surface again.

And all it takes is being willing to see it end.

And in the end the repaired heart will be more precious even than the one that broke, because it represents life going on.

Which is what life does. And that is God's doing too.