

How to grieve well: A reflection

Damein Chong



Photo by Ann on Unsplash

In the year 2021, I experienced the suicides of both a friend and an acquaintance.

The two communities adopted very different approaches: The former mourned openly while the latter wiped any existence of the deceased from the internet and kept silent. This has made me reflect on what grieving well means. Grief and sorrow are universal human experiences, regardless of one's religious orientation. Grief presents us with the inescapable choice of responding to our pain and suffering. We do not choose grief and suffering. They choose us. So we have to choose how to deal with them when they show up on our doorstep uninvited. (A. J. Bauman, *Stumbling toward Wholeness*, Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2018, 118).

Christ participates and shares in our grief

The account of Jesus raising Lazarus in John 11 provides a unique insight into how Jesus approached and empathised with a grieving community. "Jesus wept" (John 11:35). This captures the tenderness and vulnerability of Christ very well. The incarnate Christ, the Creator of heaven and earth, physically approached the broken-hearted and wept with them as they mourned the death of Lazarus. In that moment and in our own moments of loss, God mourns with us, the Creator God and His creation.

However, this sequence of events shows us "the paradox of Christ's mourning," for Jesus knew full well that he would resurrect the dead Lazarus shortly thereafter. Christ could have dismissed their grief

and raised Lazarus immediately, but he chose not to short-change them, but to affirm their human need by sharing in their grief. Christ personally makes it clear to us that not only is it permissible to express our grief, but also that this is an important process for us to grieve well.

The repercussions of suppressing our grief and emotions

When we deny ourselves permission to express our grief and instead continue to suppress our own pain, we inevitably lose our sense of being fully loved. C.S. Lewis underscores this truth with eloquent precision:

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will be wrung and possibly broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact you must give it to no one, not even an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements. Lock it up safe in the casket or coffin of your selfishness. But in that casket, safe, dark, motionless, airless, it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. To love is to be vulnerable. (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, New York: HarperCollins, 2017, 155–156).

Playing it safe between joy and grief

Counsellor Andrew Bauman writes that grief and

Continued on Page 6

ANNOUNCEMENTS

New students

We welcomed two new students in January this year. Dr Lee Chee San (Malaysia), trained as a medical doctor, is doing Sabbatical Studies for six months. He is auditing classes on missions and biblical interpretation at DTC while reflecting on his journey of doing community empowerment projects in Sarawak. Oliva Mak (Hongkong), an alumna of DTC (1992–1994), is doing the Master of Christian Studies by dissertation from Canada where she resides.



Olivia (left) and Chee San.

Visiting lecturer

We welcome visiting lecturer Rev. Dr Swarup Bar from India who is staying at DTC and teaching Asian Theology from March to May this year, as well as giving three public lectures in April on "The Spirit Shaped Church" based on his book of the same title published last year. Rev. Swarup is an associate professor of theology in Bishop's College, Kolkata, and the Presbyter-in-Charge of St. Andrew's Church, Diocese of Calcutta. He has a PhD in Systematic Theology from the University of Edinburgh. His research interests include Pneumatology, Ecclesiology, Asian theology and Christian theologies in India.



Continued from Page 5

joy can be seen as two ends on a single continuum, with the deepest grief on one end and the greatest joy on the other. The degree to which we can fully experience wholeness and joy is directly proportionate toward the extent to which we are willing to dive into the abyss of grief. (Bauman 2018, 116).

The middle zone provides an illusory sense of safety, and should we overstay our welcome, our hearts eventually become "unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable" as C.S. Lewis described. I was personally guilty of "playing it safe" by staying in the middle zone, escaping into my self-constructed wonderland or expressing my entitled anger through self-pity. If our grief is only dealt with superficially, our experience of joy too, remains superficial.

My own sojourn into the middle zone was the result of a short-lived romantic relationship that fell apart. I ventured out occasionally but withdrew immediately when the grief became too painful. It was easier to hold on to my anger and disappointment and to hold on to the misguided cultural beliefs that as an Asian man, I had to suppress my own emotions. Even if I was bleeding, I would not shed a tear in front of others because it was seen as a sign of weakness. Yet, as I reflected on Jesus' compassion for Lazarus, this act of Jesus weeping gave

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me the permission I needed to fully express my grief. The part of me where time had stood still for two years began ticking again.

Towards wholeness and joy

Grief is often a personal journey with no set timetable, and often we are tempted to hold on to exactly what we need to let go of. But even when we stumble, Christ waits patiently by our side, gently tugging at our heart to get us back in our boat. To move toward wholeness and joy, we must willingly enter the deep, dark

waters of grief and courageously mourn our losses. It is important that we allow our hearts to break so that we have the courage to love ourselves and others despite the wounded places (Bauman 2018, 123). Though the journey will be full of anguish and occasional stumbles, beauty will surely rise from the ashes of our grief redeemed by God, just as Christ rose to glory.



≠The writer is a DTC alumnus (2014–2016). He serves at OMF International and has a passion for ministering and encouraging individuals struggling with mental health challenges.

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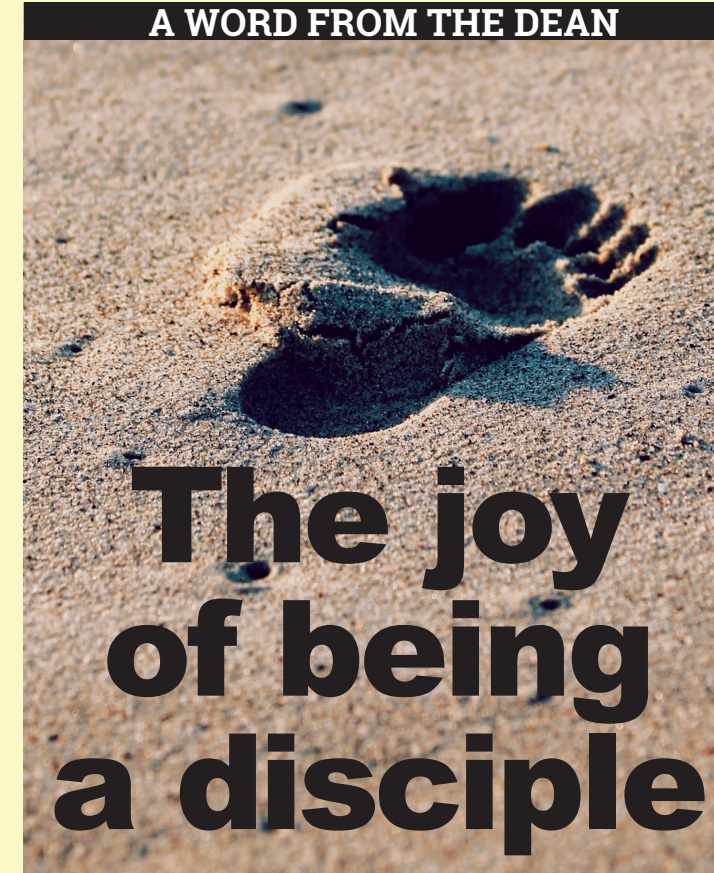
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A WORD FROM THE DEAN



The call to discipleship is an invitation to an exclusive relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. If we would Jesus' disciples be, we must make an all-out commitment to him, following in his footsteps and obeying all that he requires and commands. Jesus himself has indicated clearly that being his disciple would be costly and exacting.

Recall these words of his, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." (Matt. 16:24). Or these, "In the same way, those of you who do not give up everything you have cannot be my disciples." (Luke 14:33). The German pastor and martyr Dietrich Bonhoeffer correctly captured the sense of Jesus' teaching: "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." (*The Cost of Discipleship*, New York: Macmillan, 1963, p. 99; italics mine.)

As harsh and cutting as Christ's terms of discipleship may be, they serve to present us with the simple alternative of obedience or disobedience. Discipleship is, after all, a matter of choice—one which we must make ourselves. Hence Jesus' advice to "count the cost" conveyed via the parable about the man who prepares to build a tower. (Luke 14:28–30 RSV). That parable is suggestive of an important principle for would-be disciples to appreciate—that "the counting of the cost is to bring us to the point of clarity and decisiveness". (Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, New York: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 293).

Our decision to respond to the call to discipleship is a conscious and deliberate act of the will; no one we know of simply drifts towards discipleship. The fishermen brothers Peter and Andrew must leave their nets in order to follow Jesus, as must Levi his tax collector's booth. Though a mystery of grace is involved in discipleship, we have a part to play. What we may not do

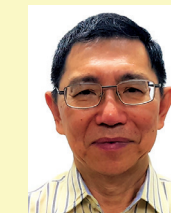
is remain uncommitted or indifferent. As someone quips, "Jesus' invitation to discipleship comes with an RSVP!"

In my own journey of faith, I first come to realise that the cost of not being a disciple can outweigh that of being one. I was inspired by reading Dallas Willard who reasons, "Nondiscipleship costs abiding peace, a life penetrated throughout by love, faith that sees everything in the light of God's overriding governance for good, hopefulness that stands firm in the most discouraging of circumstances, power to do what is right and withstand the forces of evil. In short, it costs exactly that abundance of

life Jesus said he came to bring (John 10:10)." (*The Spirit of Disciplines*, New York: HarperCollins, 1991, p. 263).

Still, I wonder what the way forward is for me in my discipleship journey. Being pragmatic about what one might lose by way of blessings, I feel, cannot be the primary consideration. Is the life of a disciple one chiefly given to being concerned about its own blessedness?

St. Paul, a disciple *par excellence* whose "joy knows no bound" (2 Cor. 7:4), would doubtless say "No!" Feel his joyful heart in these uplifting lines, "But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things." (Phil. 3:7–8). Thus, being a disciple of Christ, it seems to me, is more about embracing divine joy, and trusting God to make that joy complete in us.



DR LIM K THAM
Dean

To live as light

Seah Jiak Choo

“For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light...” (Eph. 5:8).

This is a most startling, radical, and life-changing statement. Notice that the verse does not say “once you were *in* darkness”. It says “you were darkness”. We were darkness itself. We had taken on the characteristics of the environment we were immersed in. But now we are light in the Lord. Now we stand out from the darkness. Now we are distinguishable from darkness because God has turned on the light in our lives. Again, notice that the verse does not say “you are *in* the light” or “you have been *given* a light”. Instead, the verse says, “you are light”—the light is in you! The emphasis in this verse is on the light within.

The light within us is solar-charged not by the sun but by the Son—by Jesus Christ, the Son of God who dwells in us (Eph. 2:22). The light comes from the indwelling of Jesus who is the Light of the world (John 8:12). Recognising that we are light in the Lord, however, is not enough. We have to live as light. How do we live as light?

Be governed by the action of light (Eph. 5:9)

Verse 9 tells us that to live as light, our lives must be governed by the action of light. When light is active it produces the fruit (singular) of all goodness, righteousness and truth. All goodness is the opposite of all bitterness in Eph. 4:31. Goodness is a general term that embraces all that is morally and spiritually excellent. Righteousness is rightness in our actions as God sees it—doing what is right, proper, and fitting in the eyes of God. Truth is integrity and reliability, and is the opposite of deceit (Eph. 4:14; 5:6), falsehood (4:25), and hypocrisy.

Instead of conduct characterised by ungodly vices and deeds of darkness, the Christian life should be marked by goodness, righteousness and truth. We have proof that we are light in the Lord when our lives are full of what is good, right and true.

Assess what meets God’s approval (Eph. 5:10)

Next, to live as light we must assess what meets the approval of God. In life we are always assessing—what to do, what not to do. Consciously or unconsciously, we use certain criteria to assess what actions to take. What criteria do we use for the decisions in life? Verse 10 tells that as children of light we should find out what pleases the Lord. As children of light, do we try to discern what is pleasing to God and act accordingly? List the pros and cons, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you in the direction of God’s will. If you lack wisdom, you should ask God, and he will give you wisdom (James 1:5). Make

the best decision you can in the light of the information you have gathered. Expect that the Holy Spirit will give you a deepening conviction that the decision is God’s will. Doing what is pleasing to the Lord is not something we hope we can somehow drift into. Pleasing the Lord is something we have to actively, consciously engage our minds in—to find out, to test, and to approve (Rom. 12:1–2). If we are not in the habit of doing this, we have to make a start—to develop an enlightened mind that reflects the mind of Christ. As we do this, God is there to help us. He has promised that, if we pray, he will give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that we may know him better (Eph 1:17).

Abstain from deeds of darkness (Eph. 5:11-12)

Thirdly, to live as light we have to abstain from committing the deeds of darkness. Whatever we know is improper for God’s people, we should give up immediately, because light and darkness do not mix. But it is not enough just to avoid all that belongs to spiritual darkness.

In living as children of light, we are also to take a stand against the deeds of darkness. We are to expose and reprove them. If we are to reprove the deeds of darkness, let us be mindful not to adopt an “I-am-holier” attitude. We are all sinners in need of God’s grace and forgiveness. If we need to reprove, to expose what is wrong, we should do so humbly, gently, and patiently (Eph. 4:2).

Exposure of sin also need not be with words of correction since according to verse 12, “it is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.” Light can do its work in silence, just by being light. A godly life can, by its distinctive contrast, reveal the errors in someone else’s life. Those living in darkness can become ashamed of their immorality, impurity and greed when they come into contact with goodness, righteousness, and truth in the lives of the children of light. Their sins of darkness become visible to them, and this recognition of sin can be the start of light entering their lives.

Advancing light. (Eph 5:13–14)

“But everything exposed by the light becomes visible. For it is the light that makes everything visible.” This is the light coming from Christians who live as light wherever God has placed them—in their families, in their neighbourhoods, in their schools and workplaces. The light advances into many places, exposing darkness, reproofing sin, guiding, and bringing others to know Jesus, the Light. Therefore, let us awake and arise to a new dawn.

Verse 14b reminds us of Isaiah 60:1 which urges the

Continued on Page 3

LIFE AT DTC

We began the year with a ferry ride to Pulau Ubin where we cycled and walked by the sea. During sports time, a \$2 beach ball from Daiso provided hours of fun and exercise, while in a spark of resourcefulness, students used lecture room tables for a game of ping pong. Some also found a past-time watching a pair of pink-necked green pigeons roosting in the garden.



Continued from Page 2

people of God to “arise and shine, for their light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon them”. If we have allowed the light in us to grow dull or dim, let us awake and be fully switched on. If we have allowed cobwebs of sin and impurity to cover the light in us, let us clear them away and arise to a new beginning of living as light once again. Eph. 5:14 reminds us that the source of our light is Christ. It is Christ shining on us that regenerates the light in us, as we awake and arise from ignorance, indifference or carelessness. We

can shine only because he shines on us. That brings us back to where we started at verse 8, that as believers, we are light in the Lord.



The writer is an adjunct lecturer at DTC and has taught Paul’s letters. She retired from the Ministry of Education, Singapore, as Director-General of Education in March 2009 and obtained her MA in Theology at Fuller Theological Seminary in 2014.

Why study at DTC?

Applications for July 2022 admission welcome; Scholarships available

If you ask DTC alumni what they remember of their time at DTC, or listen in on a student testimony at the annual Valedictory Service, one thing invariably comes up: the formative experience of living in a small, multicultural community.

DTC’s 54-year-old ethos of communal training in discipleship and whole-person formation was also considered a strength of DTC by respondents to an internal survey comprising 31 recent graduates, current students, board members, full-time faculty, adjunct lecturers and staff.

They observed that training-in-community provides “concrete cross-cultural experience”, “develops character and interpersonal skills”, “challenges the students to re-examine their cultural understanding and acceptance” and to practise “Christian love, patience, and forgiveness”. Recent graduates valued the daily opportunity to learn from those of different backgrounds, to learn to “handle conflict and unite in Christ”, and to learn “the meaning of iron sharpens iron”.

One of DTC’s six training objectives is wholesome and healthy community: “To build a community, in which our unity in Christ is maintained in the midst of cultural diversity, learning skills in conflict resolution resulting in servant spirit and healthy interpersonal relationships.” Such a community is not a given but always a work in progress by the grace of God, with its share of laughter and tears, as students come together with faculty for one to two years, and then part for their next “posting” as they continue on in their journey of following Jesus.

DTC’s three residential programmes accredited by the Asia Theological Association are as follows:

Graduate Diploma in Intercultural Studies

- One-year programme for graduates of tertiary institutions or those with the professional equivalent and working experience, who see themselves in ministry or work in a cross-cultural context but do not want to do a standard theological course for two or three years
- Focus on mission studies, gospel and culture, Asian studies, theological studies and ethics, and Christian Spirituality, with survey courses in the Old and New Testaments

Master of Christian Ministry

- Two-year programme for graduates from tertiary institutions or those who have the professional equivalent and working experience
- Comprehensive preparation for ministry in a cross-cultural setting, covering mission studies,



One of DTC’s six training objectives is wholesome and healthy community.

gospel and culture, Asian studies, biblical studies, theological studies, ethics, Christian Spirituality, pastoral studies, and ministry skills

Master of Christian Studies (by dissertation only)

- For DTC graduates to do research on a particular subject or topic
- A supervisor will be assigned for the writing of the dissertation
- Research and writing will normally take 6 to 12 months to complete
- May be done residentially (preferred) or non-residentially

DTC also offers a Sabbatical Studies Programme (one or two semesters, or six to nine months) for those who wish to review, reflect and refresh by attending courses, writing, or guided personal reflection or self-study.

Limited scholarship grants are available to help needy persons accepted for study at DTC. Each grant will cover up to 50% of the applicable course fees payable for the entire period of study. Airfare, books, mission trips and expenses of a personal nature are not covered. The continued award of the grant for the subsequent year of study is subject to good academic performance and the recommendation of the Faculty.

People who wish to attend our courses as audit students are welcome to apply, stating their area(s) of interest. A small fee is payable.

For more details, go to www.dtc.org.sg e-mail disciple@singnet.com.sg or call 6256 3208.