

Good Grief

Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée

The ethical expression for what Abraham did is that he meant to murder Isaac; the religious expression is that he meant to sacrifice Isaac—but precisely in this contradiction is the anxiety that can make a person sleepless, and yet without this anxiety Abraham is not who he is.
—Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*

If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.
—Eavan Boland, “*The Pomegranate*”

I bless the rains down in Africa.
—David Paich, “*Africa*,” *Toto IV*

Having happily served a mission myself, I was convinced that the only tears I would shed when I said goodbye to my oldest son would be tears of maternal joy. However, as his departure date loomed larger on the calendar, the metal harness of time strapped me in, and I felt nauseous as I anticipated the whoosh of the release of air just before being whisked straight upward and then plummeted to certain death—the thrill and the terror of knowing that I had not only signed up for this ride, but I had waited in line and I was the one who had paid for it. No one had threatened, cajoled, or bribed me. I was simply handing my baby over to the program, like some hyperspiritual psychopath.

On the day of my Holden’s mission farewell, the messages started to appear. They were angelic cries to me as I cowered in an arc of trembling uncertainty. They were the Gabriel to my Mary, to my Elizabeth. The voice to my Hannah. And they all said the same thing: *I know how you feel. And I’m sorry.* Boomerang-like, the apology seemed to be circular,

spreading its wings over both their own memories and my current state. With halos tear-tarnished and askew, these women showered me with heavenly texts to cushion the blow that they had experienced before their ministry. For them, their grief was also their invitation to become my angels. *Dear Mother, you are hereby invited to participate in a grief so deep that it will have to be shared in order to be handled.*

You can mention the phrase “baby weight” to a room full of mothers of every age, and they will all sigh in unison. Once it attaches itself to you, it never leaves. It might relocate. It might downsize. But it will never completely disappear.

The maternal grief associated with the loss that tumbles down so naturally with time is also baby weight. Any woman who has been a mother feels this emotional baby weight just as surely as she tugs at pants that once fit smoothly or self-consciously sucks in the stomach that housed the person she now loves so dearly that she never wants to let him go. Baby weight: the emotional pull of the umbilical cord. The gravity that ties you to that baby.

The airport in Idaho Falls, where we willingly deposited my oldest son on the plane that would transport him on the first leg of his journey to his new African home, looked like a real airport’s little brother, penitent in its very stature. Holden gave us one last adorable flick of his Indiana Jones hat, one of several hats I had purchased to make myself feel as if I could protect him from the Ivoirian sun, the wide brim simply covering my need to believe he would actually wear it. Our faces were completely wet, and we were in the middle of heaving a collective sigh of misery when we looked to our right and saw an elder making his triumphal return home through the arrivals gate, less than twenty feet from our little band of grieving souls. It almost seemed mean. We jealously watched this elder being smothered in a possessive hug from his giddy mother, and my husband burst out, his voice breaking: “Well . . . damn it!”

The eight of us (we had to learn to stop counting to nine) trudged over the small strip of pavement that was the parking lot—not nearly long enough to match our sorrow—and slowly piled into our Suburban. My husband turned around from the driver’s seat (still crying like the rest of us) and said, “Okay! Everyone say two things they hate about Holden!” At least we could laugh through our tears.

The post-airport dread I expected to envelop me like a deathly shroud came, but it was somehow accompanied by fluttering feathers of joy. I was surprised in equal parts by the combination of sorrow and the peace. It was the holiest grief I had ever felt.

There are only two other times when I've felt so beautifully conflicted. Once when I sat on the floor of my dorm room in the Missionary Training Center on the first day of my mission, my skirt crumpled beneath me as I cried in panic. It was a day I had looked forward to since I wrote the words "I am going to serve a mission" in my round twelve-year-old scrawl on the handout about setting goals from Beehive teacher Sister Anderson, whose perfectly feathery hair and beautiful olive skin gave each of us a hopeful vision of our own futures, our grins framed by the snarls of our permed bangs and acne-pocked chins. She had cut out a construction paper mirror made glamorous by tinfoil glued to the center that created a distorted yet gleaming reflection. "*Your goals will create your future reflection. Who do you want to be?*"

The second time I felt this juxtaposition of opposing emotions was when my husband and I guiltily whisked our newborn Holden home from the hospital, feeling like kidnappers, the afterpains still curling my toes—with toenails still shining from the fresh coat of lacquer designed to impress my obstetrician. We pulled into the parking lot of our apartment, looked anxiously at each other, and giggled as we said, "They're just going to let us keep him? Just like that? They know we have no idea what we're doing, right?"

After my firstborn became my firstborn in the jungle, a bizarre resurgence of the song "Africa" by Toto made me feel like the universe was stalking me. "I bless the rains" lurked around every corner, on every radio station, in every grocery store, in every elevator. To assure myself that I hadn't allowed my grief to take confirmation bias to a whole new level, I did ridiculously extensive research about the song that taught me that it actually was written for an African missionary. In an interview, David Paich, the writer of the song, said: "I went to an all-boys Catholic school and a lot of the teachers had done missionary work in Africa. They told me how they would bless the villagers, their Bibles, their books, their crops and, when it rained, they'd bless the rain. That's where the hook line—'I bless the rains down in Africa'—came from. They said loneliness and celibacy were the hardest things about life out there. . . . So I wrote about a person flying in to meet a lonely missionary."¹

On my morning runs, the empty potato fields are my dirt-clad Broadway stage where I set free the caged emotions I've been shoving down as I deposit kids at school and wipe counters and scrape excess

1. David Paich, in "Toto: How We Made Africa," interview by Dave Simpson, *Guardian*, January 30, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2018/jan/30/toto-how-we-made-africa>.

food off dishes and into the disposal. I belt out Toto's "Africa" as if it was written just for me, just for him. This is the maudlin manifestation of grief that they will play at the Oscars when I am announced as one of the nominees for best actress. Awash in sweat and sorrow, the sounds that escape my mouth in heaving breaths are vowel saturated and beastly. I imagine the truckers who pass me in clouds of potato dust thinking to themselves, "If it hurts that much, why does she run?" I actually shriek out loud: "It's gonna take a lot to drag me away from you. There's nothing that a hundred men or more could ever do. I bless the rains down in Africa!" The '80s synthesizers fill my ears, and suddenly I'm laughing at the cathartic absurdity of my performance. Somehow I know that allowing myself to taste the full intensity of the grief helps me not only recognize, but appreciate and learn from the wide beauty of my sacrificial sadness.

Holden left the Ghana MTC and landed in the middle of the jungle, and we didn't hear from him for more than six weeks. Not a breath. Not a word. Friends would casually ask us, "How's Holden?" and we'd shock them with our response: "We don't know." By the time we saw a photo of him taken by a member in his branch, he had lost more than twenty pounds, surviving on fish heads, rice, and tomato paste.

I channeled my anxiety by cleaning our house, which seemed so empty while being full of Holden's six younger siblings. I tackled the room of our youngest child, Charlie. I folded the too-small jeans and t-shirts, smoothing out wrinkles that would never touch my baby's skin again. A congregation of piles of fabric encircled me as I simultaneously mourned the past and celebrated the growth of this baby that had gained only two pounds in his first eight months, the doctor's words "failure to thrive" symbolically stamped on not only Charlie's too-small forehead but mine. I reached for my phone and clicked on the Book of Mormon, thinking that, if nothing else, listening to my scriptures would help me sort the rest of the clothes without crying. I was wrong.

I found myself listening to Jacob 5, not because I had chosen it, but because it just happens to fall chronologically after Jacob 4, which is one of my favorite scriptural discourses. I just didn't want to get up and choose a different chapter. I prepared myself to be bored by the sheer number of verses about the gathering of Israel teetering toward me, and I hunkered down and focused on the job at hand. As I gathered and sorted clothes, I suddenly noticed that Zenos's allegory was not just about gathering but sorting. It wasn't just a universal allegory—it was a personal one. How had I never seen it before? I sat in the half-jumbled, half-organized

disarray of my baby's room, and the words fell on me like freshly blessed rain. I sat up straight and stared at my phone. The words were new, and the allegory was personal. It was suddenly not just a story about the gathering of Israel but a personal story about the gathering of *both* my grief and my joy.

I had been eying my grief suspiciously for weeks, wondering if feeling it with such intensity somehow made me less faithful. I had been interviewing the pain repeatedly, asking it how I could possibly acknowledge it constructively without feeling guilty about not having a positive attitude. And then the words floated over the piles of well-worn fabric: "*Behold, because thou didst graft in the branches of the wild olive tree they have nourished the roots, that they are alive and they have not perished; wherefore thou beholdest that they are yet good*" (Jacob 5:34 emphasis added). The wild branches—the grief and the loneliness and the worry—could not only be grafted in, but they could actually nourish my roots.

I cradled one of Charlie's old t-shirts in my arms as I listened to the rest of the allegory. I finally understood why and how grief could be good and how the wild branches of doubt and discomfort didn't have to be denied. But I also heard the implicit warning about drowning rather than being nurtured by the rain: "*And as they begin to grow ye shall clear away the branches which bring forth bitter fruit, according to the strength of the good and the size thereof; and ye shall not clear away the bad thereof all at once, lest the roots thereof should be too strong for the graft, and the graft thereof shall perish, and I lose the trees of my vineyard*" (Jacob 5:65, emphasis added). Of course, Lehi's firstborn in the wilderness would cling to this allegory about the grafting in of wild things. His father, Lehi, was the very prophet who coined the phrase "compound in one," and Jacob's life personified the internalization and then processing of that phrase. Perhaps I could too. The grief and the joy could find their genesis in the same womb of experience as long as I carefully and gradually cleared away any residual bitterness.

For Christmas, my missionary son, my firstborn in the jungle, my boy whose name in my ears still creates tears made of equal parts of joy and grief, wrote us this letter describing the gift he wanted to give Christ that year:

For me, when I thought about a mission I also thought of the typical definition of holiness where something is removed from the common or profane in order to be sacred. I think of the children of Israel and the priests who sanctified themselves from the world to literally approach

the holy of holies or the presence of God. I thought that while a mission would be hard, it would almost be ethereal, where your head is above the clouds and you are removed from everyday distractions and just have the Spirit always with you.

However, this was not the case.

I thought a mission was something above the harsh reality of the world, but it is the exact opposite; it is the battlefield of reality. . . . Holiness for me has not become a removal of reality, but the act of embracing reality truly and fully in order to find hope and meaning. . . . Holiness for me is when one embraces reality but is not left bitter from that embrace. I love you so much it hurts, but that is the only true love, I think.

Bises,

Elder d'Evegnée

Maybe good grief is the kind that can make *us* holy, the kind that demands to be placed on an altar of sacrifice, the kind that hurts enough to give you nowhere else to turn but toward God. It needs to be felt and processed, and it needs to nourish our roots. As Lehi said to his sweetly anxious son—just as I say to my missionary son in the middle of the jungle who is just as sweet and just as anxious—there is no progress without the constructive tension of seemingly opposing forces.

Now, for me, Holden's mission is a compound element, like water—like African rain that I both bless and curse in the same long breath. I can't see the hydrogen or the oxygen as separate elements anymore. My grief and my joy are bound so expertly on the altar of my experience that sometimes I can't tell them apart. They are one, the elements of each fused into a compound substance. The holy kind of grief is the kind that isn't a dichotomy. It is a paradox the way that the Atonement is a paradox. It is loving agony. It is beautiful pain. It is good grief. It looks beyond the binary and finds a way for both the good and the bad to coexist. It is Eve saying, "And now my eyes are opened."

This essay by Sarah Hafen d'Evegnée tied for third place in the 2020 Richard H. Cracroft Personal Essay Contest, sponsored by BYU Studies.