**Dr John Cox Posts on Sadness**

**1 – Sadness is not the same as depression. Not even close.**

It’s a common misconception. People say things like “Aw, he’s sad and depressed.” Strangely, that’s impossible. Though sadness and depression are both woefully painful emotions, they are incredibly different. Depression is a dark disconnection from our emotions and our heart. Sadness, instead, is a deep engagement with our losses that actually has breathtaking power to heal. I think it’s a gift from God. I intend to post more about sadness because I believe it is so important.

True sadness and grief are the process of engaging our losses, eyes wide open (often, eyes full of tears). And when we do, something marvelous happens inside of us. Somehow (in a way I don’t fully understand (though I should, bc I’m a shrink)), God made us in such a way that if we engage true grief and sadness, our losses become softer and we are able to heal. Sadness is our friend, a sorrowful heartbreaking friend. Sadness acts like an immune system for our hearts, helping us move from devastating loss to warm acceptance. More on this in future posts.

Depression on the other hand happens when we don’t face our losses with sadness. Sometimes our pain becomes so great that we can sort of throw the breaker switch to our sorrow. The problem is that our hearts aren’t like our houses. They don’t have a whole box of breaker switches. Our hearts only have one breaker, and when we cut off connection to our pain, we are also inadvertently cutting off our connection to all of our feelings. When we do that, the only remaining feeling we experience is that darkness and emptiness we call depression -- that disconnected, lost place where we feel cut off from our souls. The only way out of such depression is to get reconnected in safe relationships in which we can go back and cut the breaker switch back on (this is one of the reasons therapy works). When we do, we will feel the pain again, but doing so with someone else makes that pain manageable. Then we can metabolize it and heal.

I want you to get this distinction before we can learn more about healthy sadness later. Not all bad feelings are bad for us. Depression is the cold disconnection of our hearts that numbs our pain but heals nothing. Sadness is the healing sorrow that reminds us that when we mourn, we are “blessed,” for now we can be comforted. More later in future posts. Also, there is a talk on depression on my podcast, Good Enough Living.

**2 – Am I angry or am I sad?**

Last week we talked about sadness and depression. Now let’s talk about sadness and anger.

Here’s a secret of the universe: Anger is always the second thing that we feel. Anger is a defensive emotion. It is a secondary emotion. It comes because we don’t want to feel something ‘primary’, something underneath. Usually something vulnerable.

You’re in a hurry for a job interview. The light changes yellow and then red….again. You bang the steering wheel. You’re angry, right? Nope. Right below the surface you are feeling helpless, maybe even a little afraid you will be late for the interview.

Your wife tells an embarrassing story about you at a party. The first thing you say when you get in the car is an angry blast: “What were you thinking telling that story!?” You are angry, right? No again. You feel ashamed and embarrassed. But anger feels better, so that’s where we go.

One step behind anger are feelings that are full of loss and sorrow. We said that depression is a way to not feel our deep losses. Well, anger is a way to protest them -- to fuss and fume and demand that they go away instead of facing them with integrity.

One of the most powerful ways to resolve our anger is to stop trying to “quit being angry,” and start realizing that most of the time when we’re angry, the truth is that we’re not wanting to face how sad we are.

I was trying to get something done on my new book a few months back and obstacles kept getting in the way. I felt angry. Then I realized what I really felt was sad that the book wasn’t progressing the way I wanted. Then I felt humbled. I can’t control everything. Surprise!!

Maybe we aren’t appreciated as much as we wish. Or our spouse doesn’t understand us. Or we don’t have the financial resources other people do. Maybe we have illness or rejection or emotional pain. If we can move out of angry protest, we can begin to feel sad about these things.

Only then will we grow.

When my clients get to the place where they can stop living out of anger, anxiety or addiction, and instead feel sadness, I know we are wrapping up! We’ve landed at Dakota beach and can begin mopping up the war.

This is where God wants us.

You can be angry forever. But if you let yourself be sad, something happens. We’ll talk more about this next post, but when we allow ourselves to feel the sorrow of not getting what we want, we grow, we heal, we get stronger and more powerful. We become noble creatures instead of petty, demanding small ones.

Anyone who is powerfully connected to reality will be sad. And someone who really lived the way God calls us to live might even be called “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.”

This man was sorrowful. But he is now glorious. And wants us to have the same power and joy that fills his heart.

**3 – Sadness: the loss that keeps on giving.**

We’ve been talking about sadness lately, but what is it actually? How does it work? My job is the world of emotion, and one emotion stands out as different from all others. You can feel depressed forever. You can be angry forever. But the fascinating thing about sadness is that if you feel sadness, you will move; you will change. Sadness is a progressive emotion, a transitional emotion. Sadness is usually put in the “bummer“ category: “Oh, don’t be sad!“ But the truth is that sadness is a very unusual and powerful emotion. It is an emotional gift from God to help us heal. When we let ourselves feel the sorrowful truth of our loses, we transition and move. Our hearts will shift from a place of being dominated and controlled by our losses and move to a place where we find resolution and healing.

My brother died 30 something years ago at a young age. Thirty years ago, I could not have written to you about it. I was too shattered. But here I am now, posting away! Why is that? Do I love him less? Do I miss him less? No -- I can write about his loss now because I had to live the very hard work of engaging true sadness and grief, and that grief did its sorrowful work. Now I can talk about Mark and feel a sweet loving heartache rather than that butcher knife of toxic loss. Somehow sadness accomplishes this.

But sadness and grief are not just about death. Our lives are surrounded by sorrowful losses. We wish people liked us and they might not. Instead of trying to impress them, can I just be sad that not everyone will love me? (Somehow, I hear George Costanza here, “No! Everyone must love me!”) Maybe we wish our spouse was more understanding. Instead of being critical of them for that, can we be sad that we aren’t understood as much as we wish? Though we certainly work to address or resolve such problems, there will always be loss to face. And when we face that sadness, the loss becomes softer and we become stronger. Sadness moves us. It moves us out of pain, and into strength and groundedness.

Sadness and loss are also about accepting that so many of the dreams and wishes we have may not come true: There are flaws in every relationship. What hurts us cannot always be “just made better.” And my own limitations will nag me until I am glorified. Can we let ourselves grieve these losses instead of living in protest or depression? It is healthy and freeing for us to listen for the things that keep us obsessed and anxious and consider what it would be like to let ourselves just be sad that they may never be resolved. That hurts at first, but sadness is a progressive emotion remember. Sadness will heal those losses and we will find peace and strength.

I know therapists are supposed to try and make you feel better. Instead, you’re probably all bummed out by now from reading all this stuff about sadness. But I promise you, true, honest sadness is a gift that will ultimately bring you the best kind of “feel better.”

After all, we are promised that “those who go forth weeping, bearing their seed for sowing, shall come home with shouts of joy, carrying their sheaves.” (Psalm 126:6) In other words, in God’s universe, sadness is never the end of the story.

**4 – Sadness and God**

OK, I swear this is the last post on sadness. Then we can talk about more upbeat things like emotional positivity and maximizing your emotional squee factor. :-//

But we can’t leave the incredibly rich topic of sadness without talking about God. He’s really into it. As I said, I think it’s one of his strangest and most wonderful gifts. I think sadness is a kind of emotional “first aid kit” that he tossed out of the East gate of Eden when he threw Adam and Eve out, saying something like, “Here! You’re about to face a lot of pain, but I’m giving you a gift to help you heal from it.”

God promises us that if we mourn, we will be comforted, (Matt 5:4). And he promises that then we can comfort one another with the comfort that we have received. (II Cor 1:4). He promises that if we go to and fro, scattering seeds of sorrow, we will return with sheaves of joy. (Psalm 126). And he promises that if we walk in the steps of Christ, we will engage sorrow. But like his beloved son, we will find Easter right around the corner.

Understanding sadness is a key to making sense of obedience as well. Here’s another galactic secret: One of the major reasons that we sin, take what we want or act cruelly to other people, is because we do not want to be sad. We obsess about money because without it, we would feel the sadness of deprivation or insecurity. We envy our friend’s condo in Cabo because it’s sad that we can’t afford one. We cruise porn websites because it would be sad to face that we can’t just take what we want sexually. We do not want to feel the loss of what we can’t have. So we take. That’s the essence of sin.

I hate to be Dr. Downer again, but if we obey God, we will be sad. For instance, if Adam and Eve have been willing to be sad, we wouldn’t be sitting here today. They would’ve said, "Wow, that forbidden fruit is pleasing to the eyes and profitable to make one wise! Isn’t it really sad that we can’t have it! (Of course, we can have every other tree in the garden, but for some reason we don’t think about that). Let’s be really sad about how we can’t have this one fruit. So sad!” And presto, they would have obeyed God and we wouldn’t be where we are today. (Then the Serpent would have been sad.)

This is what James is talking about in his chapter 2:9 when he so calls us to “be wretched and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom.” (Sounds like a blast, James!) James calls for this because he’s in the middle of a passage about repenting from sin. James knows that if we obey, we will feel sad, mourn. But he says, jump on in! Because he knows what we’ve been saying -- sadness is a progressive emotion. Sadness is a road, not a destination. Sadness is a train we step onto, and when we get off, we are somewhere else. And that somewhere else is wonderful! That somewhere else is God’s heart.

Gratefully, the story of scripture is God’s promise that sadness will never be the end of our story. Our God promises that he inclines his ear to the humble and brokenhearted; a bruised reed he will not break; he will restore the years of the locust.

And ultimately, he promises that all of those tears -- he will personally wipe them away. And we will no longer need this bittersweet gift of sadness we’ve been talking about. When we are finally with him, there will be no more crying and no more sorrow and no more pain. The old things will have passed away.

Behold, he is making all things new.

And all of us, his currently sad children, will get to see that day together.

I promise.