



Sigh



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Sigh

Years ago, I took a course about leading adult grief support groups. In the handouts was a list of ways that grief is expressed emotionally, cognitively, physically, etc. In the list for physical aspects of grief, “sighing” was listed, and it stood out to me as, at that time, I would not have thought of increased “sighing” as part of our natural grieving response. In the past month or so since my dad’s unexpected hospitalization and death, I will vouch for sighing as part of grief. It has become one of my body’s favorite pastimes.

Sigh

What is this all about—this sighing as part of grief? We sigh for lots of different reasons and in many different situations. There is the contented sigh at the end of the day or when relaxing. The “life is good” sigh. There is the sigh of relief that can come in a few varieties such as “thank goodness that is over” and “thank goodness that (bad thing) didn’t happen.” There is also the sigh that comes with disappointment, frustration or exasperation. The kind of situation where in emails we may actually write, “Heavy sigh,” in response to a particular or general wrongness in the world. Connected to this kind of sigh is the sigh of resignation—this is all there is, the best we’re gonna get, no need asking for more as no more will be provided. Submissive to the realities present, subdued, resigned, beaten. Sighs of sadness, of sorrow, sighs “too deep for words.”

Sigh

There is a part of us that resists in life. When trials come, when we are challenged or when something or someone valuable to us is threatened, we resist. We push back and fight. We’re not going gentle into that good night, we’re not going down without swinging, we have not yet begun to fight. This fight response

is often a good one and we need it. It's adaptive and helps us to not just survive a crisis but perhaps even thrive afterwards. Advice sometimes given to people with cancer is to not let the cancer take anything that it doesn't have to take—don't give it one thing more, unless you choose to let go of something that in the end is not worth the effort. Resistance is, thankfully, everywhere, for without it there would be more pain and suffering in the world and these are already in plenteous supply. Resistance is needed and many, if not most, times adaptive. But what about when resistance is futile?

Sigh

We've all been there and we will be there again. No one gets out of life alive (dammit) despite our prayers and protests. Death can be delayed but ultimately not avoided, not on this side of the veil, at least. We get that in concept and then we have to also get that in practice.

Sigh

There is a point to protest, pushback and resistance. Without it, we don't know our limits and we may live an unnecessarily small life when there is potential for more, sometimes much more. Yet some realities are just that, all too real and not in the change category, and with only so much energy at our disposal to go around, there are some fights that do us no good in the end. Singer/songwriter Lucinda Williams has a whole song devoted to the idea, "It's over, but I can't let it go." Part of us knows that it's over, and that part of us sighs. And then we realize it again.

Sigh

And if we ever start to forget it...or doubt...or wish...

Sigh

Sighing has been recently studied, and the idea found is that sighing works as a reset to our respiration. Sighing keeps us from getting stuck in a fixed pattern of breathing. It makes us, in an unexpected, perhaps paradoxical way, feel better.

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Perhaps this is true. Doesn't matter in what way because the body has its own wisdom and a mind, so to speak, of its own. We grieve and we sigh. We hope for more, wish for better, settle for what we have... and sigh. Sighing is part of getting used to what we'd rather not. Part of the wisdom of accepting what we can't change. Part of living into a new world not of our own choosing. Part of life, especially in grief world.

Heavy, heavy sigh.