

# THE STATESMAN

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## On Campus Seminars:

- May 2-27 [Psychology II](#)  
May 2-27 [Art History](#)  
May 30-31 [The Federalist Papers](#)  
June 6-7 [How to Read a Book](#)  
June 13-15 [Executive Leadership Retreat](#)  
June 27-29 [Shakespeare at GWC](#)  
July [Youth for America™](#)  
July 15-16 [Love of Learning:  
Transition to Scholar](#)  
Aug 1-2 [The Bible on Politics](#)  
Aug 1-27 [Civil and Human Rights](#)  
Aug 9-10 [Shakespeare at GWC](#)

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## Is Grief an Evil?

By Steve Farrell

Or more to the point, is there something fundamentally wrong with you or I, or a family member, or the neighbor down the road, or the poor fellow across the ocean having an absolutely devastating day, week, month, year, decade or, perhaps, lifetime—as some of our politicians, physicians and psychologists seem to believe?

And, if one of us, or let's say, a group of us, happens to believe that there IS something terribly wrong with grief—ought we to raise a hue and cry for a law, a pill, or a plug to be pulled to end the weeping and wailing, end it quickly, and end it forever?

Or does grief, in God's wisdom, have its uses?

I confess; I side with the latter. Not that I'm a believer in piling grief upon grief for the benefit's sake; nor am I a skeptic of voluntary compassion, wisely and sincerely administered, to lighten the burden of those who suffer—but then again, I am no socialist, no pill popper, no escape artist.

A little bit of grief can do a body good. That's my faith.

It was Thomas Jefferson's and John Adams' faith, as well. Their thoughts on the subject are sage.

On May 6, 1816 Adams wrote Jefferson:

“In your favor of April 8<sup>th</sup> you “wonder for what good end the sensations of grief could be intended?”

You “wish the pathologists would tell us, what is the use of grief in our economy, and what good it is the cause proximate or remote?” (1)

Jefferson was looking for answers from the perspective of faith, from the perspective of Divine Providence. Adam’s had a ready answer. He continues:

“When I approach such questions as this, I consider myself, like one of those little eels in Vinaigre, or one of those animalcules in black orred pepper, or in the horse-radish root, that bite our tongues so cruelly, reasoning upon [these, I ask,]

“Of what use is this sting upon the tongue? Why might we not have the benefit of these stimulants, without the sting? Why might we not have the fragrance and beauty of the rose without the thorn?

“In the first place, however, we know not the connection between pleasure and pain. They seem to be mechanical and inseparable. How can we conceive a strong passion, a sanguine hope suddenly disappointed, without producing pain, or grief? Swift at seventy, recollected the fish he had angled out of water when a boy, which broke loose from his hook; and said, ‘I feel the disappointment at this moment.’ A merchant places all his fortune and all his credit in a single India or China ship. She arrives at the Vineyard with a cargo worth a million, in order. Sailing round a cape for Boston, a sudden storm wrecks her—ship, cargo and crew, all lost. Is it possible that the merchant ruined, bankrupt, sent to prison by his creditors—his wife and children starving—should not grieve? Suppose a young couple, with every advantage of persons, fortunes and connections, on the point of indissoluble union. A flash of lightning, or any one of those millions of accidents which are allotted to humanity, proves fatal to one of the lovers. Is it possible that the other, and all the friends of both, should not grieve?”

Well, should they?

Adams answers his own question, “It seems that grief, as a mere passion; must be in proportion to sensibility.”

That is, if we have any sense in us, we ought to feel grief; and we will feel grief when grief is warranted;

and the more sense we have in us, the deeper the grief will grate. And that’s not necessarily a bad thing.

“Did you ever see a portrait, or a statue of a great man, without perceiving strong traits of pain and anxiety? These furrows were all ploughed in the countenance, by grief. Our juridical oracle, Sir Edward Coke, thought that none were fit for legislators and magistrates, but “sad men.” And who were these sad men? They were aged men, who had been tossed and buffeted in the vicissitudes of life forced upon profound reflection by grief and disappointments—and taught to command their passions and prejudices.”

Imagine that! Adam’s continues:

“But all this you will say is nothing to the purpose. It is only repeating and exemplifying a fact, which my question supposed to be well known, viz., the existence of grief; and is no answer to my question, “what are the uses of grief?” This is very true, and you are very right ; but may not the uses of grief be inferred, or at least suggested by such exemplifications of known facts? Grief compels the India merchant to think; to reflect upon the plans of his voyage: Have I not been rash, to trust my fortune, my family, my liberty, to the caprices of winds and waves in a single ship? I will never again give a loose to my imagination and avarice. It had been wiser and more honest to have traded on a smaller scale upon my own capital.

“The desolated lover, and disappointed connections, are compelled by their grief to reflect on the vanity of human wishes and expectations; to learn the essential lesson of resignation; to review their own conduct towards the deceased; to correct any errors or faults in their future conduct towards their remaining friends, and towards all men; to recollect the virtues of the lost friend, and resolve to imitate them; his follies and vices if he had any, and resolve to avoid them.

“Grief drives men into habits of serious refection, sharpens the understanding, and softens the heart; it compels them to arouse their reason, to assert its empire over their passions, propensities and prejudices; to elevate them to a superiority over all human events; to give them the felicitas animi immota tranquillitatum; in short, to make them stoics and Christians.”

No wonder, then, there are so many laws and pills

and safety nets and state salaried grief counselors, ready, willing and able to hinder grief from running its natural course, commissioned to deal with grief from a secular, socialist, sottish standpoint! Let's not let man, as he has from the beginning, turn to God in his hour of need!

But I'm interrupting. Adam's concludes:

"After all, as grief is a pain, it stands in the predicament of all other evil, and the great question occurs, what is the origin, and what the final cause of evil? This perhaps is known only to Omniscience. We poor mortals have nothing to do with it—but to fabricate all the good we can out of all inevitable evils—and to avoid all that are avoidable, and many such there are, among which are our own unnecessary apprehensions and imaginary fears. Though stoical apathy is impossible, yet patience, and resignation, and tranquility may be acquired by consideration, in a great degree, very much for the happiness of life." (2)

The bottom line—men of faith, see the GOOD, the ADVANTAGE, the PROVIDENCE in "Hard Times,"—opportunists, however, Adam's would point out in the next letter to Jefferson, exploit grief for political gain, for in behalf of revolutionary agendas. (3)

We know all about that today.

Jefferson concurred in all of this, called Adams' answer complete, but then added a little bit of his own faith and wisdom when he stated, "[Grief] is destined to temper the cup we are to drink." (4)

Jefferson applied this specifically and repeatedly to the erosion of physical and mental capacity, the unending aches and pains, the decline in utility to society, the loss of lifelong friends to death, which accompany old age.

His insights are inspiring. The supposed curse of growing old and approaching death "proves ... this that the Being who presides over the world is essentially benevolent,"—benevolent because "the wish to stay here is thus gradually extinguished," the fear of death reduced, a longing for life eternal found in its place. (5)

To John Adams, he wrote:

"Whither, for instance, can you and I look without seeing the graves of those we have known? And whom can we call up, of our early companions, who has not left us to regret his loss? This, indeed, may be one of the salutary effects of grief; inasmuch as it prepares us to loose ourselves also without repugnance." (6)

Death, then, could be "sweet," and "nature's kindest boon," (7) thought Jefferson, and he never let go of that theme. The longer he lived, the closer he inched toward the inevitable, the more the death of loved ones and troubles of old age mounted upon his back like so many anvils, the surer he was that life continued beyond the veil, and that he was ready, even anxious to go. He longed for that promised rejuvenation of faculties, friendships, youthful vigor, and the resolution of so many unanswered questions.

Reflective of that faith that grief and debilitation had help burn within him, he characteristically noted in letters to dear aged friends that it was of small concern that bad health had diminished the communication between he and them, because a cheery reunion was not far off.

To Abigail Adam's he writes, "With those beyond the flood, our next meeting must then be in the country to which they have flown,—a country for us not now very distant. For this journey we shall need neither gold nor silver in our purse, nor scrip, nor coats, nor staves. Nor is the provision for it more easy than the preparation has been kind." (8)

Such hopes brought sense out of suffering. Adam's thought so too. He would endure "many thousands [of] years of Smithfield fevers," so long as there is a "promise [of an] eternal life free from pain." (9)

And then, he (Adams) extended the principle to a theme of his own: "In fine, without the supposition of a future state, mankind and this globe appear to me to be the most sublime and beautiful bubble; and bauble, that imagination can conceive.

"Let us then wish for immortality at all hazards, and trust the Ruler with his skies. I do". (10)

Adam's believed that few men, if any, would sacrifice comfort, career, and life itself for family, country, freedom were there no immortality, no day of accounting, no reward waiting on the other end. It was

the belief in a greater life, a greater peace, a greater progression in knowledge in a Heavenly abode that was the greatest driving force to endurance in good works and public virtue available to man that made every sort of suffering bearable to attain it.

“Thus, [I] earnestly wish for His commands, which to the utmost of my power shall be implicitly and piously obeyed[,]” he finished. (11)

And so, these two founders (“the pen” and “the voice” of the Declaration of Independence), these two former presidents and men of great learning, were yet humble enough, wise enough, faithful enough to understand that grief, like every other form of adversity, was the Refiner’s fire, the kind of glorious fire which fit men for a better and happier life here and hereafter—if only they have the patience, if only they have the faith to wait upon and make the best of what Providence provides.

And so while it is common sense to avoid bringing grief upon our own heads, and godlike to relieve the sufferer from his burden where possible in ways that are good and wise (or free of compulsion, dependence and addiction), yet it is equally sensible and godlike to look to grief as the great teacher and benevolent friend that it is, and to think twice before we embrace measures that would legislate or medicate grief into oblivion;—for it just might be that grief is just what the Doctor of all Doctors ordered.

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#### Footnotes

1. Bergh, Albert Ellery, editor. “The Writings of Thomas Jefferson,” Volume 15, pg. 12.
2. Ibid., pgs. 12-15.
3. Ibid., pgs. 68-69.
4. Ibid., pg. 56.
5. Ibid., pg. 96.
6. Ibid., pg. 73.
7. Ibid., pg. 371.

8. Ibid., pg. 96.

9. Ibid., pg. 64.

10. Ibid., pg. 64.

11. Ibid.

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