Like Oil and Water
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Healing Life’s Losses
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My mom was one of sixteen children. Being one of the oldest she found herself in the kitchen much of her growing up years. You learn a lot when you cook and bake for eighteen people every day. Among other things, I think she learned how to make things ‘stretch’; how to make things more appetizing; how to be creative with leftovers; how to balance doing several things at once; how to time things; how to be patient and wait. I think she learned what ingredients go well together and which do not, and, simply, what ingredients just won’t work together no matter how hard you try – no matter how much you want them to. Take oil and water for example. No matter how hard you try to mix them together, no matter the length of time you spend mixing them, or the strength and power of your blender, the water and oil will not become one. No matter what, once you stop mixing, the oil and water will separate.

Speed and grief are like oil and water, they just don’t mix. We would like them to, but no matter what we do or how hard we try they refuse to become one. We would like our pain and hurt and sadness and anger and loneliness to be taken from us now, this instant. We would like things to go back to normal now, this instant. We want our lives back now, this instant, as they once were. We want this crying, weeping, this agonizing aching to stop now, this instant. We want this month to be different, now, this instant, different than the last month. We want to be strong and confident (like we used to be) now, this instant, instead of being so vulnerable and confused and disorganized and second guessing ourselves. We truly want to get out of bed in the morning looking forward to moving into our day, now, this instant, instead of prying ourselves out of bed because we have to. Now, this instant, we desperately want to be with our friends again, like we once were with our friends – able to laugh and be silly and goof around. We may want the security of what we believed about God and faith and spirituality to be what it once was for us, now, this instant.

Grieving takes time because it has more to do with our hearts than our minds. Our minds are extraordinarily fast. They can compute images and mental information in an instant. They can logically receive information. We can far more quickly imagine a blue sky than we can imagine deep joy and peace and contentment because our hearts need time to process emotional information. Whereas our minds process experiences and images and reality in an instant, our hearts need so much more time to receive and take-in and acknowledge and understand and find wisdom in that where there seems to be none. Our hearts need time to recognize light in that which seems to be nothing but darkness. Our hearts need patience and attentiveness and stillness and need to be held and listened to. Our hearts need compassion and gentleness and tenderness. Our hearts need expression and someone to honorably witness them. Wayne Muller, in his book A Life of Being, Having and Doing Enough, wisely shares with us that “our very human heart requires a great deal more time to process, understand, allow in the rich array of disparate feelings, emotions, spiritual events, however pleasant or deeply painful, however familiar or new. Every emotional state elicits in us a certain amount of confusion, denial, understanding, acceptance, and recognition. Some experiences, such as intense grief, can take years to fully digest.”

Grieving and mourning and finding life again is primarily a heart experience. Unfortunately for our hearts, our culture tries to convince us that our hearts ought to work like our minds. From cell phones to texting, instant messaging, greater memories and quicker computer speeds, instant photos and information of all sorts at our fingertips, drive through fast food windows, all pushing us to move faster and faster. While our inefficient hearts always seem to need more and more, not less, time. We try so desperately to have our hearts get caught up to the speed of our minds and in the process we do ourselves, and those around us, more harm than good, particularly while grieving. Trying to mix grief and speed are not ingredients for healing. “To relentlessly force the tender wisdom, thoughtful reflection, and perceptive honesty of the human heart to
conform to the ridiculously impossible, inhuman speed of the world, is to cause violence to our most precious and valuable treasure: the necessary guidance of the human heart.” (Muller)

Healing in grief is a matter of both the mind and the heart. Clearly, there’s a reason we have both – there’s a reason we’ll find both of these prominent ingredients in everyone’s kitchen. But, please, don’t ask your heart, and don’t let anyone else try to force your heart, to move at the same pace of your mind – to be anything but what it uniquely is and what we literally need it to be. Honor your heart and find safe people who will appreciate and honor it with you. You will be simply amazed regarding how your life can be transformed and the person you become if you honor your heart.