

What Do We Do with All This Grief?

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At 2:00 a.m. on April 25, 1992, the phone on my nightstand rang. It was a nurse from the hospital telling me that my father had died. They had been trying to call my mother, but she didn't answer because she had taken out her hearing aids. So I got dressed and drove to Mom's townhome, let myself in, and went upstairs to wake her and tell her that her husband had died. She got dressed, and I drove us to see Dad. Seeing death was not something I had experienced before. There was the occasional "wake" for my grandmother's friends when they died. I remember comments like "Doesn't she look good!" and thinking all of that was fairly bizarre given the fact that the person was dead.

Standing in Dad's hospital room at 3:30 a.m. with just the fluorescent light lit over the head of his bed, the stillness and peace I felt as I looked at my father was enormous. Dad was a tremendous fan of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and his words rang in my head: "Free at last. Free at last. Thank God Almighty, I'm free at last."

This was a very unexpected reaction as I had watched a machine breathe every breath for my father for months. Dad had a stroke in the recovery room after a minor surgery and was put on a ventilator for what was to be a few days but turned into almost five months. I went to the hospital to be with him every day when my daughters were in their elementary school classes. I would leave in time to be home for my girls, and my mother would head to the hospital to spend the rest of the day and evening with Dad. We did that for months. We did not know about hospice care at that time, and they kept talking about dad going home after getting off the ventilator. The series of strokes on his brain stem made that possibility impossible. And so I found myself calling a funeral home for the first time in my life. I didn't even know what you called the person you were going to meet with, the undertaker, the mortician? Old fashioned language to say the least. I ended up calling Bill Logan at Horan & McConaty, a person who would become a friend and colleague, "the funeral guy." It was the best term I could come up with at the time.

Within weeks I found myself overwhelmed by the intensity of grief. Why didn't anyone ever tell me that grief could feel like this? Did others experience this? Was I the only one who felt like I was a little crazy with the intensity of what I was feeling? I set out to learn as much as I could and read all that I could about grief and loss. One of the best books I found was *Praying Our Goodbyes* by Joyce Rupp. "The word *goodbye*—originally "God-be-with-ye" or "Go-with-God"—was a recognition that God was a significant part of the going."¹

Those experiences set my feet on an unexpected path to St. Thomas Theological Seminary in Denver, as I sought to figure out what to do with the experience of Dad's death, the ensuing loss and grief, and my desire to help others. I knew I was not going to be a parish pastor. That was not my calling. I thought that chaplaincy might fit and perhaps hospital chaplaincy, as there had been some very important hospital chaplains along my journey with Dad. It was through attending a daylong seminar by Dr. Alan Wolfelt from the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins that I connected

with John Horan, whose funeral service company, Horan & McConaty, had cared for my father and for us when he died. That began a connection that brings me to today and this article for you. During my Clinical Pastoral Education (“CPE”) units, I did my internship placement at Horan & McConaty Funeral Service in addition to serving as a hospital chaplain. Following graduation, I served in a Lutheran parish doing pastoral care but came to realize my calling was to be at the funeral home. So 26 years ago, I became director of grief support and community education at Horan & McConaty and also created HeartLight Center, a non-profit center for grief support in Denver, Colorado (www.heartlightcenter.org).

When Dr. Tom Long was close to finishing writing *Accompany Them with Singing*,² he came to Denver to spend some days with us at the funeral home. Tom spent time with me in my role at the funeral home. We shared many powerful and memorable conversations and experiences.

I am not a scholar or a theologian. I am a caregiver to grieving people who find themselves in some of the most difficult times in their lives, when they are impacted by the death of someone they love. It is my goal in this article to share some thoughts, observations, and suggestions I have witnessed with the thousands of grieving people I have been honored to connect with over the past 26 years working in funeral service and running a non-profit grief support center. How do we care for grieving individuals? What do we say from the pulpit? How do we care for ourselves and our colleagues in ministry as we care for others?

So what is grief and how is it different from mourning?

Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, in *All Our Losses, All Our Grievs*, pose this definition: “Grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or the object lost.”³ Grief is a normal and natural internal response we have when we experience loss and change in our lives. It is certainly most profound when we experience death of someone in our lives. But grief is not limited to when someone we love dies. Our human life is in a constant state of change, in flux, and there are many kinds of change that affect us. Here is a list that was compiled by Dr. Pat Del Zoppo from Saint Paul Bereavement Center on Staten Island New York:

List of Some Losses and Causes of Grief

Death of a loved one, Miscarriage, Separation, Abortion, Divorce, Position, Pets, Title, Things, Just leaving, Fire, Theft, Misplacement, Argument, Graduating, Distance, Tasks, Skills, Family changes, Elections, Aging, Heritage, Roots, Reputation, Culture, Leadership, Job/Career, Retiring, Success, Changing, Failure, Promotion, Change, Demotion, Challenge, Closing out, Co-workers, Fertility, Location (moving), Beauty, Identity, Responsibility, Terminal illness, Goals, Faculties, Dreams, Vision, Time, Speech, Structure, Taste, Freedom, Sexuality, Independence, Bodily controls, Country, Surgery, Money, Body parts, Teeth, Growing up, Projects, Marriages, Teachers, Births, Beliefs, Values, Leaders, Self-esteem, Schools, Youth, Lifestyle, Childhood, Faith, Health, Control, Toys, Hair, Choices, Appearance, Energy, Stamina, Trust.

Pat Del Zoppo posed an excellent question which I think is an important lens to hold up as we seek to care for a grieving person: “What does *this* loss mean to *this* person at *this* time in his or her life?”

The list above might strike very different reactions in different people. What makes sense to you on that list? Are there things you have seen others react to in surprising or puzzling ways? I remember sharing this list with family members who had someone in a long-term care facility. One woman immediately blurted out “taste!” I inquired why. She said a medication she was taking meant that she lost her sense of taste and that therefore eating had no pleasure for her. Dining with others did not have the same feeling when everything tasted like cardboard.

Mourning, on the other, is, as Alan Wolfelt describes it, “grief gone public.” The shared mourning experience is the communal experience and expression of our grief. So many people were grieving losses during the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic and did not have any opportunity or way to come together to mourn with others. Churches were essentially closed for services, bars and restaurants were closed, and people were discouraged from meeting with others during the initial “lock-down” stages in most of the country. Funeral services in many jurisdictions were limited to 10 people. Those who experienced virtual streaming services were offered some opportunity for connection, but these were a poor second to the hugs, handshakes, and shared meals of the times before the pandemic. We spent a lot of time helping people to understand that they could have multiple ceremonies, some smaller ones at first, with the promise of larger and more fulfilling ones to come in the days ahead.

Caring for your Community

How do you care for grieving people in your congregation? What do you say one-on-one or within a small group? Remember when we were growing up and were told “Don’t just stand there. Do something!” Sometimes the best thing we can do in being with grieving people is to do the opposite, “Don’t do something, just stand (or sit) there.” Hold the space. Sit in the silence. Be there without needing to fill it. Seek to be a non-anxious presence in what can be an anxious situation. When we’ve done sessions at HeartLight Center for Grief Support and Education about “What not to say to grieving people,” at the top of the list are what Joyce Rupp calls “one-liners.”⁴ These are phrases like “God would not ever give you any more than you could handle,” “God must have wanted another flower for his garden,” “She is in a better place,” “He’s not suffering any longer.”

I have described the experience of walking along with someone grieving as a “sacred trust.” People amaze me by putting their heart in my hands when they feel most vulnerable. In those moments we are invited into some very intimate places where people are raw, open, and undefended. It is an enormous responsibility and an enormous privilege. I remember standing outside a state room in the funeral home early in my career as a family group was inside seeing one of their family members who had ended his life. My fervent prayer at that moment was for God to keep me enough out of the way that I did not say or do anything that might be hurtful or harmful to them. I could only imagine the pain they were experiencing. I could not know their pain, as I have not had personal experience of that kind of death. But I could and did seek to be a non-anxious presence in a time of great anxiety, questions, and crushing sadness.

In his outstanding book, *The Undertaking*, funeral director and poet Thomas Lynch describes a powerful moment when a grieving mother educated a well-meaning clergy member about terminology like referring to the body of a deceased person as “just a shell.” Lynch says, “I once saw an Episcopalian deacon nearly decked by the swift slap of the mother of a teenager, dead of leukemia, to whom he’d tendered this counsel: ‘I’ll tell you when *it’s* just a shell.’ The woman said, ‘For now and until I tell you otherwise, *she’s* my daughter.’” She was asserting the longstanding right of the living to declare the dead dead. Just as we declare the living alive through baptisms and lovers in love by nuptials, funerals are the way we close the gap between the death that happens and the death that matters.”⁵

Hold the Space

As part of a biblical study program in which I participated many years ago, we had to have a memory verse each term. The instructor would not allow John 11:35, “Jesus wept.” At the death of Lazarus, Jesus reacted as a human being. He didn’t say “Lazarus is in a better place.” He did what many caring, emotionally based human beings would do. He wept. Why should/would we hold ourselves to a different standard than that as His representative within our congregations.

I had the honor of facilitating a grief support group where we talked about the two-sided coin of sorrow and solace. Just as we grieve because we have loved, the fact that we can have the opportunity to express the deep sorrow we can experience after the death of someone loved, we also open ourselves to the gift of solace that can come from others or from within ourselves.

The grieving people who were part of the group would tell you that when they attempted to express their sorrow to others outside the group, they were met with anxiety and reassurances that it will “get better with time.” Their need to express their sorrow was short-circuited by the discomfort of others.

Solace is soothing, comforting, and affirming. Solace can come from people around us, from nature, from the sensory beauty of music, art, food that nourishes our souls, as well as solace that can come from within, such as memories. One of the group participants spoke powerfully about “needing to sit in the sorrow in order to come to any semblance of peace with it.” Where there is a trusting relationship, there can be permission to uncover the wound. They also observed that when we console someone (or offer them solace), we must ourselves be open to the pain.

As each person shared the experience of sorrow and solace that evening, we literally passed a large coin as people took turns sharing. A woman talked about how all she had been able to feel was the deep sorrow in missing her husband, how she could not remember him healthy, how she longed for his touch and physical presence. The evening before the group, she had been sobbing in her home when she suddenly reconnected with the music she had playing in the background. At once, she had a strong memory of how it felt when they danced together, how she remembered being in his arms, and the joy of feeling so loved and cherished. When we take sorrow seriously, we can invite solace into the conversation.

Judith Skretney’s “Top Seven Things to Know About Grief” lists the factors that can impact people’s reactions to grief. This list has always been important for me to remember as I strive to help grieving people.

Top Seven Things to Know About Grief:

1. Grief lasts longer and can be more painful than most people expect.
 2. There is no right way or wrong way to grieve—just your way.
 3. The least helpful thing for grieving people is other people telling them how they should be doing things.
 4. The most helpful thing for grieving people is to be able to process their feelings (talking, writing, composing, creating).
 5. Good grief doesn't mean forgetting; it means remembering and forming a new relationship with the deceased person.
 6. Sometimes the people we think should help us simply can't.
 7. People are fundamentally resilient. They can and they will survive.
- We can empower people.

My eighth point is that having faith does not preclude you from experiencing the process of grief. It means you have a relationship with God to lean onto, or lean into, as you process loss.

Variables that Influence Grief by Judiith Skretny:

- The bereaved person's unique relationship with the deceased (strength of attachment)
- Degree of ambivalence or unfinished business
- Circumstances of the death (sudden or unexpected; violent or peaceful; age of deceased)
- Personality and coping behaviors of the bereaved person (previous history of loss; ability to express emotions and seek/receive help)
- Social support (family; friends)
- Cultural and religious support (belief system; rituals)
- Health and lifestyle of the bereaved person (history of mental illness; depression; substance abuse)

It can be helpful for people to understand that they can experience grief in mind, body, and spirit. They might feel out of breath or their heart may literally ache. *All* of who we are experiences grief and loss.

What do you say from the pulpit?

It is so important to remember that for every happy occasion we celebrate and lift up in our prayer during a service, there is someone in one of the pews who is having a very different experience from others due to loss that is impacting his or her lives. When I served at all Saints Lutheran Church in Aurora, Colorado, I often wrote and offered the "Prayers of the People." And even while giving thanks and celebrating all the mothers on Mother's Day, it was always important to talk about those who are missing their mothers on Mother's Day, some because of death and some because of broken or strained relationships.

When you are giving your sermon, how many people in your congregation may be grieving from the loss of a job, a dear friend moving away, realizing their spouse is having an affair, their favorite supervisor or other work colleagues losing their jobs or being transferred or promoted, or worried about a health challenge? What can you say that will help them better cope with their grief and to know that you understand? Scriptures can both heal and hurt.

The importance of ritual and ceremony

How can we support people to help them integrate these changes into their lives? William Worden has explained the “Tasks of Mourning” or work of grief: confront the reality of the loss, express the feelings, find meaning, integrate the loss into your life. Joyce Rupp explains the 4 ways to “pray a goodbye:” recognition, reflection, ritualization and reorientation.⁶ We need rituals and the opportunities to grieve and mourn more than ever before in the midst of COVID-19 and the tremendous aftermath of the “pandemic of grief” that we will be dealing with for a very long time.

We have seen many different and unique ways of including people in funeral services. The technology that we employ these days allows far more people to “attend” services through online links that can be listed in obituaries, church websites, through social media, and we can invite people from all around the country and all around the world to participate in these essential rituals of honoring and leave-taking. Online guestbooks where people can leave condolences or share memories are more treasured by grieving family members than ever before. Handwritten cards, notes, and letters are cherished gifts when mourners can feel more isolated than they normally would were we able to gather in person. Take a moment during a service where everyone who is participating lights a candle at the same time to represent the light that the person who died still burns within each of them and in the world forever. Invite all who participate in a virtual gathering to go and do something meaningful in honor and in memory of something that was important to the person who died, and then share that experience with the family of that person.

One pastor felt so sad at the thought of empty pews and invited all who wished to care for the family to send flowers in the deceased person’s favorite color. Each row had jars of yellow flowers with names of those who were “present” in a different way, along with words of sympathy and love. The chapel full of yellow flowers was breathtaking and a powerful representation for the family of the love and presence of those who were with them in spirit. People can participate in many different ways by sending a video of themselves sharing memories, playing or singing a favorite hymn, reading a poem or scripture.

A young man who took his own life was a student at the local high school. I was asked to come to the school to meet with what I thought would be a handful of his friends. When I got to the school, there were hundreds of students and parents. I had brought many handouts to share but was surprised at the crowd. Before heading to the front of the room, I put my hand into my purse for a tissue and was poked by a small metal Mason’s trowel inscribed “Spread the cement of love today.” This was the message I needed to share, not a big message that needed to be shared, but bringing a loving presence was what the community needed to gather around.

Self-care for clergy

As a member of the clergy, do you find yourself stifled in helping grieving people by the models you have been taught and by being burned out by being confronted with so much loss? Do you feel empty or frustrated that you have not helped or consoled the grieving person you have just spent an hour visiting? Even the most seasoned clergy struggle with the challenges they face daily helping their flock navigate the challenges and tragedies of life.

What refills your reservoir? Connections with family and friends? Finding and

honoring your own Sabbath time? Hobbies? Is there a trusted colleague with whom you can share with confidentiality and non-judgment? Find people who understand both the honor and the challenge of the places we are called into to walk with people. Find ways to process some of the troublesome memories we carry so we don't burden our family members. Our funeral service company cared for seven of those who died at Columbine High School and seven of those killed in the Aurora Theatre shooting. We needed outside people to help our staff family process those experiences. There's nothing in us we can disconnect from as we walk in painful and sometimes shocking experiences with others. Don't downplay what you might carry in your memory and heart. Compassion satisfaction and compassion fatigue are normal and natural parts of this work. The good news is having a caring heart, and the hard thing, at times, is having a caring heart. Please care for your own heart as you care for others.

Mitchell and Anderson write:

If it is human to suffer, then the principal theological question when we are confronted by loss and grief is not why do we suffer? but who suffers with us? Freedom from suffering is a blindness. The willingness to bear another's suffering in human life is the reality of suffering in human life and the acceptance that the grieving person and his or her circumstances are normal. To be a follower of the crucified Lord is to be a bearer of sorrow. For that reason, the Christian is always an alien in a world determined to deny death, to cover over loss and grief, and to ignore or stifle those who grieve. It is our ability to suffer with one another that modifies the loneliness of grief and eventually brings some closure to our sadness. The Christian's capacity to feel the pain of others transcends apathy and alienation. But in the last analysis, it is the assurance that God suffers with us that is the rock on which we stand in the turbulence of grief.⁷

Notes

1 Joyce Rupp, *Praying our Goodbyes* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1988, 2009), 1.

2 Thomas G. Long, *Accompany Them with Singing—The Christian Funeral* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

3 Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson, *All our Losses, All Our Grievs* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 1983), 54.

4 Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, 26.

5 Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009), 20.

6 Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, 60.

7 Mitchell and Anderson, *All our Losses, All Our Grievs*, 169.