



Grieving Well

| *How can we handle grief in a way that is healthy, holistic, and true to our faith traditions?*

What Is Grief?

You have heard the old saying “Into every life a little rain must fall.” (Jesus reminds us of the same truth in Matt. 5:45 RSV, “God sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”) When rain is falling someplace else, we find the saying comforting. But when the rain begins to fall on us—particularly when we or those we love begin to suffer—we often dispute the fairness of it. Why is this happening? we might ask. What am I going to do now? Where is God when I’m suffering?

In those haunting questions, we discern the powerful and painful outlines of grief, one of the most human emotions—and yet one of the hardest emotions for us to feel and acknowledge. In the Gospel of John, Jesus weeps in response to powerful emotions he experiences at the death of his friend Lazarus, and in doing so, he points the way for the rest of us. When we lose someone or something that matters to us—or when we witness that loss in those who are close to us—it is painful, and deep sadness is sometimes the only appropriate response to it.

We tend to associate grief primarily with major life traumas such as a death in the family, a divorce, or an illness. But grief may also emerge in response to any change or loss, including those that we might view as largely positive. Moving away from a place you have lived for years to begin a new job elsewhere, graduating from school, leaving home to get married—even though all of these events are normally considered to be positive life changes, they are still major changes, and as such they may entail mourning for friends, experiences, and places lost. Learning to grieve well means learning to recognize that losses, large and small, are occasions for grief and for learning to deal in healthy



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ways with the never-ending presence of change and loss in our lives.

One thing above all we should acknowledge in this lesson: grieving is necessary work in even the happiest life. If you don’t acknowledge losses great and small and do so consciously, you will do so unconsciously, and the results may ultimately be even more painful and longer lasting than when you face them squarely. In this lesson, we’ll talk about consciously grieving our losses so that we can give thanks for all the good in our lives, acknowledge the pain of passing, and learn to be a support for others.

Finding a Story That Makes Room for Grief

As part of my seminary training, I spent a summer serving as a full-time hospital chaplain in a trauma center in my hometown of Austin, Texas, and during my time there I saw grief at close quarters on a daily basis. I discovered that one of the fundamental problems patients and their families experienced was a breakdown of the stories that they had used up to that time to make sense of their lives. In the face of their tragedies they were shaken, and the stories that they lived by were failing

FIVE THINGS NOT TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

1. It's all for the best.
2. Snap out of it!
3. We'll understand it better later.
4. It's all part of God's plan.
5. It won't always hurt like this.

them because those stories could not make room for their new experiences.

This is a problem because we rely on stories to help us make sense of life. The philosopher Alisdair McIntyre writes, "I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'"¹ So it should not surprise anyone that in times of loss, change, and movement, one of the central problems we may encounter is that our stories—cultural and spiritual alike—may not accommodate the enormity of the changes we are facing.

Rabbi Harold Kushner, who wrote the best-selling book about God and suffering *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, says that he began writing that book out of the soul-pain and confusion he felt when he was witness to the slow deterioration and death of his young son Aaron. Rabbi Kushner said that *When Bad Things Happen* was "a very personal book, written by someone who believes in God and in the goodness of the world, someone who has spent most of his life trying to help other people believe, and [who] was compelled by a personal tragedy to rethink everything he had been taught about God and God's ways."² Rabbi Kushner's case can be illustrative for many of us: the stories that he had always been taught (and had taught others) about how people might live their lives and about where God was in that process shattered against the rock-hard face of unfairness. As Kushner put it, "If God existed, if He was minimally fair, let alone loving and forgiving, how could He do this to me?"³

And once those stories shattered, what was left to make sense of things?

Our sacred stories often don't make room for death and suffering, or they make room for it in unhealthy ways.

Many American believers hold some form of transactional belief in God; that is, they believe in a sacred story in which if they act in a certain way—if they pray; give to the poor or to their religious institutions; do good works; attend church, synagogue, or mosque regularly; go on pilgrimage—then they will receive good things from God in return. (I call this belief "God as Santa Claus.") Similarly, others think of God as a cosmic parent who rewards good behavior and punishes us when we do evil. In these sacred stories, God brings woe to people who deserve it and healing to those who are faithful and good. But neither story of God as Santa or God as parent holds up in the face of unwarranted suffering, of which the world seems too full. So for many people of faith, the first thing to fail in times of crisis or serious change is their faith, since their stories can't explain what might be happening to them or those they love.

Likewise, many of our cultural narratives fail us in times of grief. Americans often believe that they can purchase their way to happiness, that money and influence can and should insulate people from life's hard knocks. We may also believe in the myth of progress, having absolute faith in technology to save us and medicine to heal us. As ethicist Stanley Hauerwas has noted, we may adopt this scientific/medical narrative of meaning because we live in a rationalistic world "that promises to 'solve' suffering by eliminating its causes."⁴ Given enough time and resources, this story says, some day we will cure every disease, solve every problem. But so far that has not been borne out: we cure diseases that used to kill millions and live long enough to be killed by other diseases.

We need to seek stories that acknowledge how loss, change, and death might be a normal part of the natural order. This is where the heritage of the Scriptures can be of real value. We might, for example, look to the example of the Psalms, many of which do not end with healing or deliverance but with faithful relationship with God no matter what, or at the examples of Jesus at the grave of Lazarus or of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane mourning his impending torture and death. Faith in God and an awareness of the reality of suffering are not antithetical; in Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the two of them very clearly reflected in his prayers and actions. As with any of us, he would prefer not to suffer—and yet he also believes that whatever happens, God is working through it to bring good into the world.

We might even say that a mature faith story actually holds simultaneously the unfairness of many events that happen in human existence and a continuing belief in God's faithfulness. As C. S. Lewis discovered in the months following his wife's death from cancer, what had initially seemed to him like cosmic unfairness was transformed to his sure and steady faith that God was with him even in his sorrow. A story in which God was supposed to act in a certain way in his life had been replaced by another story—a story of mature faith that accepted that—in all things and at all times—God was faithful, present, and loving.

Practicing Grief

One of the consequences of the fact that our stories don't tend to make room for grief is that in mainstream American culture, grief is considered a sign of weakness or even a failure of some sort. I found it instructive in the hospital that many people in some cultures—the Hispanic and African American, for example—not only gave themselves permission to grieve but also gave themselves over to it. That example is a powerful one, and I think there is much to be learned from it. Grief should be felt and worked through, not denied or hidden. But my hospital experience revealed that many people feel that they must seem aloof, strong, and capable and not give themselves over to their feelings of loss, anger, or despair. Time after time I saw bereaved family members swallow their grief or save it for private expression, practices that may have the virtue of not alarming anyone with emotional outbursts but that don't allow those who grieve the chance to express their feelings of anguish in ways that might be healthy for them. If continually swallowed, grief eventually proves to be emotional and spiritual poison.

Perhaps the most important thing that a person facing grief, loss, or extreme change can do is be aware of that need to grieve and to give herself or himself permission to do it. As the happy occasion of my seminary graduation approached, although my classmates and I were finishing the preparation to which we had given ourselves and at last entering the lives to which we felt called, pastoral voices cautioned us to allow ourselves to grieve the loss of the community that had formed among us of dear friends, of teachers and mentors. As I said at the outset, any change or loss may be occasion for grief, and if we are advised to grieve life changes that



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are largely positive, how much more should we give ourselves permission to grieve when the cloud seems to have no silver lining?

For those who have trouble expressing strong emotions—particularly men, in mainstream American society—it may take time and effort to become comfortable with the idea of feeling grief, of being honest about it, of sharing it with others. Here is where community can be important—and a safe, loving community of faith especially vital.

Grieving in Community

Since grief is, in some ways, a countercultural emotion, it can be safely expressed only around others who either share the feeling or will stand alongside those experiencing it without judging. As Gordon Atkinson (the blogger better known as Real Live Preacher) wrote first on his site and then in his book *RealLivePreacher.com*, what he has learned from his pastoral work is that presence is the only thing that truly matters: “If you come in the name of Christ and stand with people in their grief, you have done the most important thing you can do and the only thing they will remember.”⁵ This is a truth that I have seen in my own pastoral ministry and chaplaincy: finding someone who will stand with you in your grief is vital, and being willing to be that person for others is a gift beyond reckoning.

The Celtic tradition speaks of *anam cara*, or “soul friends,” holy companions who will walk alongside life's path with us and be present in our darkest and most difficult times. For many people, those soul friends can be found in faith communities; for others, they may be found in grief support groups; for all, we hope, there will be members of our families or friends willing to sit with us as we grieve, for as long as it takes, without trying to impose their own meanings, making themselves feel better, or pulling away when the process takes time, as it often does. For those of us who have suffered grief and

know a little about it, it would be good to return that knowledge—and the grace of those who walked alongside us—by helping others who suffer now.

What's Next?

One of the possible consequences that might grow out of your discussion of grief is that you might form (or join) a grief support group (or bereavement group, as they are also called). These groups are often designed for those who have lost a loved one, but they could be expanded (or new groups offered) for those experiencing divorce, for caregivers, and for those experiencing other painful life changes. These groups may be ongoing or may meet for prescribed periods. What's vital is that however long they last the people who attend feel safe and supported in their grief and that they are able to feel—or discover what they're feeling—without feeling judged. It may be important that such groups be facilitated by a minister, counselor, or someone with experience in grief. Powerful emotions can surface in these groups, and deep hurts can be exposed on their way to healing, so a pastoral presence may be important.

Grief support groups often revolve around telling and listening to grief experiences. Another possible approach to a grief group could be a writing group, where members get together to share and listen to one another's stories. A third approach may be in working through handbooks such as John W. James and Russell Friedman's *The Grief Recovery Handbook* or discussing meditations on grief such as Martha W. Hickman's *Healing after Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief*. No matter how the group decides to operate, all members should be welcome to share, but none should be pressured. Often the best response to a story is not a diagnosis or reference to a personal experience but simply holy silence.

You may also want to study the theology of grief in more detail. There are plenty of books on grief, loss, and religious understandings of them. Consider accessible studies like Elizabeth Kubler Ross and David Kessler's *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*; Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*; Rowan Williams's book in response to 9/11, *Writing in the Dust*; and the author of this lesson's book on grief and narrative (Greg Garrett, *Stories from the Edge*, available in September 2008).

FIVE TIPS FOR HELPING THOSE WHO GRIEVE

1. Don't interpose your own story unless invited. This is not about you.
2. Don't try to impose a meaning or closure on someone else's grief.
3. Don't demonstrate impatience or urge someone to "get over it!"
4. Remember that grief is sometimes about stamina—being there for someone day in and day out.
5. Lend your own faith if someone in grief has lost his or hers.

Those with a real passion for walking with those who suffer might consider lay chaplaincy. While this calling represents a substantial output of time and energy in training, study, and support of the sick, dying, and grieving, the need is great. The Unitarian Church, the Episcopal Church, and other denominations have initiated programs to train lay chaplains, and the Association for Clinical Pastoral Education (<http://www.acpe.edu>) offers opportunities for hospital-based training in chaplaincy.

About the Writer

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Endnotes

1. Alisdair McIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 216.
2. Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981), 1.
3. Ibid., 2.
4. Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences: God, Medicine, and the Problem of Suffering* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 35.
5. Gordon Atkinson, *RealLivePreacher.com* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 67.