

To regard grief as somehow unworthy of a Christian who believes in the resurrection is to forget the example of Christ who was so often "moved with compassion," who wept at his loss of Lazarus and prayed the longer in his agony. We cannot short-circuit human processes; we have to give the experience time to come home to us before it can become a motive for hope and a promise of fuller life.
Maria Boudling, Prayer: Our Journey Home

A Reluctant Griever **By Virgil Fry, D.Min**

I write these words from the raw side of fresh grief. Less than two months ago Caryl, my beloved wife of 33 years, died. A tenacious, vibrant, faithful woman, she finally succumbed to death after two hard years of declining health, and 50 years of being a Type 1 diabetic. The battle for her is ended.

But for me, the battle is not ended—it's only beginning. Many a kindhearted person has tried to console me with the reality that she's now better off, her suffering is ended, and she's in a much better place.

The other side of that coin that isn't acknowledged is this: *I'm still here.* My heart is broken. The security of a long and stable marriage is shattered. I'm busy trying to get through the fog of grief while finishing up legal papers and insurance forms. I feel like I'm slogging through molasses. My life is forever altered, and I miss her. No amount of joy over Caryl's betterment removes that cold reality.

Someone I know whose husband died objects when others refer to his death as loss, as in "you've lost your husband." She likes to say that he isn't lost, but found by God.

But the truth is, it's not his loss: it's hers. And that kind of deeply significant relationship loss is excruciatingly painful.

Grieving is a process, an energy-draining task. Those of us in the faith community should particularly know this, for our God is often presented as sorrowful, upset, dismayed, grieving. So let us allow grievers to grieve, rather than trying to hurry them through their unfolding journey of sorrow. Call out the name of the one who died. Tell of special remembrances, of what you miss about that person. Or just allow the griever to tell, and often retell, stories that bring smiles and tears. A simple "I'm with you in prayer and spirit" is infinitely more refreshing to a lonely griever than "Aren't you glad she's in a better place."

For now, I grieve. In my head I know that such intense grief indicates how blessed I was to have had such a loving life partner. In time, with God's promised faithful presence, I will rejoice in Caryl's "graduation to heaven."

But for now, I grieve.

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Difficult Questions for the Second Year of Grief

*Give sorrow words: the grief that does not speak
Whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it speak.
-Shakespeare.*

Almost one-and-a-half years ago, Caryl, my wife of 33 years, passed from this life. My task since then has been to slowly learn how to re-enter life, to re-identify myself. What once was us is now me, though her spirit permeates everything I do and see. Multitudes of caring companions support me, journey with me, encourage me, and allow my emotions to be given words. I offer reflections on three penetrating questions that frequently come to me in conversation.

Question: Does it get any easier?

Answer: No, "it" doesn't get easier. "It" sometimes moves to the back burner of my mind, but my loss is ever before me. I still experience shock wave reminders of her death...I still call her name...I still weep in the silent times and in worship services. Easier—no. Even so, I am not without hope. Dealing with an empty house full of her precious handiworks, praying for wisdom in making big decisions without her input, having no "cuddle partner" after so many years, enduring holidays and birthdays and anniversaries without her—these are the markers of a grieving spouse. For me, time alone has not made the process easier. Supportive people have. But the word easy never describes my grief.

Question: How was your holiday?

Answer: Holidays emphasize joyful group gatherings. Decorations and food are intended to encourage warm conversations and joyful reunions. And I do enjoy those gatherings. But then there's always the family photo shoot, and I stand spouseless. There's the empty chair at the table, and some of her favorite foods being served, and my heart's ears strain to hear her gratefully compliment the meal or join in the friendly banter. For me, the second round of holidays is more painful, for the brutal reality of the permanence of this death-induced separation is unavoidable. I mistakenly assumed the first holiday season is the worst. Not so.

Question: Are you moving on?

Answer: In spite of the somber tone of the preceding paragraphs, the answer is yes. But it's an arduously slow process, with lots of forward and backwards movement. Breakthrough flashes of future thinking and planning are followed by backward glances that yearn for the companionship now gone. My faith in a loving, caring God is sorely tested, then affirmed in unexpected tangible ways. In my darkest despair, God occasionally flashes streaking rays of light through the clouds, assuring my broken spirit of this: "There is light behind the dark clouds. That light will never be taken from you, even if you cannot always see it."

So, with faith in God's promised presence, my journey towards wholeness continues.

-Virgil Fry, D.Min. www.lifelinechaplaincy.org

THEY ARE WITH US STILL

By Kathleen McTigue

In the struggles we choose for ourselves,
in the ways we move forward in our lives
and bring our world forward with us,

It is right to remember the names of those
who gave us strength in this choice of living.
It is right to name the power of hard lives well-lived.

We share a history with those lives.
We belong to the same motion.

They too were strengthened by what had gone before.
They too were drawn on by the vision of what might come to be.

Those who lived before us,
who struggled for justice and suffered injustice before us,
have not melted into the dust,
and have not disappeared.

They are with us still.
The lives they lived hold us steady.

Their words remind us and call us back to ourselves.
Their courage and love evoke our own.

We, the living, carry them with us:
we are their voices, their hands and their hearts.

We take them with us,
and with them choose the deeper path of living.

**POSSIBLE RESPONSES IN THE GRIEVING
PROCESS**

by Granger E. Westberg

WE ARE IN A STATE OF SHOCK

WE EXPRESS EMOTION

WE FEEL DEPRESSED AND VERY LONELY

**WE MAY EXPERIENCE PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS
OF DISTRESS**

WE MAY BECOME PANICKY

WE FEEL A SENSE OF GUILT ABOUT THE LOSS

**WE ARE FILLED WITH ANGER AND
RESENTMENT**

WE RESIST RETURNING

GRADUALLY HOPE COMES THROUGH

WE STRUGGLE TO AFFIRM REALITY

—from the chapter titles of the book *Good Grief* (Fortress Press)

SOME ALTERNATIVE STATEMENTS WHEN CONFRONTING THE CRISIS OF GRIEF by Virgil M. Fry

Instead of: I know exactly how you feel.

Try: I can only imagine what you are going through.

Instead of: At least he doesn't have to suffer anymore.

Try: He suffered through a lot, didn't he?

Instead of: It's God's will.

Try: One comfort I find is God's promise never to abandon us.

Instead of: Take this pill—it will calm you down.

Try: Do you feel like talking right now?

Instead of: She wouldn't want you to grieve.

Try: It's hard to say goodbye, isn't it?

Instead of: Don't cry—you'll only make it worse.

Try: Sometimes tears are the best way to express our feelings.

Instead of: This death is a great victory for God.

Try: Even with the promise of resurrection, it's hard to give someone up.

Instead of: You can't be angry with God.

Try: God understands even when we're upset.

Instead of: At least you have other family members.

Try: There's no way to replace the one you've lost, is there?

Instead of: Don't you think it's time to get on with living your life?

Try: Everyone has to grieve in their own way, don't they?

Instead of: Don't talk about the funeral—it'll only make you sad.

Try: We can talk about whatever you want.

Instead of: Time heals all wounds.

Try: Time lessens the pain, but you'll always have him/her with you.

From Disrupted: Finding God in Illness and Loss, Leafwood

Breaking the Silence: The Unique Journey of Grief

- ❖ **No one likes to talk about death. Everyone needs to.**
- ❖ **Tears and laughter, sorrow and joy: God's reminders of the richness of love.**
- ❖ **Dealing with grief can bring out the worst—and the best—in families.**
- ❖ **The brutal reality of death is salved by shared stories of earlier days.**
- ❖ **Grieving is a process, one that takes time. And then some more time.**
- ❖ **The more significant the relationship, the deeper the wound, the longer the healing.**
- ❖ **Grief is common to all, but unique to you. There is no "right" way to grieve, only your way.**
- ❖ **Death of a loved one offers an opportunity to consider one's own mortality.**
- ❖ **Eventually, faithfulness to the deceased demands re-engagement with life.**
- ❖ **Getting over grief is impossible...getting through grief isn't.**
- ❖ **Sometimes the best gift offered to one grieving is simply: "I'm willing to talk about anything, anytime."**
- ❖ **Rituals create communities and offer comfort. Avoiding rituals robs us of needed companionship.**
- ❖ **Faith in God doesn't lessen the pain of loss. It does, however, provide direction, meaning, and hope.**
- ❖ **Fellow grievers share a language which outsiders cannot understand.**
- ❖ **Those who try to talk you out of your grief are not evil—just insecure.**
- ❖ **Significant dates will always remain significant and deserve to be honored in some way.**
- ❖ **Those who do not—or cannot—fully grieve are vulnerable to unexpected bouts of anger, depression, and sadness further down the road.**
- ❖ **There is no fast forward button for getting through grief.**
- ❖ **Keeping it together emotionally for the sake of others exacts an exorbitant price on a griever's emotional well being.**
- ❖ **Being in grief is not being crazy. It just feels like it.**

--Virgil Fry (from Rekindled: Warmed by Fires of Hope, Leafwood, 2007)