

Good Grief
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Once again we call the names of our beloved dead, and shared this worship time together in the light of their living presence. With their names on our lips and in our ears, with their voices and faces fresh in our memories, with the truth of our love for them in our hearts, we take this time each year to consider the inevitable and inescapable truth that Forrest Church says is the foundation of all religious faith: We are alive, and we know that we have to die. We explore this in their presence, for it is hard for us to think and talk about death and grief. We need good company.

You might think it would be easier for a minister to think and talk about these things. After all, along with study and reading and time for reflection, as a minister I have had the precious privilege of speaking with so many people who have been stricken with loss and grief; I have had the honor of walking with the dying to the very edge of their departure. It's part of my calling to spend more time in this borderland between life and death than most people do. So I know its pain and desolation; and I know its richness and its beauties, too. I am blessed to have the chance, again and again, to see how human beings I know and care about make meaning out of life in the face of death, how they heal in the aftermath of the unbearable.

After all that, you would think it would get easier, each year, to lift the lid on the simmering subjects of death and loss and grief, and dip in the ladle and find something of healing and comfort, hope and courage to share in a sermon. Yet every year I find myself, as the weeks go by and this All Souls Sunday approaches, using all of my considerable skill at postponing the writing process. Isn't there a phone call I need to make? Perhaps someone has sent me an email. I've been meaning to make some copies for the reading group . . . Have we really got just the right hymns for the Order of Service? Does it need proofreading. . . again?

Some of my own dearly beloveds are gathered in our throng of silent witnesses this morning. Jessie, my wife for ten years, now twenty years dead, is here listening today. More than ten years ago both of my parents joined what George Eliot calls "the choir invisible of those immortal dead who live again in minds made better by their presence." There are recent friends here, people whose loved ones I consoled; people I laughed and wept with right here in this very place; they are here today too.

It is never easy. The only way to speak honestly about grief is from this place where our hearts break, this place of deepened reverence for what is precious. That is a holy place, and a place of great power, the power to make life luminous with fire—but it is hard to enter. That's why we do it in this rich company of our loved ones every year. They remind us that death is real, and they remind us that love is as strong as death.

Loss is an essential element of existence. Author Molly Fumia, in a small and helpful book called *Safe Passage*, says: "We are all grieving. Being alive requires of us a relationship with the mysterious, life-long experience of letting go, whether it be the small daily dyings that dot

our existence, or the gripping, transformative experience of saying farewell to someone we've loved."

Loss and mourning are inevitable and as natural as breathing.

All this is true, but it isn't very concrete. Once we acknowledge that the terrain of grief is a place where we all must walk in our turn, what road maps are there? What tips for the fearsome journey can help us along the way?

Perhaps the most helpful travel advice I've ever found is the reminder that *there is no one right way to grieve*. The best books on this subject describe their particular analysis of the grieving process, but they are careful to say, "Of course, what you experience may be very different from what we're describing." I've talked with so many grieving people who say "I'm probably not doing this very well," and I will almost always tell them: What you're experiencing is what doing it well feels like.

There is lots of good advice out there, in books and elsewhere, and if you are grieving a loss right now, I recommend that you follow some of it. Wise counselors will tell you to take time alone—or to surround yourself with people. They will tell you to find time to rest—or to keep busy. They will tell you many things. Follow their advice; expect it, sometimes, not to work for you. That's all right. No two griefs are alike. The next thing you try might be the right one for your hurt, for your healing.

Trust yourself, trust that you are strong enough to feel what you're feeling; trust in your ability to heal. Trust the messy process of grieving. No two griefs are alike, yet there are common elements, and there are skills that can help us navigate the terrain.

It may seem odd to speak of grieving as a set of skills. But grief is not a feeling; sorrow isn't the same thing as grief. Grief is *work*, it is a process made of tasks that lead us from loss to acceptance, and it comes with a kaleidoscope of complex emotions. Sorrow is only one of them. Good grieving is to the emotional and spiritual life what successful physical healing is to the body—a long and sometimes painful process of growth and restoration that is never a complete return to the way things were before the hurt.

The first aftermath of loss is often disorienting. Something that was given about our life suddenly is no more, and though we know intellectually what's happened, at first our emotional self is not so certain. In the early phases, grief often takes the shape of confusion. Our mind slows and struggles to hold the simplest thought. This isn't unlike what happens to our body when we sustain a serious injury: It often goes numb, and the numbness protects us from experiencing just how bad the hurt really is.

The way out of the confusion, and the first task of grieving, is to make our loss *real*. As our mind and spirit become prepared to accept it, we find our way toward knowing that our loss has actually happened; it isn't a mistake, and we aren't going to wake up tomorrow and realize it isn't so. We can help this process by telling someone exactly what happened, and by talking and thinking about our lost loved one. We can write or sketch a timeline of their life. We can write

letters to them. And then as the enormous, everyday implications of our loss slowly become clear, we can accept the emotions that come in response to them.

Accepting our own feelings is the second task of grieving. On any given day, we might feel: helpless, afraid, empty, irritable, despairing, restless, angry, or pessimistic. We might feel none of those things. We might lose motivation or energy, or we might feel driven to work and create. We might lose our appetite, or feel constantly hungry. We might want to be alone—or feel suddenly, shockingly amorous. We might stay up all night—or sleep all day—or both. Denying or struggling against these feelings will not make them go away. Acknowledging them and letting them pass through us at their own pace will move us toward healing. Whatever we are feeling right now is what we are supposed to be feeling right now. Let it be, and let it pass.

As we begin to accept the reality and finality of our loss, and to acknowledge our own depth of feeling, we need to offer ourselves compassion and comfort. This is a third task of grieving. Whatever our sources of grace and solace, we need to call on them in this time. That might mean praying, meditating, reading in important books or hearing beloved music; it might mean long walks in the woods or on the beach; it might mean hours in the company of loving companions. It's a time to be gentle and kind with ourselves.

A fourth task is creating the living memory we will carry forward with us. When we are healing from the loss of a beloved person in our life, telling stories or making pictures of our life with them is important. We need to remind ourselves who our loved one really was, what they were really like. Our memory is at least one part of their ongoing life, so we want it to be as true and complete as possible. No airbrushing, no digital enhancements; remember the good and the hard together. Objects like photographs and mementos can be helpful in this, especially if they are ones that trigger fuller recollections.

It's in creating the living memory of our loved one that we can often begin to sense that presence Rebecca Parker speaks of, the presence that is never wholly lost. It seems sometimes like the presence of our loved one, and then again it isn't them exactly—yet it is unmistakably a presence of love in which they have a part. It is not them, but it includes them. And it includes us as well.

Molly Fumia writes of a woman in El Salvador who was the only survivor of a massacre that killed more than 1000 people, including her four children. Later in her life she works with children at a day care center, among coworkers who share her grief with her and do not ask her to forget. In their companionship, she says, she learned that “if I give in to hatred, I will become like the murderers. Instead I give in to love, and the children I lost continue in that love. In the end,” she says, “love will be victorious.”

Give in to love. That Presence in which we feel the presence of our loved ones is the presence of Love. We give in to it when we become that presence in the world for others who are suffering and who are mourning.

In some synagogues, I've been told, there is a mourner's bench at the back, a special seat reserved for those who are grieving. We need companions who will sit on the mourners' bench

with us, who will not flinch away from our emotions or the painful reality of our loss and who remind us that life continues. Those companions are the Presence of love. This is one of the greatest privileges of ministry: I am invited to sit with you in grief; as a minister I am trusted to be that unflinching companion who may do no more than be present, recognize and accept what you are going through, and stay beside you through the worst. It is the holiest of gifts. And it is the final task of grieving: Give in to love. *Become* the Presence of Love in someone's life when they need it.

Love is as strong as death. Here in this community of love and faith, may we learn together how to accept our losses and to hold each other up when we are hurting. May this be a place where we can find companions for the mourners' bench, where we can grow to be the Presence of Love for one another, and for the world of hurt that surrounds us. May we learn to embrace each other, to accept each other, and to point each other patiently toward love, toward hope, toward new life.