

## **Good Grief: Embracing Grief and the trouble with not doing so**

UU Church of Vancouver

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### **Reflection on the Theme by Wendy Raunig**

In my early 20's, I lived over in eastern Washington. I had just undergone some significant changes in my life and needed a new direction.

So, after much self-reflection and self-examination, I decided to sign myself up to be a Big sister through Big Brothers and Sisters. I completed all the thorough background checks, training videos etc.

One warm summer day in July of 1994, I was paired with a timid young lady who was 9 years old. She had beautiful long blond hair and a smile that could pierce your heart. We were so enamored by each other.....it was tenderness at first glance, however, we had nothing to say to each other, we didn't know each other, and it was very very awkward, to say the least.

As a result, our first few visits had to be cut significantly shorter than the expectations of the program. Over the months and years, those walls melted and we became entangled in each other's lives, we went on trips together, we skied together, and I truly became a big sister and friend to her.

Angela's mom was addicted to heroin and she had a tumultuous childhood spending some of her nights in the backseat of her mom's car while she scored drugs. Angela was innocent and naive to her comings and goings, at least as a child. That all caught up to her when her mom passed away when Angela was 19 years old.

The years that followed her passing left Angela riddled with grief and evil and as a result, she turned to a life full of risk.

I would get an occasional collect call from various jail facilities. I always felt these calls were her way of keeping track of me and at the same time letting me know our relationship wasn't possible right now. Many years of silence passed.

I'm not sure how Angela got through the grief/evil/hell represented by her mom's addiction and death at such a young age but I'm sure glad Brett and I were available enough to her whenever she needed us.

Angela contacted me several years ago as a 30-year-old woman and we have rekindled our friendship. We have left the past in the past and picked up in the present.

Our birthdays are two days apart and as March rolls around this year she will be 39 years old and let's not talk about how old I will be. This July is also very special as it will be the 30th anniversary of our first meeting and we're planning to do something special together to celebrate our journey.

I hope one day Angela joins me as a guest coming to this church and look forward to our many years ahead, creating even more memories together.

## Sermon © 2024 Duane H. Fickeisen “Embracing Grief and the Trouble with Not Doing So”

“Joy and woe are woven fine, ...and when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go.” William Blake’s words are my text today.

Let’s consider grief. I will not refer to it as a process, I won’t talk about stages of grieving, nor lay out what’s normal because all of those imply a neat and tidy progression from early bereavement to getting over it. They suggest that grief is a problem to be solved. That there is some prescribed set of actions that will get us through it and beyond it. It’s not ... and there isn’t.

To suggest grief is a problem to be solved is a disservice to those who grieve (and sooner or later that’s virtually all of us). It implies we are failing if we don’t manage to put it aside within weeks of our bereavement.

I know far more about grief from personal experience than from seminary classes and pastoring to others. I cared for my spouse as she experienced the development of a rare cancer and treatment for it. I was present as she ended her life using Oregon’s death with dignity option when further treatment was futile. And I have grieved her death for more than three years and expect to do so for the rest of my life. My grief is linked every so closely to the depth of our love and care for each other. I would not want it to be otherwise.

I began thinking that denial of grief and cultural norms that expect us to get over it quickly were evil, but as my thinking continues to evolve, I now understand cultural suppression of grief not as an intention to create harm or a breach of ethics, nor something perpetrated from an outside force.

If we try to ignore grief, it moves into the shadow parts of our being. It does not rest there, but plots to remind us of its presence, both overtly and covertly.

I only learned as an adult that a brother had been born about 10 years before me and had died within 24 hours of his birth. And even later I learned that a half-sister had been born 13 months before me. I grew up believing that I was my parents’ first born. It had always been clear that my mother and father had high expectations for me, but when I learned about my brother I knew that those expectations were for both of us.

My half-sister is a lovely woman. Our mother had been raped while my father was away in WW II, and she became pregnant as a result. My parents hid the pregnancy by temporarily moving away. My sister was adopted by the delivery nurse. Janice and I only connected after Janice found me through Mom’s obituary. We have visited each other’s homes, met each other’s children and grandchildren, and we exchange family news, but we might have had a much different relationship had we known each other decades sooner.

My parents clearly buried their grief at both the loss of my brother and the rape, unplanned pregnancy, and birth of my half-sister. I know that my mother struggled with pregnancy and experienced multiple miscarriages. I believe that the shadow of their suppressed grief appeared both in their expectations of me, and in their relationship with each other, which was sometimes fraught.

Pushing it into the shadow did not remove or resolve their grief.

Grief is feral and wild as grief counselor and therapist Francis Weller asserts. It won’t be tamed and will not tolerate being hidden. Grief lurks around the corner, ready to pounce. It will strike like a snake suddenly appearing from under a rock. Or leap out from the midst of a crowd. It will come calling at inopportune times and refuse to leave, even if you aren’t willing to open the door.

Soon after the death of our beloved dog, Judy and I drove from Pennsylvania to Maine for summer vacation. After the worship service at the church we served, we changed from our work clothes into our good clothes,

then set out on the 12-hour drive. We were eager to wake up to the sound of surf on the rocks below the cottage.

We stopped in New Haven for supper. As we left the highway, we drove through a residential neighborhood and I saw a woman wearing a white lab coat get out of a car. Her lab coat reminded me of the veterinary staff and our loss. It triggered a sudden burst of tears. Grief pounces on you like that. Weller's description of grief as feral and wild really does fit.

Our culture attempts to put grief into a neat package. Until a little over 100 years ago grief was viewed quite differently than it is now.

Consider the words of William Blake that we sang earlier, and that were penned around 200 years ago. "Joy and woe are woven fine." Blake was onto a significant understanding of how the world works when he claimed that we could not know joy without experiencing woe. "And when this we rightly know, safely through the world we go," he wrote.

In a biography of Blake, author John Higgs writes that for Blake,

"[T]here is no such thing as light without dark or hot without cold. ... [T]he conflict between these divides is the fuel that moves the universe. Any view of the world must include them, because a universe without these dynamics simply couldn't exist. To try to solve problems by favouring one side and dismissing the other is to fail to understand how the world works."

Joy and woe are woven fine! Roughly a century later, in the early 1900s, Rainer Maria Rilke wrote *Letters to a Young Poet*. Among his advice is:

"So don't be frightened, dear friend, if a sadness confronts you larger than any you have ever known, casting its shadow over all you do. You must think that something is happening within you, and remember that life has not forgotten you; it holds you in its hand and will not let you fall. Why would you want to exclude from your life any uneasiness, any pain, any depression, since you don't know what work they are accomplishing within you?"

Until that time—the early 1900s—the cultural norms for rituals and expressions of bereavement were very different from today's expectations.

Prior to the World War I and the Spanish flu epidemic, grief rituals included public displays that signaled mourning. In a description of general grief practices, Laura Tradii, wrote;

"...at the turn of the century, families had a central role in the whole ritual process. There are many depictions of the 'good death', which was for a person to die at home, to be washed and dressed by the relatives, and to be displayed for several days so friends and family could come to visit. Embalming was also part of the process to preserve the physical appearance of the body for a few days so it would look as though it was sleeping."

But as casualties mounted from the war and the epidemic, particularly in Britain, it was deemed important to the war effort to limit expressions of grief. Many deaths occurred on the battlefields and with a policy of non-repatriation of the bodies, families could no longer be involved in preparing a body for burial.

The government wanted to ensure that the custody of soldier sons was transferred from their mothers to the state. Sending a son off to war was deemed a patriotic act and stoic acceptance of his death was a sign of commitment to the cause.

The war effort could not afford to lose the work of everyone who was grieving. The sheer number of deaths meant that mourning shifted from public to private expressions, and was expected to be brief.

The circumstances compelled an individual duty to 'carry on'. What was necessary for the war effort, however, has impacted cultural expectations for grieving ever since.

By the 1960s, Geoffrey Gorer wrote the many people believed:

"sensible, rational men and women can keep their mourning under complete control by strength of will and character, so that it need be given no public expression, and indulged, if at all, in private ..."

He continued:

"If mourning is denied outlet, the result will be suffering. At the moment our society is signally failing to give this support and assistance...The cost of this failure in misery, loneliness, despair and maladaptive behavior is very high."

And thus we come to sending "thoughts and prayers" to survivors and communities that experience mass killings, or in the words of former President Trump, on the day after a 17-year old shot and killed a sixth grader and wounded five other people in an Ohio school, "But we have to get over it. We have to move forward. We have to move forward."

We cannot get over it, but we do need to move forward to better understanding grief and to supporting those who are bereaved.

It is important to remember that while virtually everyone experiences grief, each of us has a unique experience of it. There is no one right way to manage it. It is feral, unmanageable, and it refuses to follow house rules.

For most of us it gets better. We begin after a time to build a life that contains our grief, but is no longer ruled by it. If after a year or more of profound grief, you or someone close to you has not begun to include their grief as a part of their new life while moving forward with living, they may be diagnosed with persistent and profound grief. In that case professional counseling may well prove helpful.

It's been three and a half years since my wife Judy's death, and it happens less often, but still occasionally I will pass a neighbor on the sidewalk during my daily walk and they will ask "How are you?"

I generally say "Oh, I'm doing well, thanks." That's only partly true. I am doing well. And I am grieving. But I imagine none of them really want to engage in a deeper conversation about my loss and how deeply I miss Judy every day. So I tell only a partial truth.

What I would rather hear is "Hey, it's good to see you. I miss Judy and when I go by your house, I think of her and her garden."

There are a few close friends who can ask "How are you?" In a way that I know they really want to know and are ready to have that deeper conversation. But it's not typically on the sidewalk.

Often I hear indirectly that people don't want to name the person who has died in the presence of their widowed spouse for fear of 'reminding' them of the death. Yet, trust me please, I am always aware of my loss. Naming her will not remind me of it, but will acknowledge the reality of the loss and our love. Most of the widows and widowers I know frequently name their dead spouse in conversation and want to talk about him

or her. We tell stories to remember events with them. Our lives together created meaning for us, and remembering them, while not bringing them back, keeps that meaning alive and fresh.

One of the lessons in chaplaincy training and pastoral care is that showing up is far more important than saying the right thing. So show up for your grieving friends. Let them know you care. If you need words, try “I’m so sorry for your loss.” Or “I really miss him.” Or “How about a cup of tea?”

Don’t however, describe your own grief experience or the death of someone else. It isn’t helpful to hear that your aunt died of the same cancer or that your grandfather also had a heart attack.

And for heaven’s sake don’t respond to a miscarriage with “Well, it happens a lot and you can get pregnant again!” Or to a young widow with “He’s in a better place now and you are still young and beautiful. You’ll surely find another partner.”

Just show up and be present.

Grief is a sign of loss and of love. A deep love results in great loss and the profound grief that ensues reflects the importance of the one who has died. Grief stays with us for the rest of our lives. We don’t get over it. We do nearly always find ways to carry on.

A poem by Rainer Maria Rilke encourages us to fully embrace all that life brings us::

God speaks to each of us as he makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.

These are the words we dimly hear:

You, sent out beyond your recall,  
go to the limits of your longing.

Embody me.

Flare up like a flame  
and make big shadows I can move in.

Let everything happen to you: beauty and terror.

Just keep going. No feeling is final.

Don’t let yourself lose me.

Nearby is the country they call life.

You will know it by its seriousness.

Give me your hand.

Let love and grief both into your awareness. Welcome them. Embrace them. And know that you are not walking through this country called life alone.

Our cultural approach to grief can shut it down and stuff it into the shadow to pop back up. That, my friends, is tragically harmful.

Alternatively we can support a healthy embrace of loss and help weave joy and woe together. Then we shall safely go through the world. Choose the healthy embrace.

Amen.