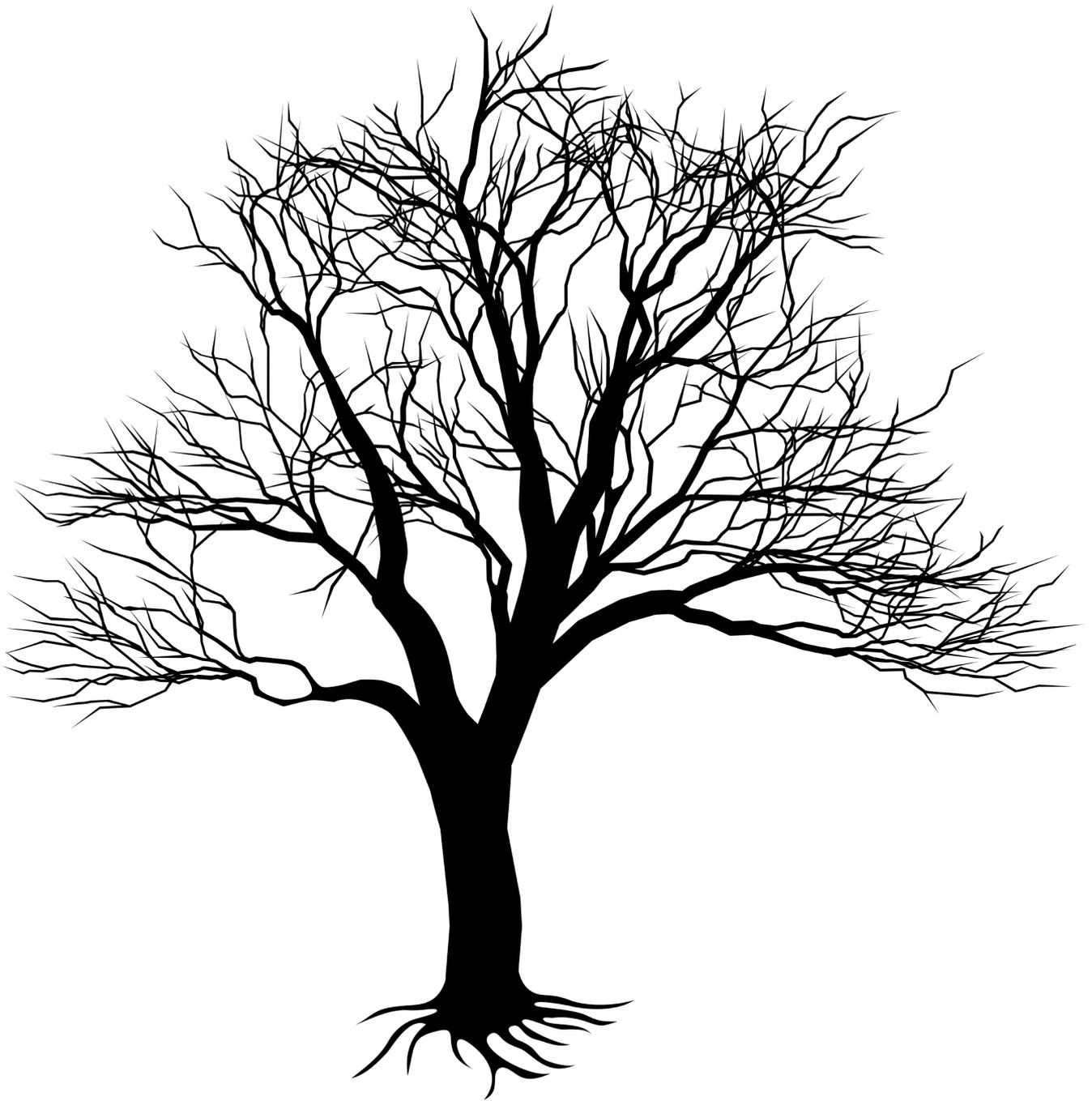


For Those Who Grieve



When you lose someone you love it hurts more than any physical pain. Understanding what's going on can help you adjust and grow. That's what this article is about. God's word says, *"we want you to know the truth about those who have died, so that you will not grieve as those who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again, and so we believe that God will take back with Jesus those who have died believing in him."* 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14. So we should grieve, but in an open and healthy way, not without any hope...

This paper shares what is often called "stages of grief". I prefer to call these "experiences" of grief rather than "stages", because they don't necessarily happen in order. We can jump all around from one to another. We also don't have to experience all of them either. They are just common things that happen when we lose someone we love. Lately I've been experiencing some of these things too, so to write about them at this time has been helpful for me. I hope it will be helpful for you to understand some of what we all go through...

Shock / Numbness

The first reaction to tragic news is often shock. Sometimes when tragedy or pain is so overwhelming we become temporarily "anesthetised". It's like it didn't happen - it doesn't register. This can be a normal and healthy thing. We can find ourselves numb. Sometimes when we see someone in the middle of tragedy seeming peaceful we might think "what great faith". Sometimes that is the case, but other times it is the natural protective mechanism of shock that is shielding them from the full force of the pain. Shock or numbness is fine as long as it is temporary. We shouldn't try to force people out of this state by telling them they "are in denial". We should be gentle and accept where they are. Every now and then we might find ourselves saying, "I still can't believe it has happened." This is natural, but as you can, you should gradually attempt to return to normal activities to take away some of the barriers to accepting your new situation.

Emotional Release

When things start to dawn in us we get an uncontrollable urge to express our grief. When that happens, we should not feel ashamed to cry - God gave us tears as a way of expressing physically that which we can't in words. At times people look down on those who cry, but to cry could be seen as a sign of strength and honesty. We all know that we feel better after emotional release. Psalm 126:5 says *"Those who sow in tears will harvest with songs of joy."* The shortest verse in the Bible tells us a lot about the

humanity and honest grief of Jesus, "*Jesus wept*" John 11:35. Sometimes tears are necessary. Do not think that you have "got it all out" and that you will not need to cry again! As you realise new aspects of your loss you may need the emotional release of tears at different times.

Sadness And Loneliness

After a time we come to a feeling of deep sadness and isolation. We are aware of our loss and it is a painful part of the background music of our life. Sometimes when we experience this we may feel as if God is not there or if God has forgotten us. We may feel that no one has ever hurt like we hurt right now. It is true that no one has experienced exactly the situation we are in, but this sadness and loneliness is felt by almost every human (if not all) at some point. In the Bible David felt it when he said, "*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, so far from the words of my groaning? Oh my God, I cry out by day but you don't answer, by night, but you are silent*" Psalm 22:1-2. Jesus repeated David's words of loneliness from the cross. What I want you to remember about this experience is that it has an end. When you are in the middle of it, it will seem like it will never change, but it will. Jesus suffered on the cross for what seemed like an eternity, but he rose again. When you are low, please know that you are needed, welcome, and accepted by our congregation at St Paul's. We are a community of people who are made for each other for the hard times. We are not "mighty and strong", we are simply those who join together to support each other in the name of Jesus. We need you too.

Fear Of Being Unable To Cope

In the weeks following a large loss we may find ourselves unable to think about anything else. I have experienced this and it is very hard. After a while this inability to focus on other things may begin to worry or even panic us as we fear that we might be going "crazy". This is not abnormal at all. In the first period of time it is totally normal to find yourself focussed on your loss. If you're feeling this way you probably want to just stay home. That's alright for a little while only, but not for long - the time comes when you must reach out and touch base with people. I know grieving is hard work, but in the long run it's much harder on your own.

“If Only I Had” / Guilt

"I should have done more". "If only I had". "I feel like it was my fault". So many of us when we experience grief think and say these sorts of things. Guilt is a very common experience of loss. We may find it impossible to get out of our heads the idea that we contributed to the tragedy in some way, or that we could have prevented it. This is a quite natural reaction, especially in very competent or high-achieving people. But the feeling of guilt does not always mean that you have done wrong or left right undone. Your heart can be wrong. *"Good sorrow brings repentance that leads to life and leaves no regret, but unhealthy sorrow brings death."* - 2 Corinthians 7:10. Note how it says that there is good sorrow or guilt, but there is also unhealthy sorrow or guilt.

To those who feel guilty about something they have left undone I would first say, "we are not God". We cannot foresee all possibilities, we cannot deal with all contingencies, we cannot solve all problems. Because we are not God we are not expected to have all the solutions. Sometimes guilt can cover up something that may also be hard to deal with - the recognition that we are not in control and that we cannot change certain things. If you feel this "illegitimate" guilt, please get it out in the light of day, discuss it with someone who cares, and they will help you acknowledge it for the deception it is. If extreme, this kind of feeling of guilt definitely requires the help of a Counsellor.

To those who continue to feel guilty about something they have specifically done or truly know they should have done I recommend that you also get it out in the light of day where it can be healed. Share it with a spiritual leader you can trust. Pray a prayer confessing it to God, and asking for forgiveness. Then ask that leader to speak words of forgiveness from Jesus for what you have done. Know that God forgives all things and that anything confessed can be released and forgiven. *"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."* 1 John 1:9

Physical Symptoms

Sometimes when we experience loss we may experience physical symptoms or sickness. Back-aches, headaches, pain, exhaustion, asthma, or even some illness reflecting the suffering of the deceased. The pressure of coping can take its toll on our bodies too, so if you are grieving and find yourself sick, don't discount the idea that as

well as physical rest, you may need to take some time to go back and deal with your loss in new ways. Suffering often hits us physically as well as emotionally. Psalm 22:15 *"My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth; you lay me in the dust of death."* If you are experiencing physical sickness of some kind and your doctor cannot find a cause, please consider the fact that God made us a "whole" and our body, emotions, and soul are all tied together.

Anger / Resentment

One of my teachers used to always say "the opposite of depression is... aggression!" It's normal to feel resentment and strong anger around a loss. I have noticed of myself when grieving that the anger often gets channelled at someone or something - and not necessarily at the most deserving parties! It's natural to be angry, and I have seen grieving people channel their anger at friends, family, medical practitioners, funeral directors, and even pastors. Of course the One who we often get angry with is God. Anger can give us a feeling of energy and control. It gives us someone to blame. It gives us a reason for that which we can't understand. Anger should be acknowledged and talked through. Usually when we finally get honest about our anger it will lead us back to a point of emotional release and crying which will feel much better. Although it is natural to feel some anger do not take this as permission to live or remain in anger. It must be acknowledged and talked through, but if we allow anger to take over our lives it can create great destruction and hurt. Here is a great piece of wisdom about anger, *"In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold"* - Ephesians 4:10. This reminds me that it is alright to be angry, but we should express our anger constructively, we should not hold onto it and let it become a destructive force. If you are experiencing anger you need to talk about it with someone who cares. Receiving counselling is not a sign of weakness - it's a sign of the honest strength to admit you need other people in your life.

Being Unable To Return To Normal Life

At some point we might feel that we have begun to deal with many of the "experiences" or "stages" of grief described above. But we still find it hard to get back in to the swing of things. It is very hard to return to normal life. Why? Because in normal life we have to carry it all inside ourselves. Many cultures around the world have a "grieving period" where people are expected to have a hard time and to feel a bit different. Our culture used to have a practice where people wore black armbands publicly for even up to a year as a way of acknowledging their grief. If you have returning to normal life it might help to reserve special places and times where you can

quietly grieve – times with family or close caring people. Specifically allocate times to retreat and times to get back into the wider world so that you can adjust gradually. The church of Jesus is a place for honesty. We don't have to live up to any ideals – we are simply and honestly received as we are by God. We are called to simply and honestly accept all comers as they are too. It's a community that is made to honour each person whatever they are going through. *"You are the body of Christ... If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it."* 1 Corinthians 12:26

Adjusting To The New Reality

After our loss we will never quite be the same again, but gradually the loss will become less of a problem and we will gradually find new ways to live and hope. The loss will always be a part of our life, but gradually we adjust so that it is no longer the most dominant or controlling factor. Granger Westberg says, "depending on the way we respond to this event, we are either stronger people that we were before or weaker, either healthier in spirit, or sicker."

Maturity takes time. Healing takes time. Grieving is a hard and painful task and we can't ignore it and hope for it to go away. If we are honest with ourselves and before God as we grieve, then we will find creative ways to understand our loss and we will adjust. That's why in grief it is so necessary to connect with other people, to be listened to, counselled, and to connect with God.

As you grieve you need others in your life. You will know that certain people are not helpful to you and don't have your care utmost in their mind. Some people will only rub the pain "in your face". It's good to steer clear of these people while you are gaining strength to face the world. But grieving alone is not healthy and so I invite you as you grieve, to call on your pastor, your family, your friends, your church community, and let them be the caring support they so deeply desire to be for you. Strangely, in allowing them to be there for you, you will help them deal with it too!

Although the thoughts shared here are mostly personal, the framework for this is adapted from Granger Westberg's book "Good Grief" © 1992 Augsburg Fortress Publishers. Australian edition Published by Uniting Education Melbourne.

- Pastor Matt Thiele, 2015