

# Grieving Nels



Stuart Segall

Some of my earliest memories as a child are of being fearful of death. All my mother could do was giggle a little to have a young four-year-old who was so afraid. She tried to comfort me, as best she knew how, as a young Jewish mother who had no real spiritual life or belief.

When I was about six years old, my parents were having our small home in Miami professionally painted. An old gentleman with silver hair and circle wire rim glasses pulled up to the house. He was the painter and his name was Nels. Nels took out his tools and painter's cloth and prepped the home.

He asked me to be his assistant and I was thrilled. After a few days of helping him in a small child's way, I was enamored with this gentle old man with his soft voice and smile. I had decided at age six, that I too would be a great house painter someday!

On day three or four Nels said "Goodbye, see you tomorrow," and slowly drove away in his old 1943 Dodge Wayfarer (like the one above). I ran to the edge of the road and waved goodbye until he was out of sight, and of course, he would extend his hand out the window until we could no longer see each other.

This time, though, a few houses down the road, his car pulled off to the side of the road and slowly came to a stop. I was intrigued, and even though I was not supposed to, I ran down the road to see why he pulled over. When I reached the driver's side of his car, there he was slumped over the big steering wheel with his face looking right at me.

His eyes were open, big blue ones under those wire-rimmed glasses. He still had a gentle smile but I could see his color changing before my eyes. I asked him what was wrong. He said nothing, but it seemed he tried to convey something in his movement. Then his eyes slowly closed. I ran home crying, not knowing what to do. A policeman later told me that Nels was gone. I could not comprehend that. I had lost a parakeet that I had loved dearly, but that was my only acquaintance with death. I had just lost the man that I adored. I deeply loved this man who reminded me of Geppetto.

For a fearful young boy, this was a tough introduction to the subject of what I feared the most, death. After that, I worried about how long anything or anyone I would love would live.

What does a boy do with his grief? Who will comfort him? What adult would understand a crushed six-year-old kid? What would you offer him? How do you help him understand grief? I would grow up from this and learn that grief is "love with no place to go."

Time would heal most of me. I say "most" because 62 years later, tears still roll down my eyes when I write this. Later on in this life, as a young man, I would realize that grief helped prepare me for life with empathy. For forty-one years I have performed the service of grief counseling. It, in part, equipped me for comforting and consoling others in their time of suffering.

I would not sign up for grief. If the list came my way, I would pass on it, rather than see it as an opportunity. However, grief happens to us all, and while I did not want it, I don't want to squander the opportunity when it happens.

*"Grief is a nasty game of feeling the weakest you have ever felt and morphing it into the strongest person you will have to become."*—Windgate Lane

We live in a grieving world, don't we? Locally, nationally and throughout the world, this kind of suffering abounds. I am grateful for the hope and the truth of knowing our future because of and in Jesus Christ.

*"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death, mourning or crying or pain, for the former things have passed away"* (Revelation 21:4).

I would learn these words as a teen time after time and the blessing of having this hope that lies within.

As a boy, I was shipwrecked emotionally when I so unexpectedly lost my dear friend Nels. Today I help comfort and encourage people to look at that time we will see ahead when "God shall wipe away all tears." No more expected or unexpected "goodbyes."

Never underestimate the pain of the quiet people around you and never underestimate the power of listening or just sitting there in the darkness with someone, and later on, a few caring words.

It is important to try to be even more mindful of what is going on around us. I remind myself to use my empathy from the past. Each day I carry a first-aid heart kit when it is needed, and I encourage you, too, to be there for others as they grieve. □

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