

Navigating Grief

Stuart Segall

We hear about the certainty of “death and taxes,” but grief has to be right up there with those two. You might be resigned to the others but how do you navigate grief?

For most of my adult life, I’ve done a lot of work as a chaplain. I’ve sat with the dying; many I did not know until I met them at their end. I often journey back in my mind to where my mom would take me as a boy to nursing homes to teach me the art of comforting those who are alone even at a time when they might be surrounded by humans that love them. It would have been easy to avoid such uncomfortable scenes by avoiding the dying. Many do; it’s how they cope. Death can be too scary for many and too close for others to deal with, so it is very easy to make up all kinds of reasons to avoid the discomfort of “being there” at the end.

When studying grief as a young man, I read the famous book by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross “Death and Dying.” In her book, she states that those experiencing grief go through a series of five emotions: *denial, anger, bargaining, depression* and *acceptance*.

She later wished she hadn’t used the phrase “stages” because it gave people the understanding that these phases are like stepping stones or a clear pathway where one stage leads to the next. Now, the understanding is clear that they can come in any order and reoccur again and again.

A UNIVERSAL EXPERIENCE

Grief is one of the most common and unique things we experience in our journey of life. How we go about it and how long grief lasts can vary with the person. The reality is, with some, it will not just go away. Grief can last for years and come back when you least expect it. It might be a billboard, a

commercial, a smell or a sound—there is always something there to remind you.

My 44 years of serving those who grieve have given me a few things I would love to share with you.

My first thought is about being with the one who is grieving or perhaps facing death. I have a tendency to want to be a fixer—to perform and to please. In the past, I tended to feel responsible for other people’s problems or grief. The reality is that grief can only be fixed, or progress made

by the grieving person. All I can do is dock alongside the griever as a companion that through the quietness reminds them of my care for them during this trying time.

My second thought is about how we approach the chaos of grief. Many are naturally analytical in their thinking and therefore may also see a need to be orderly at such a time. We are more helpful in respecting their disorder and confusion, rather than thinking it is for us to come in and impose order and logic. While these qualities are good in many



areas of life, they can cause problems when aiding with grief. They can be obstacles for someone trying to be in touch with their pain. It's better to feel someone else's pain, to feel empathy, rather than try to problem-solve them out of their grief.

A third suggestion from my own experiences is about this process of comforting those who are grieving. You serve more effectively if you come to learn from others; helping others grieve is not about teaching them. You may have more experience and knowledge in many areas than those you want to help, but when it comes to grief, it's better to try to understand how that person sees their world. It means listening and reflecting.

My final thought is when we have the unique opportunity to sit with the broken and wounded in their grief, to approach them with consoling and compassionate curiosity; it is not about expertise.

NOT ABOUT US

When it comes to someone else's unique grieving, none of us are experts. If that was required, I would have belly flopped. What works for me might not be solutions that work for the person I'm with. Approaching a grieving person requires us to try to understand them—their thoughts and feelings—rather than thinking we can bring in an imaginary crate to pack up their pain.

When I was that young chaplain, I often reflect on how it was so painful. I just wanted those I saw to have hope. I did not care if their theology was different than mine, as long as there was some rope of hope they were hanging onto. Why? Because I wanted the problem resolved with hope.

I was very caring, but I projected my own feelings too much of the time. When I go into the room of the griever, whether they are grieving the loss of a loved one or their own impending loss of life, I remind myself that this is not about me and my feelings at all, but about them.

The example of our great God and Creator gives us guidance even in His creation. Many in the

animal kingdom are hardwired to perform this act of companionship with others in death. From a bird to an elephant, we have seen or heard about the animal that sits or lays down next to the dying animal. No moans or expressions, just silence, giving presence. It is powerful and helpful for us to learn this lesson from nature.

"But ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you. Which of all these does not know that the hand of the Lord has done this?"

—Job 12:7-10

Death, taxes and grief. It is on the life menu for every one of us. We are not there to treat those we seek to comfort like a medical professional would treat a patient. We are there to offer heartfelt companionship. I call myself "Companion Stu"

when I do this, so as not to lose my purpose for being there.

In Psalm 139:14, we read: *"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful."* The Psalmist was so right, yet we are also complicated, and it is obvious to see this in action when we grieve.

We all suffer grief and loss. It is part of the package. So, I encourage you to give the griever what you, yourself would appreciate in your time of pain. You will find

that a heartfelt approach will lead you to serve in a better way.

"Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort; Who comforts us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them who are in any trouble, by the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted of God." —2 Corinthians 1:3-4

This is just one more way we can be more effective in following in His footsteps. □

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