

## Good Grief

One of the hardest parts of being a minister is getting the call. You pick up the phone and somebody's died. Often it's a member of your church whom you've known for years, but not infrequently it could be a total stranger. Sometimes it's expected: family members have been gathering for weeks round the bedside of an ailing parent or grandparent to say their last goodbyes. But then again it can be entirely unforeseen, mom and dad out for a bike ride with the kids when their six year old is killed by a car. With my thirty years of experience as a "man of the cloth," the only thing I can predictably say is that you're never ready for that call. It's one of the least favorite parts of the clergyman's job. In truth, there's no getting around it: death is a bummer.

And yet my three decades in the parish have taught me that sitting with families who are in grief and mourning is one of the most meaningful things I do. And I know that 99% of my colleagues in ministry would agree with me. More than christening babies or presiding at weddings, more than any of the sacred or mundane tasks that go into running a church, responding to those who are coping with loss is one of the great privileges of being a minister, when I know I've made a difference at a decisive point. For although I never feel prepared or equipped to match the enormity of the situation (after all, what could I personally possibly do or say to comfort someone who's just lost a beloved son or cherished daughter?) the office of ministry has a healing function. The role is well-defined. Some have likened the clergyman who conducts a funeral to the designated driver at a party where everyone else is drunk with grief. And that's what I am at those moments: a grief enabler, a sober presence who allows others to be inebriated with sorrow, because I've driven down this road before, many times, and know how to find the way home.

Occasionally the deceased leaves instructions that there should be no memorial. *"No eulogies, no music, no flowers, no public acknowledgement of life's passing for me, please! Just compost me! Recycle! Don't make any fuss!"* This wish to remain anonymous in death often springs from false humility and a basic misunderstanding. Because the memorial service isn't for the person who's died, but instead for those who survive. It's worth repeating, because it's a lesson with such general applicability to this earthly drama: it's not all about you! Sometimes the decision to forgo a funeral arises from a different impulse, a desire to spare others any unnecessary suffering or unpleasantness. *"Let there be no weeping when I die, no lugubrious hymns or mournful faces, only unremitting cheerfulness and celebration!"* What the dear departed doesn't realize in this case is that people actually need to cry. They need space and permission to feel what they're actually feeling, especially if what they feel is a breaking heart.

We live in a death denying culture where bereavement is scarcely visible or even tolerated. A century ago, you probably know, it was still common in England and the United States to don “mourning clothes” when a death occurred. Rules of etiquette governed how long black should be worn. Six months for a sibling. Two years for “widow’s weeds.” As long as the parents felt so disposed—which might be a long time indeed—for the loss of a child. As you went about your daily business--socializing, or shopping, or attending church—you were likely to be reminded by a dark arm band that the people around you were hurting. If such customs were still in force, a fair number of you sitting here today would be dressed in mourning, and the rest would be reminded to be a little gentler, a little kinder and more tender with your neighbor. For sorrow makes sisters and brothers of us all. But death now has become invisible: hidden in nursing homes, secluded in the ICU, even sanitized and made almost unreal on the battlefield. Hankies and kleenex, public displays, even flag draped coffins are frowned on because they would remind us of the uncomfortable fact of mortality we work so hard to conceal.

But of course we can’t conceal it. We begin to say goodbye in this world from the moment the umbilical cord is cut. Goodbye to moms and dads. Goodbye to innocence and childhood. Off to college and farewell to high school sweethearts. Each stage of living brings its own *adieux*. And every loss reopens the unhealed wounds of the preceding passage. This in part this is what makes it an emotional event, sometimes even traumatic, when a minister announces his or her resignation or retirement.

Barbara and Tom were pastors who served you long and well. Between them, they fulfilled the office of ministry for over forty years here, half a lifetime and more. During that span, they not only preached and prayed and went to countless potlucks. They also did the eulogy at the service for so many of you when your parents died, or your partners. They found the words to say when no words are adequate, or stood beside you at a graveside. When you planned for the inevitable or pictured your own life coming to an end, you undoubtedly imagined Barbara or Tom, the parson from your parish presiding at the last rites. Even for those of you who don’t believe in any orthodox god, your clergy stood in that ancient priestly tradition that promises the peace that passes understanding. And when that priestly figure departs, it can awaken all the sadness, anger, guilt, regret, and recrimination that accompanied those earlier losses. Because grief isn’t a single emotion. It’s the whole constellation of reactions that crowd in on us when a loved one leaves us, everything from despair to euphoria to numbness and panic. Often the feelings are so chaotic and confusing that truly we don’t know what’s tumbling around inside until we try to articulate it and let it out.

Maybe you've had the experience I've had. I'll be speaking and think that I'm in perfect control of myself when suddenly I'll feel a lump rising in my throat. My voice starts to catch. I may flush, or get misty, or have to pause before proceeding. I hadn't seen this coming. I didn't know that I was going to be so affected by the subject. And grief is like that. Often we don't know exactly what we're feeling, or how powerfully, until we begin to talk about it. That's why I'm suggesting that we take time, as a congregation, to talk about Tom's leaving and Barbara's becoming *minister emerita*, so that we at least know how it's impacting us. Just naming the feelings, bringing them to conscious awareness, somehow makes them more manageable. Next month, you'll be invited to a Caring Circle where we can have this conversation together.

Now I recognize that not everyone here knew the previous ministers or felt especially close to them. For some, Tom could be Dick or Harry and Barbara doesn't mention Merritt. Still, you've experienced other losses. And you may be among the majority of church-goers who say the number one topic they want to hear addressed from the pulpit is this very issue of how we face the end of life and pick up the pieces when a loved one dies. No wonder. It's the central existential challenge we face as spiritual beings in a material world. Until we come to terms with death, we never really come to terms or make peace with life.

This sermon is for you, and so is the talkback scheduled after this service where I welcome hearing about your struggles and whatever insights you've found. Because I've noticed something about grief, that talking about this stuff, right out loud, can be cathartic and therapeutic. I myself have done hundreds of eulogies in the course of my career, but none harder than for my own family members. I've done my grandfather's service and my mother's. I was the clergyman who presided when my wife's parents died. And though it was difficult to speak about those so near and dear, hard to get through, it was also cleansing, restorative, so that now I recommend the practice to others, to help with their own leave takings.

Write down whatever you want to say, I suggest. It can take the form of a letter, or meditation, or memoir, but give your "in memoriam" a verbal expression. Putting your goodbyes into words begins to make a finished story of a life that's reached its denouement, with a beginning, a middle and also with an end, which is how we make meaning of experience. Not only is a lifetime over, a narrative has reached completion. And speaking the words aloud brings the dead letter to life: "I love you, I'll miss you," these are statements that demand expression, that need to be aired. Grief has to be full throated. After all, Jesus didn't say "Blessed are those who have a stiff upper lip." He didn't say, "Blessed are those who suck it up." He said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." And one of the most affecting passages of scripture is also the shortest, when Jesus stands

with Mary and Martha at the tomb of Lazarus. He's moved with sadness and sighs deeply. He sees the others gathered at the doorway to the cave where the body has been interred, near Bethany, many sobbing in their distress. Then, according to the Gospel of John, "Jesus wept." You don't have to believe that a corpse was literally re-animated to grasp the point of this resurrection story. The pathway to healing and new life is one that passes through deep sighs and tears. There's no way around the darkness. You have to wend through the shadows to once more reach the light.

Several years ago, I wrote a book about grief, and there I suggested a variety of tools and techniques that might help on this journey back to wholeness. Spending time in nature, for instance. Listening to your dreams. Reading poetry is one of the things that helps me cope with loss. Lighting a candle, saying a prayer, or taking a deliberate pause each day to remember your loved ones can create a safe container for emotions that can otherwise feel overwhelming. But ultimately, I said, there is no "bullet list" of things to do or any bag of helpful hints for mending the brokenness and pain of separation. Because life is not a problem to be solved, and death is not a malady amenable to being fixed. Rather both are mysteries to be accepted and embraced. For ephemeral, transient creatures like ourselves, time is the ultimate destroyer that carries away everyone and everything we cherish. But with faith, hope, courage and patience, time is also the great healer which brings new beginnings out of every ending, and out of winter, spring.

May this time we share, this brief interval, this passing season be radiant with laughter and with the tears that are the counterpart of love. And may the peace that passes understanding, the peace that the world can neither give nor take away, the peace that dries every tear, and heals every wound, and puts every shadow to flight, be with us and with this holy church, yesterday, today, and in all your tomorrows.