

Hope in the mourning: Lessons in grief in our grief-avoidant culture

Any of us who has experienced a loss knows of the social and cultural issues to be addressed as we grieve. To mourn well, we must have the opportunity to express the pain of loss safely and with permission from those around us to do so.

Mourning takes time and requires our patient attention. At times, in our grief-avoidant culture, it becomes difficult to find support in grief.

In our culture, we are sometimes encouraged to repress, avoid or deny the instinctual spiritual and emotional pain of grief, judged to be negative, in an attempt to resolve it quickly and move on. Our natural expressions of loss make those around us uncomfortable.

By today's standards, we are limited to three business days to complete the funeral of our loved one. Many are now opting to eliminate the funeral ceremony altogether.

After a month or two, those around us expect us to be "getting over" our loss. And certainly the first anniversary of our loved one's death marks, for others, our return to "normal." Unfortunately, that is when many bereaved find the real work of grief only beginning.

The shock I felt at my husband's death led me numbly through arranging the funeral and all that it entailed. Friends and neighbors showered my confused and hurting family with meals and assistance with chores for several weeks. I was so grateful even in my numbed state.

Then life settled again, and I felt left behind to experience the intense pain of my loss as life seemed to march merrily on around me, all the while being encouraged to "get over it." I had hoped, in my misguided way, that after the first anniversary of Trent's death, my life would get back to normal. That hope was dashed as I found myself awakening from my shock to the confusing reality of life without him. Where was I to turn then?

In eras past, cultures around the world, including the United States, honored the bereaved with special privilege. Those in loss were easily identified by black clothing or arm bands that were worn no less than a year.

Family and community members sat witness to the bereaved as they honored the body and memory of the deceased. Stories were told and retold, while an abundance of food was shared.

As those in mourning later mingled in the marketplace within their community, they were encouraged by friends and strangers alike to continue to “tell their story of loss.” This provided the opportunity to mourn publicly and heal their hearts in a safe and natural setting for as long as was required.

Telling our story is one of the most important ways to express the pain of loss, but a compassionate listener is required for healing to occur. As there is no time schedule for grief, it becomes difficult over time to find those who will not judge your experience of loss.

Unfortunately as our culture began to fear death and avoid the pain of grief, communal support was replaced by expediency.

Grief is a natural response to loss and must be allowed to run its course. Matthew’s Gospel reminds us, “Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.” It speaks of doing the work of expressing grief and receiving the compassion of God through his people.

Sam shared how devastated he felt when his best friend asked him when he was going to get over his grief and on with his life.

“I was so shocked when he asked that I was speechless. It had only been four months since my wife died. He was tired of listening to my story,” he said sadly.

In today’s grief-avoidant culture, it remains up to the individual to find healthy ways to express grief. Fortunately, Sam has found refuge in a support group where he feels safe sharing the issues he faces as he moves slowly into the future.

While a support group is an important venue to meet the natural need to express

grief, those who support their loved ones in loss may consider taking the time to do some “compassionate listening.” That may require hearing the same story over time. But being present to another’s pain goes a long way in the healing of the heart. Your patient companionship may be the lifeline your loved one needs to begin to create a new and meaningful life after loss.

I have learned over time that I will never “get over” my grief, no matter how much others wish it so. But as I continue my life journey and do the work of mourning, my pain softens. With faith and hope I continue to integrate my loss into my life and have become transformed by it. We can believe God’s promise that he will turn our mourning into joy.

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