Touchstones Project

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Grief

Introduction to the Theme

While many do not want to explore grief, people may experience grief with few resources and little wisdom. Myths about grief and messages that discount the experience of grief can be harmful. These include: "You should be over this by now," "No sense in dwelling in the past," "I think you should do it this way," "It's a blessing," or "It was God's will."

Grief is a wisdom tradition. Learning about grief supports our grieving and helps us support others in theirs.

Grief is most directly associated with the death of a loved one, but many kinds of death and loss can only be endured, if that is even the correct word, through grief. The death can be that of a pet. The loss can be that of leaving home either voluntarily or forcibly, or an illness or a severe medical condition that is not visible, including a change in the health of a loved one. It can involve a job change, the loss of a job or even career loss, and financial insecurity. Graduation from high school or college can spark grief, as can changes in relationships, including divorce or losing a meaningful friendship.

Kristen Nardolillo offers examples of loss. They include

- the woman who lost her husband to dementia… and then ...to death…
- the man whose partner died by means of self-harm…
- the first-grader whose father was recently deported…
- the teen whose guardian was just incarcerated…
- the person whose best friend died from COVID-19… and
- ...people who ...lost their identity during a time of great isolation….

The problem with these is that their

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Grief & Regeneration

Grief is a process of regeneration, of healing. The process differs depending on the individual and the loss. Losses like the death of a loved one are a wound to the soul. Healing must occur at a deep level and not simply superficially. To cover over grief leaves the wound unhealed, a well filled with sorrow. Timeless, grief takes as long as it takes. On this journey, ask, "What does my grief need today?" and try to respond as best you can. Grief is never final, but loving memories leaven the bitterness with sweetness as grief becomes bittersweet, a combination of sorrow, poignancy, and a longing for connection. As our loved one lives in our heart, grief and gratitude are forever entwined.

A Theme-Based Ministry Project

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Wisdom Story

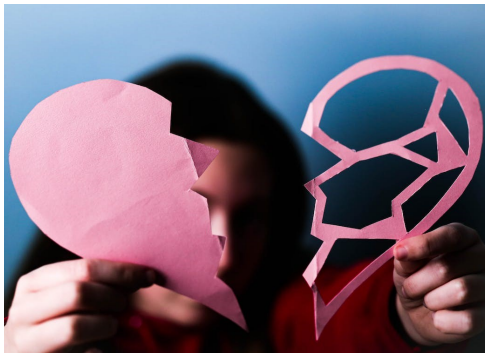
The Mish-Mash Heart

from Love Connects Us, adapted

At a multigenerational event at a Unitarian Universalist congregation, everyone was encouraged to create a heart. They were given some construction paper and some glue, and some markers to design their heart. Emily worked diligently to create the most perfect, beautiful heart she could. It even had glitter in the shape of diamonds all around the outside.

As she was helping to clean up, she noticed the heart of one woman who was around the same age as her grandmother sitting at a nearby table. It was a mish-mash mess of odd colors and had pieces that were ripped and torn glued haphazardly upon it. Parts were wrinkled and crinkled, and there was even a little hole in it!

Thinking there was something wrong, Emily offered to help the woman fix her heart. But the woman merely smiled and



explained that there was nothing wrong with her heart; it merely revealed all the things which had happened to her in her life. She said there were happy times here: the beautiful colors and designs

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Regeneration

Sharing a Piece

(Continued from page 1) **Wisdom Story**

represented when she first met her husband, their wedding, and the birth of each of their three children. There were other beautiful parts, too, which stood for watching her children taking their first steps on their own, riding a bike for the first time, and graduating from college.

"But what about all the rips and tears and wrinkles?" Emily asked. "Why are they there?"

These were for the sad times in her life, the woman explained. The time her best friend was stricken with measles, the time someone lied or did something to hurt her feelings, the hole that was left when her husband died, and the grief that overwhelmed her. "In fact, every time a person comes into my life that I care about," she explained, "they take a piece of my heart with them."

This distressed Emily, thinking of the woman having to give part of her heart away to others. "But what happens if you give it all away?" she asked. "You'll be left with nothing."

"No, I won't," the woman responded with a smile. "Because you see, they give me a piece of theirs as well."

Emily looked down at her beautiful, perfect heart with the glitter and the designs she had worked so hard to make. Then she looked again at the woman's mish-mashed heart with the jagged colors, rips, and wrinkles. Without hesitation, Emily ripped a piece off of her perfect heart and handed it to the woman.

"Thank you," the woman said as she placed it with her mish-mash heart and tore off a piece to hand to Emily. And then Emily glued the new piece onto her heart. She thought that now her heart looked even more beautiful.

Source: https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveconnects/session3/161723.shtml

From the Heart to Comfort the Soul

The Art of Condolence

Most no longer write letters of any consequence, content to reduce communication to texts with initialisms (aka abbreviations) like LOL and OMG and emojis, or emails, Facebook posts, and disappearing snapchats; the shorter, the sweeter. As a means of condolence, these often do far more harm than good. They can make death and grief seem trite. In place of these, a carefully chosen sympathy card is much better, although sympathy cards are also a lost art used mainly by those older than 40. While significant because "the thought does count," it is not always sufficient because the printed text of the card is generic, and the person may receive several copies of the same card. Better to further personalize the card as suggested below by Millicent Fenwick.

As letters went out of style, condolence notes also fell into disuse. If you had to choose between a casserole as an expression of sympathy, which is very meaningful, and a heartfelt message of condolence, the note would almost always be more nourishing. You can only eat a casserole once, but you can read a condolence note repeatedly.

The word condolence comes from two Latin roots, *com* "with, together" + *dolere*, "to grieve," meaning "sympathetic grief, sorrowing with another." Writing a condolence note without pondering the meaning of the loss itself is challenging. Without this, the sympathy card or casserole will do. We can get a glimpse of the magnitude of the loss through sympathetic grief. If our knowledge of the person and the loss is limited, a web-based caring website can help if used by the survivor(s) by reading some posted comments or by reading a web-based obituary and the comments. Of course, attending a funeral or memorial service can also give us insight, especially through the eulogy and personal sharing. Finally, though also limited, we can consider what a loss like this would mean for us as we try to "sorrow with another" and ground our sympathy.

The note may be as simple as, "I have no way of understanding all you have lost, and I am so sorry for that, but I wanted to express my sympathy." This heartfelt honesty is better than any platitude.

Part of the work of grief is to reassemble memories of the deceased. Those grieving only have their individual take on a person, which is why a family sharing stories of their loved one can be incredibly healing. You can add to this by using your condolence to share a positive memory.

Of course, if you had a closer relationship with the deceased, your words might focus on what the person meant to you, what you learned from them, what you admired about them, and so on.

Bruce Feiler writes, "The food writer and editor Jane Lear has collected etiquette books for many years and studied how condolence notes have evolved. She prefers the model outlined by Millicent Fenwick in *Vogue's Book of Etiquette*, published in 1948. First, an expression of sympathy ('I was so sorry to hear...'). Second a word about the deceased. Finally, an expression of comfort." This could be, "May all of the good memories that you shared bless you again and again." Feiler adds, "A stern reminder from Ms. Fenwick still seems apt: 'A letter of condolence to a friend is one of the obligations of friendship.'"

Because a condolence note can be hard to write, it is best to write a draft, set it aside, and then return to it, perhaps several times. Like a good casserole, it often takes time to bake.

There is time to write a condolence note because grief can last a long time. So, while the flurry of emails, telephone calls, visits, food, and sympathy cards are appreciated, a message that arrives somewhat later can also be significant.

A condolence note does not have to be a literary masterpiece. But, if it comes from the heart, it will comfort the soul.

Source Touchstones

Readings from the Common Bowl

Day 1: "What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again." Suzanne Collin

Day 2: "Absence is a house so vast that inside you will pass through its walls and hang pictures on the air." Pablo Neruda

Day 3: "Grief lasts longer than sympathy, which is one of the tragedies of the grieving." Elizabeth McCracken

Day 4: "Grief does not change you…. It reveals you." John Green

Day 5: "We must know the pain of loss; because if we never knew it, we would have no compassion for others, and we would become monsters of …self-interest. The terrible pain of loss teaches humility…, has the power to soften uncaring hearts…." Dean Koontz

Day 6: "You will lose someone you can't live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn't seal back up. And you come through." Anne Lamott

Day 7: "A …facet of our aversion to grief is fear. … If we are to return to the richly textured life of soul and to participation with the soul of the world, we must pass through the intense region of grief and sorrow." Francis Weller

Day 8: "Life is full of grief, to exactly the degree we allow ourselves to love other people." Orson Scott Card

Day 9: "The work …is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That's how much gratitude I can give. …Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible." Francis Weller

Day 10: "Grief, I've learned, is really just love. It's all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is …love with no place to go." Jamie Anderson

Day 11: "I still miss those I loved who are no longer with me but I find I am grateful for having loved them. The gratitude has finally conquered the loss." Rita Mae Brown

Day 12: "Life Lesson 3: You can't rush grief. It has its own timetable. All you can do is make sure there are lots of soft places around—beds, pillows, arms, laps." Patti Davis

Day 13: "Grief is like a swallow…. One day you wake up and you think it's gone, but it's only migrated to some other place, warming its feathers. Sooner or later, it will return and perch in your heart again." Elif Shafak

Day 14: "The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude." Thornton Wilder

Day 15: "To love means to open ourselves to the negative as well as the positive—to grief, sorrow, and disappointment as well as to joy, fulfillment, and an intensity of consciousness we did not know was possible before." Rollo May

Day 16: "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it." Joan Didion

Day 17: "When someone dies, the initial stages of grief seem to be the worst. But in some ways, it's sadder as time goes by and you consider how much they've missed in your life. In the world." Emily Giffin

Day 18: "It is a sad truth in life that when someone has lost a loved one, friends sometimes avoid the person, just when the presence of friends is most needed." Lemony Snicket

Day 19: "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die." Thomas Campbell

Day 20: "If you've got to my age, you've probably had your heart broken many times. So, it's not that difficult to unpack a bit of grief from some little corner of your heart and cry over it." Emma Thompson

Day 21: "It's so curious: one can resist tears and 'behave' very well in the hardest hours of grief. But then …one notices that a flower that was in bud only yesterday has suddenly blossomed …and everything collapses." Colette

Day 22: "Your memory feels like home to me. So, whenever my mind wanders, it always finds its way back to you." Ranata Suzuki

Day 23: "What we can do is work …to meet our life with compassion and to receive our suffering without judgments. This is a core piece in our apprenticeship with sorrow." Francis Weller

Day 24: "Never. We never lose our loved ones. They accompany us; they don't disappear from our lives. We are merely in different rooms." Paulo Coelho

Day 25: "When a child dies, you bury the child in your heart." Korean Proverb

Day 26: "When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." Kahlil Gibran

Day 27: "The more your identity was wrapped up with the deceased, the more difficult the loss." Meghan O'Rourke

Day 28: "For someone grieving, moving forward is the challenge. Because after extreme loss, you want to go back." Holly Goldberg Sloan

Day 29: "I don't know why they call it heartbreak. It feels like every part of my body is broken too." Chloe Woodward

Day 30: "Life seems sometimes like nothing more than a series of losses, from beginning to end. That's the given. How you respond to those losses, what you make of what's left, that's the part you have to make up as you go." Katharine Weber

Day 31: "A home is not a place. It's not a country or a town or a building or possession. Home is with the other half of your soul, the person who shares in your grief and helps you carry the burden of loss." Tillie Cole

Ars Gravare

Ars Morendi, "The Art of Dying." goes back to the 15th century as Christianity tried to offer guidance about how to spiritually experience a good death. This continues today, especially through hospice care. Equally important is *Ars Gravare*, "The Art of Grieving."

Unitarian Universalist minister Forrest Church said, "I have long believed that religion itself is our human response to the dual reality of being alive and having to die." And this human response includes grief. We grieve because we live, because we love, and because we lose.

A theology of grief draws on several of our principles and sources. Our **1st principle**, "The inherent worth and dignity of every person," invites reverence as we grieve the death and life of loved ones. Our grief reminds us, as newspaper columnist Robert Benchley once wrote, that "Death ends a life, not a relationship." That relationship continues as we make meaning of what we had and what we have lost. Over time our grief is mingled with gratitude. Whether or not we have experienced a significant loss, learning about grief helps us be compassionate companions to those grieving. Compassion comes from a root that means "to suffer with" and companion, "to break bread with." The role is not to try to fix someone grieving or distract them by talking about everything and anything else but to companion their journey through empathy, deep listening, and the gift of one's presence. Often a casserole lovingly made can say more than any words possibly could.

In her book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*, Francis Weller helps ground a theology of grief, writing,

- "Grief and love are sisters, woven together from the beginning."
- "…Grief is not a problem to be solved, …but encounter with an essential experience of being human."
- "A… facet of our aversion to grief is fear."
- "Grief work is not passive: it implies an ongoing practice of deepening, attending, and listening."
- "To honor our grief, to grant it space and time in our frantic world, is to fulfill a covenant with [the] soul…."

Our **7th principle**, "Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part," can lead to the anticipatory grief called climate grief, which is a response to ecological loss, including the loss of species, due to climate change. Swedish environmental activist Greta Thunberg first learned of climate change at 8. The awareness led to depression which she struggled with for four years until, at 15, she began her school strike campaign for climate (*Skolstrejk för klimatet*) in August 2018 outside of the Swedish *Riksdag* (parliament). As Thunberg said, "We children are doing this because we want our hopes and dreams back." Andrew Bryant, a therapist specializing in climate grief, has helped clients "feel their grief and ...take action that's meaningful and sustainable," which helps engage the helplessness, numbness, sorrow, and anxiety associated with climate grief.

Our **1st source** is the foundation for a theology of grief. "Direct experience of that transcending mystery and wonder" reminds us that there is more to life and death than we know. And so, we search for meaning. Frank Bidart writes, "I tell myself: 'Insanity is the insistence on meaning.'" By this definition, grief is insanity because it seeks to make meaning out of loss, or as Tennessee Williams wrote, "Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence." Rev. Gordon McKeeman wrote in his *1993 Berry Street Essay*, "in every desperately fleeting moment— [we seek] to unveil something of that which lies beyond the sense, something of the eternal, the non-sense of who we are and what we may become." The grieving process is a kind of healing, a regeneration, a snatching of something of the eternal that "moves us to a renewal of the spirit and an openness to the forces which create and uphold life."

McKeeman continued, "We are lovers; we say Yes to each other, Yes to life—to more and more of life—to its brevity, its grief, its disappointments, to its possibilities, its magnificence, its glory. We quarrel because we glimpse further possibilities—the non-sense—and wish to lay claim to it. We remember death, and that life is brief, and that the time for love is now and more is possible—one more step toward the holy. …It is to remember death, and to love life and to accept them both as holy." As ee cummings wrote, "And death i think is no parenthesis." Death is not the end; it is a change. Our immortality lies in the memories of our loved ones, in the good deeds that survive us, and in the lives we touched.

Our **2nd source**, "Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love," calls us to address the individual and collective grief arising from racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and other oppressions and acts of violence like gun violence. Some of this grief is intergenerational, as in the case of racism. Because these griefs are disenfranchised, they are made even worse. As an example, both the grief of racism and the existence of racism are denied by some. When we recognize collective grief, our hearts open in new ways, as do relationships as we bear witness to the transforming power of love. But love is not enough. The demand for justice calls us to become allies in this work.

Finally, our **4th source,** "Jewish and Christian teachings which call us to respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves," invites us to understand that the community of grief cuts across all of the divides that separate us. Grief reduces us to a common humanity, with love as the common denominator. While much of grief is inward, mourning is public and relational. A community can support mourning. And our congregations are well suited for this role.

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Helping Children Deal with Grief

Rachel Ehmke

Most kids know something about death. They've seen it on TV shows. But it's very different when it happens to someone close to them. Parents can't take kids' pain away, but they can help them cope in healthy ways.

The way kids respond to death is different from adults. They may go from crying to playing. That's normal. Playing is a way of coping with their feelings. It's also normal for kids to get angry, to feel sad, get anxious and also to act younger than they are.

…It's important to help your child express their feelings. There are lots of books on death for kids. Reading books and telling stories or looking at pictures of the person who died can help kids express their feelings. Also, expressing your own sadness lets kids know it's okay to be sad.

How your child behaves and how you respond depends on their age. Don't offer more information than they can understand. Use direct language. Saying a person "went to sleep" or even "passed away" can confuse or scare a child.

Keeping as much as possible of your child's normal schedule will help them feel secure. If you need some time alone, try to find relatives or friends who can help keep your child's life as normal as possible.

After the death of a grandparent, it's normal for kids to worry about their own parents. It's helpful to tell them you will probably live for a very long time.

…If you notice that your child seems unusually upset and unable to cope with grief, a therapist can help.

Source: https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/#quickread

See complete article at https://childmind.org/article/helping-children-deal-grief/#full_article

Family Activity: *Storytelling*

Storytelling is an important family activity. Even young children can tell stories and they tend to enjoy doing it. Storytelling is quite different than reading a story. Storytelling about the past can indirectly emphasize the importance of memory. Telling stories about ancestors is an important prelude to helping children engage with grief. While implicit, these stories convey that, in a way, the ancestors are not gone. They have become memories. When children are involved in a death, whether of a pet or a person, storytelling can bring comfort. It is better for parents to begin the storytelling about the one who has died. Having previously established a ritual of storytelling, children will know that they have the freedom to tell stories as well, but they should not be forced. In grief, the storytelling sessions should be brief. Sometimes parents can share stories of the deceased as parallel play, that is while the child is playing. In this situation, the child can tune-in and tune-out as they choose.

Family Activity: *Reading Children's Books about Death, Loss, and Grief.*

There are many sensitive children's books that deal with death, loss, and grief. Reading some of these with your children in advance of a death or a loss gives them a framework to think and feel about a death or loss when it happens. Some books are well-suited to be read in advance, while others are better to help them deal with their grief. A classic in this kind of literature is *The Tenth Good Thing About Barney* by Judith Viorst, author and Erik Blegvad, illustrator (1987) "'My cat Barney died this Friday. I was very sad. My mother said we could have a funeral for him, and I should think of ten good things about Barney so I could tell them…' But the small boy who loved Barney can only think of nine. Later, while talking with his father, he discovers the tenth—and begins to understand." See video: **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yxgU61g27V8** (4:30)

Another classic is *The Memory Box: A Book About Grief* by Joanna Rowland, author, and Thea Baker, illustrator (2017) "'I'm scared I'll forget you...' From the perspective of a young child, Joanna Rowland artfully describes what it is like to remember and grieve a loved one who has died. The child in the story creates a memory box to keep mementos and written memories of the loved one, to help in the grieving process. See a reading of the book at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mF-Izj1668I (4:15) See how to make a memory box at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Doz2FsyvqTVE (4:15)

For more books see https://www.nypl.org/blog/2017/07/21/childrens-books-about-loss-and-grieving and/or https://www.huffpost.com/entry/childrens-books-death-grief_l_5fa38deec5b660630aee43fd

Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it

(Continued from page 1) **Introduction**

grief may not be recognized, including their need to grieve. To have one's grief disenfranchised is challenging. Kenneth Doka writes, "Disenfranchised grief refers to a loss that's not openly acknowledged, socially mourned, or publicly supported."

While the goal is "good grief" that facilitates healing, that is not always possible. Grief is what relationships were. Good relationships enable good grief. But complex relationships characterized by disappointment, pain, anger, and more can upend grief. In such cases, the best that can happen is not to grieve what "was" but what "wasn't." Doing this may require the difficult task of forgiveness to let go of the past and lay down the burden of hurt, bitterness, and anger.

Grief is our internal experience of loss, especially when a loved one dies. We may feel numb, anxious, panicked, disoriented, empty, afraid, lonely, lost, pain, angry, and more. Mourning is the outward expression of grief. We mourn through our tears, through planning a funeral or memorial service, by sharing stories of our loved one, by looking at photos or creating a scrapbook, by simply remembering our loved one, by journaling or writing a eulogy, by creating special rituals, by sleeping when it all becomes too much, and sometimes choosing to take a break from grief. Grief is what we feel and think; mourning is what we do.

Our commitment to every person's inherent worth and dignity means life is worthy of reverence. When a person dies, so much is lost beyond the obvious, including all that was discovered in a lifetime of learning; all the memories that were cherished by day, and the stuff of dreams by night; all of the mind's recorded images and visual videos that evoked wonder, inspired awe, defined beauty, and cherished loved ones; all the relationships and connections, the web extending six degrees of separation; all the love and kindness and sorrow and courage and more that was experienced; and all the wisdom that was gained. This life is a remarkable history unknown to anyone else, an incredible autobiography impossible to summarize in any meaningful way, a reality now lost to the ages. In the 3rd century, the Romans destroyed the Library of Alexandria, which once housed over 400,000 scrolls. Human life is so much more than a scroll or book. A vast library of experience, memory, learning, wisdom, and more is lost through death.

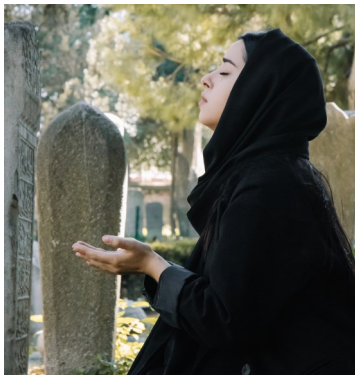
Making sense of grief is challenging. Journalist and author Joan Didion wrote *The Year of Magical Thinking* (2006) in response to two tragic events. First came a life-threatening illness suffered by their adopted daughter, Quintana Roo Dunne Michaels, so doctors put her into an induced coma to save her life in December 2003, just five months after her marriage. Then, weeks later, back from the hospital, Didion's husband of 40 years, John Gregory Dunne, died suddenly at home from a heart attack. It took a month for Quintana Roo to recover, only to collapse two months later and undergo a six-hour surgery to relieve a massive hematoma, which resulted in partial paralysis. After struggling with all this, Didion began writing the book in October 2004, observing, "Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it." The book was Didion's attempt to make sense of "weeks and then months that cut loose any fixed idea I ever had about death, about illness ... about marriage and children and memory ... about the shallowness of sanity, about life itself."

Grief was not through with Didion. Quintana Roo came down with acute pancreatitis in the late spring of 2005. She died in August 2005 at 39, just 20 months after her father's death and two months before Didion's book *The Year of Magical Thinking* was published.

Didion's grief was inconsolable. To deal with this, she later wrote *Blue Nights* (2011), her last gift to her daughter. The book is a remembrance, a eulogy, a meditation on mortality, and a commentary on aging and fragility. A blue night refers to the long, blue twilight that occurs in some regions near the summer solstice, giving a sense that the day will never end, until it does. When I began the book, Didion wrote, "I found my mind turning increasingly to illness, to the end of promise, the dwindling of days, the inevitably of the fading, the dying of the brightness." Didion struggles with her daughter's mortality and her own in the book. In his review, John Banville wrote, "The author as she presents herself here, aging and baffled, is defenseless against the pain of loss, not only the loss of loved ones but the loss that is yet to come: the loss, that is, of selfhood." Didion experienced complicated grief because of all the loss.

We think we understand grief before we experience it, but we don't. Consider the awkward way people talk with a grieving person., using words that create distance rather than comfort. Laini Taylor writes, "Nothing made you feel so useless as another person's grief." While we may feel useless, our presence is valued more than our words.

No one grieves the same, and there is no one right way to grieve. Nevertheless, models can inform our understanding of grief. Notable in this is Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's 1969 book, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach….* The stages of dying she identified consisted of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Kübler-Ross based her model on work with the dying, but it was quickly adopted for use with grief. Her model can help us understand the anticipatory grief a person with a terminal illness may experience. But when applied to grief, the bargaining stage generally does not apply, except as regret expressed in a litany of "if only," which are wonderings about how the death could have been prevented. While not widely reported, Kübler-Ross later revised her model, adding "shock" as the initial reaction and inserting "testing" before acceptance. According to one source, "Shock describes an



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Secret Anniversaries of the Heart

Mark the Time

UU minister Max Coots wrote, "When love is felt or fear is known, / When holidays and holy days and such times come, / When anniversaries arrive by calendar or consciousness, / When seasons come, as seasons do, old and known, but somehow new, / When lives are born or people die, / When something sacred is sensed in soil or sky, / Mark the time. / Respond with thought or prayer or smile or grief, / Let nothing living slip between the fingers of the mind…." His counsel to "mark the time" is a reminder of the importance of ritual. There is much bad ritual inflicted upon people: generic, superficial, disconnected rituals that fail to touch the heart or comfort the soul.

We are blessed that, most often, UU funerals and memorial services touch mourners in meaningful ways, especially through a heartfelt eulogy, a word whose root means "high praise," and shared remembrances by family members and invited friends. This is a significant ritual to support mourning, but it is not sufficient.

Robert Fulghum reminds us, "The rituals must be observed. The rituals are cairns marking the path behind us and ahead of us. Without them, we lose our way."

Many UU congregations hold a service to mark *All Souls* and/or *el Día de los Muertos*. Ritual elements may include inviting people to light individual candles to symbolize their losses and a published *Book of Names* that lists all those who are being remembered in the service, losses that may go back many years. We silently read the names, markers of loss and grief. May Sarton wrote in her poem, *All Souls*, "Did someone say that there would be an end, / An end, Oh, an end, to love and mourning? / Such voices speak when sleep and waking blend, / …what has been once so interwoven / Cannot be raveled, nor the gift ungiven. / Now the dead move through all of us still glowing, / Mother and child, lover and lover mated, / Are wound and bound together and enflowing. / What has been plaited cannot be unplaited— / Only the strands grow richer with each loss / And memory makes kings and queens of us. / …As the lost human voices speak through us and blend / Our complex love, our mourning without end."

These congregational observances are important, but often more is needed. And so Fulghum adds, "Rituals do not always involve words, occasions, officials, or a congregation. Rituals are often silent, solitary, and self-contained. The most powerful of rituals are reflective—when you look back on your life again and again, paying attention to the rivers you have crossed and the gates you have opened, and the thresholds you have passed over." The death of a loved one is one of the more significant and painful thresholds in our lives.

We can create meaningful rituals by on our own. We may choose to light a candle to symbolize our loved one as we gather around the dinner table for holidays, a birthday, or a wedding anniversary. We may mark the one-year anniversary of the death by gathering family and friends to share photographs, videos, and stories. With cremation, we may gather at a special place and time to spread the ashes. We may plant a tree to remember. We begin to transition from rituals of mourning to rituals of remembrance. Sometimes we can just sit silently calling our loved one to heart and mind. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote, "The holiest of all holidays are those / Kept by ourselves in silence and apart; / The secret anniversaries of the heart…."

Peg Mayo observed the life of her son Patrick, who died at 23, by planting a candle-red rhododendron. His last Christmas gift to her had been a big fat red candle. Buried around the rhododendron are some of Patrick's favorite books, "feeding the roots." Each year on the anniversary of his death, she takes a walk in the woods with a friend, remembering the happy times of his life. Often the most healing rituals are the ones that we create ourselves to mark the time, to mark "our complex love, our mourning without end." Source: Touchstones

UU Three Jewels

(Continued from page 4) **Faith & Theology**

In Buddhism, adherents take refuge in the three jewels: the Buddha, the Dharma (or teachings), and the Sangha (or community). By analogy, Unitarian Universalists can take refuge in the Spirit of Life, our Principles and Sources, and the Beloved Community of our congregations. To take refuge is to seek shelter and safety, which is important because those who grieve are often fragile. Further, our death-denying culture tends not to be sympathetic to nor understanding of those who grieve. In this regard, Megan Devine, author of *It's OK That You're Not OK: Meeting Grief and Loss in a Culture That Doesn't Understand*, offers a sobering critique and incredible wisdom about grief. She writes,

- "Our culture sees grief as a kind of malady: a terrifying, messy emotion that needs to be cleaned up and put behind us as soon as possible."
- "When someone you love dies, you don't just lose them in the present or in the past. You lose the future you should have had …with them."
- "True comfort in grief is in acknowledging the pain, not in trying to make it go away. Companionship, not correction, is the way forward."
- "You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief, to acknowledge it. … Some things cannot be fixed. They can only be carried."
- "... Find …people you belong with, the ones who will see your pain, companion you, hold you close, even as the ...grief is yours alone."

A theology of grief recognizes the importance of compassionately companioning people who are grieving by being willing listeners as they tell stories of loved ones and process their grief, encouraging the art of condolence, and utilizing rituals to express what lies beyond words, including, perhaps, an annual worship service connected to *All Souls Day / el Día de los Muertos*. The end in all of this is good grief that restores people to life and their loved ones to heart.

Source: Touchstones

Small Group Discussion Guide

Theme for Discussion
Grief

Preparation prior to Gathering: (Read this issue of the journal and *Living the Questions* in the next column.)

Business: Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

Opening Words: "'You'll get over it….' It's the clichés that cause the trouble. To lose someone you love is to alter your life forever. You don't get over it because 'it' is the person you loved. The pain stops, there are new people, but the gap never closes. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no one else can fit it." *Jeanette Winterson*

Chalice Lighting: (James Vila Blake) adapted (In unison) *Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human need, and to help one another.*

Check-In: How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind in order to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

Claim Time for Deeper Listening: This comes at the end of the gathering where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes, and to honor the limit of the time that you claim.

Read the Wisdom Story: Take turns reading aloud parts of the wisdom story on page one.

Readings from the Common Bowl: Group members read selections from *Readings from the Common Bowl* (page 3). Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

Sitting In Silence: Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions).*

Reading: "When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares." *Henri Nouwen*

Living the Questions: Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving on.

1. What were the earliest significant deaths that you experienced? How did they affect you?
2. What were you taught about how to grieve when young?
3. What has been helpful when you were grieving? Why? Harmful? Why?
4. Grief is how we feel, mourning is what we do. How do you make sense of this difference?
5. What have you learned about grief?
6. Robert Benchley wrote, "Death ends a life, not a relationship." Has this been true for you? How?
7. What are some of the cultural messages about grief? How might these impact people who are grieving?
8. Why do some people seem to have difficulty interacting with those who are grieving?
9. What has grief taught you about love and loss?
10. How can our congregations help those who are grieving?

Deeper Listening: If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person who claimed time.

Checking-Out: One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together exploring the theme.

Extinguishing Chalice: (Elizabeth Selle Jones) (In unison) *We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.*

Closing Words: (In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.* Rev. Philip R. Giles

The Art of Grief

(Continued from page 6) **Introduction**

initial response of emotional paralysis or numbness, and the testing …involves trying new ways of coping with the loss and re-building life after loss." Rather than stages, it is better to consider these elements as "aspects" of grief because grief is neither linear nor predictable.

Time doesn't heal. Grief heals, but grief takes time. One poll discovered that people thought the time to grieve a significant death ranged from two days to six weeks. However, research has shown that grieving typically lasts one to two years, sometimes longer. It turns out that grief adds a terrible poignancy to time, primarily during the first year, as a person experiences the loved one's absence on a birthday, an anniversary, and holidays, and then special occasions after that. As a result, grieving people mark time in a new way.

We cannot make any sense of our grief looking forward. Grief is a shape-shifter. We can feel relatively good one day and mark this as progress, only to be triggered by something returning us to the numbness we felt at the moment of our loved one's death. Some triggers are called secondary losses. These include the tasks a partner or spouse did that we must now do or the special lunches a parent made that no one else can make. We can only appreciate the healing that has occurred by looking backward to see our journey.

Each loss is woven into a fabric of grief that grows over time, reminding us that tragedy and joy are woven fine. Greta Crosby wrote, "Grief makes artists of us all as we weave new patterns in the fabric of our lives." Francis Weller adds, "Grief is not an episode or something to be gotten through. Grief is a skill and a lifelong companion."

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