

A JOURNEY OF GRIEF, GRATITUDE, & GRACE

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Preparing for this forum has been a challenging assignment, yet interestingly enough, also a helpful exercise for me personally. Challenging in that it has compelled me to articulate my thoughts, feelings and emotions beginning with my husband, Loren's illness, his death and with the past six months since his death. It has been challenging to know how to even interpret my feelings and emotions let alone how to adequately articulate them. I also found this assignment helpful in many ways, which surprised me, but I believe this came as a result of facing the challenge. The topic of Grief is complex, many faceted and very individual. My approach does not come from an academic knowledge of the topic, but from my own experience, from what I have known and lived, particularly during this past year.

We all have experienced or will experience loss in our lifetime. This is inevitable. There are major losses and minor losses, but loss touches us all in some way. There may be the loss of a job, the break down of health, an unfulfilled dream, a lost opportunity, a broken relationship, or the death of a family member, partner, or spouse. We are each affected differently and we respond differently. How we deal with death and loss is a challenge we must face, learn to live with and strive to grow from. How we deal with death and loss will be a good indicator of how we will live with life.

Sometimes loss hits us suddenly and unexpectedly. With sudden loss or death we deal with the shock aspect as well. At other times a death, for example, may be expected. In fact, it may be longed for by the person who has suffered a long and painful illness, as well as by the loved ones who have witnessed this suffering. In situations where the end of life comes more slowly there is a unique opportunity to prepare with ones loved one and family for the eventual time of separation. That was my experience.

We became aware of my husband's illness seven months before his death. The day we received the shocking news that Loren had stage four cancer and that there could be no cure was unexpected and devastating. The Dr. who gave us the news was sympathetic, thoughtful, and very patient, spending as much time with us as we needed to ask questions and to try to 'take in' this bitter news. We were told there were no procedures, treatments or medications now that would help. The focus would be solely on palliative care and helping to make each day as comfortable and rich as possible. "You have stage 4 cancer", were piercing words that sounded so final, so decisive. To learn there were no alternative options to consider was very disappointing. Receiving such hard news takes time to absorb and accept. Initially, my husband received these harsh words with outward calm and stoicism.

Following the long Dr's appointment we went directly home. As we sat down to dinner that evening, my husband said he felt nauseous- like throwing up. It became clear that the news he had just received was no ordinary news- this could not be calmly received as his outward demeanor had suggested at first- this hit him hard. "We have to talk about this; we have to talk about how we are feeling", I said. "We cannot suppress our emotions and our reactions." It is normal and natural to be worried, to have fears, to have questions when hearing such news. We realized we could not cover up our strong feelings and emotions. We needed to share our fears and our feelings as honestly as we could. We needed to let our emotions have their way in

whatever way that would be. We needed to verbalize what was going on within us. It was clear we could not hold back our feelings and emotions nor respond only with stoicism. The nauseous feeling began to subside when we began to talk.

We are human and at such major moments we react with human emotions and fears. At such time we don't respond only as we think we should, or in ways we think others would want us to, but in ways that are helpful. Fear can be a debilitating and paralyzing emotion, but fear can also prompt and stimulate. We decided to find ways to shape the remaining life we had together as creatively as possible. As Joan Chittester, a Catholic theologian said, "We can't allow ourselves to die from the outside in."

As people of faith, we often think that we should not have fears or doubts. When we do we begin to wonder- is our faith so shallow, so weak? This can be troubling. But we are human, fear surfaces, doubt creeps in, and questions arise. In such life and death moments, fear and questioning are responses that are inevitable, in fact, I think, quite normal. When we honestly face the breakdown moments, we are often surprised that they can lead us to break-open moments. This was our experience. This was a journey for which we had no previous experience; no roadmap, but a journey that would unfold and be revealed with greater clarity with each step we took. An insightful quote says it well, "Traveler, there is no path, paths are made by walking."

In a paradoxical way, these breakdown moments can awaken us to a deeper understanding- to a deeper reality; they can awaken us to the things that really matter. Our priorities shifted radically to the essentials, to the basics, to what was most important.

My husband and I soon decided that whatever remaining time we would have together, we would try to transform that time from dread to delight, from fear to joy. We would try to make the most of this time. We began by inviting close friends and colleagues to our home for tea-"three cups of tea" as we called it. The idea came from Greg Mortenson's book with that title, "Three cups of tea", which we had read together. Mortenson says that the first cup of tea is offered to the stranger, the second cup to a friend and the third cup you are family. We wanted to demonstrate that, "Life lurks in death." This was a concept Loren said he had formalized academically but had not understood the meaning of until then.

Our experience of inviting friends for tea were memorable occasions, however, they lasted only a short time since Loren's illness and weakness took hold rather quickly and soon the days became unpredictable. It became difficult to plan because we did not know if it would be a good day or a not so good day.

Early on it was important that the family gather together to talk about the changes taking place and the plans we should make or be prepared to make. As we all gathered in our living room one evening, encircling Loren, he began to talk. It became clear at that point that Loren's concern was on what kind of legacy he would leave, -would his life have made a difference, would his life have counted for something, would he have contributed to society? At first we wondered about this concern. I now understand his concern as an important assessment taking time. Has my life made a difference? Am I leaving the world a better place are questions we might each be asking at such a significant juncture in life? We sought to reassure Loren that his influence and impact had already been placed in the hearts and minds of hundreds of students and others he had taught and counseled over the years. He need not take on that worry- his work was complete.

As energy continued to wane, and Loren's body weaken, our efforts focused on keeping him comfortable and assuring him of as much quality of life as possible. Two suggestions that I did not consider at first were Hospice Care and opening a Caringbridge site. Both suggestions seemed at first to imply immediate finality. After a helpful home visit with a Hospice Nurse and Social Worker who explained all the benefits and services that the Hospice Program offered, it seemed the right course to take and Loren agreed. Many seriously ill people wait too long, we were told, before going on Hospice and therefore, do not benefit from the services and care that could be possible. Hospice offers visits from nurses, Dr's. Home health aides, message therapists and music therapists who come to your home. Hospice, however, requires that there be provision for 24/7 care in the home in order to establish their services. I was able to provide that home care only because of the generous assistance of our family who all live in the Twin Cities. A rotation schedule was set up with one family member coming every 24 hours to assist me and be with me.

We were reminded again and again by the Hospice Nurses that "dying is hard work". In the weeks and months that ensued, we experienced the full gamut of human emotions. With all the ups and downs and unpredictability there was, it felt at times like we were on a roller coaster. Granted, there were good days, days of joy and brightness, good conversation, music, singing, humor, and ordinariness. But there were also days of bleakness, days of discouragement, days that were troublesome and trying, days with great pain, days when heavy thoughts seemed to creep in. There were times of anger, times of incoherence, and times of confusion. There were indeed moments when Loren experienced what St. John of the Cross called, "the dark night of the soul". Hospice, however, was always readily available 24/7 to help us manage the pain and confusion with medication and/or good counsel.

There were also days of complete exhaustion, especially in the early months of Loren's illness before the family intervened and hospice was arranged. I mistakenly thought I could care for Loren by myself. This was not only unwise and fool hardy, but it landed me in the hospital for a few days suffering from exhaustion and high blood pressure concerns. I was so intent on providing the necessary care, that I neglected to eat, forgot to take my medications and found good rest difficult to come by. It is important to remember that one cannot be a caregiver if one does not care for oneself. It is said that it takes a village to raise a child, I have experienced that it takes an extended family or community to care for an extremely ill person at home and we all wanted to keep Loren at home.

Every person is unique; therefore, every dying process will be unique. We could not delay the hour of death nor hasten the hour. We discovered early on that we were not in charge; a humbling experience. Often times Loren tried to figure things out and process things with his sharp mind, but dying is not a process that can be rationally figured out. This can be a challenge for a theologian who delighted in figuring things out, finding solutions and solving problems. Over time, the journey became more a matter of the heart than of the head; it became a journey of letting go, of relinquishing control, of eliminating things that were not necessary for the final passage. Meister Eckhart, a 14th century mystic, once said, "God is not found in the soul by adding anything, but by a process of subtraction." As the weeks and months went on, that became more and more a reality for Loren. Little by little he began to subtract and let go. However, his concern for the many justice issues for which he cared so passionately, continued to the end.

We learned from the Hospice people that the dying person often sees a different reality. We were encouraged to validate and go along with whatever Loren said and not try to correct or reorient him. At times very poignant words were spoken and at other times words were spoken from another reality that we did not know or understand, but could only accept. There were many special and precious moments as well. One morning he said to me, "Have I told you that I love you today?" I said, "No, but you have told me a thousand times before that you love me. "But have I told you a thousand times today that I love, you?" "No," I said, "not today." "I love you, Ruthie!" Another sweet moment was when I leaned over his bed and said, "I love you" and he responded with a very soft mouthing of, "I love you too. You said it first, but I thought it first." His wit and humor continued.

During this time we received a beautiful blessing service entitled "Blessing of One Who Draws Near to Death" written by Joyce Rupp, an author and Catholic Sister. We discussed with Loren if he would like us to use this service. He agreed and we went ahead as the service seemed right and timely. Our entire family gathered around Loren's bed with each member participating. In this ritual/service we shared our love and gratitude, freed him to take leave of us as his time drew near and blessed his head, his eyes, his ears, his mouth, his hands, his feet, and his heart. Each part of the ritual ended with "You will always be a part of our hearts. Go in peace." This was a special and holy moment concluding with family encircling his bed, holding hands and singing. At the conclusion of the service Loren raised his hand and said, "Good-bye my beloved family. I love you all very much."

The veil between death and life is very thin. As he grew weaker we often whispered in his ear that we loved him and that we would miss him terribly, but that we were also willing to let him go, to release him into the arms of a waiting and welcoming God.

We were granted time, which many are not, to talk and share in ways we likely would never have done in ordinary times. In addition to our on going conversations, Loren requested to have a personal talk with each child, with each daughter and son-in-law, with each grandchild and with each sibling and their spouses. These moments became memorable and heartfelt. These again provided touching moments, joyful moments, humorous moments, sacred moments- all became gift to us. At times we had fits of laughter and at other times we had showers of tears. This extended time allowed many deeply personal conversations. In the end we felt there was no unfinished business. I believe this feeling of completeness has played a significant and positive role in my healing since Loren's death. It has helped me to not look back with regret.

As the days moved closer to final separation, the focus centered on the heavenly homecoming, the final journey. Loren had a long career in academia, preaching, and teaching others in theological matters, and now he was making his own journey from the head to the heart. This is the longest and perhaps most difficult journey we humans make. He was truly letting go, and moving into a place of deep peace and acceptance.

The many visits from Hospice personnel, who competently and compassionately cared for Loren, also counseled and cared for us in the family. They told us what physical signs to look for, what to do, and how to respond and deal with each challenge. They spoke candidly about the dying process. Their focus was to help Loren die well. Talking about death and separation became easier and more natural, thanks to the Hospice caregivers. Death began to take on a friendlier face and become less foreign. Death became part of life. As a culture we prepare very deliberately and carefully for the birth of a child, but we do not take the same care in

preparing for our eventual death. Often it is a topic we avoid. Talking about death became more natural for both the family and me, as well as for Loren, and I began to face death as a natural part of life. In its own way, the dying process became a ‘birthing’ process into new life and new understanding. This was another grace afforded me in my grieving and healing after death. Having faced death more openly and naturally has helped me to face life more positively now after death.

In addition to the Hospice program a Caring Bridge site was set up. Caring bridge is a free, non-profit web service that connects family and friends to share information, love and support during a serious illness or health event. This service became a wonderful source of connection with colleagues, family and friends both near and far. I was not prepared for the supportive impact the guestbook entries would have on Loren and on me. Each day we looked forward to the new entries. We faithfully read them and often Loren asked to have the entries reread. Caring Bridge served as a connection to family and friends bringing comfort and encouragement to us all. I tried to write a journal entry most every day and our children wrote several times as well. Writing daily during Loren’s illness helped me to review what had gone on that day and try to draw the important lessons from it. In retrospect I now see the writing of these entries as another helpful and healing part of my day. I have continued to Journal these past months. This exercise helps to express and sometimes clarify what is going on within ones heart and soul. This writing is not intended for anyone else, but I have found it helpful personally in the on going processing and understanding of myself.

My family and I experienced the dying process as a magnificent teacher. Because we had several months to share, grow and learn from the dying process I feel we were given a gift, despite the many challenges and pain we experienced. How one deals with the dying, how open and honest one can be in facing death contributes positively and significantly to the grieving and healing process after death. Grieving did not begin when my loved one died, but began when I first heard the Dr’s terminal pronouncement. How realistically one can be in facing the final separation along the way, helps with the healing.

Along the way, we learned about the University of MN Bequest Program that takes the body after death and uses it for anatomy study for medical students. The body is kept for a period of twelve to eighteen months. In discussing end of life issues with Loren he was very much in favor of this program. That is what we did. Following the completion of the study by the Medical School, the body or ashes will be returned to the family. At or near this time a service of thanksgiving is conducted for the families by the medical students to show their appreciation. We believe the gift of Loren’s body to the University bequest program enables his teaching and service to continue.

After the planning and Celebration of Life service for Loren was over following his death, after receiving family and friends from near and far and after the busyness subsided, then the emptiness, the aloneness began to sink in. The day arrived when I was alone. Life had changed and I had changed. As one book said so well, “You will never again be the person you once were. You will have lost, but in addition to the losing—because of the losing—you will have gained.” Grief now seems to come in waves. I never know just what might trigger that- a word, a song, a gesture, a picture. But the preparation I received in the long dying process has helped me in so many ways now in the healing process. What I want to do and what I am trying to do is to live these days with gratitude. Gratitude becomes a most important healing tool. The Gratitude one has for all the memories of a shared life can never be taken away. I have a choice

to make. Do I live with gratitude or do I focus on what I do not have now? I have chosen to live with gratitude. An attitude of gratitude does not minimize the on going feelings of loneliness, emptiness, and the absence of presence of ones loved one. But cultivating an attitude that seeks to live from gratitude rather than regret can make each day seem brighter and become more life-giving.

Another helpful dimension to healing is to find ways to be of service to others. There are countless opportunities for meaningful ways to contribute to ones community, church and society. As Scripture says, when we seek the welfare of the city, we seek our own welfare. Reaching out to others, having the focus be beyond oneself, gives life and healing to the giver. Life is filled with paradox and this is another one, infinitely true.

There are many things I miss, but perhaps what I miss most now is companionship-companionship with one with whom I could share so completely, one with whom I could say whatever was on my heart and know I would still be loved and accepted; one with whom I could be myself. Death destroys a life, but not a relationship.

The words of Henri Nouwen, a much loved and much-read theologian who died in 1996 expresses well my thoughts on gratitude and grace. He says, "Gratitude in its deepest sense means to live life as a gift to be received gratefully. But gratitude as the gospel speaks about it embraces all of life; the good and the bad, the joyful and the painful, the holy and the not so holy. Jesus calls us to recognize that gladness and sadness are never separate, that joy and sorrow really belong together, and that mourning and dancing are part of the same movement... the call to gratitude asks us to say, 'Everything is grace.'"

A Recommended Book

James E. Miller, *Winter Grief, Summer Grace: Returning to Life After a Loved One Dies*.