



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Grief: The canvas upon which we paint our lives

Clay Nelson © 13 May 2018

In Adult Religious Education this year we are exploring how to face death to live. Not surprisingly we have spent considerable time on the subject of grieving. One of the more helpful resources we considered was a lecture on “Loss: The Litmus Test of a Religious Faith” given in 1985 by John H. Nichols. He begins by telling of a colleague interviewing for a new ministry. “The search committee, having read all of his best credentials, had one concern. They said, ‘You seem to speak a great deal about grief. Now, we are a youngish congregation. We have, perhaps, four to five funerals a year, and we wonder if you have an interest in the younger members of the congregation. In fact, to be perfectly frank, we wonder if you haven’t styled for yourself a geriatric ministry.’” Nichols goes on to observe that this perception of the significance of grief is not limited to the young. “An older member of my own congregation said to me once, ‘You speak too much about grief. I want to hear something uplifting on Sunday mornings. Why is it necessary to be so depressing?’”

If you feel the same about grief, and you would not be alone, I hope you will find to your surprise that talking about grief this morning might give you a lift rather than bring you down. You can let me know at morning tea if I have succeeded.

Like most ministers I feel most in touch with my calling when dealing with grief. When we share grieving with our people we are facing the most moving religious issues anyone can confront. I agree with Nichols when he argues that “a religion that cannot talk about grief with credibility ... cannot find credibility on any other subject.”

Normally we associate grief with death. Certainly, there is that. I have no idea how many funerals I have conducted. There have been a lot, but I do remember one year where I did fifty of them. As you might imagine that was an emotionally difficult year. However, if we imagine that we only grieve when a spouse, parent, child; close friend dies, we are not paying attention. Grief is the experience of sadness which comes with any loss. If it were not for these, the greater losses would be more difficult to bear.

The reward I get from preparing for our Adult RE sessions is the ample opportunity to reflect on loss and its companion, grief, in my own life. My first memory is the day my father was struck down by polio. I was three. I can still see him trying to help me fly a kite in our front yard and falling down repeatedly. It was a loss I could not fully comprehend and was left scared and confused. From then on, my life was shaped by loss after loss. We moved a lot. From Kindergarten through Year 9 I went to five schools in three different states. By the time I was 21 my mother determined I had lived in 21 different domiciles. Each was an occasion of loss of friends, security and a sense of self. Each required a rebuilding of my life and finding my place in the world. While these were small losses compared with those I would experience later, they went a long way in preparing me to grieve the big losses. They didn’t make grief any easier but they gave me hope that I would survive each loss.

Looking back, I feel like my life has been painted on a canvas of grief. The canvas shaped, coloured, altered and textured my life as surely as an artist's brush. Without loss my life would look quite different. Different, but not necessarily better. Isn't that true for all of us? Nichols points out that "people grieve when they clearly cease to have the protections of childhood. They grieve when they go away from home for the first time. They grieve when they have to give up their first love. They grieve when they suffer a serious illness or injury. They grieve when they leave each stage of life for another. People grieve when they change jobs or homes; when they leave one beloved and comfortable community for another. For a teenager the end of an infatuation or friendship can bring on a grief as profound and as serious as the grief which may follow the death of a grandparent. If we minimize the grief of the young or the old, or our own grief, for whatever reason it may occur, then we do not contribute to their strengthening and growing or to our own."

The Sufi mystic Rumi invites us to be as a "guest house" and welcome each new arrival, even if it be a crowd of sorrows. Invite them in, Rumi says. Meet them at the door laughing, treat each guest honourably. They may be clearing you out for some new delight.

Grief is not a welcome guest at most doors. Grief is the companion of love, to be sure, but a hard companion. In her book *Companion through the Darkness* Stephanie Ericsson muses, "Grief is a tidal wave that overtakes you, smashes you up into its darkness, where you tumble and crash against unidentifiable surfaces, only to be thrown out on an unknown beach, bruised, reshaped."

Others experience it as a tear in the fabric of our accustomed lives that we must eventually attempt to gather the threads of what remains to reweave a new pattern of daily life.

Treating each guest honourably, to welcome them, to invite them in is no simple task. It is hard work. Perhaps the hardest work we will ever do. As difficult as the path through grief is, it is the only path that exists. It reminds me of the children's story of going on a bear hunt. In the story the child is faced with a series of obstacles. At each one the story's refrain is, "Can't go over it. Can't go under it. Can't go around it. Gotta go through it." "Even if they're a crowd of sorrows, who violently sweep your house empty of its furniture," invite them in.

But an openness to showing hospitality to our sorrows has not always been encouraged by those in the helping professions or even those close to us. Someone else's grief can make us very uncomfortable. Grief used to be called melancholia. It was considered a disease by psychiatrists. The standard text on pastoral counselling that I studied was Howard Clinebell's *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling*, published in 1966. It considered the subject of grief under the heading, "Counseling in the Crisis of Bereavement", to which only five pages out of hundreds were devoted.

Three years later Elizabeth Kubler-Ross ushered in a new era in our understanding of grief, with her book *On Death and Dying*. She opened the flood gates on research and comment on all aspects of grief with her description of its five stages. Fortunately by the time I went to seminary I had her work to supplement Clinebell's textbook in my study of pastoral counselling.

All this research does not suggest loss is a gift, especially when it is the death of a loved one. Far from it. Even when death comes at the end of a long and rewarding life, even when we

see it coming, even when we know it is not a tragedy, the loss is stark. Even when my mother died not knowing who I was after years of dementia, the grief was palpable. From that experience I can relate to Stephen Dobyns' poem *Prague*.

The day I learned my wife was dying
I told myself if anyone said, Well, she had
a good life, I'd punch him in the nose.
How much life represents a good life?
Maybe a hundred years, which would
give us nearly forty more to visit Oslo
and take the train to Vladivostok,
learn German to read Thomas Mann
in the original. Even more baseball games,
more days at the beach and the baking
of more walnut cakes for family birthdays.
How much time is enough time? How much
is needed for all those unspent kisses,
those slow walks along cobbled streets?

Nor does the research say grief can or should be "gotten over", though people are told to get over their losses. Michael Lee West expressed his feelings about such messages vividly in *American Pie*:

"I was tired of well-meaning folks, telling me it was time I got over being heart broke. When somebody tells you that, a little bell ought to ding in your mind. Some people don't know grief from garlic grits. There's some things a body ain't meant to get over. No I'm not suggesting you wallow in sorrow, or let it drag on; no I am just saying it never really goes away. [A death in the family] is like having a pile of rocks dumped in your front yard. Every day you walk out and see them rocks. They're sharp and ugly and heavy. You just learn to live around them the best way you can. Some people plant moss or ivy; some leave it be. Some folks take the rocks one by one, and build a wall."

Beyond the research are the reflections of the bereaved. Holly Tanguay offers these thoughts in a sermon a year after the death of her husband:

"Loss connects us to our deepest needs: the need for shared pleasures, for touch, for love and for meaning in our lives. Even as we yearn backwards for the treasures we once had, grief reminds us to treasure life now and drink of it deeply.

"Any new grief also connects us to every other loss we carry. Some of those losses may have been well mourned and stand ready to welcome a new loved one into the company of cherished memories. Others may have left wounds not fully healed by time. The pain of those can be newly intensified. Still others may have been sealed up without healing at all, leaving us unaware of buried suffering that was never comforted.

"As we struggle to cope with a new tear in the fabric of our accustomed lives there are perils and opportunities. Some of the time we must just "soldier on," cope with settling the estate, paying the bills, mowing the lawn and caring for others and ourselves as best we can. But, if we only soldier on, only stay positive because that is what our loved one would want, only keep chin up and eyes on horizon, we will miss the chance to hold and comfort ourselves, the

chance to grow through our grief, developing deeper compassion for ourselves and others, renewing our awareness of how sacred each life is, including our own.”

I have come to understand that in a world that has trouble welcoming sorrows, the church, at its best, is a beloved community where it is safe to grieve. Safe because we welcome as an honoured guest the sorrows at our door. Safe because we will accept that everyone grieves, but each in their own way. Safe because we won't hurry the grieving to finish up. Safe because we will remain present to those living with sorrow, even to our own discomfort. Safe because we know healthy grieving leads to new life, new possibilities, even if the bereaved can't yet see that far. Safe because we know that life gives us more than it takes away.