



Navigating Grief and Loss: Being Good Stewards of Hope

"For everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven: A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to weep, and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance..."
(Ecclesiastes 3:1, 2, 4)

There has always been grief and loss in our journey through life: deaths of those we love, illness and injury, ending relationships, job losses and more. During these two years of the COVID-19 pandemic, we feel that grief and loss more keenly. We are more aware of injustices in our health, education and social support systems which have unfairly burdened the most vulnerable. And our strength as communities of Christian faith has been compromised by weariness, isolation and division. How do we navigate this time of grief and loss to be good stewards of hope?

Honour the love and lament the loss: Grief can be immobilizing when we focus singularly on either lamenting the loss or minimizing the loss. In our grief we need to allow space set aside for both giving thanks for the life and love shared and mourning our loss.

Acts of hope: Plant a tree, donate to a cause important to your loved one, share stories with family – especially the next generations, pass along a skill that was taught to you.

Love one another: Support one another in times of grief and loss but respect that everyone journeys through grief on a different timetable. We have included some helpful things to say and not say in loving and supporting another through grief.

Pray: Even when we don't have the words, God knows the silent prayers of our hearts. Prayer can offer us sacred space to gain clarity, strength, and grace whether we are praying for our own or another's grief.

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Here are some suggested phrases, from *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved* by Kate Bowler, on what not to say and what to say when comforting someone in their grief:

What not to say:

Well, at least . . . We say this when we are trying to make people feel better. Unfortunately making a comparison doesn't help, it just minimizes.

In my long life, I've learned that . . . Remember we all experience life differently, be sensitive to how others might be experiencing their loss.

'It's going to get better. I promise.' Only God knows whether things will get better. Instead offer to pray or a shoulder to cry on.

'God needed an angel.' This statement is always surprising because (a) it makes God look sadistic and needy and (b) angels are, according to Christian tradition, their own entities not created from dead people.

'Everything happens for a reason.' Kate says, "the only thing worse than saying this is pretending that you know the reason. I mean, no one is short of reasons. When someone is drowning, the only thing worse than failing to throw them a life preserver is handing them a reason."

'I've done some research and...' It's best to stay in your lane as friend or acquaintance unless they ask you to do research with them.

'When my aunt had cancer...' Again try not to compare. Keep the focus on the one who is currently going through grief.

'So how are the treatments going? How are you really?' This is the tough one because the intent is to try and understand their world. But be careful not to ask questions like these, it's hard for people to relive them. If you have the honor of being close to the one who is hurting they will share in their own time

"God never gives us more than we can handle" While it's true that people's faith can grow, or change during periods of pain, plenty of good people find it hard to hold on to faith when all they can see or feel is suffering. Instead of speaking theology, be the faith your friend needs. Help shoulder their burden because this statement might make them feel like they should be self-sufficient in handling hard times.

What to say:

"I heard about _____ (your dad, your job, etc.). I'm sorry."

People will often say "I'm sorry for your loss" which is also fine but is not as personal. The important thing is that you acknowledge the loss without trying to make them feel better or fix.

"I don't know what to say." This is a perfect response because a lot of times we don't know what to say. It shows you're trying and you're being vulnerable.

"Oh, my friend, that sounds so hard." Perhaps the weirdest thing about having something awful happen is the fact that no one wants to hear about it. People tend to want to hear the summary, but they don't usually want to hear it from you. And that it was awful. So, simmer down and let your friend talk for a bit. Be willing to stare down the ugliness and sadness. Life is absurdly hard, and pretending it isn't is exhausting.

Silence....The fewer words the better. Listen and reflect. Learn to be comfortable with silence.

Send a text saying ***"I'm thinking of you/praying for you."*** When sending these do it with discretion; base it on your relationship with them and their Christian walk. You may be compelled to send a Bible verse. If you do, be very thoughtful about the one you choose and why you've chosen it. Often it will be received well, but if a person is in the anger stage of grief it might be hard for them to receive.

"I'd love to bring you a meal this week. Can I email you about it?" Oh, thank goodness. I am starving, but mostly I can never figure out something to tell people that I need, even if I need it. But really, bring me anything. Chocolate. A potted plant. A set of weird erasers. I remember the first gift I got that wasn't about cancer, and I was so happy I cried.

Excerpts from ***Ecological Grief and Creational Hope*** created by Dr. Sylvia Keesmaat with The Bishop's Committee on Creation Care for the people of the Diocese of Toronto, Lent 2022

“The world as we know it seems to be changing irreversibly. Loss of biodiversity, unbearable heat, flash floods and forest fires have started to bring home the reality of the climate crisis. For many, this has created both deep grief, as we mourn the loss of the beautiful and diverse world we grew up with, and deep anxiety, as we worry about the world that will be our future home. For many, this grief and anxiety has made it difficult to imagine a hopeful future.

We need to remind ourselves of the beauty and diversity of this world that God has given us before we begin to explore our grief over creation's suffering. We need to recall that God's love is shown to us in creation. We need to remember that we are called to love our place and all the creatures, plants, water and rocks with whom we share it. This week we will consider all the ways that creation sustains us, feeds our imagination, and nurtures gratitude. In short, we will ground ourselves in what we love about creation.

Just as Jesus' journey in Holy Week does not stop at the cross but continues on to new life, the biblical story constantly imagines a future of abundance and life for the earth and all of God's creatures. It may be that the depth of our sorrow over what is happening with creation makes it hard to imagine any part of this future vision ever coming true. That's okay. Sometimes it is helpful to know that a vision of hope is there while admitting that more time needs to be spent in grief. As we have discovered again and again in these stories, God is faithful to God's promises. The trajectory of hope may be long, but God has promised that it leads to a restored creation.”

Suggested Scripture Readings:

Psalm 104	Isaiah 65.17-25	Revelation 18:11-13
Romans 8:19-26	Jeremiah 9:10-14	Revelation 21:1-5
Genesis 6-9	Luke 19:1-10	Revelation 22:1-2

Prayer: Creator of all, in love you have called us into being and surrounded us with the sight, sound, and scent of beauty. We thank you for [*here may be inserted moments where being in creation gave you a sense of deep happiness, awe, or wonder*]. May they remind us of your love for us, and for all of creation. Amen.