

“Good Grief”

Rev. Annie Holmes

All grief is good grief. Do we believe it? Because how often have we said these same exact words; “oh good grief,” and usually we mean, how can something possibly be true, whatever is on our mind for that moment. When we say “oh good grief,” we are usually angry, annoyed or put out. And isn’t that the way it is in our sorrow also, how can this be we ask, how can this person be gone? How could we have lost that object? Or that idea? You know, and maybe we need to remember, loss and grief includes a whole lot of kinds of death, not just the death of a person.

Many times in the past years I have learned of the true power and effectiveness of Hospice. What angels of mercy they are to a person or family in the middle of a death situation. And they have put out some very important material on grief that I want to share with you today. Because we have all lost something, many things, hundreds of things actually: an heirloom, a wad of money, a friend, a day, a month due to an illness, all of these are reasons for grief. And we seem to go through the whole sadness, unbelievable grief process over and over again. And what might be the reason, maybe because we need to learn how to do it, when the need for some healthy letting go is really necessary.

As many of us know, we hang on to things and people pretty tightly in our lives. There is a constant fear we live with every day, things and people could be lost so quickly. There are fires, traffic accidents, violence, illness, etc. All threaten what and who it is we hold so tightly to. But, because we want to hold on to people and things so tightly, when they are taken from us, we not only feel their absence, we feel we need to rile up and protest the actual taking.

World religions around the globe have been a help in assisting us in learning how to be looser in our ownership long before there is a problem with loss. Learning how to ebb and flow with the ways of the life. Learning that every breath we take is a gain and a loss. Many of us have lost sleep over anxiety. We have lost blood over an accident or an operation. We are constantly making up for the losses. Or, learning to live with them.

But I am talking about much more than coping. I am talking about being able to see the reason for the loss and then a way of accepting the loss. But for many of us these are concepts that sound like gibberish, because our way is to want to hold on to everyone and everything with both hands, all the time and never, ever let go. Often until we are forced, and then we spend untold number of hours coping. How can we ever learn to loosen our grip on people and things before they are grabbed away from us and then we are left with only anger, resentment and fear that of course it happened once, it could happen again? In truth, my friends, life is a series of accumulating and letting go, either by choice or by force.

I am suggesting that in order for all of us to work with our ongoing grief issues we practice letting go, starting today. See what there is in your house that you could give away or gift to someone. Just the physical action of taking an object in your hand and thinking clearly and sanely about who could best benefit from this book, this shirt, this piece of jewelry, or any object, and then gift it to them with your love and good wishes. I tell you it feels wonderfully freeing. So much better than spending days putting colored dots on every item you are going to sell and then haggle with people over \$.50 or a \$1.00 for items that clearly are not worth the haggle.

We could learn so much from aboriginal peoples who gift possessions to others so much more easily than we do in our culture. You see, this little exercise is how you learn in your solar plexus, to be prepared for the larger losses, death, damage to your body or loss of treasures.

Because as a human being all parts of us are all connected, what you do in a healthy way in one area of your life, you will also know to do in other parts of your life. This is called living your religion, being your spirituality. Walking your talk. Living your faith. Let's see what else...being authentic, getting it, well you get the message. Is the process really that simple? Yes and no. But I would bet that most of us have never really given the gifting idea of material things enough of a chance to really know. Or maybe you have and you could share with all of us the benefits of living this kind of life. But I must admit what I see mostly in people around me and my own heart, is a theory that says "If I hang on tightly to my possessions and the people I love, somehow they will be safe." Not so much.

Thich Nhat Hanh tells us, "Suffering is not enough." Thomas Hopke goes on to tell us, "Forgiveness is the great "Yes." It is a decision in the sense that you have to will it. You have to choose life. A person can choose death by not forgiving. So there is a sense in which you can destroy yourself by not saying "yes" to the reality that actually exists. That's the choice, "yes" or "no" to what truly exists."

And when we are in grief, we are working toward the place of saying yes, yes, yes truly we are ready to accept what is. And who knows how long that takes for a person? No one can tell you how long that process will take for you. No one. And don't let them tell you, you should be this way or that way, simply because they may be uncomfortable with your grief. Now this grief process is not very different from beginning to work on letting go of the control of things you cannot control now. And the outcomes can be the same, saying yes to what truly is.

So many people at memorials say the words, no, no, no over and over again. As if the reality of the situation is more than they can handle. I watched my wedding ring go down the drain while washing dishes one month after I was married. I got the janitor of the building in to look for it, and of course it was there, sitting in the drain, but the terrible empty helpless feeling of feeling it slip off my finger and see it go down the drain in the soap suds. How many lost items will never be recovered in our lives? And how we react and what we do in the face of the small things, matters when we lose a loved one, a pet, our health, our fortunes, our looks, our eye sight or hearing. How we react all matters in the scheme of our lives.

Many religions remind us what we thought we owned, possessed, had or thought was ours and ours alone, actually turned out to be a lie. Everything is only on loan. The people we love, the things we believe we own, the health we enjoy today, all on loan. And the sooner we realize that, the easier it will be to say yes to what is. This is not to say that we don't care about people and things, honor them, love them and all that. This is to say there is a better way, and that is to be able to be separate from people and possessions and still love them.

We are not our possessions. We are not the people of our family. We may be a part of that family but we are not them. This separateness is important to our mental health. It enables us to not be co-dependent. That is a term to describe what I feel we all suffer from in one degree or another. And that is not being able to distinguish the boundaries between a loved one and ourselves. We suffer from this malady with our children, our spouses and partners, our relatives, our friends. If they bleed we bleed. If they are rich, we are rich. If they die, we die. Healthy boundaries assures healthy responses to those parts of life over which we have no control.

So, when it is time to grieve, in the beginning you may feel shock, denial, numbness, disbelief. You may need to be gentle with yourself, even protect yourself. These feelings may last for weeks or even months because everyone is different. As the grief continues you may feel disorganized, anxious, empty, sad, relieved, fearful and feelings of being released. You may need to be patient and tolerant of your emotional physical struggles. These feelings may last for months or even years. Everyone is different. Ask your friends to listen to you talk about your loss and your grief. For some people the more they share the better they feel.

As you begin to heal, you may notice that you are again organized, talking about the future, recognizing that you are open to other changes in your life. You may notice that your relationship with your deceased loved one is of memories, that you have a new self-identity, that you are starting to accept other losses in your life. These feelings may surface over many years. Everyone is different. Be sure to take time to thank your friends and -- thank yourself for support, gentleness, and encouragement. And be forgiving of any emotional or physical setbacks you may experience—this is normal. Healing is possible.

Some untruths about grieving:

1. Untruth: The pain of loss will go away faster if you ignore it. Fact: Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make the process worse in the long run. Facing your sadness and dealing with it actively is necessary for true healing.
2. Untruth: It's important to be strong in the face of a loss. Fact: Feeling sad, frightened, lonely or other emotions is a normal reaction to loss. Crying or breaking down doesn't mean you are weak. You don't need nor should you protect others by putting on a brave but false face. Showing your true emotions may help someone else be honest about their feelings. And it reminds people of the love you had for the one who is gone.
3. Untruth: If you don't cry, it means you aren't sorry about the loss. Fact: Crying is a normal response to sorrow, but it's not the only one. Those who don't cry may feel the pain of loss just as deeply as others. They may simply have other ways of showing or coping with loss. They need just as much support and comfort from others. All of us need to remember not to put people in a cage of our own making and demanding that people respond as we would. As if the only valid response, is our response.
4. Untruth: Grief should only last a year. Fact: There is no right time frame for grieving. How long it takes varies widely from person to person.

Kindly, gently remind people your grief may take longer than most people think is appropriate. Your grief will take more energy than you would have ever imagined. So rest, walk, take care of yourself. Your grief will involve many changes and be continually developing. Your grief will effect and permeate itself in all spheres of your life: psychologically, socially, physically, spiritually. And, your grief process will depend upon how you see the loss. You will grieve for many things both symbolic and tangible—not just the death alone. Your grief will include mourning not only for the actual person you lost, but also for all the hopes, dreams and unfulfilled expectations you had for and with that person, and for the needs that will go unmet because of the death. Your grief will involve a wide variety of feelings and reactions, not just those that are generally associated with grief.

You may experience combinations of anger and depression such as irritability, frustrations, annoyance and intolerance. You may have grief spasms, sudden waves of grief that occur without warning. You may have trouble thinking, remembering and making decisions. You may feel like you are going crazy. You may begin to search for meaning and may question your religion or philosophy of life. Society will have unrealistic expectations about your mourning and may respond inappropriately to you. Your job is to know yourself well enough to stay on your track, true to your process. (Excerpted from: *Grieving: how to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies*, by Tereses A. Rando, Ph.D)

Four Facts about Good Grief:

1. The only way out of grief is through it.
2. The worst kind of grief is your own. Never apologize for grieving. Remind yourself as often as needed that your loss is worthy of this grief. Your loss is worthy of the grief.
3. Grief work is hard work. Nobody can acknowledge the death of your loved one for you. You must do the difficult work of saying good bye. You must do the work yourself.

4. Grief work is not done alone. Find support in groups, in a good friend, writing about it in a journal, but sharing the grief with others helps the grief feelings to not become distorted. Sharing with others allows you to learn from their experiences.

When your heart feels like it will break forever and never ever be healed. Know that that feeling is a part of the grieving process. When your heart feels light for a moment and free, don't feel guilty. It is a reprieve, because no one can be sad all the time and still live in this world for very long. And the point of this whole discussion is to know that you can survive, you can be happy once again, only differently. And the aging process, the loss of objects and even a friend is all manageable if we have the faith perspective. Letting go of preconceived notions, letting go of stuff, letting go of control, all will be a path to health and freedom which will enable you to live with a loss. Life is loss. Life is gaining. Life is a wild wonderful ride, I am just so thankful we don't ride it alone. And remember, be kind to everyone you meet, for they are all fighting a great battle.