



Grief

Where Sadness and Hope Meet

by Bruce M. Hartung

Two Emotions: Forever Paired in This Life

As I approach the celebration of the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ—a time that overflows with festivity and the expression of joy and mirth—I get increasingly sad and even a bit angry. Since 1958 the time around Christmas has been colored by the death of my mother on December 18. Now, more than half a century later, I still get the same kind of sorrowful feelings, even though over time they have been tempered and leveled off somewhat.

Sometimes when people would ask about my sullen disposition in a time that was supposed to be joyous, I would tell them of the connection of the season with my mom's death. Most would see right away the importance of the connection. A few would wonder why I was still so affected, given so much time had passed. "Time heals all wounds," they would say. The inference I took from this was that perhaps there was something wrong with me from which I had not fully recovered. After all, why was I still feeling such a sharp sense of loss over the death of my mother more than 50 years ago?

What do you think? Is it possible that time does not always heal totally, even for the Christian? Do you think that a person, even a Christian—even me—*should* ever be healed in this world from such a bitter event?

Noted German theologian and Lutheran Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer addressed those questions in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.

"There is nothing that can replace the absence of someone dear to us, and one should not even attempt to do so. One must simply hold out and endure it. At first, that sounds very hard, but at the same time it is also a great comfort. For to the extent the emptiness truly remains unfilled one remains connected to the other person through it. It is wrong to say that God fills the emptiness. God in no way fills it but much more leaves it precisely unfilled and thus helps us preserve—even in pain—the authentic relationship. Furthermore, the more beautiful and full the remembrances, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude transforms the torment of memory into silent joy. One bears what was lovely in the past not as a thorn but as a precious gift deep within, a hidden treasure of which one can always be certain."

It is in many ways an astounding assertion in a culture that would like to remove practically all discomfort and pain. The pain of grief is natural, normal, and needs to be, at least somewhat, substantially retained. The pain is, as it were, a monument inside the grieving person. It indicates the authentic depth of the relationship to the now-deceased person in life, and also the depth and significance of that loss.

One reason that *getting over* grief does not really work is that to completely get over it means we tear down the monument that stands as a marker to the importance of our relationship with that person. No wonder we would resist such a recommendation. The grief survives as an inner monument that keeps us connected with the person we have lost. It's a connection that is very important to maintain; it helps us and others recognize the importance of the person whose loss we now grieve.

In all the ways we deal with grief, we must honor our internal pain. It stands as the natural grief that is generated when we lose by death someone special to us.

Take the pain of grief and cherish it. It is a reminder of the relationship now physically gone. Such experience of pain is not pleasant, for sure. Such heartache is not something for which we strive. But it is real; it is natural; it is normal, but it is not all there is.

Sadness Does Meet Hope

"In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this which is corruptible must clothe itself with incorruptibility, and this which is mortal must clothe itself with immortality. And when this which is corruptible clothes itself with incorruptibility and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then the word that is written shall come about: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:52-57).

Alongside the inner monument of the grief that you and I feel is the hope that is born of the resurrection of Christ, the monument, so to speak, of which is the empty tomb. "But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a Man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Corinthians 15:20-22).

These two emotions—sadness and hope—meet in the spiritual life of every one who has experienced the loss of a person who was important to us. Sadness is normal for all mankind. Hope is that which is believed by the power of the Holy Spirit. It is born of our faith in the Christ who will lead us, resurrected in our bodies, into life everlasting. Since this is so for us who have been baptized and follow Christ, it is so for all those for whom we grieve who have been baptized and also followed Christ. Thus, we anticipate a joyous reunion with those whose loss on this earth we now grieve.

With this meeting of sadness and hope surrounded by the love of Christ, let us learn something more about grief and its human and spiritual dynamics.

Grief Unpacked: Feelings

It's hard to speak or write about grief. It's such a personal thing. Still, there are some things we know about it. One very important thing is not to let what you know *about* grief define your personal experience. These are some generally understood thoughts about grief. See how they fit with your experience.

To begin, grief brings with it all kinds of feelings. Typically, they come and go. Sometimes they arrive without a clear reason as to what prompted them. These feelings range across the board: numbness, anger, exhaustion, guilt, relief, sadness, loneliness, and fear and despondency, to name but a few. When my mom died, I held all my feelings in; it was a numbing experience. Then, about two weeks later, the principal of my high school died, a man for whom I had a lot of respect. My sobbing in the back seat of the car with my friends and at the memorial service was uncontrollable. My feelings needed to be expressed. My friends did not know quite what to do with me, but they did their best. What they did *not* do (thankfully) was tell me to "get it together." Instead, they let me be and stayed with me, quite silent as I recall—right at my side. I was surprised at the intensity of my feelings and blindsided by their out-of-control outpouring. But I now understand they needed expression, and they needed to be received by people who cared about me.

And so it goes with feelings. They are unpredictable; they come and go; they vary in intensity. There may not even be anything obvious that brings them to the surface, but they are there. And they are all okay to feel. There is no shame in whatever emotional or intellectual responses you might have to the loss of someone close to you. Others have likely walked a similar road.

Alongside you in your grief and the feelings that accompany it is our Savior, Jesus, who steps every step with you. Whether or not you feel His presence, He is there and holding on to you. Every feeling you experience has been His, and His perfect walk, including His death and resurrection, has redeemed all that you feel. Jesus deeply and truly understands your grief and responds to it with His continuing love and care. Share your feelings with Him in prayer and meditation. He can and will embrace them as He holds you in His love and care.

Jesus Is There

Also, alongside you in your grief and turbulent emotions is the body of Christ: people in the community who follow Jesus. In his exhortation to mutual love, Paul calls upon each of us to, among other things, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15). In order to be able to weep with you, others will need to know that you are weeping. The same is true for all the other feelings you are experiencing. This, of course, requires that you let people into your experience. Talk to others; share your feelings with people who will, in a Christ-like way, accept those feelings. Do not keep what you feel locked inside. To best respond to your needs, people will need to know where you are emotionally.

Stay connected, then, with the community that is the body of Christ. Stay connected in community worship, in service, and in social events. In worship, the Word and Sacrament are present, which means that in this real and concrete way Jesus is present for you. Likewise, in this real and concrete way the community of Christ surrounds you. There may be an urge to withdraw as you see yourself lacking confidence in even familiar circumstances. It is a good thing to push through that frame of mind; however, continue putting yourself in places where God’s Word is spoken and taught and where Christ’s body and blood are present for you.

Grief Unpacked: Stages

Next, consider grief’s stages and see where you now fit. The idea of stages can appear fairly linear; though real life is not always this way, is it? Grief is like the back-and-forth ball in a pinball machine. Regardless, considering grief as having stages can help us learn from others and understand our own experience more deeply. Seeing things in stages can also provide a helpful marker for us. If we get stuck in one place for a long period of time, we can call out for help. (When others respond, it is good for us to be open to their suggestions to see if getting unstuck is possible.)

It is important to recognize and accept that the loss is real: at first I fought admitting with all my heart and being that my mother had died. “There must be some mistake. They must have gotten her mixed up with someone else.” For quite a long time I would fantasize that she would come through the back door with flowers from her garden, or that someone would drop her off from visiting friends. All of this was my fighting reality. I found that it was one thing to intellectually recognize my loss; it was quite another to emotionally embrace it. Part of that fighting was also that I was fairly numb to my own feelings.

Have you felt this way in dealing with your own grief? If so, there are many others who have also experienced this, too.

Emotional Turmoil

It was when I experienced the pain associated with the loss that the sadness and sobbing exploded for me. As a high school senior, I began experiencing the deep heartache connected with losing my mother. Anger and guilt soon followed when I thought about times I had disobeyed my mom and had given her a hard time. To top it off, I was fearful about what would happen to my dad and me. These were all part of the pain associated with losing her. Many were the emotions of loss I experienced at her death, and some of these are present still today, years later.

What are the pains you experience from your grief? How is sharing these feelings and thoughts with others going? Are there people who can come to your side and be a listening ear for you, offering you a consoling touch? Do you need to do more talking and more sharing? If so, resist the tendency to keep what you think and feel all bottled up inside. Seek out safe spaces where you can share what you are experiencing.

Everything changed when I tried adapting to life without the physical presence of my mom. No longer was the primary organizing person of our family present. Mom managed the household. She was a fairly traditional woman who worked part time, but still handled the lion’s share of the chores. She also gave the encouragement to work hard in school, study diligently, attend church regularly, and the like. After she died, neighbors provided food for a time and offered to help. A distant cousin of my dad came for a couple of weeks to help out too, but everything needed to be redone. It was—but only for a while. What follows after that, though, is another story.

Life changes a lot with the death of someone you love. A simple statement, but it has such profound consequences. As you reflect on the loss of the person’s physical presence, think about making a list. Note those practical, emotional, or

spiritual items that are gone as a result of that person's physical presence being absent. Give thanks to God for the gifts they were as individuals. Recognize the blessings that came from them; grieve all that has been lost by their passing. Now take your list and see what there is on it that requires your immediate attention. This is part of adapting to your new circumstances. You will find there are things that will need to come from other people now.

Here trusted family members, a pastor, or other mature members of the body of Christ can prove very helpful. As you share your needs with them, pray for God's Holy Spirit to work with those who have your best interests at heart. As they offer their wisdom and counsel, pray also that you will be open to their feedback. Some things you will likely work out on your own. For other matters, trusted advice can be helpful.

How is this stage going for you? Remember, it helps to talk through things with trusted members of the body of Christ, as well as trusted family members.

Engaging Life Through Previous Routines, Developing New Ones

After my mother's death, I needed to turn my attention to other life challenges: completing high school, finding summer employment, prepping for college, saying goodbye to close friends, etc. Late that summer I attended my first year of pre-seminary training at Saint Paul's Junior College in Concordia, Missouri. It was there that a few people heard bits and pieces of my story and helped me focus on my life's vocation. But most of all, they surrounded me with the care and love of Christ.

Movement is often helpful when dealing with grief. To "move on" does not mean somehow magically eliminating all the emotion that exists because of the loss of a loved one. Instead, it's the recognition that there is life yet to be lived on this earth, and we need to be about living it. Sometimes well-meaning people expect that you should get to this stage and develop new interests and activities that will brighten your life, giving it renewed purpose and vision. These changes may very well come, but most likely they will not arrive as soon as we would like them to. Take your time. Give yourself room to breathe, to ponder, to mourn, to grieve and, yes, to even dream again.

The grieving process is described in *ScienceDaily*: "The grieving process is unpredictable. Mourners' movement between different stages of grief is much like a pinball machine. They bounce back and forth from shock, to depression, and back to shock again, until they are able to resolve their emotions and integrate the meaning of the loss into their lives. ...They have found a loving space within themselves for their memories of the deceased that do not let the loss take over their whole lives."

God's Loving Care

From a Christian perspective, the "loving space within themselves" is fostered and energized by the Holy Spirit. He wraps all of life's experience into the story of Jesus' unfolding love and care for each of us. His redemptive life means we can, by the power of the Spirit, follow Him, in life, into death, and again at the resurrection of the dead, into life again, sharing this transformation with all believers. This means that in the company of the saints we will be surrounded in eternity by those whom we love and who love us. Finally, the story of our lives and those of others blossom in the life that has no end, in the presence of God through Christ forever. The pinball experience ends, and at the resurrection of the dead we are settled eternally with God.

When Grieving Gets Stuck

Sometimes the experience of grief gets stuck. Here are some examples:

- Instead of saying, "I feel sadness a lot of the time, but I believe eventually things will get better," a grief-stuck person may say that "I am filled with despair nearly all the time, and I almost always feel hopeless about the future."
- Instead of saying, "My sadness or depressed mood often come in waves, but there are events, activities, or people that help me feel better," a grief-stuck person may say, "My sadness or depressed mood is nearly constant, and it isn't improved by positive events, activities, or people."

- Instead of saying, “I sometimes feel like a part of me has been lost. I wish I could be reunited with the person or part of my life I am missing. Still, I still think life is worth living.” Rather, a grief-stuck person may state, “I often have persistent thoughts or impulses about ending my life, and sometimes I think I’d be better off dead.”
- Instead of saying, “The things I have always liked doing (reading, listening to music, sports, hobbies, etc.) give me some comfort and consolation, at least temporarily,” a grief-stuck person may report that “Almost nothing I used to like doing (reading, listening to music, sports, hobbies, etc.) is of any comfort or use to me anymore.”
- Instead of saying, “When I am reminded of my loss (of a loved one, friend, job, etc.), I frequently feel intense grief or have painful memories, but sometimes, I have good thoughts and pleasant memories too,” a grief-stuck person may say this: “When I am reminded of my loss (of a loved one, friend, job, etc.), I feel nothing but pain, bitterness, or bad memories.”

A general characteristic of grief-stuck individuals is their preoccupation with memories of the deceased person. They have almost no vision of the future without the presence of the person lost. This is frequently accompanied by waves of painful emotions and a sense of foreboding about the future. While all these kinds of experiences, as discussed above, might be present from time to time in the pinball experience of grief, a grief-stuck person experiences them chronically. Thus, they are, in a real sense, *stuck*.

Go to God

If you are in this kind of *stuckness*, the first step to getting *unstuck* is to prayerfully put words on your grief. Do this even if they’re as basic as “Abba, Father” (see Mark 14:36), and put your grief in the arms of Jesus. “Out of the depths I cry to You, O Lord! O Lord, hear my voice! Let Your ears be attentive to the voice of my pleas for mercy!” says the psalmist (see Psalm 130:1-2).

At the same time you do this, put your words and grief into the arms of members of the body of Christ. Here your pastor is a great resource, as may be other Christian friends and family members. While they will probably already sense your predicament, they may not feel comfortable in approaching you. If they do, pray for the Holy Spirit’s energy and guidance to put your grief into words. If they do not yet come to you, pray for the Holy Spirit’s energy and guidance and go to them.

We are not built to face grief alone. In fact if we do, the sense of isolation is likely to increase, and we’re more likely to remain stuck. In our do-it-yourself culture there may be pressures to take care of this all by yourself, but this is not the biblical way of life. You and I are in a community of believers, placed there when we were baptized. It is not good for anyone to be alone.

If this is true, and I think it is, then people need people. That means everyone, including you, needs other people. This means, among other things, moving—however hesitantly and reluctantly—into social activities. Granted, you may need some help to do this. You may, for instance, not feel like going to church, but if friends or family encourage and invite you to go with them, then go—whether or not you feel up to it. Share your hesitancy with them. If they are wise, they will understand and help you as you go. If it is your initiative alone that brings you to church, perhaps calling up a friend or family member to accompany you will be helpful. Or, as reluctant as you may be, just go. You will go to a place where God’s Word is proclaimed, where the Sacraments are celebrated, and where a community of believers gathers in mutual support and care. Plus, your resolve to go, even if you’re flying solo, will strengthen your determination to make other positive moves to get through your grieving.

Consider too the possibility of additional comrades on your life’s walk. One might be your family doctor who could help determine if any of your *stuckness* is physical in its nature. Another might be a counselor who has special training in bereavement or grief counseling. Having such a person to focus specifically on what is happening in your life can be very helpful. (Check with your pastor or, if your church has a counseling ministry or something like it, speak with someone in that group. They should know of resources in the community.)

Remember too that into your *stuckness* come the arms of Jesus to lift you from it. The arms of others who surround you in the Name of Jesus are sent by Him to help lift you from it as well.

Learning How to Deal with Grief Comes Early and Influences the Present

While we generally associate grief with losing a person through death, grief occurs with a host of other changes in life. We often learn our first strategies of dealing with grief in small ways. We should pay attention to these somewhat minor experiences of grief. We can learn from these less traumatic events and see how they have shaped our understanding of how grief works, and how best to deal with it.

Grief is a human reaction to loss. Now this loss may take many forms: the loss of one who is dearly loved (human or animal), the loss of a friendship or a marital relationship, the loss of employment and financial security. These losses can produce emotional and physical reactions such as extreme sadness, guilt, physical issues, extreme anxiety, and other problems.

It's plain to see that changes in life of any kind can bring a sense of loss and with that loss a certain amount of grief. And since life is constantly changing, early on in our lives we learn how to deal with grief. In small matters we get practice that prepares us for the bigger issues.

How did your family teach you to deal with grief? Consider the first time you lost something important to you and could not find it—ever. Did you learn to keep your feelings of grief inside of you? Did you learn that boys are not to cry and girls are not to talk about it? Did you learn that grieving is a natural response and, therefore, you were encouraged to express what you were feeling? Were there “coaches” in your family or extended family who helped you identify your grief and how it was connected with your loss? Did they encourage you to talk about it so you could verbalize your feelings and get a better handle on them?

All of us have ways of dealing with grief. How did you first learn to deal with it? Often our response is first learned in minor situations and then solidified over time. That's why your expression of grief over larger, more significant losses may surprise you. It may even cause you to think something is wrong with you and the way you grieve. Do you remember me saying this before? “My sobbing in the back seat of the car with my friends and at the memorial service was almost uncontrollable. ... I was surprised at the intensity of my feelings and was kind of blindsided by their out-of-control outpouring. But I now understand they needed expression, and they needed to be received by people who cared about me.”

I had learned in my family to suppress my feelings and not communicate them to others. The intensity of my feelings overtook what I had learned, and I began to think there was something seriously wrong with me. This happened even though the emergence of my feelings of grief was a natural process. How I had learned to grieve over small losses became my standard for dealing with this much larger loss. And my capacity had been breached.

Be aware, then, how your experience and expression of grief can erupt in ways that could surprise you. How you dealt with grief in the past will likely be a sort of *normal* for you. As a result, reacting differently and with much more intensity might be unsettling. This could cause you to retreat emotionally and isolate yourself.

For example, if you were taught that crying is only for children, and you cry frequently as a response to your loss, you may avoid places like church. This is because you're afraid a hymn, a reading, a friend's inquiry, or the message may spark a memory and with it your tears. Consequently, you might then shy away from public places because you feel awkward or embarrassed should you succumb to crying.

Grief Has Many Expressions

I encourage you to challenge any form of thinking that says there is only one “right” way to grieve. There is no one way to grieve correctly—just as there is no single way to get a job done or tackle some project. We grieve and handle loss individually based on a multitude of reasons. Allow yourself flexibility in this area. You will come through.

Now as for grieving alone, it's less healthy than grieving with others at your side. However you have learned to grieve, open yourself up to others who can sensitively accompany you in your grief. After all, being there for others should be one of the core roles of the body of Christ, the community of believers who follow Jesus' example. It is He—the Way, the Truth, and the Life—who promises to be with us and walk alongside us, through good times and bad.

In the booklet *Take Heart in Your Grief*, Rev. Dr. Oswald C.J. Hoffmann put it this way: “When Jesus said, ‘Happy are those who mourn, for God will comfort them,’ He did not expect that the loss would make you happy. He did not for one minute pretend to think that mourning would be a happy process. But the happiness, the blessing, the relief, is that there is One with you to share this experience with you. He is Jesus Christ. He is open to you when you seek to share your quiet, even secret, hurts with Him.”

In the words of the hymn, “I Lay My Sins on Jesus,” there are these words: “I lay my wants on Jesus; all fullness dwells in Him; He heals all my diseases; my soul He does redeem. I lay my griefs on Jesus, my burdens and my cares; He from them all releases; He all my sorrows shares.”

As Jesus shares your experiences of sorrow and grief, so do others who are there for you in the grieving process. Together, you can look to Jesus Christ, who is the Resurrection and the Life (see John 11:17-27).

We sing of this too in the familiar hymn, “Blest Be the Tie That Binds”: “We share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear, and often for each other flows the sympathizing tear.”

May you and the fullness of your grief be held in the arms of Jesus, sheltered by Him as He has promised, and may you find strength and comfort in the arms of your sisters and brothers in Christ!

Additional Reading

Bruce Hartung: *The Neurology of Grief: Sadness and Joy Meet*, 25th Annual Theological Symposium at Concordia Seminary, online seminar at <https://scholar.csl.edu/theo/2015/schedule/5/>

C.S. Lewis: *A Grief Observed* Readers' Edition (London: Faber & Faber, 2015).

Daily Prayers for Grieving Hearts: A Prayer Devotional (Siloam Springs, Arkansas: DaySpring, 2022).

Project Connect (www.lhm.org/projectconnect)

Oswald Hoffmann: *Take Heart in Your Grief*

Rick Marrs: *Journey Through Depression*

Kari Vo: *A Grief Like No Other: When Suicide Takes Someone You Love*

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