

“What I Know About Grief”

Reverend Sharon K. Dittmar
 First Unitarian Church
 536 Linton Street
 Cincinnati, Ohio 45219
 513.281.1564
 May 4, 2008

Ministry has taught me a lot about grief in the past twelve years. Seeing how you respond, and how your family and friends respond. Everyone is different. What I know about grief I have learned from you. Since so many of us find grief mystifying and overwhelming, I want to share with you what I have learned.

Number 1: Grief does not have a shelf date. Grief does not expire, though most of us wish it did. I recently spoke with a member who told me that she felt so foolish because she was still mourning the death of someone a year later. She was somewhat surprised when I told her that sounded normal. When someone you love dies, someone you have known, your world changes, and so does your identity. Rebuilding you without your loved one present takes time, years. In many ways it never ends. And “anniversaries” and unexpected events bring this up. Your father died when you were ten years old. When your own son is born you miss your father, deeply, again. You see a report of a car crash on the evening news and immediately flash back to your car accident twenty years ago, and cry all over again. Grief does not have a shelf date. This is normal.

Number 2: There is a difference between grief and mourning. I recently purchased an excellent book on grief entitled *Healing a Teen’s Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends, and Caregivers*. The introduction explains “Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone loved dies. Mourning is the outward expression of our grief.” Everyone feels grief over losses (death, illness, divorce, job loss, family fights, moving). But not everyone mourns because mourning makes us feel “vulnerable and dependent.”¹ Mourning is talking to someone and crying a firestorm of tears in front of them. Mourning is joining a support group or bereavement group. Mourning is public. It is a public expression of internal grief.

Number 3: Mourning is for the living (so is grief) who feel the pain of loss. The dead do not mourn (to the best of our knowledge). Memorial services, wakes, funerals are all for the living, and we need to attend them so that mourning is public and communal. Come because it is sad; don’t stay away because it is sad.

A corollary is that there is also communal mourning. When a long time member at First Church dies, other members become very concerned about when the memorial service is, and want to care for all the details we can manage (tablecloths, flowers, guest books, etc). These are not just details; they are manifestations of love and communal mourning. The care we show to our dead members and their families helps us to mourn and embrace the loss and celebrate their lives.

¹ *Healing a Teen’s Grieving Heart*, 1.

Number 4: Change is morally neutral. I got this one from Morita Marmo. Change happens, whether it is your health or how many services we have at First Church on Sunday morning. Change is eternally present and moving. Change is. And it is morally neutral. You might like the change or dislike the change or have mixed feelings about change, but change itself is not “good” or “bad.” It is.

A corollary to this is that even changes we like bring loss. Why do parents cry at weddings? Why do we feel strange sadness when we graduate or leave home? Lots of changes, even happy changes, bring feelings of loss. This is normal.

Number 5: Everyone grieves differently. Years ago Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published groundbreaking material on death and loss. She noted five stages of grief; denial (“It’s not happening”), bargaining (“if you only spare my child I will go back to church”), anger (“This isn’t fair”), depression (“This is too much. I will never be OK again”), and acceptance (“I have suffered a terrible loss, but I can integrate it into a good life”). For many years people spoke about these stages as if the order was written in stone. Today we know that different people experience different stages at different times and that most people coping with a significant loss or losses, cycle through the stages throughout their lives. An anniversary of a tragedy can bring back depression. A thoughtless comment brings back anger. This is normal.

If you have ever sat with a family in mourning you will immediately notice how different people deal with grief and mourning. I find this when I enter a hospital room and the family is assembled. One person says “Things look good.” Another crying family member confides to me “I don’t know if I can go on.” And another family member explodes at the medical staff. This is grief. It is all grief. We all have different coping skills and use them differently at different times. There is no wrong or right way to grieve and mourn (as long as you are not hurting yourself or someone else). There is only your way.

Number 6: A corollary to this is that grieving people need hope. What looks like denial to you, is hope to someone else and it is not our place to undermine hope. One of my colleagues told me that this is her golden rule in hospice care, let people hope.

Number 7: We die the way we live. Grumpy old patients were grumpy young patients. People who listen well allow their doctors to tell them they are ill. People who like to laugh will find a way to laugh through job loss or public humiliation. Grateful people will be thanking others while being wheeled to surgery.

Most of us learn about grief and mourning from our families of origin. If you look back you will realize how much you learned your earliest lessons about grief from childhood, and how “breaking” the rules many adult years later about what you learned seems like “breaking” a taboo. If you were taught not to cry, you are mortified if you cry, etc. There is a poem by Donald Hall that articulates this experience so well. He writes: [POEM]

I love this poem because it is so reminiscent of families in grief. The father cannot or will not speak, and lets his wife take control. Grief often makes people want to take control, to do something, because grief, which is so human and natural, makes us feel vulnerable. His wife cannot and will not let anyone speak of loss, pain or death. Children who show the smallest sign of any of these “taboos” (a kiss on the cheek) are reprimanded, in this case, in a letter. And in the end, it is almost absurd to hear the father say “If anything should happen to me.” We die the way we live. And when

family members grieve and mourn you will once again be subject to the system into which you were born. There is no way around this at times. You can of course make different choices, but those won't always be rewarded.

Number 8: Every major change is a psychological opportunity to prepare for the final change, death. Many UU ministers have a book on their shelf, entitled, *Running Through the Thistles*. It is a book about leaving a congregation, and how to do it well. The author notes that most of us want to run through change, to have it be over, and yet, this running leaves us with impregnable wounds.

The better course is to slowly and carefully walk through change. In this case, to say good-bye to special people, to let members throw you a going away party (to name and celebrate what was), to call people with whom you still have unfinished business or unhappy relations. To take the time to both say good-bye and let people say good-bye to you. And this work is exhausting, and often bittersweet. But it is worthy because it teaches us about vulnerability – that it is real and bearable. It allows us to process the good and the bad which helps people move towards a new chapter in their life in a healthier fashion. Change happens. It is survivable. It creates public celebration and mourning. It models the importance of talking about change and saying good-bye.

One of the greatest gifts you can give your loved ones, is the model of how to openly and lovingly say good-bye in death. I still recommend the book *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom. It is a wonderful, true story about a busy sportswriter, Mitch, who learns about death, and hence life, from his old teacher Morrie. Although his body fails, Morrie is so spiritually strong that he can talk about love and life, loss, and change, his illness, and death while dying. It is a beautiful book. When I begin to actively die, I hope I have the opportunity to be like Morrie. It will help me and everyone I know. I don't want to be so fearful that I refuse kisses on the cheek.

Number 9: Unexpected death is a special kind of grief. Whether from illness, violence, or accident, sudden death is a unique kind of pain for the living. There was no chance to say good-bye or even live a long life. This is some of the hardest grief of all. We need to be gentle here.

Number 10: Losses that are unspoken become more painful. In order to begin some healing, even the most private people need to find some safe place to say what they think and feel. Therapists and support groups are wonderful tools for people living with grief. We all need a safe place to talk.

Number 11) Some of the hardest losses are the ones that are “taboo,” losses such as suicide, abuse, domestic violence, miscarriage, abortion, infertility, rape, or AIDS. Notice also, that most of these (except suicide) are related to sexual relationships, procreation, and/or sexuality. Taboos often exist because they hold off our greatest societal fears. People struggling with any of these losses need compassion and community, not judgment and isolation. Be kind.

Number 12: Grief is not just for adults and the elderly. Children know grief too. Most five year olds can tell you about grief and if not by five, certainly by ten years old. Children see pets and family members die. They live in homes with violence, they move. They show grief a bit differently than adults. Grieving children may act out at school, become sullen, pick fights, sleep a lot, engage in concerning play or draw explicit pictures. Children are young human beings who don't often have the words or emotional

maturity to process their grief. Children are resilient, but they also grieve and they need our love and support too.

Number 12: Grief is normal, healthy, and bearable. Sometimes grief feels like insanity, but it gets easier over time and everyone knows this human condition. In grief, we are never truly alone. Helen Keller writes, “We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in the world – the company of those who have known sorrow.” You are not dumb or weak or pathetic because you feel loss. You are human. Be gentle with your grief and yourself in mourning.

As I was thinking about this sermon I kept repeating a phrase over and over “the fires and the black river of loss.” It is a line from a poem by Mary Oliver entitled *In Blackwater Woods*. Oliver writes

Look, the trees
are turning
their own bodies
into pillars

of light,
are giving off the rich
fragrance of cinnamon
and fulfillment,

the long tapers
of cattails
are bursting and floating away over
the blue shoulders

of the ponds,
and every pond,
no matter what its
name is, is

nameless now.
Every year
everything
I have ever learned

in my lifetime
leads back to this: the fires
and the black river of loss
whose other side

is salvation
whose meaning
none of us will ever know.
To live in this world

you must be able
to do three things:
to love what is mortal;
to hold it

against your bones knowing
your own life depends on it;
and, when the time comes to let it go,
to let it go.

Here is my final thought on grief. It is an honor and a privilege to sit with so many of you during your times of grief and mourning. Through you I have learned about death, and hence, life. Through you I have come to accept change more easily, including the reality of my own death. Through you I have learned more about life and love than I could have ever learned alone. Through your grief and mourning I have found greater peace and meaning than I have ever known. I have much more to learn, and I am confident that you will teach me. I am grateful to be a student of grief and mourning in this beloved community.

