

THE POWER OF HAVING GRIEF WITNESSED



GRIEF COURSE

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"For the dead and the living, we must bear witness." – *Elie Wiesel (Holocaust survivor)*

My Loss

Have you ever had a moment you wish you could freeze in time?

As I pulled my car into our driveway, I could hear my daughter's scream that echoed through the neighborhood, "Daddy's home! Daddy's home!" I looked up to see my five-year-old, Jackie, bounding down the stairs of our deck to greet me. This wasn't a one-time announcement to the neighborhood but a regular ritual that occurred each day during the work week.

As I opened my car door and stood up, she took a flying leap and jumped into my arms. I caught her, held her, and kissed her little head, never realizing what a cherished memory this moment would become. I wish I could freeze that moment and live in it forever. I would give anything to hear those words again. I believe someday I will.

What makes this moment so memorable was the sequence of events that followed shortly thereafter. Jackie, who could light up any room with her smile, now was experiencing unusual symptoms that a battery of tests couldn't explain, until an MRI revealed an inoperable brain tumor. She died in my arms six weeks later. My heart was broken, my soul was injured, in way I never imagined possible. To this day, the emotional aftershocks linger. This was a turning point that changed the course of my life forever as I took my first steps on a lifelong grief journey. Yet, in the darkness, my deepest life purpose would emerge from the rubble of my pain.

Will My Life Ever Be Good Again?

Jerry Sittser, author of *A Grace Disguised*, received thousands of letters and emails from readers. He found one question kept surfacing: *Will my life ever be good again?* That certainly was my number one concern and question after my loss. Here is what I've discovered: my life has not been the same since I lost my daughter, and I am not the same person anymore; I have changed. The good news is I have grown, and I found that life can be good again. Not only good, but really good! I have a new relationship with my daughter as I carry the gift of her life and memory with me forever. Grief never ends because love never ends.

Jesus Wept

Jesus is our model for grief. John 11:35 simply says, "*Jesus wept.*" It's the shortest verse in the Bible and in my opinion one of the most powerful verses because it reveals he understands why we cry and shows he's able to sympathize with us in our pain. Jesus was fully divine and fully human. He knew what it was like to feel his feelings and express his human emotions. He felt deep sorrow when his good friend Lazarus died. If the Son of God needs a good cry, then maybe so do I." And maybe so do you. Be assured that God understands your pain. He brings comfort in our grief. He grieves with you and is right beside you after your loss. "*The Lord is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit*" (Psalm 34:18 NIV).

Hardwired to Have Our Grief Witnessed

Having your grief witnessed is something that griever needs. This need is so fundamental that if you don't get your grief witnessed it becomes impossible to progress on your grief journey. Grief requires witnessing. Human beings are social and emotional creatures designed by God to live in community and to have our grief witnessed by others. This need is hardwired within us, since our emotions bond us to one another, and those connections are the key to our survival.

Having our grief witnessed means allowing others to see our grief and respond to what has happened to us. When a child is injured, say, they skin their knee, they look to their parents for help. That help may come as a light kiss on the injury to make the pain go away. Kids want their injury to be seen, their pain to be heard and validated by mom, dad, and everybody around them, and so do we.

David Kessler, grief expert and author of *Finding Meaning*, writes, "Each person's grief is unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn't mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining."

We begin to witness grief by acknowledging a person's loss and letting them know they are seen. It's saying, "I see you and hear your pain. Your grief is real, it's genuine." Witnessing people's pain empowers them to feel supported and less alone. Observing grief allows grievers to focus on their loss instead of grieving the support they need but never got.

It's important to create space for grievers to share their painful feelings. There is no greater gift you can give someone in grief than to ask about their loved one, listen and just let them talk. I feel honored when someone shares their pain and grief with me. When we see our sadness reflected in the eyes of another, we realize our grief matters, so we feel we can survive and that a hope-filled future is possible.

Witnessing grief is about meeting people where they are, accepting them without trying to change them, and coming with no agenda, judgment, or shame.

Witnessing grief helps people

develop a sense of comfort in the mist of their painful and negative feelings that accompany grief. Loss becomes more meaningful and bearable when it's accurately reflected in another person's eyes.

Can I Get a Witness?

This phrase is commonly used in African American churches and has a spiritual connotation: When the pastor asks, "Can I get a witness?" he's asking the congregation for affirmation which is often met with a response of "Amen!" The word *amen* means "it is true" or "so be it." I've had the privilege of preaching in a predominantly black church and it's inspiring to receive encouraging participation from the congregation. It fired me up and made me a better preacher when they would say, "Amen" or "Go on." When someone tells us their story of loss, our job is to witness their grief by listening and being present with them without thinking about ourselves or how we should respond. Witnessing affirms the griever and declares their loss is true and genuine. Our world needs more grief witnessed. Can I get an "Amen!"?

Stop the World from Spinning

My world stopped at 9:40 am on a Saturday morning on March 4, 2000, when my daughter died. It seemed strange that the clocks of the world continued when my inner clock stopped. When Jackie died, I wanted the world to come to a screeching halt to acknowledge the loss of my daughter. When it didn't happen, I wanted to scream, "Don't you understand that we're in deep pain here and our family's life has changed forever?" At least they could have flown flags at half-mast around the world to display our grief. In my mind Jackie's death was just as important as that of any government official. It's hurts to watch the world keep spinning for everyone else when my heart has a hole the size of Texas in it and such a bright light as Jackie had gone out.

A Unique Way of Witnessing Grief

I love how one tribe witness's grief when someone in their village dies. Kessler was touring Australia when he met a researcher that shared about her study of the aboriginal way of life in northern Australia. On the night someone dies, everyone in the village moves a piece of furniture or something else into their yard. The next day, when the bereaved family wakes up and looks outside, they see that everything has changed since their loved one died, not just for them but for everyone in the village. This shows the grieving family that their loved one's death matters. It's a tangible witness as it makes the loss visible. Our world needs more furniture movers.

Witnessing Grief at a Funeral

Funerals are vital for having our grief witnessed. I never realized how critical a personalized funeral can be until after my daughter's death. Meeting with families and performing hundreds of funerals convinced me that a funeral ceremony done well can be the first step toward healing for a bereaved family. Funerals, memorials, and graveside services matter. Something magical happens when others gather to see, hear, feel, and witness our grief.

Funerals are the oldest and most familiar rituals in the world. Rituals unite us. Funerals are for the living, for those who remain. It's an important psychological step within the grieving process and helps bring closure. Funerals allow us to pay tribute to our loved one's life, and helps survivors face the reality of death. Funerals assist us in beginning the mourning process, expressing our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, and saying goodbye to our loved one. Funerals

give people an opportunity to support the family by demonstrating their love and respect for the deceased.

When loss happens, the first thing we need to do is to establish the significance of that event. Significance is a key concept in witnessing grief. The hardest part of grieving is finding a way to establish significance. Friends and family are not comfortable with talking about death, pain, and loss. Yet, we want people to know about our loss and respond to it in an empathetic way without trivializing it.

Doug Manning, author of *The Funeral*, gives three levels of significance that need to be fulfilled after loss. *First, we need to establish the significance of our loss.* This is what has happened to me. The first thing we think about when someone dies is ourselves. "What is going to happen to me now?" This may sound strange, but it's a coping mechanism God designed for us to withstand the loss. It's not selfish, it's survival. We need to share how the loss of our loved one has impacted us.

The second level is the need to establish the significance of the person we have lost. We want to tell everybody about the person we lost and show photos of them. "I need to tell you who this person was, what they meant to me and how significant they were." We need to share how meaningful and important our relationship was with our loved one and how different life is without them.

The third level is the social significance. This is one of the major reasons for having a funeral and why funerals are so important. The funeral is a time to gather so friends can tell us how much our loved one meant to them and share their impact upon society.

Funerals provide a network of support for grieving families. Funerals have become the new family reunions. Relatives you haven't seen in years travel great distances to attend the service. When a family decides not to do a funeral it's a missed opportunity to have their grief witnessed and for their friends to show their love and support, which can lead to an increase in unresolved grief for years to come.

Auggie Pullman, the main protagonist in the movie *Wonder*, said, *"I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should get a standing ovation at least once in their lives."* I agree with Auggie. I've done funerals where family and friends gave the deceased a standing ovation at the end of the service. Too bad we don't do it while the person is alive rather than waiting until they're dead to show our appreciation.

I think there should be a rule that everyone in the world should have a personalized funeral service. Why? Because I believe in the dignity of every human being. God created each person in his image and therefore every person has value. All people matter to God. Thus, I feel that every life is worth remembering and celebrating. To deny a person a funeral is to deny them an act of dignity.

I Don't Do Funerals

My friend, Paul, 52, informed me that he doesn't do funerals and had never attended a funeral in his life. "Why not," I asked. "I get super emotional; I don't do funerals," he said. The irony is Paul is a public speaker, trainer, and coach. He has started successful companies, but he's never been to a funeral. His friends have asked him to speak at funerals, but he couldn't do it.

It broke my heart to hear him share about his fear of facing grief, sadness, and sorrow. Paul is not alone in his feelings about funerals. A few months later he called me and shared one of the two puppies he got for his boys had died. He asked if I'd consider doing a memorial for the puppy. I'm a big dog lover and we'd just lost our thirteen-year-old pure breed Siberian Husky a few months before his call. I know first-hand the pain of losing a beloved pet. My heart went out to their family. I agreed to do the service.

A few weeks later Paul called and informed me that his stepfather, Michael, who he considered his dad, had died, and asked if I would do the funeral. Family and friends from all over the country attended the service. I am so proud of Paul for facing his fear and being willing to honor his stepdad by having a memorial service for Michael. The family's grief was witnessed, and they seemed happy to see one another and interact as they celebrated their loved one's life.

Having Our Grief Witnessed at Jackie's Funeral

We had a viewing of Jackie's body the night before her funeral. The wake was only for family and close friends. Jackie appeared to be peacefully asleep in the casket. She looked cherub like in her beautiful white dress and ruby red slippers. Reality sinks in quickly when you see your little angel laying in a child size white casket on a dark spring night.

Our family had been at the wake for a couple of hours, and we were getting ready to go home when my sister Suzy and her husband Mark, along with their month-old baby Alex, walked into the room. There was a noticeable silence when my sister's family entered. Jackie was lying ever so still in the casket. You could hear a pin drop. Out of the silence came a loud cry from Alex which pierced the stillness and broke the silence. It was music to my ears.

Amid our despair there was hope. One child dies, another one is born. One child's last breath was taken, another's first breath was given. The circle of life was staring us in the face. Jackie had died. Alex was alive and full of life.

The Funeral Service

Jackie's funeral was a fantastic celebration of her short life. She was so full of life and joy. I wanted everybody to know what a special little girl she was and that her life was not lived in vain but had significance.

Our family, friends, and staff at church worked together to create a custom-made funeral service that celebrated and honored her life. Workers made a beautiful rainbow balloon arch over the casket. Jackie's favorite movie was the *Wizard of Oz*, so it was breathtaking to view the rainbow over her casket and later hear the song *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. What many didn't realize was Jackie had always wanted red ruby slippers like Dorothy in the movie. So, we made sure she was buried in her ruby red slippers.

The service began with a video tribute and live solo of *I Believe I Can Fly*, followed by worship songs, Scripture, the reading the clergy record, a prayer, and a song by Christian recording artist Bryan Duncan. I did the eulogy for my daughter. I didn't know if I could do it, but God gave me strength. We also played a recording of Jackie's voice that a Sunday School teacher made. Kay Warren gave the benediction. We were able to laugh and cry, feel pain and joy simultaneously.

During an open forum, something special happened. An 8-year-old walked up to the microphone and shared about how much Jackie meant to her and how much she would miss her. It was touching. Even though Jackie was only five when she died, she lived a storybook life and made a tremendous impact upon her family and friends.

My fondest memory of the service was having our grief witnessed by nearly a thousand people including our closest friends, family, and church. I'll never forget that day for as long as I live. The love and support were overwhelming. Following the service, they had an impromptu reception line for our family as people came up and hugged us. Folks were unbelievably kind and compassionate toward us that day as they witnessed our grief. This demonstration of love and empathy helped carry us through the darkest time in our lives. The memorial service was lovely and the beginning of our healing.

Witnessing the Grief of Friends

I have also had the privilege of witnessing some of my friends' grief by performing a memorial service for their loved ones.

Weston Pickett

One Sunday morning at Saddleback Church, Jeff, a grandparent, came to a worship service and was distraught. He shared in desperation that Terra, his daughter, had just suffered the loss of her child. She had consistently gone to her obstetrician, everything looked fine until four days before her due date when the baby's heart stopped for some unknown reason. Terra had a stillbirth delivery. Weston Blake Pickett was born on March 27, 2022. The excitement of a long-awaited pregnancy came to a shocking, unexpected, and painful end. This precious 7-pound, 20.5-inch baby boy was born without life as we know it. Terra and Brian, her husband, were devastated. In moments like this, we are cut to the deepest part of our soul.

Many mothers and fathers suffer the silent grief of miscarriage or stillbirth. Both terms describe pregnancy loss, but they differ according to when the loss occurs. The silence after a miscarriage or stillbirth is deafening and extremely painful. It's considered a private loss and a taboo subject worldwide linked to stigma and shame.

I met with the couple and witnessed their grief and let them share their pain. I asked them if they wanted to do a memorial for Weston. They were in shock and weren't sure if they wanted to have a service or not. I shared that I would totally understand if they chose not to have one, but I also shared my bias that every person deserves to have their life celebrated including Weston. And I knew how meaningful it would be for their family to have their grief witnessed. The decision to have a funeral or not is up to each family. It's a personal decision. I wish everybody could have a personalized funeral, but I realize that's not always possible and there are good reasons sometimes not to do a funeral.

I shared the words of David with them from Psalm 139: "For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb ... Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be" (Psalm 139:13,16 NIV).

The couple showed me a photo of Weston. He was breathtakingly beautiful with his dark brown hair and gorgeous facial features. He was wrapped in a blanket and looked like he was sleeping. They said they would pray about having a memorial or not.

A week later they called me and confirmed they wanted to have a memorial. We had it at the church, I performed the service and many of their family and friends came to witness their grief and to honor the life of Weston Pickett. We sang, cried, laughed, and prayed together. I could feel the healing beginning to take root because of having their grief witnessed at the memorial service. Terra and Brian will never regret having a memorial service for their precious son.

Mary Shriver

Mary and Dennis Shriver had been attending Saddleback for over two decades. Mary was diagnosed with stage 4 cancer and was placed on hospice. Dennis requested a pastoral visit.

I went to his home and met with the family including Mary and her beloved dog, Tyson. After the meeting the family pulled me aside and asked if I would perform Mary's memorial. She died two weeks later.

Dennis describes the first time he laid his eyes on Mary as a magical moment. He knew instantly that she was the woman he would marry. The couple began dating and fell in love. While in boot camp in the Air Force, Dennis sent an engagement ring to his father who took Mary out to lunch and placed the ring on her finger on behalf of Dennis. Mary accepted the proposal. Dennis and Mary were married for 57 years.

Mary's memorial service was held at a local park in Mission Viejo as Dennis and the family had their grief witnessed in a wonderful way. There was a sense of joy in the air despite the sorrow people felt in their hearts regarding Mary's passing.

However, Dennis was lost without Mary. She was his everything. He'd spent all his time being the caregiver for his wife. I was concerned about Dennis. Would he be able to cope with Mary? I asked Dennis if he wanted to meet me the next week at Starbucks for coffee. I told him I would help witness his grief and help him to frame his grief. He jumped at the chance. I can't do this for every person I do a memorial for, but I could do it for Dennis. Dennis shared with me that he wasn't sure he wanted to keep living. He felt he'd lost his purpose for being on earth.

Dennis is doing well albeit he still misses Mary. He's involved in a small group and our Hope for Grief Community. He's working part time has a renewed sense of purpose and hope in his life. I see a new sense of wonder in Dennis' eyes, and I have grown to love and appreciate this special survivor who has become a dear friend.

Christian Taylor

Christian was going into his senior year at the University of Arizona. He was deeply loved by his family and friends. He had so much to live for until that fateful day when he accidentally overdosed with what turned out to be drugs laced with fentanyl. Christian was only 21 years old when he passed. His parents were in shock.

I met Tina's side of the family after his death. Christian was a good-looking young man, played football in high school, was confident, caring, and cool. Tina deeply loved her son as did the entire family.

Tina and the family initially had their grief witnessed at a graveside memorial service that I performed. What struck me is how intentional and creative Tina has been in keeping Christian's memory alive. Tina developed a series of events to honor her son and to have her grief witnessed after the memorial. These events include:

- Christmas prayer vigil at Lake Mission Viejo
- Birthday parties in Orange County and Colorado
- Graduation from the University of Arizona
- Angelversary party at home
- Memorial anniversary at the graveside

Tina walked in the graduation ceremony in place of her son and received Christian's diploma from the University of Arizona. She also had an angelversary party for Christian. An angelverary is a special way for parents to reflect love for a child who died, in recognition of their continued presence in their lives. I applaud Tina for keeping the memory of her son alive through various rituals. A byproduct of is that Tina and her families' grief is continually being witnessed.

Witnessing Grief at a Wedding

My daughter Jessica got married recently. This was a big deal for the Page family. She is the first of our three adult children to get married. I asked her if she wanted me to walk her down the aisle as her father or if she wanted me to perform the wedding ceremony as a pastor and wedding officiant. "Dad, I want you to do both," she replied.

She asked six girls to be her bridesmaids. I wondered who her maid of honor would be? She decided her sister, would be her maid of honor. I got a bit teary eyed when she told me. Matt, her fiancé, hand carved a small wooden bench that held a frame with Jackie's photo in it. Engraved on the bench were the words, "Jacqueline Brooke Page." The bench and photo were positioned next to the bride where the maid of honor typically stands.

This is what I said at the wedding: "We are thrilled to have most of our family members here from both sides of the family, but we also want to remember a family member who can't be here today, someone who is not physically with us but is with us in spirit, most notably the maid of honor, none other than Jackie Page, Jessica's sister. When Jessica chose her bridesmaids, I kept asking her, 'Who's going to be your maid of honor?' She wouldn't tell me. Finally, a couple weeks before the wedding she said, 'Jackie is going to be my maid of honor.' We have a photo of Jackie on top of this bench which is strategically placed in the maid of honor's spot. Jackie

absolutely adored her sister Jessica so it's natural that Jessica would have Jackie be her maid of honor. So, Jackie, we remember you today and our love for you never ends."



There wasn't a dry eye at ceremony, tears of sadness and tears of joy beautifully blended together as our family had our grief witnessed some twenty years after Jackie's death. Witnessing grief lasts a lifetime because love never dies.

At the end of the celebration, Jessica came up to me and said, "Dad, this is the happiest day of my life." I'm sure Jackie was smiling down on us from heaven that day.

Witnessing Grief During the Holidays

It's extremely important to have your grief witnessed during the holidays. The most wonderful time of the year can also be the most difficult time of the year for those who grieve. It is at this time we became acutely aware of the void in our lives. How do we have Christmas without Jackie? Adding insult to injury, Jackie's birthday was on December 20th. She was our Christmas baby.

Church services went on, Christmas carols were still sung, and people wished everybody a *Merry Christmas*. But my thoughts were on Jackie, fixed more on Jackie and her departure than on her

arrival five years prior. Christmas was different that first year without our daughter. We hung a stocking for her, talked about her, lit a candle in her memory, and shed many tears. Sometimes

showing up for something is the best you can do. We showed up that first Christmas and that was good enough.

Talk About Your Loved One. Maybe the best way to have your grief witnessed during the holidays is to talk about your loved one. We talk about the weather, food, sports, and work. We talk about everything else ... except the elephant in the room. We all know it's there. It has hurt us all. But we don't talk about the loss. I encourage you to introduce the elephant in the room. Oh, please, say her name. Please say "Jackie" again. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Nothing brings relief like hearing a good story about your loved one.

Memorialize Your Beloved. Find a way to remember and memorialize your beloved during the holidays. It might mean lighting a candle, writing a letter to your loved one and placing it under the tree, or creating an ornament with your loved one's picture on it and hanging it on the tree. I know someone who created a memory book of their loved one. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one. You can donate to a favorite charity in their honor. I do this each year to the HEART Africa ministry. You can also go to www.Tributes.com and create a tribute page for your loved one. These are all ways to express your love for your family member or friend and to have your grief witnessed.

Include the Children. Children feel confused, powerless, angry, and anxious during the holidays because of a death in the family. Kids grieve differently than adults. Our children need their grief witnessed during the holidays as well. Be honest with them. Explain that it is okay for them to cry and for adults to cry, and that although they are feeling sad right now, they won't always feel like this. See what part of the holiday tradition is most important to them. Try to

involve them in memorial rituals. For example, ask them to draw or write down their favorite holiday memories of the departed loved one.

Witnessing Grief During Milestones

I recently graduated from Biola University with my Doctor of Ministry degree. It was the culmination of years of research, hard work and perseverance. On the morning of my graduation ceremony, I couldn't help but think of Jackie and my dad. I made a video that I posted on my social media platforms expressing how sad and disappointed I was because they couldn't be there to witness my accomplishment. Yet, though they were not there physically, I felt their presence. My success in many ways was due to their influence on my life. Jackie became my motivation to keep going when I wanted to give up. I started the program after she died to grow and become a more effective pastor, better able to serve those I work with in ministry.

I don't think I would have finished without her inspiration in my life.

As for my father, Dr. David Edward Page, was a plastic surgeon and the biggest cheerleader in my life. He was so proud of me. His dad, my grandfather, Edward Page, was a Baptist pastor and a Chaplain in WW2. My grandfather forced my dad to go to seminary after graduating from Wheaton College even though my dad never felt called to vocational ministry. My dad dropped out after six months and enrolled in medical school and became a doctor for the next forty years. He felt maybe the calling that my grandfather felt skipped a generation to me. My dad wholeheartedly supported me in all my ministry endeavors. I felt Jackie and my dad were both smiling down on me from heaven as they witnessed my milestone with great pride that day.

Witnessing Grief During Birthdays and Anniversaries

It's tricky going through birthdays and anniversaries after a loss. My wife and I give two cards to each other for every birthday, one from us and one from Jackie. We also give two cards to each other on Mother's Day and Father's Day, and our wedding anniversary. I write Jackie's card like she used to write, the typical handwriting of a five-year-old. Jackie's birthday is always a special day in our family. We've had birthday cakes before, and we've lit candles in her honor.

The anniversary of her death has always been extremely difficult. It was Thursday, a day like any other day, maybe not. I couldn't sleep the night before. I kept thinking of my baby and how much I missed her. Why was the 10-year anniversary of her death harder than 5 or 9 years? I don't know. It just seemed so final.

I was on the road leading a NEXT Coaching Network in Minneapolis. I got up Thursday morning and remembered that March 4 was the exact day ten years earlier that Jackie had passed away in my arms. It was a peaceful passing but the finality of her being gone was more that I could handle.

Carrie went to work that morning but after arriving she broke down in tears. "What are you doing here?" Her friends asked. They told her to go home. I called her from Minneapolis. She was walking on a pier in Santa Barbara. "How are you doing?" I asked. "Not good," she replied. "Are you going to jump off the pier?" I asked. "No, it's not that bad," she replied. But she was in excruciating pain and so was I. I longed to hug her and hold her, but we were 1500 miles apart.

I shared with my Coaching Network of guys about my loss. They graciously prayed for me and our family. It felt good to have my grief witnessed by my colleagues. Jessica stayed home from school and Joshua wrote a song in Jackie's honor. Sometimes we get ambushed by our emotions. There was something about the finality of living life for ten years without Jackie that blindsided us all. We agreed the next year we wouldn't be apart on her death day.

Launching a Grief Community at Saddleback Church

I was asked to do a memorial service for Mary at Saddleback Church. I met Mary a couple weeks before she died while she was on hospice. On my first visit to the house the siblings took me aside and asked if I'd do her memorial. I agreed. She died two weeks later. Her husband Dennis is prince of a guy and loved Mary well for over 50 years. He was lost after she died. He was wrecked. He didn't know what to do and felt he'd lost his purpose for living.

Our church has a ministry called *GriefShare*, which is a grief recovery support group for those who have lost a loved one. I asked the leader of *GriefShare* if we could get Dennis in the group. She said the next offering of the 13-week group wouldn't begin until September. Mary died in May. Dennis couldn't make it till September to get support. I asked Dennis if he wanted to have coffee the next week at a local Starbucks. He agreed. We met every other week to talk about Mary and his grief. I couldn't do this for every person I counsel with, but I could do it for Dennis. Four months later Dennis did go through *GriefShare*, and it was helpful, but I felt that there had to more we could offer him.

I felt grieving people needed more than a 13-week support group because grief is ongoing and lasts a lifetime. Some erroneously think grief ends after a year or two and are shocked to find year's later that it's still a big part of their life. I felt griever's needed to be part of a community, a supportive community. A community that could witness their pain and support them on their grief journey.

Saddleback Church has a community for people suffering from addiction (hurts, habits, and hang-ups) called *Celebrate Recovery*, which was started by John Baker and is now in over 29,000 churches worldwide. We also have a community for people with mental health issues called *Hope for Mental Health*, started by Kay Warren. Why not a community for grieving people?

So, I launched a Grief Community called *Hope for Grief*. We all need a community when we grieve. Nobody can get through grief alone. We were never meant to be islands of grief. Healing comes in community. I started this grief community to help people have their grief witnessed.

We gather on a regular basis and provide hope, inspiration, encouragement, training, and connection within a caring community. Our gatherings view grief from five different lenses: Personal, theological, educational, musical, and experiential. I teach at these events, and we also bring in guest speakers who are grief specialists. We have segments like *Music & Grief*, which is a form of grief therapy, *God & Grief*, which deals with theology, and another bit called *Best and Worst Things to Say*, along with *testimonials*, and a *Q&A panel* made up of pastoral care pastors and licensed therapists. Our Hope for Grief Community is an umbrella for our grief ministry at

Saddleback Church. All other grief ministries and support groups come under the umbrella of our Hope for Grief Community.

Our Hope for Grief Community is a central gathering for grievers. Our relationship with our loved ones has shifted from one of physical presence to one of memory, a spiritual presence. Our grief community seeks to keep that memory alive and to honor our loved ones by sharing lessons we've learned from them and are still learning. We want to talk about our those we lost. This is a safe place to do that and to share our feelings, even negative feelings. It's a time to remember the past, live in the present and trust the future is going to be good because God is good. Attending our grief community lets everyone know they are not alone in their grief.

I wrote the mantra below to unite us as a community, to express who we are, and to voice what we value as fellow grievers. This is our slogan that we repeat at each gathering.

Hope for Grief (Mantra)

We are a community of grievers, mourners, and lamenters. Jesus wept. We value tears. Don't take our grief away from us, we've earned it. We recognize that each person's grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what we all share in common is a need to have our grief witnessed. We honor each person's grief journey. We don't tell grievers to get over it or move on. We all experience grief in our own way and in our own time. We don't get over it, rather we grow into it. We will carry the loss in our hearts for the rest of our lives. Our grief never ends because our love never ends.

We believe that God is close to the brokenhearted and delivers those who are crushed in spirit. Therefore, we realize God is with us in our pain. We grieve, yet not like those who have no hope. Our hope is found in Jesus Christ, our living hope, strength, comforter, and friend. He is helping us find new meaning and purpose for living. We accept that our lives will never be the same but believe they can be really good again.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted." We belong to a community of mourning that goes back thousands of years and continues today. We long for Heaven, our home, and to be reunited with our loved ones. But for now, we wrestle with the paradox of pain but proclaim that God is good. We grieve well that we may live well.

Tips for Witnessing Grief in Others

Below are tips to help witness grief in others and provide a compassionate presence.

Depend Upon God for Help. When feeling overwhelmed, remember that God is with you in your pain. Don't run away from the discomfort but take a deep breath and lean into the sadness knowing God designed your body to grieve. Grieving is a natural response to loss and part of God's healing process. Tears are welcome. Words are not necessary at first. Trust God to give you the appropriate words to say when the time is right. *"The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the moment when you need them"* (Luke 12:12).

Acknowledge the Pain. When witnessing a griever in pain, realize you don't have to fix them. Rather, seek to create a compassionate space for them without taking on their pain. Let them know that God sees them in their pain and so do you. Recognize your presence alone, along with

touch, is more powerful than words. Acknowledge their pain and confirm what they're going through really hurts. Let them know they don't have to hide or rush through their grief.

Show Empathy Toward Those in Pain. Let grievers share their pain from their heart without judging or embarrassing them. Encourage them to feel their feelings, name them and embrace the pain. There's no need to look for a silver lining, but instead perhaps share a good memory or story with them about their loved one. Let them share their feelings openly and remind them you are there solely to listen. The bottom line in witnessing grief is to show empathy for how they feel. The Apostle Paul wrote, *"Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn"* (Romans 12:15).

It takes enormous courage for a person to have their grief witnessed and to truly be seen when they feel wounded inside, when their heart is vulnerable and hurting. When grief is witnessed, all the masks and protective layers are washed away, and the person is seen as they truly are.

Life is full of opportunities to witness other people's grief, whether it's by saying nothing and just listening and being fully present with them or by being gracious in the words we speak and the actions we choose to take. It takes courage to witness the grief of another, their tears and pain. Even though it can be an emotionally exhausting experience, it's worth it because they will forever be changed.

May we seek first to understand, then to be understood. This approach supports the other person in their pain. It's what we all want and need, to be understood, valued, and affirmed in our grief. In a nutshell, we all need to have our grief witnessed by someone who cares. I witness your grief and you witness mine. May we seek to witness the grief of others and have our grief witnessed within a caring community because healing comes in community, not in isolation.

THE END

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