



GRIEF EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION COURSE

WEEK 6:

Face Your Fears



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification Course taught by Dr. David Page through The School of Grief.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads 'Dr. David Page'.

Week 6: Face Your Fears

"No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear." C.S. Lewis

A Reflection on Grief and Fear by Samantha Stein

Maybe grief doesn't just feel like fear, maybe it is fear.

Okay maybe not completely. Grief does, of course, contain great loss, the loss of someone or something or both that was tangible and real. That was important and precious and beloved. So there is a true sorrow that comes with loss. A sadness so real your body aches and you want to get outside of your own skin. A sadness that makes you scream. And makes you lie down and cry.

Are you beginning to understand that grief is not just loss. Grief is also about becoming untethered. It's about losing an identity. Losing a map and compass all at once - a way to orient our life. Our love.

This untethering is not only disorienting, but it can also be terrifying. "I'm not afraid," C.S. Lewis goes on to say, I just have "the same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning." Not afraid, he says, yet he's having trouble breathing, sitting still. Painful feelings in the pit of his stomach. This sounds like a perfect description of fear to me.

And why shouldn't he be afraid? He has just lost his wife. She was central to his world, his heart, his home. He was her husband. Now she exists no more on this earth, and he is not that person. So who is he and where the hell is home?

I would suggest that not having the answer to those two questions is terrifying. And with loss, life offers you no chance to answer it the same way you did before. Even if you've spent your whole life answering it the same way, loss and the subsequent grief force you to find a different answer.

And the fear is not just about the untethering, about not having the answer. Rather, it's because the answer to those questions isn't knowable in minute. Or day. Or month. Or sometimes even a year. And so while we figure it out, we must live in a world without orientation. Without knowing who we are or where we're going or where we live. We have no coordinates to plug into our GPS. We can only put one foot in front of the other, each day. Breathe. We can't run but we can't stand still either. We must keep walking forward, holding fear's hand. Until we arrive somewhere new.

Taking Back What's Been Stolen

Taking back what's been stolen means actively reclaiming a sense of agency and control over your life after experiencing a significant loss, essentially fighting back against the feeling that grief has taken away a vital part of you, allowing you to rebuild and find meaning and purpose even in the face of loss.

Key Points Regarding this Metaphor

- **Loss as Theft**

Bereavement comes from an Old English word that means “rob,” “deprive,” and “seize.” Grief is often described as a thief, stealing away joy, energy, and a sense of normalcy after a loved one passes away.

- **Reclaiming Power**

Taking back what's been stolen signifies a conscious effort to not let grief completely consume you, to actively engage in healing practices, and to find ways to live a fulfilling life despite the loss.

- **Process of Healing**

This isn't a quick fix, but rather a gradual process of integrating the loss into your life while still honoring the memories and love you had for the person that is gone.

How Do We Take Back What's Been Stolen?

- **Remembering the Positive**

A goal is to remember your loved one with more love than pain. Focus on the happy memories and positive aspects of the person lost, instead of dwelling on the negative.

- **Engaging in Meaningful Work**

Returning to hobbies or finding new pursuits that bring joy and purpose. Allow God to turn your pain into purpose.

- **Seek Out Support**

Talking to friends, family, a pastor, a therapist, or joining a grief support group to share experiences and process emotions.

- **Self-Care Practices**

Prioritizing physical and mental health through exercise, healthy eating, prayer, Bible reading, meditation and relaxation techniques.

A Key Scripture: Blessing After Devastation

“So I will restore to you the years that the swarming locust has eaten, the crawling locust, the consuming locust, and the chewing locust, my great army which I sent among you. You shall eat in plenty and be satisfied, and praise the name of the Lord your God, who has dealt wondrously with you; and My people shall never be put to shame. Then you shall know that I am in the midst of Israel: I am the Lord your God and there is no other. My people shall never be put to shame” (Joel 2:25-27 NKJV).

When facing significant loss or hardship, I believe that God will bring healing and renewal.

Charles H. Spurgeon

LOST years can never be restored literally. Time once past is gone forever. Let no man make any mistake about this, or trifle with the present moment under any notion that the flying hour will ever wing its way back to him. As well recall the north wind, or fill again the emptied rain cloud, or put back into their quiver the arrows of the lord of day. As well bid the river which has hastened onward to the sea, bring back its rolling floods, as imagine that the years that have once gone can ever be restored to us.

It will strike you at once that the locusts did not eat the years: the locusts ate the fruits of the years' labor, the harvests of the fields; so that the meaning of the restoration of the years must be the restoration of those fruits and of those harvests which the locusts consumed.

You cannot have back your time; but there is a strange and wonderful way in which God can give back to you the wasted blessings, the unripened fruits of years over which you mourned. The fruits of wasted years may yet be yours. It is a pity that they should have been locust-eaten by your folly and negligence; but if they have been so, be not hopeless concerning them.

"All things are possible to him that believeth." There is a power which is beyond all things and can work great marvels. Who can make the all-devouring locust restore his prey? No man, by wisdom or power, can recover what has been destroyed. God alone can do for you what seems impossible; and here is the promise of his grace: "I will restore to you the years that the locust hath eaten."

By giving to his repentant people larger harvests than the land could naturally yield, God could give back to them, as it were, all they would have had if the locusts had never come; and God, by giving you larger grace in the present and in the future, can make the life which has hitherto been blighted, and eaten up with the locust, and the caterpillar, and the palmer-worm of sin, and self, and Satan, yet to be a complete, and blessed, and useful life, to his praise and glory. It is a great wonder; but Jehovah is a God of wonders, and in the kingdom of his grace miracles are common things.

Grief Feels Like Fear

Grief is an intense emotion we experience after a significant loss, like the death of a loved one, a divorce, the loss of a pet or job, or a terminal illness diagnosis. Grief is a multifaceted sensory experience that typically manifests itself in physical pain, feelings of numbness, hopelessness, loneliness, and deep sorrow.

Fear is an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger. Truth be told, grief and fear often go hand in hand, as the experience of losing someone can leave you feeling vulnerable and uncertain, leading to a sense of fear about the future and potential further losses; basically, grief can trigger feelings of fear because it disrupts your sense of security and normalcy.

Key Points Regarding the Connection Between Grief and Fear

• Uncertainty

When someone dies, it creates a void in your life, leaving you questioning what's next and how to navigate life without them, which can manifest as fear of the unknown.

• Loss of Safety

A significant loss can make the world feel less safe, leading to anxieties about potential further losses or dangers.

- **Physical Sensations**

Both grief and fear share similar physical sensations like tightness in the chest, rapid heartbeat, and difficulty breathing, further intertwining the emotions.

- **Anticipatory Grief**

Even before a loss occurs, the fear of losing someone can lead to anticipatory grief, causing anxiety and worry.

The fourth need grievers have is the need to face their fears. Grief feels like fear because fear, in a sense, becomes our reality. My worst nightmare came true when my daughter died.

Facing fears in grief involves actively confronting our anxieties, worries and perceived fears that arise as a natural part of the grieving process, where the loss of a loved one can trigger deep-seated fears about the future, loneliness, or even our own mortality, requiring us to acknowledge and work through these emotions to move forward.

Key Aspects of Facing Fear in Grief

- **Identify Your Fears**

Recognizing specific anxieties that surface during grief, such as fear of being alone, fear of making decisions without the deceased, or fear of the unknown future.

- **Validate Your Feelings**

Understanding that fear is a normal and expected response to loss and allowing yourself to feel these emotions without judgment.

- **Gradual Exposure**

Slowly engaging with situations that trigger fear, like visiting the deceased person's belongings or talking about them with others, to gradually desensitize yourself.

- **Healing Happens in Community**

We don't get through grief alone. Become part of a grief community at your church. Reach out to friends, family, grief support groups, a pastor or a therapist to share your fears and receive emotional validation, support and spiritual guidance.

Healthy Fear and Unhealthy Fear

Fear can be healthy and unhealthy. It is programmed into our nervous systems and gives us the survival instincts we need to keep ourselves safe from danger. Primal fears help us survive. A lion in the bush should be feared. Stoves are hot and knives are sharp.

Fear is unhealthy when it makes you more cautious than you need to be to stay safe. Fear is unhealthy when it prevents you from moving forward in your grief, therefore holding you back from any progress or steps forward. The goal is not to necessarily eliminate fear but to integrate it.

Types of Fear Accompanied by Grief

- Fear of a loss happening again
- Fear of being abandoned by God and loved ones
- Fear of not grieving correctly

- Fear of vulnerability
- Fear of never being happy again
- Fear of the unknown
- Fear of change
- Fear of death

Perfect Love Drives Out Fear

Fear is an emotion caused by the belief that something or someone poses a threat to us or our loved ones. The Devil uses unhealthy fear as a weapon to disrupt our faith. He wants us to doubt God and His plan for us. If Satan can move us to a point of unbelief, then he can cause us to distrust God.

The Bible says that fear doesn't come from God: "There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear" (1 John 4:18). It also says, "God is love" (1 John 4:16). When you're afraid, it's not from God because the essence of God is love and there is no fear in God's love.

As a pastor, I've learned the number one thing most people fear is death—either your own death or the death of a loved one. The Devil will use that fear to manipulate you. But the good news is Jesus defeated death and destroyed the Devil's work. So, now, when we grieve, we grieve with hope.

We grieve because we miss our loved ones who have gone on before us. We fully grieve but know we will see them again in heaven.

Whenever you sense fear creeping into your psyche, whether it's the fear of your own death, the death of a loved one, or some other fear—remember that unhealthy fear is not from God. Ask Him to help you face your fears and to drive out fear with His perfect love.

Facing My Fear

After Jackie died, I took two weeks off from work, which was not nearly enough time to process the pain of her loss but there was some conflict at church I needed to come back to deal with. When I returned to work, I took a short detour each day to the church, so I wouldn't pass by the radiation center where we had such a horrific experience with Jackie. Jackie's radiation treatment left a bad taste in my mouth, and I had a bad memory of the place and that day. The center had become a trigger for the pain and anger I felt regarding Jackie's brain tumor. On the day of treatment, Jackie cried for a few hours and didn't understand why she had to go through such an agonizing procedure.

After a couple of weeks of avoiding the Auburn Radiation Oncology Center, I felt ready to face my fear head on. I drove up Bell Road and came face-to-face with the radiation center. I parked on the side of the road and walked straight to the front, staring that place down for a few minutes as I prayed to God for strength to overcome my fear.

A few minutes later, I drove the extra two blocks to work. After embracing my feelings and standing up to the fear, I never took that detour to work again.

The secret to eliminating fear in your life is to move against the fear. King David said, “Yeah, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death. I will fear no evil for Thou art with me” (Psalm 23:4 KJV). If God is for us, who can be against us? When you are ready in your grief process, do the very thing you fear.

Navigating the rocky terrain of grief is a faith journey. David said, “The LORD is my light, and my salvation, whom shall I fear. The LORD is the stronghold of my life – of whom shall I be afraid” (Psalm 27:1-2).

Physical Symptoms Can Accompany Grief

Grieving people feel anxious about their own health and the safety of their loved ones. Anxiety causes fear, which can then manifest physically. One week after Jackie died, my other daughter, Jessica, who was seven years old at the time, was experiencing terrible pain in her abdomen. Carrie and I thought, Oh no, not again! She would bend over in pain from stomach cramps and cry because the pain was so intense. We took her to the hospital immediately—the same one Jackie received treatment at—to determine what was wrong.

After a battery of tests, the doctor said, “Mr. and Mrs. Page, there is nothing physically wrong with your daughter. It was all in her head, which caused her to have pain in her stomach.” Jessica was having a difficult time processing the hurt and pain from losing her sister. If you swallow your emotions, your stomach keeps score. This is what Jessica was experiencing after the loss. The pain got worse at night. This was when she would normally spend time with Jackie, talking themselves to sleep every night in a bedroom they shared together. After a couple of weeks, the stomach pain went away.

What We Run from Pursues Us and What We Face Transforms Us

What we resist, persists. What we run from pursues us. What we face transforms us. The transformation is found in the rubble of our grief and pain.

It’s natural to want to run away from pain and disconnect from it. We are biologically predisposed to avoid pain. Contrary to what some people believe, intense pain from grief is not like touching a hot stove. When you’re in intense grief, it’s like the entire hot stove has fallen on you. No wonder we want to avoid those feelings.

We must honor the pace of our grief. We will continually revisit grief throughout our life. Grief lasts longer than we think. Grief never ends because our love never ends. I never got to experience Jackie’s graduation from high school. I never got to teach her how to drive. I never got to walk her down the aisle for her wedding. I never got to experience the birth of her child and my grandchild. I never dreamed we’d experience grief in such a profound way at Jessica’s wedding as Jackie was Jessica’s maid of honor. This was extremely gratifying for me but at the same time, it was incredibly painful.

As human beings, we can't take all the pain in one day. We touch the pain (hot stove) and then retreat and need a break. Respect the wisdom and timing of your grief process. I've learned that it's not my job to move people along quickly in their grief. They need to go at their own pace.

Buffaloes Run into the Storm

Grief is a storm in our lives—maybe the biggest storm we'll ever face. The only choice that we have is how we respond to the storm. And more specifically, when and how we respond to those storms.

Colorado is known for the world-famous Rocky Mountains. Many people don't realize that the state of Colorado is divided nearly in half: the western part of the state is the great Rocky Mountains and to the eastern part of the state is the great Kansas Plains. Because of this unique landscape, they have the Rocky Mountains and the Plains. Colorado is one of the only places in the world that has both buffaloes and cows.

When storms come, they nearly always come from the West and roll out towards the East. Cows can sense that a storm is coming from the West. So, a cow will try to run East to get away from the storm. The only problem is cows aren't very fast. So, the storm catches up with them rather quickly. Without knowing any better, the cows continue to try to outrun the storm. But instead of outrunning the storm, they run with the storm, maximizing the amount of pain, time, and frustration they experience. We, as human beings, do the same with the storms in our lives, including loss and grief.

What buffaloes do is unique in the animal kingdom. Buffaloes wait for the storm to cross right over the crest of the peak of the mountaintop. And as the storm rolls over the ridge, buffaloes turn and charge directly West into the storm. They run at the storm and by doing so, they run straight through it, minimizing the amount of pain, time, and frustration they experience from that storm. This is a great metaphor for all of us who have experienced loss because even though our losses are different, we all face storms.¹

We don't get to choose whether we experience storms. The only choice that we have is how we respond to the storms in our lives. Which direction are you heading?

Chasing Daylight or Running Toward the Darkness?

Poet John Donne makes a point that although east and west seem the farthest removed on a map, they eventually meet on a globe. What therefore appear as opposites come together in time if we follow one or the other long enough and far enough.

Jerry Sittser wrote, "The quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise."

We have the power to choose the direction our lives will head; will we run from our loss or face it the best we are able?

Darkness from grief is inevitable and unavoidable, so maybe it would be best to walk into the darkness rather than try to outrun it. Maybe it would be best to allow my experience of loss to take me on a journey wherever that may lead, and to allow myself to be transformed by my suffering rather than to think I can somehow avoid it. It's your choice in terms of which way you turn.

In our next session you will learn that grief is not something we get over. Loss is something we learn to live with and can serve as a wake-up call to live life to the fullest.

- Dave



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification
Course taught by Dr. David Page through The
School of Grief.

Dr. David