

GROWING INTO YOUR GRIEF



GRIEF COURSE

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Grief Course

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Don't Get Over It - Grow into It

Grief isn't something you "get over." Grief is a tool God gives us to get through our losses and transitions in life. Loss is unavoidable but grief is a choice. It's important to choose to grieve. Many people choose not to grieve and instead they stuff it.

In our modern culture in language, we tend to use the phrase "getting over something." I've learned through experience you don't get over something rather you grow into it. My daughter Jackie has become part of the landscape of my life.

It's not over, it's into. It's not through, it's absorbing it, like wearing a piece of clothing until it fits better. I now wear it differently, I carry it a little more lightly, but I still carry it. I think it's because my soul has a bit more spiritual muscle than it did 20 years ago. I keep asking, "How can I grow through this?" "How can I grow in my faith?" "How can I be better at walking along side others in their grief?"

We will carry loss for the rest of our lives and that's how it should be. There is no stage called "closure" in grief. Our friends and family may want us to find closure because our pain is making them uncomfortable.

Kay Warren's Facebook Post

In our modern world, we often share our grief feelings online. Kay Warren was angry. She had a right to be angry. Kay is the co-founder of Saddleback Church and a dear friend. Her son Matthew died from suicide. This is part of what she wrote on Facebook:

"As the one-year anniversary of Matthew's death approaches, I have been shocked by some subtle and not-so-subtle comments indicating that perhaps I should be ready to *move on*... I have to tell you – the old Rick and Kay are gone. They're never coming back. We will never be the same again."

"Because these comments from well-meaning folks wounded me so deeply, I doubted myself and thought perhaps I really am not grieving *well* (whatever that means). 'When are you coming back to the stage at Saddleback?' 'We need you,' someone cluelessly said to me recently. Mourners are encouraged to quickly move on, turn the corner, get back to work, think of the positive, be grateful for what is left, have another baby, and other unkind, unfeeling, obtuse, and downright cruel comments."

"What does this say about us - other than we're terribly uncomfortable with death, with grief, with mourning, with loss – or we're so self-absorbed that we easily forget the profound suffering the loss of a child creates in the shattered parents and remaining children."

Within seven days, her 800-word post had gone viral with 3.75 million readers and 10,000 comments. Thousands of individuals shared stories of lost family members due to illness, suicide, or accidents. They recounted the insensitivity of family and friends, and their own shame and guilt about their overwhelming grief.

Kay's post is a good summary of what not to say to those in grief and why those things shouldn't be said. I feel like printing her words around my neck that say, "Please just read Kay Warren's Facebook post."

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego's Relevance to Grief

When Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego faced the fiery furnace, they had no idea how their world-famous story would turn out. Grief and pain can feel like a fiery furnace.

Their confidence in God's ability to save them was not based on any prior guarantee of deliverance. This was not a test to determine whether God would come through and therefore deserve the faith and service of these three young men. Even if the outcome would be death, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were committed to God alone.

As these three friends faced the king, their confident words couldn't have been more different from a panicked foxhole prayer. They did not beg, "Save me, God, and I'll serve you." Instead, they declared, in effect, "We will worship you alone, O Lord, no matter whether you save us."

As their bodies were sent hurtling into the flames, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego were more than prepared to die.

Instead — in the midst of that fiery trial — their ropes fell off, they stood up, and One like God's Son appeared to them. This was a preincarnation appearance by Jesus Christ walking with them in the fire. God didn't take them around the fire but through the fire and was with them in their trial. In the same way, God doesn't take us around our grief but enters into our pain and suffering with us. Jesus is with us in our grief.

This is not some God who remains distant on his throne, pulling the strings of the universe. This is a God who becomes a human being and enters into the human story and in such an inauspicious way. And then with a birth which was lowly enough, his downward trajectory continued until he dies outside the city gates on a hill in the most torturous way a person could be executed. And then he actually went all the way to hell for us. This is unspeakable to me. In the end, I think it's the Christian answer to suffering. It's that God chooses to come and enter into our human world, our human existence, our human predicament, our grief, and suffer in a way that even we will never be able to comprehend.

Plunging into the Darkness

Jerry Sittser had a dream where he was chasing frantically after a setting sun and had a feeling of utter panic because he didn't want to let the sun go. He wanted to stay in the fiery warmth of that sun. And it occurred to him over time that the sun's going to beat me to the horizon. So finally, he stopped running and exhausted as he was, and then watched with horror as the sun set below the horizon. And then he looked over my shoulder to the east and saw the darkness sweeping over him. And then he would wake up. How horrifying to live in existential darkness for the rest of your life.

Sittser said his dream was so painful. It was like torture, soul torture. Two things happened to him in the next week. He talked to his sister about his dream. And she said, "Jerry, this might be a cue to you. As long as you run west, you'll actually stay in the darkness all the longer. But if you have the courage to turn east and plunge into the darkness, all the sooner will you come to the sunrise." Then a his cousin sent a poem written by John Donne, a very famous Christian poet from the 17th century.

And he describes the difference between east and west on a flat map where they're farthest removed from each other. The farther you go east, the farther you get from west. And when you look at a globe, because if you go east, you'll eventually come to the west because it's circular.

And now those two, the poem and his sister gave him a cue. If you can find the courage, however broken you are, the courage to step into the darkness with support from community, maybe a therapist and other things, all the sooner will you come to the number of sunrises that will happen in your life over the years to come.

And it's not a one-time occurrence. You keep coming, you keep plunging and then coming to this sunrise and plunging and coming to the sunrise. But that was a cue that was enormously helpful to me: dare to step into the darkness.

Recovery

In regard to recovery from loss, there is a difference between a broken leg and an amputation. We can't go back to something else before. I believe there are experiences in life where there is no recovery, if by recovery we mean we're going to be able to go back to something we had before. I think we need to have clear expectations going forward in our grief and change our definition of recovery.

Authors John James and Russell Friedman in their book, *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, define recovery as "Feeling better...claiming your circumstances instead of your circumstances claiming you and your happiness...finding new meaning for living, without fear of being hurt again...being able to enjoy fond memories without having them precipitate painful feelings of regret or remorse... acknowledging that it is perfectly all right to feel sad from time to time and to talk about those feelings no matter how those around you react...being able to forgive others when they say or do things that you know are based on their lack of knowledge about grief...one day realizing that your ability to talk about the loss you've experienced is indeed normal and healthy."

I still miss Jackie immensely and talk about her all the time (which I've learned is very healthy). I hold onto the hope that I will see her again in heaven. But I don't feel guilty anymore for feeling good. I know now that feeling good is not disrespectful to her memory. It's kind of like being injured physically but worse because you've been injured emotionally. The good news is you are in the process of healing from your loss. God is in the healing business.

Growing Through Loss

Author, radio host and artist, Joni Eareckson Tada, became a quadriplegic as a result of a diving accident when she was 17 years old and has been paralyzed from the shoulders down since then. One of her mantras that she says repeatedly is, "Lean into the pain, grow from the pain." Our natural reaction to pain is to say, "No, I want to get rid of the pain. I want to divorce it, medicate it, suppress it." We spend much of our time trying to avoid pain and loss and the call of discipleship is to grow into them.

Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted" (Matthew 5:4). He doesn't say "Blessed are those who've overcome mourning." Nor does he say, "Blessed are those who once mourned and aren't anymore." The verb for mourn is in the present tense, which means mourning is continuous.

I think the words of Jesus also remind us that our own pain should lead us to be able to carry the pain not just for ourselves, but for other people as well. It's kind of a job description for a believer, especially a maturing one.

Railroad Tracks

Does that mean God wants us to be continually sad? No. I used to think that life as a series of peaks and valleys; sometimes we're up, then we're down. But I've come to realize that life is much more like a set of parallel train tracks, with joy and sorrow running inseparably throughout our days.

Every day of your life good things happen. Beauty, accomplishment, pleasure, fulfillment, and perhaps even excitement occur. That's the track of joy. But every day of your life also holds disappointment, challenges, struggles, and perhaps even losses for you or those you love. That's the track of sorrow.

Most of us try to outsmart the sorrow track by concentrating our efforts on the joy track, as if by our positive outlook or outright denial of reality can make the sorrow track go away. That's impossible because joy and sorrow will always be present together. No matter how positive we think or how hard we try to visualize only happiness, the sorrow track remains. And in the strange paradox of the universe, at the exact moment you and I are experiencing pain, we are also aware of the sweetness of loving and the beauty still to be found.

One of our toughest challenges in life is to learn how to live on both of those tracks at the same time. But there's hope! Consider what it's like to stand between two sets of train tracks and look off into the horizon. Those parallel tracks come together as we look ahead. They are no longer distinguishable as two separate tracks.

That's the way it will be for us too. During our lifetime, we stand on the tracks looking for signs of Jesus Christ's return. We watch for the sights and sounds that will alert us that his appearance is very close. One day, in the brightness of his coming, we will meet him face to face. And when we do, the tracks of joy and sorrow will merge. The sorrow will disappear forever, and only the joy will remain.

Grief Never Dies Because Love Never Dies

Love always survives death. Let's not give death any more power than it already has. Death can end a physical life but not our relationship with our loved one, and certainly not our love because love always survives death - it never ends.

The Bible teaches that death is an enemy of mankind and God (1 Corinthians 15:26). It snatches away people in the prime of life, when they are still needed by their family, their work, their nation. It leaves behind the sorrowing widow, widower, and children.

God never meant that people should die. There was no death in the Garden of Eden, no pain, no tears, no suffering. But human beings had a will of their own, and they rebelled against God. The Bible teaches that death came because of sin, and death reigns today over the whole human race.

The Bible also teaches that this enemy, death, will ultimately be destroyed forever. The day is coming when Jesus Christ will reign as King of kings and Lord of lords. Everything that resists the will of God will be destroyed, and "the last enemy that will be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:26). Those who are in Jesus Christ will participate in the resurrection and will be given new bodies. These bodies will be glorious, powerful, spiritual, immortal, imperishable, sin-proof, age-proof, and death-proof. We will have bodies like the body of the Lord Jesus.

The Bible teaches that this enemy, death, has already been defeated. It was defeated at the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The final destruction of death lies in the future, and the fight with death continues at this hour, but the defeat of death belongs in the past, at the cross and the resurrection.

Nothing Can Separate Us from God's Love

The love of God never ends. Death can't separate us from God's love. Nothing that enters our life is able or sufficient to separate us from God's love demonstrated at the cross.

Paul wrote in Romans 8:38-39 (NLT): "And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

God's love allows the believer to be a conqueror in adversity (Romans 8:37). God walks with us through every adversity and hardship. We do not merely survive or squeak by. We are more than conquerors! In Christ, we are super-conquerors. This verse emphasizes the absolute and overwhelming victory that God gives to the believer through Christ. Believers are supremely victorious because of their relationship with Jesus Christ.

God allows nothing to separate us from his love (Romans 8:38-39). Paul considers some powerful threats in the universe, but none of them can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Don't let suffering cause you to doubt God's love. Suffering is designed to draw you closer to Christ and makes you more like him. You have nothing to fear. You are secure in God's love.

In grief, when everything else is gone, God's love continues. Love is the tie that binds us forever.

It is Well with My Soul – The Story Behind the Song

Horatio G. Spafford was a successful lawyer and businessman in Chicago with a lovely family - a wife, Anna, and five children. However, they were not strangers to tears and tragedy. Their young son died with pneumonia in 1871, and in that same year, much of their business was lost in the great Chicago fire. Yet, God in His mercy and kindness allowed the business to flourish once more.

On Nov. 21, 1873, the French ocean liner, Ville du Havre was crossing the Atlantic from the U.S. to Europe with 313 passengers on board. Among the passengers were Mrs. Spafford and their four daughters. Although Mr. Spafford had planned to go with his family, he found it necessary to stay in Chicago to help solve an unexpected business problem. He told his wife he would join her and their children in Europe a few days later. His plan was to take another ship.

About four days into the crossing of the Atlantic, the Ville du Harve collided with a powerful, iron-hulled Scottish ship, the Loch Earn. Suddenly, all of those on board were in grave danger. Anna hurriedly brought her four children to the deck. She knelt there with Annie, Margaret Lee, Bessie and Tanetta and prayed that God would spare them if that could be His will, or to make them willing to endure whatever awaited them. Within approximately 12 minutes, the Ville du Harve slipped beneath the dark waters of the Atlantic, carrying with it 226 of the passengers including the four Spafford children.

A sailor, rowing a small boat over the spot where the ship went down, spotted a woman floating on a piece of the wreckage. It was Anna, still alive. He pulled her into the boat and they were picked up by another large vessel which, nine days later, landed them in Cardiff, Wales. From there she wired her husband a message which began, "Saved alone, what shall I do?" Mr. Spafford later framed the telegram and placed it in his office.

Another of the ship's survivors, Pastor Weiss, later recalled Anna saying, "God gave me four daughters. Now they have been taken from me. Someday I will understand why."

Mr. Spafford booked passage on the next available ship and left to join his grieving wife. With the ship about four days out, the captain called Spafford to his cabin and told him they were over the place where his children went down.

According to Bertha Spafford Vester, a daughter born after the tragedy, Spafford wrote "It Is Well With My Soul" while on this journey.

When peace like a river attendeth my way,

When sorrows like sea billows roll,

Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,

It is well, it is well with my soul.

Chorus:

It is well with my soul,

It is well, it is well with my soul

Anna gave birth to three more children, one of which died at age four with dreaded pneumonia. In August 1881, the Spaffords moved to Jerusalem. Mr. Spafford died and is buried in that city.

And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, shall keep your hearts,
your minds through Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7).

THE END