

What I'm learning from grief

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We have seen a lot of death around here lately. Last summer, our neighbor came by to tell us he was throwing a block party. Two weeks later, he had a heart attack and died. His wife threw the party anyway. We planted a tree for him in his yard and drank lemonade.

My stepmother died after a long illness. We all sat for 20 long minutes in a mausoleum full of echoes, while two workers hoisted an urn containing her ashes into a two-storey columbaria using a creaky, moving scaffold.

Another elderly neighbor dropped dead suddenly at home alone one day last winter. After he died, and still to this day, I think of him every time I go outside to work in the yard. For twenty years, he was always there across the road, keeping an eye on our farm. He is no more.

In mid-summer, I was startled to learn that the man who runs my favorite restaurant in town, only in his 50's, had run off the road early one morning on his way home from work, flipped the car and was killed. He left a wife and two teenage girls.

An elderly friend of mine confided in me his disgust that the funeral director had charged him \$17,000 to bury his wife.

Now my mother-in-law has died. She was 92 and died at home. After I got the call, I left work and drove straight to her house. I was asked to help one of her daughters dress her body in preparation for her trip to the crematorium. She wore a deep pink outfit. And socks. Several of her children stood around, tearless, but dazed. The next day, a few of them went back to the house to clean out the freezer so it could be unplugged.

My husband, however, went out and bought himself some flowers.

What have I learned from experiencing death up close? I've learned that I both hate and love receiving those sympathy cards. I have no idea what to say when

someone says "I'm sorry for your loss". I want to work out my own salvation in fear and trembling, thank you very much. I want to stay busy in my solitary way. But many of the people I pastor are just the opposite. In grief, they flock like birds, and finger objects and tell stories, and eat.

I've learned that grief is as unique to each of us as the pores in our skin. There is no wrong or right way to do it.

Despite all that has been written about grief, there is very little to say when it knocks on your door. It's just this hole that nothing can fill, and it stays empty forever, but you keep going.

Of course, that's not what I say from the pulpit at funerals. I preach about resurrection and all that. But when death happens among my own circle of kin, I don't think about resurrection. I think about how my life and I will never be the same.

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