

Reorienting grief

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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Last week, I had a chance to teach at Omaha Presbyterian Seminary Foundation's Pastors' School. I love working with OPSF, since I received a scholarship from them as a student. They helped to make me the person I am, so I'm grateful for the opportunity to thank them.

There were a lot of interesting people on the Pastors' School faculty. [Gene Fowler](#) was among them. He lead us through grief training, pointing out the difference between modern and postmodern ideas of grieving. I was sort of soaking in all of it and I didn't take notes, so I don't have direct quotes. But his lectures stuck with me, so I wanted to write my reflections on what Gene had to say.

Grief is not an obstacle course. When we talk about grief, we often speak of it in terms of letting go, moving on, and getting over it. People want to know when they will be back to normal. But the loss of a loved one is not a bump in the road that we go over and then the pavement is smooth again. Grief fundamentally changes who we are.

With grief, we develop our relationship with the deceased in a new way. Gene said that he spoke with a woman who prayed every night before she fell asleep. When her spouse died, she began to say goodnight to her husband. She felt odd about that, but Gene assured her that it was okay. We cannot cut off our relationship with those who die, but we learn to relate to that person differently.

Mourning often forces us to rethink God. For many people, we think that God's only job is to protect our loved ones and ourselves. Then when someone we love dies, we begin to rethink our notions of who God is. Often, this cannot be worked out solely in a therapeutic session. People need pastoral care.

Grief is a process of rewriting our story. Not only do we rethink our ideas of God, but we also need to rewrite our own stories. When we get pregnant and our

heads fill with all beautiful ideas of whom that child will be, and then we suffer a miscarriage, we have to recreate our narrative. When we imagine growing old with our spouse, and he dies suddenly, we have to rethink our plotline. We have to write our story of bereavement and we often need to rewrite where we're heading.

Ancient Psalms of Lament reflect healthy grieving. Gene said that the psalmist were so honest that we don't even allow them in our church half the time. Then he went through a beautiful process of comparing lament psalms to [Theresa Rando's](#) stages of grief and led us through a process of writing our own laments.

Recognize loss—address

React to separation—complaint

Reexperience deceased—trust

Relinquish—petition

Readjust—assurance

Reinvest—thanks

We will revisit grief. Often, when we go through a loss as a child, we will need to revisit that grief in different phases of our lives—as teens, young adults, in middle age, etc.

Grief does not just happen with death, but with many losses. Within the room, grief seemed to resonate with many different experiences. Divorce was a big one, where people had to learn to develop relationships with their spouses and children in a new way and rewrite their own stories.

Pastors experience grief with “clergy killing” congregations. There are some ethical questions about the term “clergy killing,” but I'll use it for shorthand. Pastors know what I mean. There was a great deal of resonance around the room when we talked about the grieving process a minister goes through when a pastoral relationship dissolves. One pastor said in his early years, he always assumed that if there was a problem in the pastor/parish relationship, it was always the pastor's fault. But then, after getting out of a couple of churches, just in the nick of time, he realized there was more to it than just blaming the pastor. Pastors have to rethink our view of God, understand the church differently, and rewrite the stories about ourselves. The main thing that Gene left with was that when we are in clergy killing

situations, we can stop trying to please the congregation. It's okay to take care of ourselves.