

I am terrible at grieving, or an armored heart

By [Martha Spong](#)

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I am terrible at grieving. I grew up in a family and an environment in which crying generally and grieving specifically were not only discouraged but practically anathema. When my Grandmother Spong died, my father, who was her only child and as close to her emotionally as he was to anyone, told me, “I’m all right if you’re all right,” which was his way of saying, “Don’t cry, or I might, too.”

As an adult, I faced three major losses in my thirties—first my mother, then a pregnancy at 21 weeks, then my father—and in each case, the circumstances made it difficult for me to grieve properly, at least as I came to understand proper grieving, ideas presented in classes at seminary, where I studied pastoral care through the life span and took a whole course on bereavement.

I’m not sure I got any better at grieving. Instead I learned to squeeze my eyes shut and keep the tears inside.

Crying, you see, frightens me. I associate it with a severe postpartum depression 20 years ago, a time when nothing seemed as if it would ever be right again, a time when everything that mattered seemed poised to slip over the edge of an abyss. I said I had cried all my tears, but what I really meant was, I am not going to let things get that far out of my control again. If something threatens to hurt me, I will armor myself against it.

Just about the only exception to that armor was my first dog, Molly. She was charming, winsome, life-rearranging. I was 41 and had never lived with a dog before and had no idea how much it would feel like having a baby, another child to raise. A Bernese Mountain Dog, she had the terrible joints that some Berners do, and the crippling arthritis to go with them; that she lived to be almost seven years old was a testimony to both my commitment to her and her incredible joie de vivre.

After her death, I did allow myself one good cry. (Emphasis on “allow,” which implies control, no?)

I always tell people who are afraid they will cry at a funeral that it's exactly the right time for it, that their tears are a tribute to the person they loved and will miss, but I am confessing to you how poorly I do it. You may know what I mean. We hold ourselves together for the sake of others, because who doesn't want to be a hero. And isn't it a more secure feeling to be that hero than to let the feeling flow through and out of us? If we can only hold it all inside, we will never have to admit to vulnerability.

Aric Clark, Doug Hagler, and Nick Larson write in [*Never Pray Again*](#),

To mourn, to fully and consciously engage with the truth and pain of loss, is agonizing. It is something so difficult and frightening that incredibly successful people who are otherwise driven and aggressive risk-takers stereotypically shy away from grief.

And Becca Stevens, in [*Letters from the Farm*](#) suggests three Gs to keep faith simple:

Grieve fully, feel Gratitude profoundly, and be humble enough to do the Grunt work!

Books, darn it, sometimes make me think about things I would rather not, make me feel things I would just as soon compress into the components of more armor. Not long after reading both the quotes above and confessing to my journal that I am terrible at grieving, I opened Facebook on my iPhone and clicked on the daily memories they now provide whether I want them or not, and there I found a picture of my dog Hoagie.

Hoagie was a rescue who came to us at a time when my daughter and I really needed him even more than he needed us. He would have come with me to Pennsylvania, but he developed cancer and did not live long enough to embark on the new chapter of life with us.

"Oh, Hoagie," I said to my iPhone, to Facebook, to no one in particular, as I sat in bed in the early morning half light. I blinked, because if you blink hard enough, or scrinch up your eyes just right, the tears will go away. Except that they don't. Something calcifies. After kathrynzj's Old Man Dog died last fall, we started talking about when and whether to look for a new dog, and where, and whether to get a puppy, and although my loss was further in the past, I could not say I was ready. I

didn't really grieve, I realized. I set my eyes toward the horizon, and I hardly stopped to let myself be sad, to grieve for the dog, the dogs, the life I thought I had, because of course the future looked favorable and many good things lay ahead.

I looked at the picture again, and I remembered the words I scrawled in my journal the early morning of the day before, and I looked at the picture again, and I cried.

At my house there is a new dog, this crazy puppy Teddy, a lab mix who loves my slippers, who is mouthy and likes hard pets and peeled carrots, and whose short coat feels good to the touch.

He likes to stand on his back legs to see what's on the table or the counter, just like Molly.

He does this at the storm door when we leave the house, front paws up like a child, sending his heart with us in little cries of love and longing.

An armored heart cannot love that way. An armored heart cannot move into joy.

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