

# The transforming power of grief

## A widow's story

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**G**iven a choice, none of us would choose suffering or grief as a means of transformation. Yet everyone has faced or will face losses, and these experiences can be an opportunity for personal growth and transformation.

My husband, Harold Hartzler, had a heart attack and died unexpectedly on October 6, 1999. It was a beautiful fall day. I

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was making a blueberry pie when Harold gave me his usual good-bye kiss and left to run on the millrace path in Goshen. He didn't come back. During the next few days I experienced an outpouring of love from family and friends as they surrounded my children and me. One week later, Harold's ashes were brought to me, and my children and I took the ashes out onto Lake Michigan

in Harold's boat and scattered them there as the sun set on another day and on the life that I had known and loved.

Thus I entered a season of mourning far more painful and intense than I had ever imagined grief could be. Each of us has experienced the pain of loss: the death of a loved one, a spouse, parent, child, perhaps an unborn child; the death of a marriage through divorce; the loss of health or job; some other unexpected transition. As I share from my grief story, I invite you to enter into my suffering or to allow yourself to feel your own pain. Let it carry you to a place deep inside yourself where you can meet God.

I will borrow from Joyce Rupp four aspects of praying a goodbye: recognition, reflection, ritualization, and reorientation.<sup>1</sup> Grief is irregular, and these four acts do not follow a linear

pattern. The stages of grief overlap and mourners often cycle back through stages again and again. We each experience grief differently, but for many of us a season of grief is full of paradoxes and confusion, with backward, upside-down, and inside-out times.

## **Recognition**

When Harold died, my children ranged in age from 15 to 25. Telling them that their daddy had died was one of the most difficult things I did in those first days. When I told my 18-year-old daughter, she sobbed inconsolably, first in my arms and then in the arms of pastors, mentor, guidance counselor, and friends. I told my 25-year-old son in Portland, Oregon, over the phone. He screamed “No. No. No.” I cry as I remember, because that first telling made Harold’s death even more real for me than seeing and touching his lifeless body.

I entered into a stage of shock and numbness. Later I wrote in my journal: “I have felt numb a lot during these past three weeks. Then sometimes I feel a big aching emptiness, and when the pain seems too much to bear, I begin to feel numb again.” I couldn’t deal with the full reality of my loss in those first weeks, so I went about many of my tasks by rote. Tumultuous feelings interrupted my dazed days. I felt suspended between the world as it had been and the world as it is now—without Harold. I was being

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transformed by his death, but from what and into what I didn’t know. At times Harold’s absence was palpable. Each day I felt as much of the pain of his absence as the protective numbness would allow. I knew that I needed to walk into the darkness, embrace my grief, and feel the pain deep within.

As the weeks went by I concluded that what I felt was unimaginable. This pain can be known only by experiencing it. One acquaintance told me that she knew exactly how I felt. I said, “You do?,” thinking her husband must have died and I hadn’t heard. She said, “Yes. My mother died 10 months ago.” I must have stared at her dumbfounded. I know the pain of a parent’s death, and it is not the same. Many friends said, “I can’t imagine your pain.” They were right. Just as in marriage there is mystery in

the two becoming one, so in the death of a marriage partner there is mystery in the depth of the pain caused by the loss. In *A Grief Observed*, C. S. Lewis says that the death of a beloved is an amputation.<sup>2</sup> It is. A part of me is gone forever. We humans don't get over an amputation.

Great comfort has come from others who have been widowed. One widow embraced me, then stood looking into my eyes with

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tears filling her own, and without words communicated much: I knew that she knew. On this journey words are often unnecessary.

In those early months I talked about walking *in* grief. I couldn't say, "I am walking *through* grief," because I didn't know if I would ever get to the other side. Harold's absence was always present with me. The fact of his death was so deeply etched in my psyche that his absence was the last thing I

thought of before I went to sleep at night and the first thing I thought of when I awoke. Some people talk about waking up and reaching to the other side of the bed to touch the one who is no longer there. I never did that. I was aware even in my dreams that Harold had died. And his absence made that valley of grief seem deep and dark and long.

Then I realized that I was in the valley of the *shadow* of death. And in order for there to be a shadow, there must be a source of light. Suddenly I knew clearly that God's presence was that light for me. I felt the wonderful mystery that is God's presence. In good times I have often been aware of God's blessing, but never had the divine presence been so real and so comforting.

For months I found it difficult to pray. But I wanted to be in the presence of praying people, so I continued to go to the prayer group on Wednesday evenings at College Mennonite Church, my home congregation. As others prayed, I wept. This grief plunged me into the depths of my being, depths I hadn't known existed. There, in my pain and anguish and lament, I have communed with God. And in that divine, holy, loving, sustaining presence, words are not needed.

Music has often taken me to places that I had not known before Harold's death. It has also been prayer beyond words. One

of my first outings after Harold's death was to a retirement center where my brother and his family were singing. Some of the residents requested songs. I thought I would cry when we sang "Shall We Gather at the River" and other old songs about heaven, but I didn't. But then we sang "Nearer My God to Thee," and I began to weep. The tears didn't stop until long after the hymn ended.

### **Reflection**

My acts of recognition and reflection overlapped from the beginning. Some widowed people say they cannot return to the places where they had special times with their spouse. But I needed to go to those places, even knowing that I would feel deep sorrow there. So I went, and as tears ran down my face, I moved slowly forward on my grief journey. Remembering is sometimes the best way to forget.

As we grieve, we need to tell our stories over and over. The telling confirms the reality of loss, and only when we fully accept the reality of death can we move toward a time when we will experience some healing. Todd Davis, associate professor of English at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, says that we tell our stories to try to make sense of life. As I tell my story I remove some of grief's power over me and I "become empowered to reconstruct [my] present reality" in a way that accounts for my loss and lays to rest some of the past "without obliterating the continued healing presence of memory."<sup>3</sup> In the telling, I open doors to the living and to life, without closing the door to the past and to Harold. Thus I establish reference points for making sense of both my past and my present life.

Grief work is hard work. For me, the work of reflection was complicated by so many other difficult tasks, my widow's work: dealing with mountains of paper work, legal matters, financial issues, income taxes, health insurance questions; making a new will; writing "deceased" in the blanks when I filled out forms; and being a single parent to my two adopted teenage daughters who both have multiple health issues. During those early months it was difficult to find time and energy to reflect on life-and-death issues, on my spiritual journey, and on my future as a single woman. So I enrolled in my first seminary class four months after Harold died,

and began daily journaling. Writing has been a means of reflection that has served me well. It has helped me move along in this mixed-up, unpredictable season of grief.

### **Ritualization**

As I have reflected over the months, rituals and symbols have become important to me. So ritualization also overlaps with reflection. I entered into some rituals, knowing they were important to me without fully understanding why. I wore black most days during that first year out of a desire to identify with widows throughout the world and throughout the ages who give

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me hope that life does go on. I have burned many candles. Candles in my windows glow day after day and night after night. Candles somehow represent a glimmer of hope, a beacon in a storm, and the Light of the world.

As the anniversary of Harold's death approached, I felt a need to mark that occasion with ritual and symbol. Many cultures have traditions for the first anniversary of a death. Since we do not, I

learned about other cultures, I read, and I talked with my widowed friends. I learned that rituals and symbols are the language of the soul; they express what words sometimes cannot. Rituals and symbols open doors of transformation.

I considered what Jim Lapp did on the first anniversary of his wife Nancy's death.<sup>4</sup> He gathered family members and friends, and they remembered Nancy and had a time of worship. Jim wrote about what followed: "On the table burned two candles in candleholders used at our wedding 39 years before. To mark the change, I transferred the light from Nancy's candle to a small lamp as a symbol of the different but enduring place she will hold in my life. With great poignancy, Nancy's wedding candle was then snuffed out. My light was transferred to a new candle and candleholder to symbolize a fresh beginning. Then my wedding candle was also extinguished."<sup>5</sup>

I was not ready to do what Jim had done. I decided that I wanted to walk in silence along the millrace in Goshen on October 6. I invited family and close friends "who aren't afraid to

weep, or walk with those who weep” to join me. We remembered and honored Harold as we walked along the path that now feels like holy ground to me, the place where Harold’s spirit left his body, where his body began the process of returning to dust. A park bench has been placed there in memory of Harold and beside it is a rock on which his name is engraved. We continued our walk to the dam, and I felt carried as I was surrounded by God and the congregation of family and friends behind me. Like a great cloud they cheered me on with their presence. We did not speak because words were not necessary. A blue heron escorted us part of the way, which to me was a beautiful symbol of hope and of the unexpected gifts I have received on this journey.

We returned home to continue remembering Harold. My son Jon had baked bread for the occasion and my son Joel had helped me make grape juice. I arranged candles on my dining room table: A Christ candle is in the center. It is for me a symbol of God’s abiding presence in the past, of light for this day, and of hope for the future. It is also a symbol of my commitment to keep Christ in the center of my life in my ongoing journey. Around the Christ candle I placed other candles in memory of loved ones who have died untimely deaths: Harold, of course; my father, who died when I was 21; Eric Liechty; Gerald Kauffman; Keith Gingrich; Marlin Miller; Roger Unzicker; Charlotte Holsopple Glick and others in that great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before.

### **Reorientation**

At the end of the evening we told stories. And we laughed. It feels good to laugh again, and I have learned that sometimes laughter brings even more relief than crying! Reorientation has been occurring slowly over the past months in the midst of my reflecting and ritualizing. I believe that God dwells within each one of us, at the center and the core of our being. Remembering that images are the language of the soul, I understand Joyce Rupp when she says that images “connect our outer world to this inner world of our self where the divine dwells.... It is there that life is gradually reoriented or given renewed direction and energy.”<sup>6</sup> It is then and there that healing and transformation can occur.

But even in healing there is pain. About six months after Harold’s death I awoke one morning and began to think about my

day. I thought about a person I was going to meet later that day. Suddenly I realized that Harold had not been my first thought, and I cried. I cried because letting go seemed even harder than hanging on. But I am learning that I need to let go so that my life can go on, and so that I can more fully dwell in God's presence.

In grief a gift eventually emerges if we open ourselves to it. My most treasured gift during this season of grief is experiencing God's presence. In God's presence, I have found a new joy. As Henri Nouwen explained, the cup of sorrow and the cup of joy are one and the same.<sup>7</sup> There is an old saying, "When the heart weeps for what it has lost, the spirit laughs for what it has found." It is a paradox that pathos and joy can co-exist in the midst of suffering.

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And yet, that is what I am learning. Kahlil Gibran in *The Prophet* says that "your joy is your sorrow unmasked. The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain." Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall write, "The secret to joy in suffering...is not in denying the pain, but in focusing on...God's great love and care for us. When we feel intensely loved in the midst of our suffering, suffering cannot take our joy away."<sup>8</sup> I have experienced God's love and care as I have been surrounded by the people of God. For "just as God's love was made

incarnate...in the person of Jesus," so "God's love becomes incarnate for us in the body of Christ."<sup>9</sup> Thus, as I drink this cup of sorrow in the presence of God and my community, I am also drinking the cup of joy!

These lessons of grief are leading me toward a greater understanding of the meaning of life and toward transformation into wholeness, and for that I am grateful.

*It has been like a year of Lent,  
of giving up one thing after another.  
Only this Lent will not be followed by Easter Sunday  
when I resume doing or eating what I have given up.  
For I am giving up a life  
with Harold's companionship and friendship.*

But now I know a different kind of Easter.  
With faith restored, I look forward to bright new days,  
even knowing that clouds will appear  
and storms will come again.  
But having survived a year of deep sorrow and grief,  
having lived through what seemed like  
insurmountable difficulties,  
I have hope that I can face whatever comes my way.  
My life will cycle through more days of Lent,  
and Good Friday will come again,  
but it won't last forever,  
for now I know that the hope of Easter  
follows a season of grief  
and in the Resurrection is the promise of life after death.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Joyce Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1988), 78–89.

<sup>2</sup> C. S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961).

<sup>3</sup> Todd Davis and Kenneth Womac, “Reading the Ethics of Mourning in the Poetry of Donald Hall,” in *Mourning and Literature*, ed. Christian Riegel (forthcoming).

<sup>4</sup> James M. Lapp, “On Losing a Spouse,” *Christian Living* (June 2000): 21–24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Rupp, *Praying Our Goodbyes*, 87.

<sup>7</sup> Henri Nouwen, *Can You Drink the Cup?* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptists: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Newton, Kans.: Faith & Life Press, 1994), 105.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*