

Navigating grief

Reflections on grief and aging

Marian Durksen Wiens

Grief and spirituality

Grief in later life is an everyday occurrence. At first glance this would not be obvious since we tend to hide or discount our grief. We name the aging process *annoying* or *challenging* or other words rather than *grief*. In small ways and in larger ways our lives are infused with losses causing grief.

Our spirituality informs how we live in this daily grief. Daily spiritual practices invite us to focus our attention on *God with us*, every day, even



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as grief is part of our daily living. Our daily spiritual practices allow, encourage, or assist us to live a both/and way of thinking and being: both with the losses *and* with the blessings of our age and stage; both with the grief of limited seeing, hearing, moving, and energy *and* with valuing and enjoying relationships, nature, music, reading, and many other

life-giving experiences; both intensely missing our loved one *and* thankful for the memories as well as holding onto God's love.

Grief may also call us to find spiritual practices other than what we have done previously. There are a variety of reflective and nurturing ways to spend time with God in meditation and prayer. Listening to God is crucial for ongoing awareness of God. Every single day the Spirit moves as we take time for spiritual practices. Every day the grief is touched with love from the Spirit moving. It may be with tears. It may be with new thoughts. It may bring smiles of memories. It may be in a sense of peace.

We may be guided to Scriptures and psalms of lament and sorrow, allowing them to speak into our grief. Grief invites us to look at Scripture in new ways, allowing for new insights and ways of thinking about our relationship with the Holy as we grieve.

In her book *The Cure for Sorrow*, Jan Richardson writes blessings for expressing her grief. She explains, “A blessing helps us to keep breathing—to abide in this moment, and the next moment, and the one after that.”¹ Other authors may bring encouraging words as they speak their grief in their spiritual journey. A Buddhist teacher shares his discovery that suffering is a part of life, and there is no escape from it. This is the first Noble Truth, and acknowledging it can help us to suffer less. If we can accept where we are and not judge the disruption in our life as wrong or bad, we can touch great freedom. This is because fighting what is doesn’t actually work. As the saying goes, “Whatever we resist persists.” Spirituality helps us allow God and the reality of life to come together. Spirituality is life-giving in our times of grief.

Healthy expressions of grief

Grief needs expression. Grief has a way of being expressed regardless of our choosing. Choosing our own way of grieving gives it a focus and meaning.

Acknowledging grief is crucial. Naming experiences of grief is important. We not only name the persons or situation we are grieving, but we also realistically name how this grief causes us to think and feel. Naming both the small griefs of fumbling fingers and aching joints and the much bigger griefs of the death of a loved one are significant. It is helpful to name both kinds of grief. Healthy expressions of grief keep us from becoming bitter and cynical and move us to become more mellow in aging, rather than complaining and harsh.

Acknowledging and naming our grief is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith but a way of being realistic about our losses. It frees us from hiding and pretending. Naming our grief allows us to be more compassionate to ourselves, which then brings out a more caring spirit for others and for life.

Acknowledging our grief can even lead us to see humor in our experiences. Realistic dry humor can lighten our lives and our relationships with those close to us. Remembering our loved ones with their own funny comments can both make us sad and give us relief. Expressing humor does not discount our grief.

1 Jan Richardson, *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief* (Orlando: Wanton Gospeller, 2020), xv.

Complaining drags us down emotionally and causes friction with others. Acknowledging our grief in healthy ways keeps us from wallowing in negative thinking and speaking.

Each of us is different in our temperament and characteristics. There is no right way to grieve. An introvert will likely choose to express their grief with writing and other self-focused expressions. One-on-one conversation with a trusted friend can be helpful. I am an introvert and was introduced to writing by my spiritual mentor some years ago. I find I write best in my own short sentence style. When struggling with a relational grief or other frustrations, I find writing psalms to God



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helpful in clarifying my thoughts and feelings. An extrovert will more likely need more other-focused interactions for expressing their grief.

Because grief can last for an extended period, it is helpful to explore compassionate and caring ways to carry or live with our grief. Visualizing a room or pocket or space to hold our grief can assist us in continuing on with our lives without being overwhelmed or stuck. Visualizing in this way helps us not feel guilty when we take time for enjoyment of life: we know we will take time when needed to visit the place of grief. Visualizing in this way honors our grief while allowing us to keep on living in peace. When we acknowledge and name our grief, we will find healthy ways of expressing it.

Tears allow us to feel the depth of our sorrow. They release the emotional strain of being sad, and they bring relief. Writing often helps express our grief. It may be helpful to write in ways that best fit for us: words, sentences, poems and psalms, or stories. Often this writing can come alongside our time with God. It can be interesting and eye opening to write out conversations with God. Writing comments or questions and then taking time for sitting and waiting for a response from God allows for new insights. God speaks through our thoughts, so we must trust that which comes to us in these conversations.

Because grieving affects all areas of our being, there are many ways of expressing it. Such activities may include:

1. creating visuals with colors, textures, and shapes as with mandalas or pottery;

2. listening to or creating music as an emotional way to express grief;
3. utilizing Scripture through contemplative reading, Scripture memorization, or using Scripture in conjunction to writing and visual art;
4. visualizing a favorite relaxing place (either imagined or real) to create a peaceful setting to calm the mind and heart;
5. holding and sipping a warm drink of tea or hot chocolate;
6. walking alone or with another in nature, swimming, or engaging in other light physical exercises such as biking or yoga as a form of healthy body care, which settles the mind and spirit;
7. talking with a trusted friend, spiritual director, or other listener as a way of sharing grief in a safe setting with compassionate persons.

Finding the right combination of expressions for our grief helps to keep us balanced. Having a discipline of spiritual practices and other disciplines for physical, emotional, and mental expressions of grief and self-care enhance our well being for the extended period of our lives.

Grief in old age

I conclude by offering my own expression of grief through poetry:

*Grief in old age
Is nothing new
The journey
Has been going on
For many years
The small deaths
Of leaving childhood (no responsibilities)
Leaving the teen years (trying out the new)
The young adult years (new ventures)
Left behind as aging happens
It hurts to acknowledge
Lack of strength, the need of help
Smaller losses adding up
Age mates sick and dying
Pain intensifies*

*Looking back
Years quickly gone
Replaced by helps
Like aids for seeing
And hearing
Facing grief
Acknowledging sadness
Speaking the pain
Living the Psalm
Of aging*

About the author

Marian Durksen Wiens has walked with many as a counselor and spiritual director. Now in her eighties, she is making her way through the grief of her daughter's death and her husband's Parkinson's diagnosis, alongside the losses of age. She spends her time reading, walking, swimming, quilting, and doing puzzles, often while listening to various kinds of music, depending on her frame of mind. One of her favorite nature spots is a rock on the Grand River (her prayer rock).