

To Be Cured
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Reading *The Sadness of Clothes* by Emily Fragos

When someone dies, the clothes are so sad. They have outlived their usefulness and cannot get warm and full. You talk to the clothes and explain that he is not coming back as when he showed up immaculately dressed in slacks and plaid jacket and had that beautiful smile on and you'd talk. You'd go to get something and come back and he'd be gone. You explain death to the clothes like that dream. You tell them how much you miss the spouse and how much you miss the pet with its little winter sweater. You tell the worn raincoat that if you talk about it, you will finally let grief out. The ancients etched the words for battle and victory onto their shields and then they went out and fought to the last breath. Words have that kind of power you remind the clothes that remain in the drawer, arms stubbornly folded across the chest, or slung across the backs of chairs, or hanging inside the dark closet. Do with us what you will, they faintly sigh, as you close the door on them. He is gone and no one can tell us where.

Sermon

With four children, my household goes through a lot of band-aids. While I don't relish the little bits of wrapping paper that I always seem to slip on with bare feet, I do secretly enjoy my role as She Who Makes it Better. Foster parenting means coming to terms over and over with the depth and breadth of early childhood trauma and so it's lovely to occasionally inhabit a world where pain is visible, explainable and solvable; "I slammed my hand in the door," "my sibling poked me," "I fell and it's bleeding," "I slightly bumped my leg and am now convinced that it's broken." You get the idea. And I can fix it all though the drugstore magic of a Doc McStuffins band-aid. Let me tell you, it's way closer to playing God than ministry ever is, even on a great day.

This humble band-aid application ritual is satisfying, I think, because it contrasts starkly with a deep truth of life: so many of the ways we hurt are invisible and too enormous even to fully comprehend. Sometimes there is nothing to see or hold on to while we grapple with a medical diagnosis or the death of a close loved one. Tragedy happens to us all at one time or another, in some way, and its aftermath can be devastating. Such is life.

Pain, grief, loss, whatever you call these inevitable hurts, are simply part of what it means to be alive. And thus the spiritual teacher Louise Hay says that “grief is not a condition to be cured but a natural part of life¹.”

Just as we are bound to encounter sadness in our own lives, if we are connected in any way to family members, friends, neighbors, acquaintances, coworkers, even strangers we barely know, then we also experience proximity to the pain and sorrow of others. This can be much harder and more confusing than witnessing a small child’s bump or cut because there’s no one-size-fits-all band-aid to whip out of the kitchen drawer and apply. So what can we do for our loved ones or anyone we might witness suffering? Can we do anything, anything at all that is actually helpful?

An expert in facing these hard questions is Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt. He directs the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado. His philosophy is that there are certain tenants that are especially essential when, as he elegantly puts it, one is companioning the bereaved².

His first piece of wisdom about companioning the bereaved is perhaps both the simplest and hardest: he suggests that we always bear in mind that companioning is about being present to another person’s pain; it is not about taking away that pain. Our task is only to bear witness, not to judge or direct the struggles we see play out. I’ve never directly said this to the Pastoral Care Team but one of the reasons we talk about this concept so much in our annual training is that I struggle with it myself. When I see someone trying to pick up the pieces of a hideous loss, like the death of a close family member, I long to just make the pain go away because it tugs my own heartstrings so deeply. I have to remember that shouting, *Try a hobby! Get on medication! Do this or that, quickly and the right way and you will not suffer!* is more about my own discomfort. It’s actually the opposite of helpful.

I have found that when we practice listening and believing at our Pastoral Care Team meetings, like with partner listening exercises, it helps me and the lay ministers stay focused on our task of listening to witness—not for the purpose of spouting random advice or irrelevant truisms. It always reminds me anew that when I’m sad I don’t want a deluge of tips. I want understanding non-judgment and warm kindness and that’s about it. Dr. Wolfelt describes this essential practice of companioning as listening with the heart rather than analyzing with the head.

It’s easy to get stuck in the head, especially when we’re afraid we might say the wrong thing. A big part of my job as your minister is connecting folks with each other, especially in times of emotional need. The insecurity I most often hear expressed when someone alerts me to a pastoral situation in our community or when I disclose some news myself is, “My heart goes out to them...but I just don’t know what to say.”

In fact, there are some guidelines that I personally find helpful when faced with this concern. One of my big ones (which I got from the Rev. Amy Bertschausen) is to never say “at least.” You know what most folks don’t want to hear when their child has died? “At least you still have other kids living.” And multiple people have told me that hearing “at least they didn’t suffer” doesn’t feel good. Someone at a congregation I served previously told me that when she called her mother, sobbing, upon discovering that her husband had stolen their joint financial assets and passed on to her a serious sexually transmitted infection, her mother responded, “At least you didn’t take his name! Think how much easier it will make the divorce!” Bottom line: if you want my advice, I would suggest you avoid saying “at least.”

¹ <http://www.louisehay.com/>

² <https://www.centerforloss.com/bookstore/companioning-the-bereaved/>

But still, there are so many wrong things to say accidentally! I remember how hard it felt to return to regular life after my grandmother died. One morning I was sitting in the kitchen of the communal house where I lived in Olympia, Washington. It was summer, so the doors and windows were open, and I could hear my roommate on the front stoop laughing and talking on the phone with her long distance girlfriend. I was so offended by her cheerfulness that I stormed upstairs to my room and slammed the door with such anger that the whole house reverberated. I was raw from sadness and everything rubbed me the wrong way for a while.

If you are reaching out to someone who is grieving, you might say or do something that feels weird or awkward. "I'm sorry to hear about the death of your uncle," I murmured to a coworker once in the hallway. "Don't be!" he snapped; "He lived a long life and I wish people would quit being sorry." Oops. I respect his position and regret that I said the wrong thing but it hasn't stopped me from saying something similar to others, who've indicated that they appreciate the traditional expression of sympathy.

We're talking about hard situations, so there's a chance that the conversation might sometimes be stilted. I tell these stories not to discourage anyone from reaching out but to remind us all that in tender times people can be tender in ways that they and we can't always predict. And that's ok. It's still a blessing—in Judaism we call this a *mitzvah*, a good deed—to extend kindness.

And so I offer to you one of my essential principles when faced with those in grief, to add to Dr. Wolfelt's. It is this: be brave. It takes courage to move towards someone's sadness. When and as you do it, give yourself credit for your bravery. Be sure to get support and encouragement from someone who's not in the thick of grief themselves (like me, your minister), because it's hard to enter the world of the bereaved.

Another essential principle from the Center for Loss and Life Transition is that the disorder and confusion that comes with grief must be respected. This is not a time for imposing order and logic. Is it logical to throw a temper tantrum because your friend is laughing on the phone? No. But can you understand why I was emotional? Probably. And think of our reading today. Is it strictly logical to worry about the sadness of the clothes left behind by the dead? Not really, but at least for me, such a beautifully expressed and well-developed metaphor helps me understand how complete and totalizing a major loss must be for the one left facing a closet full of clothes with no one to wear them anymore.

Companioning the bereaved, says Dr. Wolfelt, is about learning from others; it is not about teaching them. Curiosity is going to be more helpful than flaunting your expertise. If you don't know what your loved one is going through then you know what? That's perfectly natural. You have not failed them. Maybe given the situation and your relationship it would be acceptable for you to ask, *How are you doing, in this moment or in general?*

Regardless of if you feel comfortable asking directly, you'll need to accept that you don't know how they're doing because they likely don't know themselves. They might be fine, they might not be. The terrain might change rapidly. They're probably in the process of figuring it out, of trying to find a new normal. That's exhausting labor.

Be curious about yourself too. How will you reach and bend and flex to stay in relationship with them as time progresses? The future is always at least somewhat unwritten. If you can hold that uncertainty close then your loved one won't have to feel guilty about changing and growing as a result of what they are experiencing. Give them that gift.

When I was a teenager my grandmother's health failed suddenly and my mother hopped on a plane in an attempt to reach her before she died. But she was too late; Grandma died while Mother was en route and so she returned home. My sister, father and I picked her up at the airport. I had assumed that we'd whisk her back to the comfort and quiet of our home but instead she asked to go out. I was shocked. Growing up, we never ate out. It's expensive and just wasn't a habit of our household. But my dad was wise enough to go with the flow. He didn't remind my mother that actually she didn't usually like dining out. He just drove to a restaurant because he didn't need his wife to be any particular way while she was grieving. He was just present.

Kindness to others when they are suffering is, I hope, enough of a reward itself. But it strikes me that in the current climate of political instability, inflammatory rhetoric and discriminatory presidential action, knowing how to be there for one another is going to be especially paramount. I'm not saying it hasn't always been important but I find myself thinking more and more these days about how we're going to build a strong enough community to keep ourselves and each other—especially the most vulnerable among us—as safe as possible.

This winter my family has been hit hard by colds, flus and other illnesses. Being laid up has given me time to think about how vulnerable I really am and how much help we need to get by. My influenza diagnosis a couple weeks ago was humbling; I found myself only able to rest. When my partner Amy came down with it they told her she was under CDC quarantine and could not leave the house for any reason for many days. It was grim!

But though the magic of community, by which I mean Amy's random Facebook pleas, people showed up for us mightily. Our seven year old got a ride to his basketball game, someone else brought us groceries and takeout pad sew noodles appeared on my doorstep without my even asking. We were touched. The help made a huge difference.

It's not always the big, sexy, glamorous stuff that is meaningful. Sometimes the practical is the most needed. Take for example the case of Linda Sarsour³, a person I don't know personally but have been reading a lot about this past week. A widely respected Palestinian-American Muslim activist, she was one of the organizers of last Saturday's Women's March. Due to its success, she is now being viciously harassed on social media by a network of sexist and Islamophobic people and groups who are threatening her and her loved ones, including the safety of her children. It's pretty despicable, although I am heartened to see her wider community rush in with public statements of support and the #imarchwithlinda.

Cocooned in my comforter, blowing my nose, I found myself thinking about the people in Linda Sarsour's inner circle. Who is companionship her? Her nephews, if she has them? The other parents at school or the friends she grew up with? Her husband and coworkers, maybe. Who does she depend on? Are they there for her? Do they know how to do this hard, weird, flexible, tender work of showing up even when it's not always clear what's required? Do they know that a band-aid isn't enough, and that they will need to be present with the pain without being able to take it away? Are they brave enough to respect the confusion, and be curious instead of prescriptive?

³ <http://www.elle.com/culture/career-politics/news/a42375/womens-march-organizer-linda-sarsour-is-under-attack/?src=socialflowFB>

I don't know Linda personally so I don't know how she characterizes her response to being targeted. Would she say she is in grief or experiencing loss? Maybe or maybe not. But I do know that when people we love are suffering, our task is to try to figure out a way to be present and helpful and more often than not that means facing the reality of hardship in our world. Perhaps the most basic essential principle is to not pretend that sadness doesn't exist. It needs to be acknowledged.

Louise Hay reminds us just how normal this is when she says that "grief is not a condition to be cured but a natural part of life." We cannot hope to cure our loved ones in the sense of solving their terrible pain with a simple band-aid. Yet there is a different kind of curing that we can realize, for ourselves as well as for the bereaved. We can be cured in the sense of becoming well seasoned, just as fine food or beautiful wood can be cured and seasoned.

Curing is a process of readying something. Of aging it and giving it both the attention and essential substances it needs but also providing space so that it can rest under the right conditions to assure its excellence and its longevity. Grief is a natural part of life and that is not exactly something to celebrate because it is very hard to companion the bereaved among us—including, sometimes, ourselves. But it is also a reflection of a beautiful reality that it is our spiritual and human task to be cared for and care for others. May it always be so!

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