

HELPING THOSE WHO GRIEVE

justin agoglia | long island, ny | july 3, 2006

For the past three years I have spent countless hours thinking about those who grieve. Obviously, I fall under this category. But as I look at others – my family, friends, even strangers who share in the same emotional struggle – I’ve been able to walk away with some keen insights. By no means is this scientific or supported by extensive research. Much of this is derived from my own personal journey and the experiences others have shared with me. I find great value in learning from others. There is by far a great amount of literature that would offer much more extensive help than these personal findings. But when it comes to practical insights, there is nothing like learning from those who have walked the path of grief. On the whole, my findings come from a variety of sources: personal reflections, professional training, books, people suffering terminal illnesses and the family members who suffer along with them, and those who’ve lost a close relative.

Soon after my father passed away, I was surprised at the various responses we received by those who tried to console us. Most individuals acted out of great compassion. Whether it was preparing meals, phone calls, e-mails, or luncheon meetings, we were touched by the love extended to us. However, I would be remiss to address another issue: the careless behaviors of people who act before thinking, or speak without considering the ramifications of their choice of words. I’ve listened to many share how they were hurt by those who wounded them with their words, their actions, and, in some cases, their lack of actions. I felt this needed to be addressed and I’ve done my best to approach this sensitive issue in a way that we can all learn from, especially myself.

In 1999, I received a phone call from a friend of mine who shared that his wife was diagnosed with breast cancer. Having four young children, two of which I personally worked with before on a few youth outings, I knew this would be devastating news for the entire family. Over the years, as the wife received numerous experimental treatments, there seemed to be moments of great hope and optimism as the doctors shared that her cancerous tumors were getting smaller. Then, months later, I was gripped by one particular e-mail. It said the doctors made a grievous mistake in their original prognosis. A few months later, this mother of four gracefully passed into

eternity. I'll never forget the feeling I had. I was dumbfounded. It was as if I lost my own mother after reading months of positive e-mail reports and praying for her speedy recovery.

Only God can tell us one day the impact (both good and bad) this event has had on this family. But what I saw in the months that followed was even more horrific. Although my clinical training gave me some tools in the area of grief counseling, there was nothing I could do that would restore normalcy to this home. I just knew that I wanted to communicate my concern and care for this family. But how was I to do this? Because I was in graduate school and lived out of state, I couldn't visit this family on a weekly basis. But what I did commit to doing was visiting the family whenever I was home.

I'll never forget that first meeting. No one was home except one of the sons. As I sat down at the kitchen table - the place where a lot of stories, memories, and laughter took place - a dull quietness covered the room. I sat on one end of the table, and he sat at the other end. The teenage boy, with glazed eyes and his head drooping downward, looked at me as if to ask, "what happened?" I looked over to him and said, "I don't have any words to say except that this must feel like "sh—" (explicative used). [I do apologize for shocking some of you. I was shocked myself because I've never been one to use such language. However, at that particular moment, I made the decision to use something that captured what this boy might be feeling, and that was a risk I chose to take.]

Surprised at what I said, the teenage boy looked up at me and said, "That's exactly how I feel." From that moment on, he shared his wounded heart with me, like a dam that broke wide open. His candidness gave me a window into the most sensitive area of his life. I was surprised that his focus at that time wasn't on questioning God but the failure of key individuals to reach out to him and his family. There were some who reached out, but his disappointment came from those he looked up to especially leaders from his local church. These were people he spent considerable amounts of time with, and in many cases, either failed to show up or showed up months after they buried his mother. And then, if that wasn't enough, several used heartless phrases to console the family. Phrases like:

- "God must have had a reason for taking her home."
- "God needed her more than your family needed her."
- "I guess it was her time."
- "She must have done something wrong to bring this upon herself."

- "If God didn't take her home, you would never become the person you are today."
- "I know what you're going through. I totally understand."
- "All of our days are numbered. This was her day."
- "You're mother is now in good hands."

The choice of words which people use to "comfort" hurting people is still mind-blowing to me. Just try putting yourself in another person's shoes for moment. How would you feel if someone said something like the phrases above after losing the closest person in your life? Would you feel any better? Or would you be angered by such comments? In many cases, such platitudes permanently damage one's ability to ever reach out to that person again because it can feel so insensitive. If we had the opportunity to replay verbatim what people actually say at such times, would they be shocked at how reckless their words truly were?

After that meeting with the young boy, I met with my father and shared my concern at how inconsiderate people can be, especially people within the Church. I thought the Church was to be the first to bring comfort, not pain. I thought the Body of Christ was to be an extension of God's love, not the poisonous venom of condemnation. My father shared some insights with me which I felt were good for me to hear and I still use them as a guide today.

Here is for the most part what he shared: When it comes to death, most people don't know how to respond in a way that is appropriate. Many don't know what to say or what to do when someone passes on especially the surviving members. As a result, there are three types of people that fall under this category:

1. **The Ignorant.** They don't have the experience, knowledge, or maturity on how to respond. Thus, they typically do nothing and show little care for others.
2. **The Scared.** Some can't handle such situations. These people really do care; yet are too afraid to make a mistake. They simply fail to show-up in a timely manner or even say something because they can't accept the reality of the situation. These individuals rarely do anything. If they do something, it's usually in an awkward manner and both parties feel uncomfortable.
3. **The Careless.** These are people who respond, but their actions (whether in word or deed) inflict more damage than good. In many ways, their shallow remarks and religious statements are like arrows that inflict even greater wounds to an already bleeding heart.

He concluded by saying that everyone responds differently in various circumstances. In most cases people do care; but, there are those few who simply fail to deliver. He added that we must always be willing to give people the benefit of the doubt that there may another reason for their failure to reach out. And most importantly, we must always be ready to forgive others.

That discussion has always stuck with me and been a great source of comfort particularly after he passed away. I've encountered all three types of individuals. But even with the wisdom my father once passed on to me, I was surprised at how painful the words of some still cut to the heart. I was quickly reminded that I must forgive and continue to forgive, for I, too, would certainly fall short in consoling others. No one has a market on this. So we're all learning, one way or another.

This lesson became very real to me soon after my dad died. The first funeral I attended after his passing, I found that I was at a loss for words. The only thing I could do was look the suffering person(s) in the eyes and give a strong embrace as if to say, "I know this hurts, but you're not alone, friend." Not wanting to create any more pain, I've learned to listen more than speak (and I could always do a lot more of that in any context). In my opinion, that is sufficient. It can "say" far more than a bunch of trumped up words and even communicate how much you really care.

Ironically, a few individuals expressed to me how appreciative they were for all I did when they were going through their loss. To be quite honest, I didn't do anything. I think what they were really commenting on was their feeling of being heard. Oh, and before I forget to mention, just a few years ago, the young man I met with at the kitchen table recalled our original conversation. He told me he was surprised when I used that explicative to describe his situation, but shared, "You were the first person (I felt) who understood exactly what I was feeling at that time." By the way, I'm not condoning the use of inappropriate language. I'm just open to God using anything or anyone in any given situation.

People need to see that we're more concerned about them than we are at getting it right. We must learn to be sensitive to each person's needs. Most of all, we must ask God for his wisdom on how to care for people, especially those who are facing such painful losses.

Although there is no hard and fast set of rules on how to help those grieving the loss of a loved one, I do want to share with you some things that I feel are helpful. I encourage you to sift through what you feel is most appropriate for your own context and throw out the rest. I would hate to think these are mandates for a quick fix. If anything, this reflection isn't about quick healings; it's about being sensitive, about caring better for others and coming along side those

who simply need a friend. They need to see love in motion. If there is an image I could paint to capture what I see, it would be this: two sets of hands holding the heart of another – one hand firmly holds the heart; the other carefully strokes it. Together, those hands encompass the hands of compassion and the heart of God.

PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS WE CAN DO TO HELP THOSE GRIEVING

1. Listen! Listen! Listen!
2. Acknowledge and validate the person's pain and suffering.
3. Offer to cook a meal for them. Take them out for a lunch, a cup of coffee, watch their kids. Offer to purchase their groceries.
4. Write them a letter, but keep it brief. Too many words can cause overkill. (Although e-mails are good, writing communicates far more than a quick electronic note.)
5. Tell the person, you're sorry for their loss. (You may be surprised at how some forget to even say a word.)
6. Offer your availability.
7. Be patient with people. Give people the room to doubt, question, grieve, vent their true emotions. Don't set a timeline on how quick or how long they should grieve. Respect each individual's ability to work through their loss.
8. Try to continue the same type of friendship you once had. If you met each Tuesday for a lunch, try to encourage that person to continue meeting on that date. If you prayed and read the Bible together, then continue to do so. Remember, their world has changed entirely. They need assurance that their friendship with you hasn't changed.
9. Keep your word. If you promise to do something, do it.
10. Encourage the person to keep a journal. Write down what they feel, what thoughts come to mind.
11. Encourage the sufferer to write a letter to the one they lost, expressing all their feelings. Even though they can't hand it to their loved one, it helps them express what is trapped deep inside.
12. Stay away from formulaic answers. (Prov. 25:20, Rom. 12:15)
13. Get them out of their environment whenever possible. Loneliness will quickly settle in, especially if it's a spouse. It's easy for the surviving spouse to become secluded which can lead to severe depression.

14. See if their attending church offers a grief or bereavement group. Connecting with others who share in similar losses can offer much healing.
15. If the grieving individual cries, even if feels awkward to you, you don't need to say a word. And you shouldn't feel the need to cry when they do. A warm embrace may be all the person needs at that moment.
16. Be genuine with your responses. Don't say something you don't mean.
17. Pray. Don't tell the person you'll pray for them unless you're committed to doing it.
18. Give special attention to the surviving children. They may not have the "tools" available to express how they feel. However, I would ask good questions.
19. Never say, "I know just how you feel."
20. Dispense grace to those feeling guilt of any kind. It's not uncommon to find the surviving spouse riddled with guilt. We need to remind them of God's love and forgiveness - helping them move from looking backward to looking forward.
21. Don't act like a parent or doctor. Just be their friend.
22. Visit. Small amounts of time are far better than large amounts of time. You want to be sensitive to their time to grieve. And respect their space and their alone time.
23. Don't say, "You will get over it in time."
24. Consistency. People are typically present right after the funeral is over. But after a few months or years go by, most people aren't around any longer. Everyone needs someone who is available. They are there for the long haul. It's a call to be a faithful friend.
25. Look out for signs of deep depression (i.e., loss or increased appetite, sleepless nights, extended sleep, inability to maintain a daily schedule or even hold job). If this continues for an extended period of time, a visit to the doctor should be encouraged.
26. Prevent a sense of helplessness. Many will quickly lose hope and feel a loss of purpose. Help those suffering see that themselves as helpers and givers, not just receivers. (This will take some time.) At some point, they will see that they are the best ministers to those in need of encouragement and hope.
27. Don't push people into talking about the death of their loved one. If they want to talk, they will.
28. Encourage the sufferer to not make any major decisions.
29. The bereaved may ask the "why" questions. In most cases, we don't have answer, so don't try to make one up. Sometimes it's better to simply say, "I don't know why."

30. Suicidal thoughts are not uncommon. Don't react. Encourage the person to see their great value and purpose on earth.
31. Remind the person that it's ok to be angry. They may be angry at God, the person who died, other family members, the clergy, doctors, a variety of people, etc. Encourage them to acknowledge their anger and find healthy ways of handling it.
32. Learn about the various phases of grief.
33. Encourage them to express their feelings. Welcome whatever feelings are shared. Don't dictate what they should or shouldn't feel.
34. Be aware that holidays and anniversaries will be difficult especially the first year.
35. Be aware of any drug or alcohol use. These can delay the grief response. Medication should only be given by a physician.
36. Encourage individual counseling. If necessary, offer to attend the first meeting.
37. Encourage group counseling which focuses on bereavement issues. People who share a common experience can offer a very unique support system - understanding, friendship, and, most importantly, hope.
38. Encourage them to exercise which helps work off tension and anger, aids in better sleep, and simply helps you relax.

In short, we can all improve on our ability to care for people. Although I have experienced firsthand the loss of someone very special, I am at best just a student who still asks, "How can I care for others better?" How can I respond in a way that not only appears real but is real? How can my presence, including my lack of presence, communicate that I care for the one who feels lost and alone? These are just some of the questions I must continue to ask. This is the sacred journey God has allowed me to experience.

PRAYER: Lord, I wish I had the purity of mind and purity of heart to care at the level only you can truly give to all humanity. When one suffers, you fully understand their pain. When one loses a loved one, you can enter into that loss. I am but one person. Although my limitations are great, I ask that you kneed this clay. I beg that you spark this dormant self. Stir this heart of mine and move me with a new compassion for those who need to sense your great love. Help me to see beyond my own selfish needs and wants so that I can clearly identify and minister to the needs of others. Use me Lord...use me.