

When It Hurts October 28, 2007

This is the day that we here at The Garden are observing All Saints Day, which is officially recognized on November 1. It's a time to remember and honor the lives of our loved ones who have died, and I'm well aware that this can be a difficult day for many.

Most of us deal with a lot of pain and loss in the course of life. We move from one place to another, and leave behind friends and familiar haunts; we leave our working lives and enter that stage of life referred to as retirement, and that can result in a loss of identity and a loss of purpose. Marriages are severed by divorce and separation, leaving huge holes in the life we once knew. And loved ones die, sometimes leaving us with a confusing mixture of emotions.

In all of those kinds of situations, we experience surges of grief that we can't predict, that we can't understand, and that we can't control or manage. Those are just some of the times when we hurt beyond imagination, and yearn for the hurt to ease and life to go on. When it hurts like that, what's going on? What helps, and where is God when our hearts are breaking?

For one thing, it's important to understand that grief is a normal, healthy response to a major loss. Even though we feel as though life is out of control, grief is an experience we can't avoid; we have to walk through that valley, if we ever hope to have the capacity for living and loving once again. So, it's important to acknowledge what we're going through, and to give ourselves permission to grieve.

We also need to understand, if we want to be helpful to someone who's grieving, that there is not a formula for how long it should last, and the steps it should follow. Every person is different, and every relationship has its own uniqueness. Members of the same family grieve very differently, because each person had a different relationship with the one who has died. We have to allow for those differences, realizing that we are not in anyone else's skin, and we cannot assume we know how he or she is feeling.

I can tell you from my own experiences of grief that I felt as though my world had stopped, even though I could look around and see everyone else going on as though nothing had happened. In working with others who have been through this experience, I can affirm that that seems to be a common experience. Sometimes people even experience a sense of resentment toward those who aren't hurting, whose lives are affected. That's just part of the process.

It was amazing to me to see how crystal clear some things became as I dealt with the initial impact

of a loved one's death. Things that had been critically important just hours before now faded into obscurity. Things I had not even seen or noticed seemed to stand out even more brightly than before. It was as though my life had been in one of those glass globes with a candle inside, and then suddenly the snow had settled, and I could see clearly what I had not been able to see before.

The book, *Can't Wait to Get to Heaven* by Fannie Flagg, shares a similar experience. The key character is someone named Aunt Elner, who had a near-death experience. One of her friends, a man named Mackey, had become disillusioned with his marriage, and was thinking of running away from it, but Aunt Elner's experience had an impact on Mackey. The author wrote, "**Almost losing one person you love shines a bright spotlight on life, and suddenly strips you of everything but your real feelings.**" The story continues that later that day, when his wife came home from work, he really saw her, as for the first time. That's the kind of experience many have in the wake of the loss of a love.

There are all kinds of things that people find helpful in dealing with the death of a loved one. One of my colleagues shares a story about a remembrance ritual that helped him and his wife begin to heal when his adult daughter was struck and killed by a bus on a downtown Indianapolis Street. The day after the funeral, the two of them felt that they needed to face the harsh reality of her death, and they decided to go downtown to the corner where the accident had happened. He said, "It felt like the right thing to do." As excruciatingly painful as it was, they parked their car, tears flowing, and walked to the corner, and held one another and sobbed at the sadness and tragedy of it all. He said that no one seemed to notice them, nor even remember that, just a few days earlier, a young woman had been struck down in the prime of her life.

When the first anniversary of her death arrived, they talked about going once again to that fateful corner, and again, felt that it was right to do so. Because their daughter had so loved roses, this time they took with them the most beautiful rose they could find, and when the way was clear, they lovingly placed the rose at the spot where she had died, stepped back, and held one another and cried as buses and cars rolled over the rose, crushing it. They decided to go through the same ritual again on the second anniversary, and on the third and on the fourth, and on every anniversary visit, the rose they placed was run over and crushed.

A few months before the fifth anniversary, the two of them talked about it, and decided this would be the last year they would make an anniversary visit, and the last time to leave a rose. Again, he said, it just felt right; they had moved to a place of being able to give thanks for her life, instead of focusing on her death.

They followed the same ritual, but something unexpected happened that time. The weather was pleasant, and the traffic was lighter, and their feeling level was less intense. They placed the rose, and then walked away respectfully and quietly and without much hesitation. They had planned to go out to breakfast after this last visit, and they did. After breakfast, they returned to the place where they had put the rose, but this time it was not crushed; it was gone! Someone had taken it, and it now added beauty to the life of another, just as her donated organs had done some five years earlier, and they felt a sense of peace and hope. Rituals like that, or any other, are often helpful in getting through a painful and difficult time.

For me, one of the things I find most helpful is the reminder from our Bible passage for today. It's been one of my favorite psalms since my growing up days in Madison, Indiana, nestled in the hills that surround that Ohio River town. The version I remember began with the words: 'I will lift up my eyes to the hills, from whence cometh my help? My help cometh from God...'

Our more contemporary version puts it a bit differently, but it assures us of the same thing—God's constant presence. This is how Psalm 121 goes:

**I look up to the mountains—
Does my help come from there?
My help comes from God
Who made the heavens and the earth!
God will not let you stumble and fall;
The one who watches over you will not
sleep.
Indeed, the one who watches over Israel
Never tires and never sleeps.
God watches over you
And stand beside you as your protective
shade.
The sun will not hurt you by day,
Nor the moon by night.
God keeps you from all evil
And preserves your life.
God keep watch over you as you come and go
Both now and forever.**

Those words assure me that God is always with us, to comfort us when we hurt, to lift us up when we fall, to carry us when we can't take a step by ourselves. God is with us, now and forever. That, we can trust.

Closing:

I really appreciate the words that theologian Frederick Buechner has written: We find by losing. We hold fast by letting go. We become something new by ceasing to be something old. This seems to be close to the heart of that mystery. I know no more now than I ever did about the far side of death as the last letting-go of all, but now I know that I do

not need to know, and that I do not need to be afraid of not knowing. God knows. That is all that matters.

Knowing and trusting God—that can make all the difference when we hurt.

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace.
Amen.