

# Along the track

## When Someone Dies

Death is never easy. We often surround death by so many platitudes that it is hard to confront or even to come to terms with our loss. With every good intention, those who offer sympathy couch it in well-meaning but false comfort (*he/she has gone to a better place, God wanted them early, The Lord never gives us more than we can handle* (That is not how I feel right now). *I know how you feel.* (No we don't - we never really know how someone else feels). *Everything will be okay.* (A nice sentiment but that can make it feel as if you are dismissing someone's grief). *At least he or she is out of pain.* (Well I am not!).

Our culture works so hard to preserve youth and beauty, so it is not surprising that we try to deny the reality of death or at least to avoid discussing it. We don't want to be reminded of it. We don't like to talk about it. If someone is coping with loss, there is a time when we feel they should 'get over it' and move on.

To cope with the reality of grief, we meet the misguided idea of 'stages of bereavement' and the idea that we have to 'pass through' them almost in an orderly fashion, and if we can do that, it leads to 'acceptance.' We are encouraged to hurry through our mourning and get back to 'normal'. Life goes on, as they say. Some even believe that the pain left by death will just go away. But grief isn't like that – it doesn't move neatly through stages – it goes up and down. We may feel we have come to terms with someone dying, then it all comes back. We rarely accept the loss. We learn to live with it; we learn to live differently without the pain that initially accompanies the loss, we come to change our life accordingly but 'a living memory' will always remain.

The Irish poet Eugene O'Connell wrote about learning to live with grief in this way:

So when Johnnie died we wanted Nell to sit on his side of the fire,  
Out of the way of the draught and the traffic up to their room.  
But she kept to the habit of their life together, and preferred the visitor to sit on his chair.  
Afraid that if she crossed the fire that there would be no-one on the other side to return her gaze\*.

One of the hardest things when someone dies is that we no longer see him or her again – their old familiar ways become a memory that doesn't disappear but changes over time, no matter how hard we would wish otherwise. Life may never be quite the same but nothing we do in the future will change our love for the person who died.

Grieving is a process, it is not an event. The reality is we grieve at different times, in different ways. There is no set time to 'get over it'. So we need patience with ourselves and with others. Taking time to listen is so important – to ourselves and what is going on with our 'inner-talk' as well as to others. It is not good to minimise or ignore the loss. It is better to acknowledge our grief. If we are to work

through our grief and our pain - ignoring it is the worst form of coping. We can't help but be sad. The pain of loss cannot be ignored, especially about someone near and dear to us. It is hard to say goodbye, to realise that this person will not be part of our day to day life again.

An important part of any grieving process is the sharing of stories, the sharing of fond memories of who they were and what they did, what they meant to us. A great gift we can give to one who is mourning is to take time to listen, to hear their stories, and sometimes to sit in silence because that too is a great way of communicating – sometimes words are not necessary to convey feelings, support, love and encouragement. Silence can be a way of entering each one's pain and the isolation they feel at this time.

Don't leave God out of your grief. The story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus is one of sorrow, bitterness, anger and disappointment. Their world has been turned upside down by the events of the past week: celebration, conflict, violence, and then death. They had lost the one they had pinned so much hope on – he was to restore the fortunes of Israel. And now he is gone. Their disappointment and sorrow was all-consuming. Confused and grief stricken, they wanted to get away, to be alone. They could not hear the message of the stranger who joined them, the one who spoke to them along the road, but later, when he sat down and ate with them, when he spent this time with them, they recognised him by his kindness, by his actions.

It is OK to be angry, disappointed, upset, to ask 'why?' The Hebrew psalms express every emotion – sometimes they were deeply in love with God, at peace, at other times they were greatly disappointed, angry, frustrated with God. But God never left them. Sometimes it takes us time, not to see reason, not always to find the answer to our question 'why'. That may never come. Sometimes it takes time and patience to realise that God seeks us out, God is always close in the good times and the bad. Sometimes we can't see that but it is often in the kindness of others that we discover God's presence. When we listen, empathise, and honestly open ourselves to our own and others' experiences, we come to know again the presence of the Sacred.

\*From "Crossing the Fire" by Eugene O'Connell

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