

Unraveling Together

Sharing the Threads of Grief

DIANNE DEATON VIELHUBER

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This book includes stories from my life. They are told as I remember them. If you remember the stories differently, please embrace your version. I have also included many stories based on other people's lives. Sometimes I changed names and sometimes I didn't. Each story is precious and valuable to me. They are told from my perspective and recollection. If your version of the story is different from mine, I also accept your version knowing that my interpretation may be different from yours.

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Hardcover: 978-1-7342280-3-8

Paperback: 978-1-7342280-4-5

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*Unraveling
Together*

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To Grandma Hazel Deaton - You explored the importance of talking about grief long before I realized the significance of it. Thank you for modeling how to embrace grief even when I wasn't sure I wanted to. Your words and thoughts are woven into this manuscript. As I recite the Lord's Prayer every night after I crawl into bed, I remain inspired by our evening ritual. How you connected faith to everyday life has deeply inspired me and is part of my daily journey. Love you!

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Before You Begin, Please Read This

*I look up to the mountains and the hills, longing
for God's help. But then I realize that our true
help and protection come only from the Lord, our
Creator who made the heavens and the earth.*

PSALM 121:1 (TPT)

Dear Reader:

This is a book that I never expected to write. What do I know about grief? I am not a psychologist or a grief counselor. I have spent most of my life downplaying personal grief experiences. I can name many people whose experiences are more poignant than mine.

For 25 years I have sat with parishioners who experienced loss, pain or hurt. Each story felt like a holy moment. We all have a story. Some people are more comfortable sharing. Most find it difficult to be honest because we do not want others to know who we really are. So we maintain an external image that says we are fine when we may not be. In reality, we are novices dealing with our emotions, hiding the scars of pain scratched in our hearts and

souls. We want suggestions on how to journey with someone living through grief without acknowledging our own suffering.

Why a book about grief? Why dig through the feelings and emotions I have experienced and witnessed with so many others? Has this topic not been written about, talked about and discussed enough? This is what I thought until a friend challenged me to write a layperson's book on grief. Jo has her own grief litany. Her sister died when they were teenagers. Her father-in-law died early because of congestive heart failure due to diabetes and her mother-in-law died of pancreatic cancer. A niece born with Ewing's Sarcoma, a rare bone cancer, died six days past her 16th birthday. Her cousin's daughter died in a snowmobiling accident. A close friend died by suicide. Jo often wondered if the wrong sister lived. She felt alone and wondered if anyone knew she was suffering.

One winter evening, Jo and I sat in the cozy parlor of the old house where I used to live. The evening's dark shadows were appropriate. Jo does not talk much about her sister. "If I said one too many sentences, I would lose it," Jo confided. "It took a long time before I let myself laugh again. Eventually, I gave myself permission to laugh and cry. Sometimes at the same time."

Jo's account is the story of thousands. Many people do not know what to say when someone is going through a life-changing event. What is the right thing to do? The wrong thing to say?

I wanted to know why Jo thought I should write *this* book. "We need a different voice about grief," she challenged me. "People don't know what to say so we say stupid things. We want a guide for our grief; how to be there for others. Write a book that people can relate to. Let them know they are not alone. God has not abandoned us."

So here are my words, Jo. Words I have poured over for years. Thoughts I pray readers can relate to and find helpful. Real words for unreal times served with comfort and peace. Words I pose as a ministry of presence to encourage you to embrace life beyond grief.

As I began to stitch these words together, I thought I was ready to dive deep into suffering. But soon, my emotions and feelings surfaced. My heart was fragile. My feelings needed a safe place. This is the journey of grief. When people expose their deep sadness and disappointment, they discover more about themselves. We are reluctant because it means looking within ourselves and being brutally honest.

And who wants to do that?

Were there times I wondered if dealing with my feelings would be worth it? Yes. I still struggle with this. Suffering should not define every breath or have the last word. Wounded healers discover how to hold the tension of sadness and disappointment in tandem with joy and happiness. They become curious, vulnerable and actively seek healing. While grief's fingerprints never go away, healers embrace hope and intentionally create a beautiful life beyond hurt and pain. This is *my* story of grief.

Dear Reader: you are not alone in your grief. Consistent grief became part of my life when I was diagnosed with persistent ulcers in sixth grade when I was 12-years-old. I never really dealt with it and kept the hurt hidden for decades. Then I found myself smack-dab in the middle of an overwhelming situation. My future husband, Rick, had just experienced the unexpected and tragic death of his 21-year-old eldest son Nate. Rick's grief was raw and abrupt. I wanted to be present but unresolved grief prevented this. The grief I had carefully buried *begged* for attention.

The timing was significant. I was seven months into serving as a first-time pastoral leader at Rick's home church. Could I comfort others as I struggled internally? Could I ask others to address their hurts as I kept my sequestered grief buried? How could I expect vulnerability from my future husband when I had not asked this of myself? To walk alongside others as their pastor, I had to face my scary feelings and emotions.

This book is about living with all different kinds of losses. It is an opportunity to acknowledge the pain rooted in our hearts and bellies and bravely explore hurts and disappointments. Reading it may feel scary because it *will* be. Tiptoe gingerly through difficult parts. Choose chapters that relate to you today knowing other chapters may be helpful later. Many chapters include questions within the text. Spend time with them. At the end of each chapter are reflection questions. Share your answers with a trusted friend or in a small community of healers who are willing to explore grief and suffering. Beyond this book, I pray you will sit with someone, share a meal, go for a walk or have a long conversation with a fellow griever.

Please embrace a pace of grace. I will not cheer you out of your hurt and ask that you carry your emotions, not fix them. I pray some of my wounds allow for connection and relatability. I have learned much from being with people deep in grief who witnessed life's fragility. Unable to sufficiently answer their questions, I am constantly reminded that the journey is more important than the destination.

Ultimately, my personal grief journey has forced me to reexamine my relationship with God. Faith is part of my story. I navigate this journey by regularly looking to the mountains and the hills, longing for God's help. Have your own faith beliefs. If you question a relationship with God, it is okay. I pray you keep an open mind to

how God might be speaking to you. You are a beloved child of God who deserves all the grace God longs for you to know.

In time I pray we see grief as an opportunity to grow. If something feels offensive or hurtful, I ask for forgiveness. Have viewpoints different from mine. People often get things wrong, especially pastors. Please share your personal experiences by emailing me at sharingthethreadsofgrief@gmail.com and join others in this discussion through the *Sharing the Threads of Grief* Facebook Group.

Here's how Elizabeth Kübler-Ross wrote beautifully about the brave souls who explore grief: "The most beautiful people we have known are those who have known defeat, known suffering, known struggle, known loss, and have found their way out of the depths. These persons have an appreciation, a sensitivity, and an understanding of life that fills them with compassion, gentleness, and a deep loving concern. Beautiful people do not just happen."¹

As you pursue your beautiful self, I pray you are blessed. Exploring grief requires bravery and courage. Joining this conversation is valiant. Let's get started.

Blessings –

Dianne

1 Desmond M. Tutu and Mpho A. Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving*, Harper One, New York, 2015, p. 220.

Prayer: Dear God – It requires so much courage to sit with our grief. I pray for the person who holds this book. You know their journey. You know their stories and sadness, their joys and disappointments. Surround them with a shroud of grace and mercy as they journey through these pages. May they discover some nugget that speaks to them. Together, may we discover the unlimited grace and mercy You extend to us. May Your help allow us to know Your protection. Amen.

What would be a helpful metaphor for grief? The next chapter shares an example.

SECTION 1

The Conversations No One Wants to Have

Talking about grief is terribly uncomfortable
for most people. Yet, avoiding grief
also has consequences.



CHAPTER 1

The Threads of Grief in Our Lives

A Patchwork View of Grief

*My spirit sags because of grief. Now raise
me up according to your promise!*

PSALM 119:28 (CEB)

Often we define our lives in terms of “before” and “after” specific events. This is how we measure time.

Before the crisis.

After the divorce or failed relationship.

Before the medical diagnosis.

After a loved one’s death.

Before the addiction began.

After I lost my job.

When people share their story, it seldom takes long before a historical “before” and “after” situation surfaces. Life-changing moments mentioned with little incidence. Yet, a simple follow-up

question can shift an entire conversation: body position changes, eyes move to a far-away place, or the head tilts as a pregnant pause holds court.

Will he or she go there or not?

Maybe you have had a similar experience. While visiting someone, the air in the room changes. It is a casual mention of the mother who passed away while the young mom was a teenager. Stifled hurt is painted on one's face when they mention a quick change between jobs. Should they share they were let go? Sadness spills out as tears when asked if a couple has children. No and they quietly reveal the multiple unborn children they have lost.

I know these responses because I use them. Did the person see when my eyes moved to a faraway place and my body involuntarily repositioned itself? Was my halted response observed? When this happens, my brain goes through a mental debate whether to share a story. Is it appropriate? Will it help or hurt the conversation? Do I want to be vulnerable?

How do we choose when to expose our hurts or keep those thoughts and feelings deeply cloistered? Will sharing become a connecting point or a distraction and invalidate the other person's story and feelings?

Grief is difficult and sticky. It's complicated and nuanced. Disappointment and sadness can be overwhelming and debilitating. While it is more enjoyable to share positive events, our hurts and sadness are often more life-defining albeit difficult to share.

It is amazing how often others want to share their take. We want to be an expert on something. If we have a past experience vaguely similar, we feel qualified to process a person's pain. While well-intentioned, our advice may not help someone feel better. Best

intentions backfire because we cannot know how someone else feels. Platitudes such as “you will be stronger” feel hollow. Oftentimes cheerleading makes the grieving person feel like no one understands. How do we navigate demanding sadness and feelings? Maybe we need a perspective shift.

The Quilt-Like Features of Grief

Years ago my paternal grandmother, Grandma Deaton, shared with me some quilt blocks her mother hand pieced together during the 1950s. My great-grandma Sharp clipped material scraps into small octagonal pieces and stitched them into designs that looked like flowers. While my grandmother intended on arranging the flowers into a quilt, she was not able to do so. Could I finish the quilt?

I did so and the quilt is a special, priceless family heirloom.

Often we shove these precious items into a closet or drawer. They are safe from damage and dirty hands; saved for *some* day.

For years my great-grandmother’s quilt graced an antique bed in our house. As I walked by it, I remembered her and the skill and time that created every hand-stitched piece. Slowly, the quilt’s beauty changed. Washed and exposed to sunlight, tiny stitches frayed. The overall pattern was overshadowed by worn edges. While the quilt was pretty, it lost some striking qualities. I struggled with hiding and preserving the quilt versus enjoying it and the woman who started it.

The quilt shows me love. It displays pieces of my family’s heritage stitched together. Tiny fragments that span generations assembled into a piece of art. Yet as the flowers unraveled, I saw the struggles and stresses each generation endured. Grief is the tiny little stitches that hold everything together. When one thread

gets tugged and breaks, individual pieces unravel. Imperfections become obvious. As the stress of grief continues, the blanket's beauty and usefulness diminish and the quilt feels and looks different.

Is it still usable? Is it fixable? Is it worth it?

What is the alternative? Keep the quilt hidden. Safe and secure but never seen. Intact and protected but sequestered where no one appreciates its beauty. A some day that never happens.

Grief invades our lives in a remarkably comparable way. When the fabric of our lives is tugged and broken, our exposed and worn hearts and minds feel like they are unraveling. Vulnerability means allowing our imperfections a place to breathe. We look at the gaping holes in our lives and wonder, "What happened? How can I fix this? Is it worth fixing?"

What is the alternative? A safer life that protects our emotions from our deepest pain but also withholds life's greatest joy. Covered up holes yearning to be fixed that we keep hidden.

Grief comes in all shapes and sizes, all ages and abilities, and all stages and circumstances. It happens when we lose something precious. Processing grief is contingent upon our experience, age and maturity when it happens. More life experience does not guarantee we address grief adequately. Most of us lack a fully equipped sewing kit with everything needed to deal with grief's frayed edges. When grief is part of our fabric, we often shove it deep into a closet to conceal it. We think if we avoid the hurt, eventually it will disappear. Unfortunately, this is not how grief works.

Two Common Grief Responses

Most of us lack the appropriate words to articulate, convey and honor our grief. We find ourselves living with one of two common responses to suffering.

In one response, we expect people to bounce back from a challenging situation and demand the same of ourselves. We downplay the effect of pain and will ourselves to keep going. We must or we will fall apart. If we keep a calendar full of distractions, we lack time to deal with hidden feelings. If we ignore them, we believe they will go away. Then one day, we find ourselves swallowed up in a grief-filled situation with no apparent way out.

Alternatively, grief can leave us stifled and almost unable to function. A trip to the grocery store feels overwhelming. An empty house feels too quiet, yet the noisy world is too demanding. We cannot focus. We forget things because our memory fails us. If one more person asks how we *really* feel, we *will* fall apart.

With either response, grief doesn't organically disappear. Delayed grief only fosters mental exhaustion and confusion. We want to move on, but we do not know how. Essayist James Baldwin says it this way: "I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain."² Frayed threads barely hold things together. How long *can* we hang on?

2 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, Collected Essays, Literary Classics of the United States, New York, 1998, p. 75.

When a Pandemic Enters Our World

The world was filled with grief when the COVID-19 pandemic started in 2020. Our lives changed immediately. Packed schedules looked different. We cooked at home and lived 24-7 with the same people navigating their torn quilts. We struggled with how seriously to take the virus.

The pandemic's reality set in when my dear friend Sara shared with our mutual friend group that her mom was hospitalized with COVID-19. It was an early case in our state and before a stay-at-home order was issued. Pre-COVID, Sara's mom had been active and healthy with no pre-existing conditions. The virus attacked her vigorously. When she needed to go on a ventilator, she said good-bye to her family, unsure she would live.

Our friends' group was stunned. What could we say to Sara other than we would pray? We felt the pandemic's helplessness of not being able to do anything while sheltering in place. We could not drop by and give a hug nor could we have dinner with Sara as she shared her feelings. Our calls and texts felt meager. How could we support Sara's grief and anxiety when we felt incapacitated and confined? Sara's mom lived but her situation shifted our perspective.

If a pandemic was not enough, Americans found themselves swimming through more challenges in subsequent months. Some experienced financial instability and disaster. Others released the buried pressure valve of racism. Our polarized nation tried to navigate a divisive presidential election. Layers of grief, disappointment, hurt and anger spilled into every thread of society. Navigating unprotected feelings felt uncomfortable. What could we do other than pray this would pass? People wanted things to go back to "normal." Was it possible? Returning quickly

to our “before” meant we skipped processing the emotions in our quilt.

Sorrow and disappointment became more apparent as the pandemic wore on. People felt grief for desperately sick loved ones alone in a hospital with no visitors allowed. Survivors tried to honor a loved one’s life as they maneuvered limitations on people congregating. We experienced sadness and disappointment from canceled sporting events, holiday gatherings, live music, theater presentations, dance recitals, birthday parties, planned vacations and trips, in-person worship and simply going out to eat.

We just wanted to hug each other and laugh. Have an in-person conversation over a cup of coffee or a glass of wine. This became clear the day of my aunt Beverly’s 90th birthday. As family members celebrated virtually via ZOOM, we saw her completely alone and isolated in her assisted living room. In place of eating birthday cake together, we greeted each other from our home sofas. It felt terribly unfair. My heart ached.

As the pandemic lingered, isolation and lack of in-person human contact led me to question things I had not examined in my adult life. My life threads felt vulnerable. Admitting or revealing these doubts seemed silly and foolish. Was I the only person struggling?

Aware that others may have similar challenges, I longed for a safe place to share my thoughts and feelings. A racing mind took me to unhealthy places. Internally I wondered if I should keep my baggage deeply hidden or if it was time to let it breathe. My heart and mind felt raw and exposed. Threads holding the tiny pieces of life were thin. Hubby Rick and I were better off and less affected than others. Why should I feel this way as blessed as I was? The choice became mine: continue previous ways of dealing with grief or explore other options. If I was going to write a book about grief, maybe I needed to change my relationship with pain and suffering.

The Depth and Breadth of Grief

Grief is more than a word. It's a feeling and an emotion. An in-your-gut expression that life feels out of whack. We know what grief feels like even if we do not fully understand it. We know what it feels like to be sad, disappointed and let down. Grief surfaces when we see a photo, read words, hear a certain song or smell a particular scent. These trivial things remind us of something we lost. Current emotions are as real as when we experienced these feelings.

***Often we
equate grief with
the loss of a loved
one, but grief is
so much more.***

Often we equate grief with the loss of a loved one, but grief is so much more. Grief is part of any life change. Alterations to finances, health, relationships and any natural or unnatural disaster involves grief. Moving into a different house, changing jobs, choosing a new location, entering a different life stage, and living during a pandemic can initiate grief.

Grief happens in positive situations as easily as negative ones. The excitement of a new opportunity may be saddled with the anxiety of adjustment and learning something new. Embarrassed to allow angst when a terrific opportunity lies in front of us, we gloss over our feelings and stick with carefully crafted responses rather than be real. As much as we want a cause-and-effect explanation for suffering, this is not how it works.

Often we want to rank grief. When we experience a difficult situation, we believe this grief is "the worst ever." Our grief is more severe or challenging than anyone else's grief. It has a special caveat that moves it up the severity scale to out-trump another person's experience.

Here's the truth. Grief is messy. Your grief is your grief. My grief is my grief. How I respond to a life change will not be the way you respond. How you and I grieve will be different. Granting permission to experience our own pain, at our own pace and by our own path is absolutely necessary. Grief is not an Olympics-style competition where we assess whose pain is worse. Comparing grief serves no purpose and creates entitlement.

What you consider grief may not be my experience. My struggle may be insignificant to another person. Lack of patience with someone's grief leads to them not being empathetic. The dreaded phrase, "When I was in your shoes ..." and similar comments cause people to tune out and feel lonely. Even if you do not understand someone's grief, do not exclude their grief. To them it is real.

***Granting
permission to
experience our
own pain, at our
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People can get stuck in an unhealthy relationship with grief for years, even decades. Falling apart is a healthy response to trauma. Stuck grief is not managed trauma. When someone hides grief, it gives permission for others to bury pain. Often families manifest generations of unresolved grief. Generational grief gives permission to hide pain. We replace it with something else not healthy for us, deal with it on our own and assume it will eventually go away. We think we must be strong for others. But these tactics do not get to the core of grief.

Can we find less traumatic ways for grief to exist or ways to hear our pain and be present with it? How might we embrace the opportunities suffering brings with it?

The goal of grief is not to stop feeling pain. It is giving permission to be aware of our heart's pain so we can be kind to ourselves,

The goal of grief is not to stop feeling pain. It is giving permission to be aware of our heart's pain so we can be kind to ourselves, care for our needs and have empathy for others.

care for our needs and have empathy for others. When we only consider grief negatively, we miss its positive redeeming qualities and outcomes. Often we want a source to blame, but a clear cause cannot always be placed. It's learning to feel without assigning blame or a reason something happened. When we widen our approach, we allow for something beautiful to grow from our disappointment and we see grief through a different lens.

Grief From a Different Lens

Each of us decides when to deal with the frayed edges of our quilt. No matter how shattered our lives and dreams may feel, there can be hope. We can stop constantly frowning and allow laughter and smiles without guilt. Living with brokenness gives us the opportunity for wholeness. Embracing suffering with our eyes, hearts and souls wide open gives us hope. Finding healthy ways to do this grants us permission to remember our grief and move forward.

Until we see how trauma affects our whole brain and body system, surviving is difficult. Our brains and bodies are intimately connected and in constant dialogue with one another. After a traumatic experience, they slide into survival mode. We get stuck with chronic physical and/or emotional pain because we do not resolve the trauma. When we do not return to safety, trauma takes over. Our desire to heal is perceived as a threat. Left unchecked, trauma causes post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When trauma is part of our everyday lives, our emotional and nervous systems are affected. We aren't sure what to trust. Some people

move from pain to pain rather than trying to go from pain to appropriate safety.

We stay on high alert until we get specialized support to help rewire danger's perception and stand down. While we may know we are no longer in danger, unless we process this with all of our senses, we stay on high alert until we provide space for our brains and bodies to feel safe. The brain-body system yearns for two interdependent assurances: that we will survive and that we will make a social connection. When we treat our bodies with love and care, we find safety and heal within the security of a safe relationship. We long for someone to validate our pain and assure us we can get through this. Yet, we are hesitant to seek this vulnerability. Without these primary needs met, we remain stuck.

The painting on the cover of this book portrays how life may feel. It pictures grief as real. Raw. Dark. Cloudy. Sad. Naked. Grief branches into every millimeter of our being. While the cover is a painting of grief, it is also a picture of beauty. There is elegance in raw beauty just as there is artistry in a thread-bare quilt. We can find goodness and beauty in life's saddest and happiest times. It can be a scary path but one worth our vulnerability.

My older self realizes exploring hurt and disappointment as a young girl would have allowed me an openness to sorrow that I hid for decades. This later-in-life insight encourages me not to be afraid of addressing grief with others as a pastor and a person. A friend. A fellow griever. I am learning to trust myself not to abandon pain and encourage you to explore this.

Because we love, we experience grief. Grief is a natural extension of love. Loving each other means we experience loss. Yet, the price is worth it. Love's power reminds us of the fragility of life and the necessity to be kind to those in pain.

Grief provides a mutual connecting place. We long for a compassionate soul to love us. We long for someone who looks beyond our individual pain with a wider lens and helps us discover additional wisdom and resilience. Author and speaker Brené Brown says we need more vulnerability and less shame. "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all people. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong. When those needs are not met, we don't function as we were meant to," she writes.³ The journey is less daunting when we do not face the unbearable alone.

For me faith is a lens through which I try to interpret and understand grief. Faith offers promises of hope and healing. God knows the depth of my pain and wants to guide me through the tension of being sad while living. Faith does not guarantee I will fully recover. Rather it allows me to experience joy and hope in tandem with pain and sadness. Trusting God is dangerous because I may be disappointed by God. Yet, it is worth the risk.

Sometimes my great-grandmother's quilt is on a bed in our house. Sometimes it is in a closet. There is a tension in preserving the quilt while enjoying it. This is how grief works. At times it is necessary to momentarily set aside our emotions knowing this is not a long-term fix. We miss growing and discovering new things when we protect ourselves so much that life's edges never get frayed. Our "befores" and "afters" never go away.

3 Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection: Let Go of Who You Think You're Supposed to Be and Embrace Who You Are*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2010, p. 40.

Developing a Grief Vocabulary

Lots of words are associated with grief. With the help of many grief experts, here are some helpful definitions.

- **Grief** is the internal feeling of loss. It is how we feel inside our hearts, minds and souls.
- **Mourning** is the external and visible way we express loss. This includes the actions, rituals and customs we go through, such as a visitation, funeral and/or memorial service. Preparing rituals can be exhausting. Some people keep themselves so busy preparing they are not fully present when it happens. We mourn differently. Mourning happens beyond the initial loss period like when we revisit a gravesite or a special spot.
- **Compassion** means “to suffer together.” It is the highest level of concern. We express compassion when we relieve a person’s suffering and offer help.
- We express **pity** because we do not want someone to experience hurt or pain. Connection with the suffering person is less personal. It is expressed like, “Oh no! What a shame!”
- We extend **sympathy** when we feel more of a connection. Our response may be, “I am so sad you experienced this.”
- With **empathy**, we feel the hurting person’s suffering and we want to help.
- **Pain** is an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience. It has a purpose and a root cause, whether physical, emotional or mental. It wants to be heard, felt and seen, but we do not always allow it.

- **Anger** is unregulated pain and often tied to a feeling of injustice. Embracing anger feels scary but gives pain a voice.
- When we ignore pain, we get angry, which leads to **suffering**. In suffering, we feel dismissed and unsupported. We question if something is wrong with how we feel. We wonder if what we did was right or if we did enough.
- **Bitterness** happens when we place judgement and blame. It wants to be the only emotion. Left unchecked, it can consume you. Bitterness is hurt, not hate.
- **Rage** is accumulated anger that can be turned inward or outward.
- **Sorrow** is a feeling of deep distress. We may want a coping mechanism to numb the pain so we no longer feel hurt and often use outside sources.
- **Hardness** demands that we expect a mental toughness to withstand hurt and pain. We do not want to be too soft.
- **Courage** is the ability to do something that frightens us. It allows for healing. Hearts become softer and let go of some hardness. Courage takes patience and time.
- **Forgiveness** happens when we begin to release our tightly-held pain.
- When wounds reopen, **recurrence** happens. It may feel like you have taken a step backwards and this may be true. Nonetheless, do not discount the work you have done.
- When a recurrence of grief happens, have **gratitude** toward your past self and grief. All of this remains relevant.

Ultimately we cannot extend empathy or compassion to everyone experiencing a difficult time. It is humanly impossible. We do not

have the capacity to respond to everyone in the same way. Strive to be okay with this.

Knowing Grief Without Understanding Grief

Our granddaughter Ellie and I were together when the word grief came up. Although she was an astute young girl, grief was a foreign word to the then nine-year-old. Ellie wrinkled her little nose and asked, "What's grief?"

Cautiously, I mulled over whether this was a safe subject to explore. I carefully explained grief as a time when someone feels sadness and disappointment. To personalize it, I asked Ellie when she felt sad and upset. The naturally cheery dark-haired girl's expression shifted. Her eyes turned downward. She whispered, "When Mom and Dad got divorced."

While Ellie had never heard of grief, she knew what it felt like. She had lived it. Those same emotions resurfaced during our conversation. She defines her life as "before" and "after" this event. Returning to her previous normal is not possible.

It's not a matter of "if" grief will happen but "when" grief will occur. Think of your life-defining "before" and "after" events. What happened? What feelings and emotions surface? Where do you feel angst in your body? What frayed edges need tending?

Many times we do not choose *if* a situation happens. We choose *how* we respond: whether to be a victim or a person who addresses and overcomes challenges. What we do next is important. Options include letting pain consume us or accepting pain and letting love guide us towards hope.

Pause for a Moment

Locate where you feel angst in your body right now. Just name where it is, nothing else.

Reflection Questions

1. Why did you pick up this book? What would you like to discover about grief?
2. Name a grief situation from your life. Describe the feelings that well up. Where do you physically feel this sadness?
3. List all the different grief experiences you have experienced. Do some of these situations surprise you? Why or why not?

Prayer: *Holy God – So often we think of grief in terms of a sagging spirit. Our souls become weary and filled with sorrow. Our hearts weep and cry because they are sad and tired. Fill us with Your strength. May we discover a way to stand back up on our feet with Your help. As You promise to be strong with us, may we see this promise fulfilled in our lives. Amen.*

How do we acknowledge grief's presence in our life? We explore this next.