

Grief Has No Guidelines

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During 2019–2020 I was studying for a MA in Applied Spirituality. Part of that programme included spiritual accompaniment. It was to be a fortuitous engagement in hindsight, as I was set upon a path that travelled inwards to soul searching. The Covid-19 virus was spreading at an alarming rate throughout the world and the mood of the media reporting and reflections was becoming sinister at best and apocalyptic at worst. My story surfaced in this context.

In the Spring of 2020, my mother was diagnosed with cancer, which had progressed eerily and quietly to an advanced stage before it was ‘discovered’. There were suggestions about not travelling a distance from home (my mother lived 270km away from me), and I began to fret about visits and access. While reports bombarded us daily about ‘Covid deaths’, my anticipated sense of loss upon the impending death of my mother became very complicated: ‘Oh, she’s lived a long and good life!’, ‘She’s a grand age!’, ‘Isn’t she lucky to have lived this long!’, and other similar but completely ineffective comforts and



platitudes. I did not know what to think, feel, believe, fear, anticipate or indeed how to function, in the way that I presumed ‘society’ could expect of me. The best I could deliver was to be mostly foggy and mentally chaotic as I went about my days and studies.

A dear friend who was studying with me noticed my tension. I shared my thoughts with her. She suggested that the five-week course being offered by Bethany could be of help. I attended each Monday evening for five weeks and sat quietly listening to the confidential sharing of the group in the ‘safe space’ created by the group leaders. I felt like a fraud to begin with, as my mother had yet to pass away, and I thought that perhaps

my attendance there was premature. I learned quickly that death was not the only loss being mourned there. Others were broken relationships, death of a beloved pet, loss of a job, anticipated loss of a loved one to an incurable illness. I did not speak/share for the first three sessions; I just sat there and nervously shredded a fistful of tissues or soaked them with tears as my feelings ebbed and flowed. The leaders took us through mindful memories and gently encouraged us to think about our loved ones in symbolic ways, a flower, a picture, a watch. Mine was a stick of chalk, as my mother was a teacher!

I spoke on week four. I inarticulately ‘blubbed’ about her impending death,

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how I was afraid I would not be there at her passing and how I was afraid to be there at her passing. ‘Trust in God and go with the flow’ was the insight I gained. There is no right or wrong here; this is life. Death is a part of life. It is guaranteed, and yet we are afraid to face it or talk about it. Perhaps it’s the finality of it all that frightens us, but I take comfort in my faith in the resurrection on that score.

I was there when my mother died four months later. It was a Covid-restricted affair, and we were allowed to see her through an open window. My youngest sister was by her side (one person allowed in the room) and she held her hand as she died. I felt no shock at this moment; it was as if I had witnessed the most natural thing in the world, and it was bathed in blessings. I truly believe that my time with Bethany prepared me for that moment. I have since joined Bethany and serve on its GEC in an attempt to ‘pay forward’ what I received. Of course I cried later and went through many different presentations of grief but that moment was, and remains, a blessed moment for me.