
COPING WITH GRIEF DURING A TIME OF PANDEMIC

This is the text of a presentation Sister Rose Miriam Schulte gave May 14, 2020, for a virtual gathering of 35 Springfield Dominican Sisters and Associates. It was one in a series of virtual events hosted by the Dominicans called The Community Room. Sister Rose Miriam is the vicaress general of the Dominican Sisters of Springfield and an experienced child and family therapist.

It is truly good to be with you. I Invite you today to look with me through the lens of the pandemic at our common experiences of loss and the grief that follows loss.

Let's begin with a reading from the book of Revelations Chapter 21:

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed. I saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God as a bride prepared to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice saying this is God's dwelling among the people. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be nor more death or mourning, crying out or pain. For the former world has passed away. (The Word of God).

Hope Restored

I come today with the hope that amidst the pain and turmoil of a pandemic our hearts can be changed...our spirits renewed...our hope restored. I come as your sister in Jesus Christ...the Jesus who came to us as God/Man. The Jesus who understands our plight because he, too, grieved: at the death of his cousin John the Baptist, at the grave of his friend Lazarus, and with the widow of Naim whose only son had died. Jesus, the preacher, who turned noticeably sad when the rich young man walked away...Jesus, the faithful Jew who looked over his beloved Jerusalem and wept!

What is this phenomena we call grief? Psychologists tell us it is an internal physiological and emotional response to loss. It is a natural...a normal condition of the human spirit. Grieving can stimulate emotional and spiritual growth and might even be considered developmentally essential. It can be cumulative. Left unrecognized or unattended grief can cause undue pain, limit our personal resources, and negatively affect our relationships with our God, ourselves, and others.

Most of us are familiar with Kubler-Ross's stages of grief: **denial, anger, depression, bargaining, acceptance.** Experience tells us these so-called "stages" are neither linear nor sequential. They are more cyclical in our experience. When suffering a grievous loss, we move back and forth between these stages, much as we do the rooms in our home. The movement is

less planned than spontaneous and can be triggered by newly occurring events in life which may seem unrelated to the earlier loss.

Three Kinds of Grief

Grief comes in different sizes and shapes. We have all experienced **personal grief**: at the death of a close friend or family member...or the end of a significant relationship...a shattering physical or mental health diagnosis. Hopefully when in the throes of personal grief, you have had supportive persons, a faith community, internal resources to draw upon as you moved through the period.

This current era...this time of pandemic, has compounded our experience of grief by adding two different forms of grief.

The first of these is **collective** grief. Many have experienced collective grief when, as part of a geographical group, you have been struck by natural or man-made disaster...floods, hurricanes, fires...closing of a neighborhood school...or the bankruptcy of a local business. With a ground swell of assistance, those immediately affected are often able to survive and move on with their lives...not unaffected, but often with a renewed sense of gratitude, hope and faith in humanity.

Within this worldwide pandemic, **Collective** grief is grave...more extensive and pervasive. Citizens of multiple countries including our own have not only lost beloved family members, community members, and fellow citizens but their livelihoods: jobs, investments, retirement benefits...those things looked upon to secure their futures. I'm confident that many of you can name family, friends, or perhaps yourself who are experiencing this type of loss. We stand in solidarity with the millions who have lost their moorings...a sense of normalcy.

And layered on top of the personal and collective grief is a new phenomenon, **Anticipatory grief**: that dark cloud of anxiety, worry, disillusionment that a miniscule organism might rob us permanently of our sense of self, of safety, of a future for ourselves and our children.

Amidst all this personal, collective, and anticipatory grief we are asked to embrace necessary precautions to prevent the spread of the virus. Precautions which, while reasonable and even desirable seem unnatural, disconcerting, and can compound our sense of loss.

Compounding Loss

- Disallowing of our customary ways of worshipping, of celebrating Eucharist, of burying our deceased, of celebrating family events—graduations, marriages, etc.
- The limiting of personal interactions through social distancing...the seeming inability of companioning our elderly and ill family and friends.
- Even the caution against physical touch—hugs, kisses, gentle caring

The situation is made more complex by the dearth of scientifically based information in the media and likely our own disappointment around our government's lack of readiness to respond and the failure of governments throughout the world to collaborate for the common good.

So about now you may be thinking...“Thanks a lot, Rose Miriam! I was hoping you'd make me feel better...and so far you've only reminded me of how miserable I (we) really are!!!! It is not my intention to encourage groveling in our misery. It is important, however, If we are to accept...even co-create the new heavens and new earth that we realize the debilitating tendencies of grief and loss...and look within those very experiences of our own vulnerability for signs of grace and challenge.

Let's spend a few moments considering how loss can both negatively affect and more so—positively challenges us...perhaps even become a *Kairos* moment.

What's Happening Psychologically?

Psychologically speaking: It's helpful to name your losses, claim them as your own. Identify your emotional reactions. If previous serious losses of the past are triggered and come to the surface...tend to them, recognize them for what they are; try to be gentle with yourself. Try not minimize or deny your losses by comparing them to others...resist a sense of guilt for being “normal” and having natural reactions of anger, sadness, resentment. (2) Name the challenge, the opportunity, the need for support contained within the loss. Invite that support even as you offer it to others. Psychologists use a term “reframing.” It's a therapeutic practice of taking an articulated experience e.g. a specific loss, and re-examining one's emotional and cognitive response looking for more life-giving or spiritually challenging interpretations.

A Question: Can my experience of vulnerability or even helplessness be reframed to put me in touch with the gifts of understanding, compassion, and cooperation I have to offer?

What's Happening Physiologically?

Physiologically—Dealing with loss is exhausting and stressful...Do you understand your reactions under stress: Do you have difficulty sleeping? Nerves on edge? Caving into that sweet tooth? Skipping your daily walk . . . and then engaging in some form of self-loathing over the fact that you didn't take the time? We all have some addictive tendencies. Are you eating too much, sleeping too much, isolating and spending inordinate amounts of time on computer or in front of the tv? Ruminating In your anxious thoughts? It's during such times as stress our addictive behaviors are most likely to reappear. A simple step...a proactive baby step in addressing those behaviors can be huge! Trust yourself and the God who loves you! You are not losing your mind! You are going through a period of change...transition...grief...a time of heightened vulnerability!

A Question: Can I allow an honest appraisal of my creatureliness and the limits of my personal resources lead me to a fuller experience of God’s mercy and forgiveness?

What's Happening Spiritually?

Spiritually—during times of loss we can expect our prayer—our relationship with self and God to undergo some change—God will not abandon us...God can accept our sadness, our angst, even our anger! Can we accept e.g. the challenge within new rituals of worship—search for ways of deepening our understanding of the gift of Eucharist...

Can you allow yourself to adjust your personal prayer to what truly supports your maintaining your equilibrium? Need more structure? Return to the tried and true prayers memorized as a child. Need more reflective time? Use music, meditation, mindfulness, solitude (even tiny bits). Need encouragement? Turn to your favorite scripture passages and friends.

Remember Kubler Ross’s stage of **negotiation?** ...it can pertain to God. Have you ever found yourself bargaining with God “God, if you spare me or my loved one... or my job...I’ll never miss Mass again! I’ll even say 10 rosaries! That’s normal... not necessarily a healthy, mature interaction!

Discernment During Grief

Finally a Caution: While times of grief can be graced moments of transformation spiritually, psychologically, emotionally...such times are not typically good times to make any serious decisions about your basic lifestyle!

I’d like to return now to the Scripture with which we began:

Then I saw new heavens and a new earth. The former heavens and the former earth had passed. I saw a new Jerusalem, the holy city, coming down out of heaven from God as a bride prepared to meet her husband. I heard a loud voice saying this is God’s dwelling among the people. God will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there shall be nor more death or mourning, crying out or pain. For the former world has passed away. (The Word of God).

Questions for Reflection

With what did you resonate from the presentation on grief?

- *What new insight into the grief process do you have?*
- *In what way are you experiencing your own vulnerability at this time of pandemic?*
- *What personal gifts have you become aware of? How have you used these gifts for yourself and others?*
- *What is your emotional and/or physiological responses to the imposed changes/losses you are experiencing?*

Three Attitudes

Part of the Final Summary: Consider adding daily doses of the following three attitudes to your life.

- **Wonder and awe:** take the time to notice the resurgence of life in nature, the beauty of a single flower...the small miracles in each day...the song of the birds...the night stars...encourage creative curiosity
- **Humor:** real humor...which touches into our deep sense of spiritual peace and joy...which allows us to smile...even laugh at the ironies of life...and stimulates our imaginations into creative problem-solving
- **Gratitude:** Amidst the loss and hardship, take a couple of minutes at the end of each day to list that for which you are grateful...a good meal, an unexpected word of encouragement or support...sink into the peace of heart and mind, gratitude has to offer

Practical Suggestions:

- **Expand your study**...turn off the debilitating news on media and pick up a good book...maybe **THE GOOD BOOK**...read authors you've never tackled before
- **Try journaling:** a litany of feelings, newly realized personal gifts of God, a letter stating your grievances, a list of the blessed interactions of a day.
- **Take short walks**...of surrender...of gratitude...of appreciation of nature
- **Tell stories**...spend a few moments each day with a friend, a spouse, an adult child...speak to your pain and your coping...support one another.
- **Enhance your prayer** with the new awareness of what gifts and talents you are developing during this time as you look for ways of supporting others or filling very real needs of others...within family and beyond...
- **Be true to yourself**...your personality...if adding quiet time is restorative for you tend to that need, even if it's only a few moments a day...on the other hand structures is stabilizing and strengthening, don't totally forfeit the structures you've built into your life.

We gratefully acknowledge the [Collective Psychology Project's](#) publication, [This Too Shall Pass](#), which inspired some of the practical suggestions included here.

For more information about the Dominican Sisters of Springfield, Illinois, visit springfieldop.org.