

Care for Self, Care for Others

Reflection by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

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"There is this natural place in grief where it really messes with your identity. You can't remember where things are, miss meetings, and tell the same story over and over.

"It's so hard to keep on loving yourself when you fear you're going crazy, and yet, loving yourself is exactly what you need." These words were spoken by Reverend Barbara Cornell, a Unitarian Universalist minister and hospital chaplain.

Last week we started our month-long journey on grief. It is clear from the messages I've received that this is a journey you long to understand and are grateful to do this together.

"Grief," as Francis Weller writes, "is not an episode or something to be gotten through. Grief is a skill and a lifelong companion."

This morning I will offer some thoughts about how we care for ourselves and for others as we grieve, specifically during times of loss, the first gate of grief. Some of these skills also apply to the grief related to the other gates of grief including ancestral grief and the sorrows of the world. We have some different needs when dealing with those types of grief which I will talk about later this month.

We need to remember that grief is both universal and unique to each person. Everyone grieves, and each of us grieves in our own way, in response to different things. This leads me to the first skill of caring for ourselves and for others who are grieving.

1. Make no assumptions. You will not know how you will grieve nor whether another person will grieve as you do.

You will not know what the other person wants or needs nor what you will want or need.

You will not know what you or another person will want or need or whether grief will be the same one day to the next. Our wants and needs are logical, and they will change. One day you will be talkative and need to share with someone. The next day you'll need to be quiet and introspective. In one moment you may fear this will never end,

and in the other you may feel grateful and hopeful.

2. The second skill of grief is to be selfish and allow others to do the same.

If ever there was a time to be selfish, this is it. The veil is thinner when we are grieving. We know what matters to us and what we want to say. Go for it. This is the time to say "No, I don't like that," or "Please don't tell me stories about your cancer," or "I don't need more casseroles," or "It would be great if you could walk my dog." Invite others who are grieving to do the same.

3. Be open to surprises. Allow the unexpected in.

You may usually be an introvert, but now you can't stand being alone or vice versa. Even as you cry, you may experience deep joy when you see your cat come through the front door or when the young boy from next door brings you a Tupperware container of soup. You will be more sentimental, emotional, and easily touched. You'll also be more easily angered, more often grouchy and frequently unkind in your thoughts if not your actions. You can expect all of that.

4. Please know you are not crazy.

You may find yourself talking to your loved one who has died or grieving over the death of someone you sincerely disliked. You will forget things. You may be unable to think for days on end and then discover that your normal rationale or creativity return. You'll think you're all over things, and then the cycle will start again. You may be drawn to religious traditions of your childhood, reciting prayers you memorized when you were seven years old. Your mood may change like the tides one hour and then feel like stagnate clay. All of that is okay. There is no right way to grieve.

5. Lastly, give up planning.

You were unable to plan as your loved one lived with dementia. The health diagnosis took you by surprise. Grief plays havoc with

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time.

You lose hours reminiscing and reliving things from long ago. You make a plan to meet friends, then change your mind at the last minute. Or you decide you need time to organize the house then go to the grocery store instead.

All of these things are true for all of us, even as it will look slightly different for each person and with each loss. Thus, don't assume, be selfish, expect surprises and open to the unexpected, remember you're not crazy, and give up planning. These things apply to how you care for yourself and how you care for or accompany those who are grieving.

The time of grieving losses is liminal space. The past is behind and gone and the future ahead and unknown. Grief changes us.

A time of grief is a time for loving yourself, a time for surrender, a time for trust.

Amen.