

Prolonged Grief

Reflection by Reverend Helen M. Murgida, Ed.D.

February 12, 2023

Many thanks to Reverend Rebecca for today's theme of "The Faces of Grief" and for sharing this Sunday with the Pastoral Care Associates. I surprised myself when I volunteered and said, "I can talk about Prolonged Grief" – followed by saying to myself, "What have I gotten into?"

For me, grief is the deep sadness and loss I continue to experience from my husband Frank's death. I knew that his death would mean big changes in my life, and it did. I coped and I adapted with the ongoing support of family and friends and by plowing on!

March 3rd will be the fifth anniversary of Frank's death. Frank was a risk-taker. He lived a large and wonderful life as a loving husband and father to Matthew and Lucas, and as a musician, choral singer, engineer, marketeer, entrepreneur, and university professor. He was the primary source of income for us and made good money and we enjoyed the lifestyle it afforded. He only wanted the best for his family in our professional and personal lives. He was very smart, a good listener and conversationalist, full of energy and eager to help. As a risk-taker, he had to be his own boss, and loved the creativity and thrill of initiating high tech start-up companies, a risky business with very high highs and very low lows. Consequently, in our later years, things didn't work out as we had planned financially. As the chief financial provider, his declining health over many years brought about a shift in that role as I became both the caregiver and the provider. This shift was not easy for him.

Loss is not defined by time; it is a very loose space. Society expects us to "move on," which is a very uncomfortable phrase for me. I have no idea what it means! Just as "closure" is indefinable to me. I am a happy and productive person, and I am at peace with the work that I do. My internal state is harder to share, but I'm attempting to do so today.

My Prolonged Grief began several years before Frank died. I would not change any part of this continuing journey. I grieve for him every day, but also smile and find joy in the life we had as a family.

It was a therapeutic respite for me to sit and examine my journey with Prolonged Grief. I know that Frank's actual death in the ICU at Massachusetts General Hospital was "The Big Loss." I had a month to sit in semi-immobilized sorrow. I did the extensive required paperwork to declare myself a widow, visit the lawyer and financial planner, and plan his memorial service with our interim minister, Reverend Susan Milnor. I was surrounded by the support of my beloved sons and family, spiritual sisters and brothers from my chaplaincy program, the FRS community, especially from choir members, and my co-workers at the Department of Education. I was so fortunate!

That same year Reverend Rebecca asked me to serve as Affiliate Minister at FRS - such an honor and privilege! As you know, my focus is on our Accessibility and Inclusion Ministry (AIM). I love this work and am so proud of the work we are doing to welcome, embrace, integrate, and support people with disabilities, both visible and non-apparent.

Grief and loss are a complex, multifaceted, multilayered, and highly personal journey. As I now approach 80 years of age, I am blessed with good energy and ability to focus on tasks. I will continue to serve at FRS and do memorial services for families of deceased loved ones who have no established church affiliation – this work of crafting meaningful ritual fills me with gratitude – and work with the Massachusetts Department of Education in the office that serves special education programs. My life is full.

David Weller, author of *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, tells us:

"We need to recover our right to ask for help in grief. Otherwise, it will continue to recycle perpetually. Grief has never been private; it has always been communal."

I have delayed in making necessary life-altering decisions:

Downsizing – keepsakes, mementos, photos, clothing, collectibles, and especially troves of books.

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Financial Decisions – I know what I have to do but have been “too busy” to do it. I work for the Department of Education not only because I love it, but because the income allows me to avoid dealing with my financial realities. It allows me to maintain my lifestyle and immerse myself in work for others.

Self-Care – I am good at caregiving but not so good at self-care. This is my next step in my grieving process. Jack Kornfield says it best: “If your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.”

While grief has no time limits, I cannot avoid my reality and I am hurting myself by delaying taking care of myself. My immediate need is to find a two-bedroom apartment in the greater Newburyport area in the next few months. Please feel free to let me know if you have any leads. Will down-sizing, budgeting, and moving put an end to my Prolonged Grief? Yes and no.

Thank you for allowing me to share my journey of grief.

I conclude with a quote by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and David Kessler, pioneers in hospice care, that always resonates with me when I use it in many of my memorial services:

“The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not ‘get over’ the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to.”