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Understanding Grief and Grieving in God’s plan

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JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

Recently a friend of mine lost her adult son to disease. We all sense the wrongness of children predeceasing parents; only other parents, who have conceived, birthed, and raised children, can truly understand the depth of this loss and grief.

We all lose people that we love to death. One of the ways we deal spiritually with the tragedy of this loss is to say with St Paul, *How Unsearchable His Ways* (Romans 11:33-36). The context of St Paul’s remark was that he, a highly educated and dedicated Jew, thought he knew “the plan,” and so after his conversion, he tried to persuade his Jewish community to accept the salvation Jesus’ offered. But then he began seeing that actually God was giving that call to more and more non-Jews (the Gentiles). With deep sadness and loss, Paul had to change his life focus and project.

This rearranging of our lives in face of loss was hard for Paul, and so very, very hard for us. We struggle to believe that any good is going to come from the situation of deep loss. Either we despair and lose our faith, or with time we are forced to acknowledge as Paul did, that “the plan” is only known to God. With the help of grace, we continue loving and trusting God without understanding “the plan,” the “why” of our loss.

For me, the physical separation is the hardest part of grieving. The loved person is just so gone. Suddenly there are no heard words, no touch, no smell, no substantial body coming through a door. I personally experience physical “separation grief” as never totally ending, a permanent hole in my life that I can’t get rid of but only weave around. Eventually I come to accept this hole as part of my self-identity; now I am a person who has lost someone I deeply loved.

One of the ways I weave life around the hole left by physical absence is by paying attention to the ways my loved one is actually still present to me.

Relics help! In Catholic devotional life, a “second class” relic is an article of clothing or some other article used by a saint (while first class relics are actual parts of the body). I’m not suggesting saving excessively, like a cousin of mine, who has unopened cartons of stuff from her long-deceased mother! But there is a connectivity, a “still with me” experience, that comes from having objects that were used or touched by our loved ones. Something they made exists because their bodily energy and planning produced it. Something written in their handwriting came from the pressure of their hand and their

unique writing style. Something they used, like a tool, a cook book — these things were touched often by their body and still speak to our bodies.

In a deep relationship we learn to know deeply the character and enthusiasms of our loved one. So another way they remain present is when we do something in their memory. We might continue to support an organization important to them, or engage in a hobby they loved. A friend takes her deceased husband’s antique car for a good spin on his death anniversary. Some folks I know go to the casino on their casino- loving mother’s death anniversary. Lots of our holiday traditions have elements that make our loved ones present.

Memory is the preeminent way our loved ones are still with us. Today in our multi media world, we have many ways of preserving our memories. This abundance can be a little distracting. The point of these visual aids is to help us remember deeply. Remembering deeply means embracing the whole “body” of what our loved one was — not only how they looked or did but what they believed in and treasured. Remembering deeply means dwelling on the ways they were good and holy people, on what brought them joy, on how they gave themselves to us and others. We keep that deep, living memory of them “in mind,” so that our own lives can continue to be influenced by them. We hang out with others who knew them, letting their memories add to ours. And above all, we let our memories bring us to deep thankfulness and praise of the God who joined us with them.

Words our loved one said, their laughter, their touch, still lives in our own body. The way they influenced people, events, and decisions during their embodied time still effects things today. Their presence continues. In a counter intuitive way, the grief we experience because of their physical absence actually keeps their presence in us. It keeps our memories alive, and it prompts us to keep exploring what they meant to us, and still mean. While missing them forever, may all who grieve loved ones treasure their presence always.

Sister Mary Garascia, PhD (Theology), is a member of the Sisters of the Precious Blood of Dayton Ohio, where she now resides. Until recently she lived and ministered at The Holy Name of Jesus in Redlands. You can follow her weekly Sunday scripture blogs at Precious-BloodSistersDayton.org.