

“Grieving” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at Knox Church Dunedin New Zealand on 24 January 2016. Readings – Romans 8:31-38; John 14:1-6,27

This sermon follows on from last week where I talked about funerals. The subject has arisen because of conversations people in the congregation have been having about changes in the nature of funerals, including the increasing number of people for whom no funeral is held after death and people who specify that on their death they will have a private funeral.

This address, less a sermon, concerns grieving. I am using material from Tom Long and Thomas Lynch’s book *The Good Funeral*.

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross published a book called *On Death and Dying* which set out five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance¹. The book was extremely influential and when I came to train in the early 80s and then in my first years of ministry it was a framework I applied. So if people were feeling certain ways I would try to work out whether they were denying, or angry, or bargaining or depressed or accepting. And an industry of grief counselling arose.

And the stages became applied in other areas. So when people divorced and remarried too quickly, people suggested they were short-circuiting the grief process. It was too early, too soon. The idea of stages of grief became applied in all kinds of circumstances.

Kubler-Ross herself came to see that the idea of going through stages was unhelpful and she regretted suggesting that grief was somehow manageable. Yes, she said, people might deny, they might be angry, they might bargain, but there was no progression to it, no order, no one step and then another.

Other writers, and this is now the prevailing view, suggest that the whole idea of different stages of grief is very unhelpful and untrue. They point out how little data Kubler-Ross used to reach her conclusions.

Ruth Davis Koningsberg wrote a book called *The Truth About Grief: The Myth of its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss*. She challenges the whole idea that grief is a manageable process that moves through stages. She suggested there was no evidence to support Kubler-Ross’s theory.

Instead, she said, grief is unpredictable, wild, undomesticated in form and intensity. It breaks like a storm and then it calms, without reason, without pattern, and then it might break again. It is perilous, unruly and emotionally fraught. Attempts to manage grief may be quite unhelpful.

Koningsberg's approach has itself been the subject of criticism.

Nevertheless, it is now widely held that the idea of stages, manageable stages, is unhelpful, and the idea that somehow grief can be managed is unhelpful.

"When someone dies the threads unravel, the narrative shatters, and those of us who are part of the story "go to pieces". When we grieve we are not simply grieving the loss of one we have loved, we are also grieving the loss of the narrative by which we have lived our lives. We have gotten up every day counting on this person to play a part in the unfolding drama of life and now that member of the cast is no longer present, and the play cannot proceed. So grief is, in part, confusion and anxiety about how to advance, how to keep living the story of life without this important person in the drama. We don't know what to say or do. Life stands still. The work of grief is to gather the fragments and to rewrite the narrative, this time minus a treasured presence.ⁱⁱ"

Theologically there have always been problems with the approach Kubler-Ross took. She tended to suggest that death is a freeing escape of the soul from the human body. But that is not a Christian approach.

As Tom Long says – "Death is a power pitted against all life, is the destroyer of life, the breaker of promises, the slayer of love and communion. Death is not to be welcomed but resisted and fought against as the final enemy."ⁱⁱⁱ"

Colin Murray Parkes –

"We think ... I know where I'm going, and I know who's going with me," except that when we lose one we love, we no longer know where we are going or who is going with us^{iv}."

And so we need to rebuild our world, to discover new meanings, a new story and a new world.

The questions can range from practical questions, how did the person die, to relational questions, Who am I now I am no longer a spouse, to deeper spiritual questions like – why did God allow this to happen.

We do not take this journey alone. In the wilderness of grief, God provides food, knits together the unravelled life and gives us a story by which to live. We are not seeking closure, we pray that those we love may be gathered into the great story, the eternal story, fashioned by God's grace.

Jan Richardson is an artist, writer and poet. After her husband died at a young age, she found a card she had painted for him on a Valentine's Day.

This is what she said, and the poem she wrote^v.

“Looking at the card now, I think of the nurse’s words just after Gary died. I had placed my hand on his chest and remarked on how strange it was to feel a heartbeat and know it was only my own pulse. “His heart beats in you now,” she said to me.”

“Though Gary and I didn’t make a big deal of Valentine’s Day, February 14 will still give me pause this time around. I know I’m not alone in not looking forward to the day. But instead of simply dreading it, I thought this seemed like a good starting place for a blessing. If you’re living with a broken heart right now, or know someone who is, this blessing is for you. In the midst of the breaking, may our hearts never cease to open.”

A Blessing for the Brokenhearted

There is no remedy for love but to love more.

– Henry David Thoreau

Let us agree
for now
that we will not say
the breaking
makes us stronger
or that it is better
to have this pain
than to have done
without this love.

Let us promise
we will not
tell ourselves
time will heal
the wound
when every day
our waking
opens it anew.

Perhaps for now
it can be enough
to simply marvel
at the mystery
of how a heart
so broken
can go on beating,
as if it were made
for precisely this—

as if it knows
the only cure for love
is more of it

as if it sees
the heart's sole remedy
for breaking
is to love still

as if it trusts
that its own stubborn
and persistent pulse
is the rhythm
of a blessing
we cannot
begin to fathom
but will save us
nonetheless.

In an interview Richardson said this ...

“I think it’s so important in every season, to figure out what’s going to help us abide the mystery, whether it’s the mystery of just simple unknowing that is always attending our lives or the mystery of the darkness that comes in times of pain and grief. I have found that whatever kind of darkness we are in, God is always very keen to meet us there.”

ⁱ Long, Thomas G and Lynch Thomas, *The Good Funeral*, 2013, Westminster John Knox Press 2013

ⁱⁱ *Ibid* p 224

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid* p 223

^{iv} *Ibid* p 224

^v <http://paintedprayerbook.com/2014/02/10/a-blessing-for-the-brokenhearted/> Jan Richardson