

Niamh Finucane

# Grief and Loss in a time of Covid-19

As we approach the month of November, the month of All Souls, we are invited to remember those we have known who have died, whether it was a recent death or a death that occurred a long time ago. Those we have shared love and laughter with, those who were dear to us, connected by family or by friendship. Whatever the situation, each and every person's death and therefore each and every person's grief is different and unique, like a fingerprint.

This year, there is an added dimension to our thoughts and grief, as some of the people who died this year, died during the current COVID-19 pandemic. They may or may not have died of COVID-19, but for many months, the restrictions of the pandemic affected how things were when the person was sick, or when they died. The restrictions meant that we may not have had the opportunity to see people, to talk to them in person, to say the goodbye we would have liked to have had. Some people died surrounded by those they loved, but for others, family were not able to visit and it was the staff in the hospital or the nursing home that were present when their relative died. It may also have changed how the funeral took place with many people over the past few months having much smaller funerals than normal. For some, there was a great intimacy in this experience, a freeing up of needing to pay attention to others in the world for a period, but for many, there was also a loss in this as we could not celebrate the life of the person with the wider community, share our grief and have it held and witnessed as we normally would.

So this year, you may be remembering and grieving, not just the person who died, but also the experience of how different things were. The changes brought by the restrictions we have had to live with since the COVID-19 pandemic began, mean there are often many other losses that we have grieved and continue to grieve. We have missed seeing friends, family; missed celebrations. There may have been times we really missed the hugs or handshakes of our family and friends. All of this goes against our normal, natural

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instinct. It may have caused us to feel down and sad, a sense of loneliness.

In the early months of grief, we often focus on our sadness and loss, what is absent, what is different, what is lost, before we can start to process our grief to be able to connect more with the positive memories of the person, the connections. It can feel like coming through winter to move into the new growth and life of spring time. It takes time for us to find new ways of keeping the person's connection alive, of developing and strengthening the continuing bond with the person. Remembering times of joy and laughter, memories created and shared. Much like flowers in the garden, we may need to tend and nurture this until it blooms within us again. Remember that death ends a life, but not a relationship.

There are many metaphors that are used to describe grief. It can be described as a journey, where we travel from the person we were in a world that was familiar to us, to become the person we will be, adapted to the changes that death has brought. Sometimes in the midst of grief, as we are trying to adjust to all the changes in our world, we can feel lost, but as the journey continues, we learn the landscape of grief and learn to navigate back to living life again, enjoying and connecting again.

Others have described grief as a wave, the intensity and strength of grief can ebb and flow, wash over us at times, but at other times when we feel more able to manage in the world, it is more like the sea gently lapping at our ankles. As we deal with our grief, we learn to navigate the waves, to find comforts that are like ports of safety and to know we will still be standing when the wave washes over – something we may not have known in the early days of grief.

*"I walked the road to sorrow—a road so dark with care,  
so lonely, I was certain that no one else was there.  
But suddenly around me were beams of light,  
stretched wide;  
and then I saw that someone was walking by my side.  
And when I turned to notice this road which I had trod,  
I saw two sets of footprints—  
My own... and those of God."*

Lucille Veneklasen, *Chicago Tribune*, 1958.

For me, the poem captures something of the loneliness of grief, but also the support that can be there for us in our grief. Our challenge can be to feel this support. In the poem *Footprints* that was written later, the final paragraph gives the Lord's response to the author:

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*He whispered, "My precious child,  
I love you and will never leave you  
Never, ever, during your trials and  
testings.  
When you saw only one set of footprints,  
It was then that I carried you."*

The Irish people have a wonderful culture of remembering those who have died, of rituals to celebrate their life and traditions to help accompany their relatives, friends and community as they grieve. Like many times in life, out of great darkness, there comes a great light, as people up and down the country began to show great creativity and initiative. They developed new rituals to mark the death of someone important to them and to show their solidarity with the bereaved. People lined the streets of towns and villages as the hearse made its way to and from the church. People made a human circle around the graveyard to let those inside know they were not alone. Many

people joined wakes and funerals through webcams, sent video messages and cards, wrote poems and music. The creativity and the strength of our communities found ways to shine through during the darkness of grief. The Franciscan, Richard Rohr, says each generation has to make its own discoveries of Spirit for itself. If we notice all the things that people did to support and acknowledge the grief and loss of their friends and family, to ensure they were not left standing alone, to let them feel their warmth, their thoughts and prayers, to show the solidarity of community, we can see a great depth of spirit that was nurtured over the recent months, reminding us of how much we need and value connection and acknowledgement. Connection is at the heart of all of this.

Creating our own rituals to remember the person who died, can be helpful. It may be as simple as lighting a candle and having a few quiet words with them, playing their favourite music or watching their favourite film. It may be in the prayers that we say. It can be cooking their favourite meal, sharing stories with friends and neighbours, marking birthdays, anniversaries, or other special days. There may be places that help us feel connected to the person, like their favourite park, or by the sea. We might ask ourselves "what would they tell me now if they were here?" and use the answer to help guide us through challenges. Remembering is a lifelong connection, an invisible string to the person, a continuing bond. A death ends a life, but not a relationship. ■

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