

Fall 2012

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Well Meaning Statements Devastate Mourners

Larry M. Barber, LPC-S, CT

Mourners need two things: (1) to be able to express themselves and share their grief experience without being judged and (2) to know that they have been heard and understood. Remember that the best way that you can help mourners is to be present, listen, support and encourage them. Simply being there for grievers can help them move toward healing.

Here's some of the actions and sayings you should avoid doing for people in grief

- *Don't judge the person or his or her circumstance.* Avoid telling the mourner why the death or situations leading up to the death took place. Steer clear of telling the mourner that "Everything will be all right" or that "Everything happens for a reason." There could be some truth in those statements, but still they are not comforting to mourners in pain.
- *Don't try to find theological reasons for the death.* (I put this rule in for well-meaning ministers, chaplains and church members.) Don't try to make the situation better by explaining it in spiritual or theological terms. Avoid saying, "It was God's will."
- *Don't belittle or discount their feelings.* Stay away from statements like "You shouldn't feel that way." Let the mourners feel what they feel at the moment. A more appropriate response

might be to affirm the person's feelings by saying "I could see how you might feel that way."

- *Don't say "I know how you feel."* This statement is one quick way to get a rise out of an angry mourner or to shut down him or her from any further expression of grief emotions.
- *Don't say "I am praying for you" when you aren't.* Often this declaration is made at the end of a conversation with the mourner as a way for the comforter to exit to other activities.
- *Stay away from "at least" statements.* Some of the most discomfoting statements made to mourners start with the words "At least." Steer clear of such statements as:
 - *At least you have other children....or you can still have other children.*
 - *At least you had (however many) good years of marriage together....*
 - *At least they didn't suffer....*
 - *At least you know they are in a better place...*
 - *At least you're young. You can always remarry...*

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NAN ZASTROW
Co-Founder,
Wings—A Grief Education Ministry

A Different Kind of Grief

This summer, I wrote on my Facebook page, “What once was a lush yard with wooded trees and green lawn, now was a pile of wood chips and dust.” These were words that described a different kind of grief.

My husband and I decided we needed to cut down 1-2 trees that died and could cause potential damage to our roof. But, when we called the Tree Surgeon, we didn’t realize we were in for a much bigger surprise. Our expert analyzed all the trees and determined that many of the root systems were tied together. We could cut down those that needed it right now, but within a short time the others would die also. So we decided to resolve the issue at one time. This meant cutting down 10-12 beautifully matured trees and literally changing the entire yard.

I protested the drastic measures we were taking though I knew it was the best choice. I couldn’t imagine the view out of my window without all the beautiful green and magnificent fall-colored foliage. When the project was complete, I felt like our yard was hit by a Biblical-type plague. And then I grieved. The yard resembled barren land where locusts feasted



on the green trees and foliage and left behind a scattering of wood chips and dust debris.

Grief has many faces. Grief—by definition—is the loss of something once valued. I realize that trees are not people...and this grief cannot be compared to the kind of grief we feel when a loved one has died. But it also reminded me that in our lives we face all kinds of grief...some temporary, some life-changing, and some permanent. Each grief requires a process for healing.

We often forget or ignore the other losses we have grieved. Because death is such a permanent loss, it seems to stand alone in importance and influence in our lives. But if each of us took time to trace our loss histories, we would find that we’ve “survived” other losses that hurt too. We might be surprised at what we’ve endured. Some of these losses may include loss of a job; loss of a valuable item; the ending of a relationship;

or the loss of a physical ability such as hearing or mobility. As we go through these kinds of loss, we may not sense that we are grieving because the emotional, physical, spiritual, and mental aspects appear very different than those we experienced when someone loved has died

Fortunately, the loss of trees is a very temporary grief. It doesn’t begin to compare with the many permanent losses we’ve faced in our lives. But every loss is a reminder of “change.” Sometimes change is welcomed, necessary, and invited. Other times, it comes without invitation. When children go to college, parents grieve for their presence and grieve the absence of nurturing. Moving to a new city creates anxiety about many things like a place to live, the location of a church, grocery store—and we grieve for a period of time for the comfortable and the familiar. When elderly parents become dependent and require our assistance, we grieve with them for their once independent lives. Each of these situations involving change leaves behind something that we’ve lost...and we may grieve for what once was.

As humans, we tend to grieve outwardly only for those “big” losses that seem to set us back for a period of time. This becomes a time of transition...and we seek methods to help us move forward. Grief helps us discover what is really important in our lives. Grief demands attention, and we should give it the attention it needs. When we grieve fully, we can expect the shock and numbness and the sad

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The Gardener

A True Inspirational Story

Carl was a quiet man. He didn't talk much. He would always greet you with a big smile and a firm handshake. Even after living in our neighborhood for over 50 years, no one could really say they knew him very well.

Before his retirement, he took the bus to work each morning. The lone sight of him walking down the street often worried us. He had a slight limp from a bullet wound received in WWII.

Watching him, we worried that although he had survived WWII, he may not make it through our changing uptown neighborhood with its ever-increasing random violence, gangs, and drug activity.

When he saw the flyer at our local church asking for volunteers for caring for the gardens behind the minister's residence, he responded in his characteristically unassuming manner. Without fanfare, he just signed up.

He was well into his 87th year when the very thing we had always feared finally happened.

He was just finishing his watering for the day when three gang members approached him.

Ignoring their attempt to intimidate him, he simply asked, "Would you like a drink from the hose?"

The tallest and toughest-looking of the three said, "Yeah, sure," with a malevolent little smile.

As Carl offered the hose to him, the other two grabbed Carl's arm, throwing him down.



As the hose snaked crazily over the ground, dousing everything in its way, Carl's assailants stole his retirement watch and his wallet, and then fled.

Carl tried to get himself up, but he had been thrown down on his bad leg. He lay there trying to gather himself as the minister came running to help him. Although the minister had witnessed the attack from his window, he couldn't get there fast enough to stop it.

"Carl, are you okay? Are you hurt?" the minister kept asking as he helped Carl to his feet.

Carl just passed a hand over his brow and sighed, shaking his head. "Just some punk kids. I hope they'll wise-up someday."

His wet clothes clung to his slight frame as he bent to pick up the hose. He adjusted the nozzle again and started to water. Confused and a little concerned, the minister asked, "Carl, what are you doing?" "I've got to finish my watering. It's been very dry lately," came the calm reply.

Feeling satisfied that Carl really was all right, the minister could only marvel. Carl was a man from a different time and place.

A few weeks later the three returned. Just as before their threat was unchallenged. Carl again offered them a drink from his hose. This time they didn't rob him. They wrenched the hose from his hand and drenched him head to foot in the icy water. When they had finished their humiliation of him, they sauntered off down the street, throwing catcalls and curses, falling over one another laughing at the hilarity of what they had just done. Carl just watched them. Then he turned toward the warmth giving sun, picked up his hose, and went on with his watering.

The summer was quickly fading into fall. Carl was doing some tilling when he was startled by the sudden approach of someone behind him. He stumbled and fell into some evergreen branches.

As he struggled to regain his footing, he turned to see the tall leader of his summer tormentors reaching down for him. He braced himself for the expected attack.

"Don't worry old man, I'm not gonna hurt you this time."

The young man spoke softly, still offering the tattooed and scarred hand to Carl. As he helped Carl get up, the man pulled a crumpled bag from his pocket and handed it to Carl.

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The Gardener ...

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"What's this?" Carl asked. "It's your stuff," the man explained. "It's your stuff back. Even the money in your wallet." "I don't understand," Carl said. "Why would you help me now?"

The man shifted his feet, seeming embarrassed and ill at ease. "I learned something from you," he said. "I ran with that gang and hurt people like you. We picked you because you were old and we knew we could do it. But every time we came and did something to you, instead of yelling and fighting back, you tried to give us a drink. You didn't hate us for hating you. You kept showing love against our hate."

He stopped for a moment. "I couldn't sleep after we stole your stuff, so here it is back."

He paused for another awkward moment, not knowing what more there was to say. "That bag's my way of saying thanks for straightening me out, I guess." And with that, he walked off down the street.

Carl looked down at the sack in his hands and gingerly opened it. He took out his retirement watch and put it back on his wrist. Opening his wallet, he checked for his wedding photo.

He gazed for a moment at the young bride that still smiled back at him from all those years ago.

Carl died one cold day after Christmas that winter. Many people attended his funeral in spite of the weather. In particular the minister noticed a tall young man that he didn't know sitting quietly in a distant corner of the church.

The minister spoke of Carl's garden as a lesson in life. In a voice made thick with unshed tears, he said, "Do your best and make your garden as beautiful as you can. We will never forget Carl and his garden."

The following spring another flyer went up. It read: "Person needed to care for Carl's garden."

The flyer went unnoticed by the busy parishioners until one day when a knock was heard at the minister's office door. Opening the door, the minister saw a pair of scarred and tattooed hands holding the flyer. "I believe this is my job, if you'll have me," the young man said.

The minister recognized him as the same young man who had returned the stolen watch

and wallet to Carl. He knew that Carl's kindness had turned this man's life around. As the minister handed him the keys to the garden shed, he said, "Yes, go take care of Carl's garden and honor him." The man went to work and, over the next several years, he tended the flowers and vegetables just as Carl had done.

During that time, he went to college, got married, and became a prominent member of the community. But he never forgot his promise to Carl's memory and kept the garden as beautiful as he thought Carl would have kept it.

One day he approached the new minister and told him that he couldn't care for the garden any longer. He explained with a shy and happy smile, "My wife just had a baby boy last night, and she's bringing him home on Saturday."

"Well, congratulations!" said the minister, as he was handed the garden shed keys. "That's wonderful! What's the baby's name?"

"Carl," he replied.

Would you like to share your story or poem?

If you would like to submit a short story, poem, or article, we welcome it. The material does not need to be original, but if it isn't, please include the author or credits that can be printed along with the material.

We are looking for articles that inspire the bereaved, teach, and offer hope which is the focus of our ministry of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry. Poems or material may be submitted *In Memory* of your special loved one.

Well Meaning ...

Continued from page 1

- *Think before you speak.* After twelve years of working with grieving people, I have collected some of the most common statements made by would-be comforters that can deeply upset the mourner. Please avoid these hurtful clichés.

Waxing theological:

- *It's God will....*
- *God needed him (her) more than we did...*
- *God never gives you more than you can handle...*
- *He (She) is in a better place....*
- *She (He) is an angel now looking over you....*
- *Remember, God is in control....*
- *Everything happens for a reason...*
- *People die every day. It's just part of life....*
- *It was his (her) time...*
- *It's all for the best....*
- *It will get better...or...It will be all right...*

Unwelcome advice:

- *You just need to move on....*
- *It won't help to dwell on the past (or the death)...*

- *You need to get busy and just forget....*
- *Aren't you going to go back to work? Get your mind off the loss...*
- *I could introduce you to someone nice. I don't want you to be alone...*
- *Are you able to have another baby?*
- *Quit throwing your pity party! It's been three months....*
- *You need to get rid of all of his (her) stuff... (And when you do, can I have the....?)*

When with a mourner, be there for them, listen and say only statements that let them know you have heard them, that you understand them, and you love them.

Written by Larry M. Barber, LPC-S, CT, author of the grief survival guide **"Love Never Dies: Embracing Grief with Hope and Promise"** Available on <http://grief-works.org/book.php>. Also available on Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, and your local bookstore. Available now for Nook and Kindle.

Editor's Journal ...

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times to dissolve. WE become adjusted to the new "normal" and learn from our experiences.

The smaller losses in our lives pass by pretty quickly and become a vague memory. But in fact, there likely was a period of time when we were saddened by what happened. For example, I accidentally broke a beautiful blown glass dish my son gave me. It was one of the last gifts I received from him before he died. I also remember a beautiful white Samoyed dog that was our friend for years that died suddenly when he was hit by a snowplow. I missed

his greeting when we came home, but was able to move forward in a short time. Many years ago, leaving high school and the UW caused a break in many relationships that had developed over the years tied to great memories. Such is the circumstance of losses in our lives that may go unnoticed.

After looking at our yard when it was divested of its trees and lawn, it seemed empty and sad. We quickly began plans to restore some beauty to it. We created new landscaping, planted trees, and re-seeded the barren lawn. Even though this

summer has been harsh with its near drought conditions—tender attention to our project created new growth. A new normal began to evolve. The feeling of unwelcomed change began to subside. Now, young trees are growing and flowers are blooming. The spirit of renewal can be felt. We can't replace what we've lost, but we can be grateful that it was only trees—a necessary time of change. But, it also serves as a consistent reminder that every loss deserves attention so we can heal the emotional impact in our lives.

Be Good to Yourself
A Care Tip 

Comforting the Bereaved Child

Recognize a child's need to grieve or express his or her feelings. Give special attention to younger children who are confused by the emotions adults often show. Children have similar emotions but express them differently than adults and sometimes their feelings are misunderstood by adults.

Reassure each child, separately, that his or her feelings are important. Encourage them to talk and ask questions.

How To Connect With Wings:

- Email: wings1@charter.net
- Postal: P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401
- Phone: 715-845-4159
- Follow the EVENTS calendar posted at the website
- Subscribe to the free online ELetter sent quarterly.
- Visit our website: www.wingsgrief.org
- Order a Free copy of Grief Digest at www.centeringcorp.com
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Wings is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to grief awareness through education. We welcome your donations, in any amount, to support the ministry of Wings.



Harvest Time Beyond the Stars

1995 Nan Zastrow

Harvest time is quickly coming
Across God's great and chosen land.
Time to gather souls of followers
Homeward bound--the Master's plan.

In the soil of life's spring planting,
God plants roots and seeds to sow,
From the bounty of each year's labor,
Our goal, to enrich our human soul.

God sends the warm sun to encourage,
God sends the rain for strength to grow.
The rainbow assures us of His promise,
We chose the crops we wish to hoe.

God may pluck from our favored garden
The life of someone lost and loved,
Sometimes before he was fully ripened,
On vines nurtured from above.

Did he leave behind rich memories?
Like abundant harvest from the rows?
Of each heart he touched with goodness,
And for God's blessings once bestowed?

Are you ready for the harvest?
Was your journey trod in fertile land?
Or are you strangled by weeds and creepers,
Spoiling the best of your heart's plans?

From this late summer's harvest gathering,
Will you find an abundant stow?
Of all you earned to guarantee
Life after life---forever more?

Dear Lord, after each year's harvest,
Remind us how truly blessed we are,
To reap the fruits of loved ones' labors
From harvest time beyond the stars.

From the Archives

Stories worth repeating...



Even This Santa Gives Thanks

by Nan Zastrow

The hustle and bustle of the holiday season begins. Shopping carts and arms are brimming with purchases. Early in the season there is a sense of joy—the miracle part of Christmas when good moods prevail; and everyone is wrapped up in the joyous preparation. We become “Santa” as we plan the perfect holiday celebration. We credit Santa with joyous moods, family celebrations, and the perfect gift.

I once played the role as Santa, just like them. Today, there is something missing from the Santa scene...my son.

Since our first Christmas without Chad, I’ve never been quite as enthusiastic about the holiday as I once was. There is an overriding sense of pain that hangs over the merriment that others feel. It stifles the comfort of music; takes the fun out of tradition; and dulls many memories that once sparkled. Grief and Ebenezer Scrooge make good bedfellows. I soon realized the center of our holiday was our loved ones. Chad was the special element that put “thankfulness” into Thanksgiving, “happy” into Birthday and “merry” into Christmas.

Playing Santa for him was always a challenge. Though he never wanted any gift in particular, he could produce a list 16 pages long without much effort. And he would smile mischievously at his accomplishment. Whatever I

ended up doing or buying was still a surprise! But more than the gifts were the good times: The piñatas and Santa visits as children; the hidden presents and other traditions as adults. Santa lived in our hearts even as an adult.

That first holiday after his death, my heart ached with every thought of celebration. I tried all the tips for coping, but nothing seemed right. I even talked to my family early on about “changing our traditions”—doing things differently. I remember, clearly, sitting on the golf course in August, with my sister—wanting advice how our family was going to cope. It’s no wonder that by the time the holidays arrived my anxiety level had peaked. All I wanted to do was to get it over with!

I didn’t make a very good Santa that year. I couldn’t have cared less if I shopped. It hurt to watch the children. I couldn’t find peace in the religious celebrations. I cried through every ornament I hung on the tree. I backed out of Christmas Eve services because my heart ached and my eyes were red from crying. And, as much as I tried to make things normal for everyone else, I couldn’t find a bit of peace for myself. I was a Santa with no reason to give thanks.

I was miserable by choice. I was angry at God for allowing my life to take such a turn. I felt sorry

for myself and wanted everyone to feel my pain. I couldn’t deny it. It’s easy to give thanks when life is splendid. But giving thanks when life faces dark moments is a priceless message of trust.

The anticipation of my reaction on the first holiday without Chad was much greater than the actual emotion I felt. Maybe I cried myself out. However, for a brief time every year, the nagging pain of Christmas-past beckons at my door reminding me of where I’ve been and where I am today. Today, with certainty, I can say, “Facing the holidays is easier; but it’s very different.”

In the darkness of this journey through grief, there are some shining lights. The gifts I’ve received aren’t Santa-given, but they are blessings I sometimes take for granted.

- I am blessed to know that my God is always with me. No matter what I felt or what I said in His presence, He understood. And even today, when I have memory lapses and pity myself, He is there for me. What a friend I have in Jesus!
- I am blessed because I could choose my attitude, and my choices gave me new options. I still miss the things I’ll never have, but I don’t ponder them anymore.

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From the Archives ...

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- I am blessed with family and friends who value my commitments and support me beyond a shadow of a doubt. This gives value to what I do.
- I am blessed because God has given me the gift of writing and I've found a way to use this gift to soothe the pain.
- I am blessed with a healthy mind, body, and spirit even though I sometimes take them for granted.
- I am blessed with the gift of purpose each morning. I like the quote: " God put me on this earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I'm so far behind, I will never die!"

I purchased a figurine of Santa on bended knee, head bowed, arms folded. It reminds me of those early years of holiday grief. Perhaps the craftsman's interpretation was meant to capture the magic of Santa and the miracle of Christmas that brings two stories together to serve a higher purpose. Or maybe it was Santa giving thanks after his arduous task of delivering packages. Or maybe it was just Santa giving thanks that the holiday was finally over this year!

Life is a gift. For my son, Chad, the gift of life was brief. But in the brevity of those 21 years, he lived and touched the lives of many. Most of all, he touched mine. His death uncovered my weaknesses, but the spirit of his being has brought out the music in my soul.

I remind myself that it's okay to yearn for the past, but only momentarily. There is much to do in the present. Our tree sparkles with ornaments that tell the stories of many beautiful Christmases-past. Ornaments remind me of family who have died. There are messages in sparkling angels; stars of hope, and bells of joy. And, always the silent chorus of beautiful memories. With all this to be grateful for, even this Santa can give thanks!

*This story is included in Nan's new book: **When the Holidays Hurt**. This book makes an awesome gift for a bereaved friend!"*

Meow!

A cat died and went to Heaven. God met her at the gates and said, 'You have been a good cat all these years.

Anything you want is yours for the asking.'

The cat thought for a minute and then said,

'All my life I lived on a farm and slept on hard wooden floors. I would like a real fluffy pillow to sleep on.'

God said, 'Say no more.' Instantly the cat had a huge fluffy pillow.



A few days later, six mice were killed in an accident and they all went to Heaven together. God met the mice at the gates with the same offer that He made to the cat.

The mice said, 'Well, we have had to run all of our lives: from cats, dogs, and even people with brooms! If we could just have some little roller skates,

we would not have to run again.' God answered, 'It is done.' All the mice had beautiful little roller skates.

About a week later, God decided to check on the cat. He found her sound asleep on her fluffy pillow.. God gently awakened the cat and asked, 'Is everything okay? How have you been doing? Are you happy?'

The cat replied, 'Oh, it is WONDERFUL. I have never been so happy in my life. The pillow is so fluffy, and those little Meals on Wheels you have been sending over are delicious!'

NEW



When the Holidays Hurt...

practical ideas and inspiration
for healing grief

Nan Zastrow

For nearly two decades, Nan, and her husband, Gary, have inspired the bereaved through community holiday programs for those who grieve.

They offer ideas to preserve holiday sanity and sanctity based on their own experiences.

Learn how to unwrap and add heart-warming, commemorative rituals into the holiday that honors and remembers your loved one who died. In this book is a collection of stories meant to inspire you and encourage you as you plan your first holidays after your loss.

\$7.95

What will you find in this book?

Discover new possibilities for a season of good memories and joy through some of these chapters:

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- ✦ Find out how to paint your holiday the way you want it to be
- ✦ Learn how to tell which traditions are silver and which are gold—to help you decide what you might consider changing or not changing
- ✦ Share the priceless lessons of the Gifts of Hope that can heal your holiday grief with a lesson from a fortune cookie
- ✦ Determine which boxes are under your Christmas tree that can outshine the mysteries of Pandora’s Box.
- ✦ Find ways to decorate your holidays with hope, ideas, and rituals that heal.

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A Grief Education Ministry

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