



Winter turning into spring

Living with pandemic and the death of a loved one

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

"The sun shines not on us but in us." John Muir

The seasons change because the earth rotates on an axis that is slightly tilted. As our off-kilter planet makes its annual orbit around the sun, that 23.5° tilt causes the northern and southern hemispheres to be oriented differently to the sun at different times of the year. That means while it's winter here, our fellow earthlings in places like Australia, South Africa, and Argentina are enjoying the brighter, warmer, and greener days of summer. These basic facts of astronomy and meteorology suggest two things; 1. change is built into the very ordering of the solar system, and 2. Even during our darkest days, the sun is still shining somewhere.

As winter approaches and the cold settles in here in the northern hemisphere, the number one concern of my clients always seems to be a looming sense of dread for the dark, dreary, and snowy days of winter, and especially the isolation that's predictably a part the season. Of course, winter 2021 is unlike any other in living memory. Not only are we dealing with a global pandemic and its requisite social distancing practices, but we are also grieving. By itself, an upper-Midwest winter is not for the faint of heart. Combined, the current conditions of winter, COVID, societal stressors, and grief, brought with the winds of change a sense of foreboding that chills us to the bone.

For all practical purposes, forecasting grief is just about as precise as long-term forecasts for the weather. As a grief counselor, I can anticipate general trends and patterns but there are just too many variables to predict what your grief will look like over the next few months, or on any given day. Consequently, my advice is, "Don't make any prognostications about your grief as if it were a series of predictable stages or a steady state. While there is wisdom in stocking up on firewood, food, and facial tissues, those who crawl into a cave to wait for spring certainly miss those intermittent rays of sunshine that periodically break into the gray days of winter and offer us a glimmer of hope.

This winter the chance of accessing our primary coping strategies for dealing with grief was greatly reduced. Generally speaking, the bereaved cope better when they can connect with community-based sources of support. When that special someone dies, those who grieve usually spend time with their remaining family members, go out to lunch with friends or joining a grief support group. For the most part, accessing those external resources has been limited by social distancing guidelines for more than a year. Some of our friends and family members are at greater risk, others out

of an abundance of caution, have been hunkered down now for many months.

And let's face it, social media with all its advantages just doesn't measure up to physical presence. Nor does an elbow bump in any way compare to a real live hug. Yes, for better and worse, many have adapted to remote learning, working from home, and even benefited from book club and faith community gatherings via *Facebook Live* or *Zoom*, but it's not the same, it's just not the same.

Interestingly, one widower whose family is spread out over three continents, saw the positive side of live-streaming his wife's funeral service because it provided the opportunity for friends and family to participate, who could never have otherwise attended in person. Still, for many of us who have experienced the death of a loved one over the past twelve months from COVID-19 or any other cause, our on-going grief has been complicated by the fact that we were denied the chance to be with them when they died. We're heart-broken because circumstances prevented us from honoring them at the end of their life with a service in the way they deserved, and we've been robbed of the opportunity to receive the consolation of the community gathered at a time when we so desperately needed it.

Paradoxically, over the years I've observed that the isolation imposed by winter in some ways actually mimics the historical year-long mourning period. It

provides the bereaved with a reasonable excuse to withdraw from societal expectations for a period of time to allow their wounded - but still beating - hearts a slower rhythm needed in order to recuperate. I've also noticed that once spring is in full swing, I tend to get more calls for grief counseling. In part this is because the death rate is higher during the winter months; but more likely, because the seasons of grief are seldom in-sink with the seasons of the year. That is to say, when the recently bereaved observe everybody else all excited about getting outdoors and enjoying the new life around them, they tend to withdraw and feel more depressed because their internal state of mind does not reflect what is going on in the lives of the people around them.

This winter, a primary topic in discussions with my clients has been the vaccine. "Have you gotten it?" "I tried and tried, but I can't seem to get an appointment anywhere!" "My family doesn't want me to go anywhere until I get it." "I'm not sure if I want to get it." "Even when I get it, life won't change much because the other people in my circle probably won't get theirs until the end of summer." I can say from personal experience, once a person has had their second dose of the vaccine there is an observable shift in their mood as well as our conversations. Suddenly, where once there was only grief and gloom, hope is dawning on the horizon with the possibility of brighter days ahead.

Even in the most bitter moments of the cold winter chill, experience reminds me that beneath an insulating blanket of snow, a seed planted stirs with life.

It is with assured confidence and perhaps impatient anticipation that I await the first flowers of spring. It is their promised appearance that sustains my spirit and renews my hope that each tomorrow will be warmer than the day before.

Although the changes are incremental, indeed, hardly noticeable, the light of day grows longer, the wind blows fresher; and with the robin's return, I am compelled to sing with her a song of joy.

TJ Melvin

As a society, we remain cautiously optimistic. There are certainly logistical challenges to vaccinating 332 million Americans, not to mention the rest of the people on the planet, and public health experts can't say how effective the vaccines will be at keeping us safe over time.

Still, there are some really smart people working on these problems, and the experience of shared suffering, although at times overwhelming us, is also teaching us the true meaning of gratitude, empathy, and compassion.



I've often said that grief evolves gradually, sporadically, and unevenly, like winter turning into spring. I dare to say that is how we will also emerge from this pandemic.

While we cannot predict the future, we can observe and learn from the past. The experts in my field have noted that traditional mourning rituals and customs in Europe and North America largely vanished after the devastating losses of the First World War and the Spanish Flu pandemic that followed. The theory goes that there had been so much death, that people just wanted to move on, they didn't want to be reminded of all that loss. I sincerely hope that will not be the case this time around. I'm a little concerned that once the weather changes and we start having all of those memorial services and celebrations of life, there will be a new wave; not of pandemic, but a new wave of grief. Will we as a society have the stamina to be with the pain, or will we continue the strategy that suggests, "the best thing to do is keep busy," and avoid the distressing thoughts and emotions that accompany grief? If we do, those who have lost a loved one during this terrible time will continue to feel isolated and alone long after the social distancing directives have been lifted and COVID-19 has receded into history.

I don't know much about John Muir, (1838-1914) the environmental activist and philosopher, whose quote about the sun leads this article, but his words resonate with a truth that resides in me. In times of darkness, we need to look within to find the light. To find it, you have to have the presence of mind to stop your frantic wandering, your calling out, and the fear-fraught ruminations that you are completely and utterly *ALONE!* We need to calm ourselves, wait in the silence, sit in the darkness, and watch for the dawn.

I'm told that when someone is lost in the wilderness, they are supposed to stay in one place. The reason is that when search parties are organized, they work with a grid. Once they have searched one section of the grid, they move onto the next. If you are just roaming around aimlessly, chances are you will cross over into a place that has already been searched, making it harder for you to be found.

The isolation forced upon us by winter, loss, and pandemic, each in their own way, threatens our survival. But hidden in the current darkness is a seed of truth. Muir points to that truth in another of his more famous quotes; *“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”* When we are able to grasp this truth, a light dawns inside us and we realize that none of us are ever really alone. Muir understood this because, like Native Americans and indigenous peoples around the world, he lived not in isolation *from* but in relationship *with* the natural world. Inspired during one of his many sojourns into the wilderness Muir also wrote, *“Here I could stay tethered forever with just bread and water, nor would I be lonely; loved friends and neighbors, as love for everything increased, would seem all the nearer however many the miles and mountains between us ... I am learning to live close to the lives of my friends without ever seeing them. No miles of any measurement can separate your soul from mine.”*

I can't say I am one of those smart people who have any of the answers to the world's problems, but I can say with certainty that the grieving heart instinctively needs the darkness of winter to experience the light and renewal that eventually comes with spring. While your natural inclination may be to continue to hibernate, I'd like to suggest that you resist the temptation to stay in bed with the covers pulled up over your head and go outside like everybody else. Walk, breathe, touch, taste, and observe. Contemplate how change is built into the very ordering of the solar system and experience firsthand the consolation that comes with being hitched to everything else in the Universe. Given that grief evolves gradually, sporadically, and unevenly, I can't predict how long it will take for you to emerge from the current season; but I'm certain you will agree with me that even during your darkest days of grief, the sun is still shining somewhere.

Contrary to what many people think, grief is not a “process.” Instead, the experience of grief is more like a river: dynamic, often turbulent and constantly changing. Instead of using confusing clinical terminology, the **Grief River®** model uses images from nature to help us find a way to cope with all our losses across the lifespan. Take some time to explore <http://www.griefriver.com> to read other free .pdf articles, and feel free to photocopy any of them to share with a grieving friend. You can find additional resources for coping with grief and loss at:

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