

Day 5: Sunday, Introduction of Denial

Grief, The Emotional Buffer of Denial

“It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting; for this is the end of everyone, and the living will lay it to heart.”—Ecclesiastes 7:2

Denial of death can take many forms. For the person diagnosed with a terminal illness, the stage of denial may include rejection of reality and facts. The person may go searching for a second, third or fourth medical opinion or might turn to alternative modes of healing to bolster their disbelief of the terminal diagnosis.

To the grieving, denial can feel like as if they are living a dream, or as if a big mistake has been made that will soon be corrected. Joan Didion’s 2007 book *A Year of Magical Thinking* describes the year after her husband’s unexpected death. She writes the details of the day he died, trying to convince herself that it actually happened. Describing the year after his death, she continues to write of waking up in bed wondering why she was alone, wondering why other people thought her husband was dead, wondering – fearing! – that she had allowed her husband to be buried alive.

Denial serves an emotional purpose in the grief process. In *On Death and Dying*, Kübler-Ross writes about denial acting as an emotional “buffer,” giving the grieving person time to collect themselves and, in that time, to build the psychological strength to withstand the pain that comes with deep loss. Denial is a mode of survival: our biological means of allowing only as much pain as we can handle. In this way, denial can be understood as a form of grace.

As we reflect on grief’s stage of denial this week, contemplate the way this stage serves as grace. What pain have you experienced that was simply too much to bear? What pain have you needed to deny in order to survive? When have you witnessed others experiencing denial to protect themselves from painful truths?

Prayer: Merciful God, we all experience loss. We all grieve life’s limits. We praise you for subtle grace, the gifts that keep us afloat while awash in grief. Amen.

Teri

Day 6: Monday

Letting It All Out

“All who believed were together and had all things in common.”—Acts 2:44

At a large conference, I was seated at a table with confident, sharp professionals. One of them was a woman who shared with a couple of us, just before the workshop began, “I feel like I want to go to my room, curl into the fetal position and sob.” Her eyes drew down. “I’m realizing my whole job is going to change . . .” She trailed off, eventually explaining that the conference was making clear to her that she was on the cusp of a big transition.

Hers was the grief of a shifting season, a beloved season that now needed to evolve. And she felt she had nowhere to go. Sobbing in public would be unheard of. Sobbing in her room was to be avoided, too, because *that’s not how professionals work through things*.

I don’t think she’s alone.

Society exerts an unspoken pressure to keep it together. Unless our grief feels especially acute, who are we to need space to sob over a change in seasons, a move or the end of a beloved Sunday school?

How naturally we can isolate ourselves as we hold to society’s party line: *Chin up. Keep smiling.*

The truth is that seasons of change are seasons of grief, and these seasons need honest, communal processing.

Fortunately, this woman risked just enough honesty to tell a bunch of put-together professionals, “I really need to cry.”

She went ahead and let it all out. And we teared up too.

I no longer remember the workshop details, but I will never forget the time when a few professionals chose to drop

their guard and discover the kind of shared healing only ever known when keeping-it-together is set aside for vulnerable love.

Prayer: Merciful God, thank you for receiving me just as I am. Help me receive those around me in the same way — and may love multiply because of what you do in that space. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 7: Tuesday

Tears That Mean Love

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.”—Matthew 5:4

A speaker challenged our Toastmasters gathering to give an impromptu speech based on a prompt: If you could go back in time to any place and time, when and where would you go?

He looked in my direction. “Bobby, give it a try.”

My response hit me as clear as pain.

“To 1975. In Cincinnati, Ohio. That’s the year my parents were seniors in high school — and they lived in Cincinnati.” Then I pivoted. “I’d hope to see the Big Red Machine play a baseball game. To this day their legacy shapes the city.”

I meant it — I really would love to see those Reds. But I was also using sports as avoidance. Eventually, though, my heart released: “And . . . I would want to see my parents together in high school. I’d like to see a glimpse of the love that was lost.”

I stopped, about to sob with grief echoing from their divorce a quarter-century before. I managed to hold the flood within, though my voice cracked as I spoke the final sentence: “I don’t know what I would see, but I’d really like to go to 1975.”

Grief, it seems, plays by the same rules as impromptu Toastmasters speeches. It arrives with no warning, provides us with no preparation for its wave and calls forth waters we had no idea still shaped the cityscape of our soul so profoundly.

In these moments, we find it tempting to pivot toward the glory or mess that is our sports team or the weather.

Yet what is the only real way forward into a healed future?

Receive grief’s messy invitation. Somewhere amid it all, remind yourself that where there are tears, there is love.

And somehow, oddly and painfully, take comfort in that.

Prayer: Merciful God, I give thanks for the tears that remind me of love. And may your living water flood the cityscape of my soul with your comfort, healing and new life. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Bobby

Day 8: Wednesday

Living the Gift of This Day

“This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”—Psalm 118:24

A week after her death from lung cancer, my friend Elizabeth declined my calendar invite for our writing group’s weekly Thursday meeting.

On the morning I woke up to this notification on my phone, sent mysteriously at 1:23, I sat staring at this message from the great beyond, confused and rattled. Grief grabbed my heart and squeezed. No, I reminded myself again, *she really is gone*. This notification was likely a family member or friend cleaning up Elizabeth’s calendar, or perhaps her computer was automatically sending last notifications before it went offline for good.

I called my dog and grabbed his leash to go for a walk. I needed a minute.

Elizabeth loved her morning walks, the only exercise she could do with her diminished lung capacity. As her cancer progressed, she complained about how slow she had to walk, how difficult it was for her to breathe. I spent the night at her place once and was in her kitchen when she came home from a walk gasping for air, her chest wheezing. She kept walking, though. Eventually, she needed the support of a rolling walker.

Denial is easy to slip into because death doesn't feel real. How could someone be here walking her neighborhood one day and be gone the next? But the reminders of this natural cycle are everywhere. Friends and loved ones live and die. Flowers bloom and wilt. The leaves turn from green to red and gold each fall. Life is fragile, limited and precious. Every created thing has an expiration date.

Our faith reminds us of our mortality as well as our hope in Jesus Christ. Jesus died so we could live. This isn't just an eternal promise. It's also the gift of this very day, and it's a blueprint for how to live it. In the wake of Elizabeth's death I ask myself, How will I live the gift of this day? When I wake up each morning, I wonder what I might do with this next beautiful stretch of 12 whole hours. Who can I love? What good can I start and spread? How can I honor the precious yet fragile gift of life God has given?

Prayer: O God, our Alpha and Omega, our beginning and our end, wake us to the beauty and opportunity of this day, so we can honor its gift as well as its Giver. Amen.

Teri

Day 9: Thursday

Help for Our Unbelief

"I believe; help my unbelief!" — Mark 9:24

"Life changes in the instant. The ordinary instant."

Didion wrote these words in January 2004, days after her husband died of a sudden, massive heart attack. Writing was Didion's way of making sense of the reality she experienced. But she couldn't make sense of this tragedy. These two lines waited in a Word document on her computer for four months before she could add anything more.

It was the ordinary of the instant when her husband died that left Didion so baffled. In *The Year of Magical Thinking* she writes about how

we all focus on how unremarkable the circumstances were in which the unthinkable occurred, the clear blue sky from which the plane fell, the routine errand that ended on the shoulder with the car in flames, the swings where the children were playing as usual when the rattlesnake struck from the ivy.

In 1966, Didion interviewed witnesses of the attack on Pearl Harbor, noting how often they said it was "an ordinary Sunday morning." Didion's husband died at the table where they'd just sat down for an ordinary evening meal.

Denial includes the belief (or disbelief) that such remarkable tragedies aren't supposed to happen during unremarkable moments. Shouldn't clouds threaten in the sky when a plane crashes? Shouldn't a heated argument, where threats of divorce are hurled, take place before one spouse succumbs to a heart attack? Life can pull the rug from under our feet so fast it leaves us wondering if we were ever standing on carpet at all.

In such moments of grief, faith reminds us that there is much we will never understand. "I believe; help my unbelief," we pray along with the father who asked Jesus to heal his son in Mark's Gospel. We, too, pray for healing, believing that God understands what we cannot and loves us through the grief.

Prayer: God who is able to do far more than we can ask or imagine, heal us and help us when the unthinkable happens. Guide us by your wisdom. Love us in your grace. Amen.

Teri

Day 10: Friday

Trust the Process

“They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, ‘Peace, peace,’ when there is no peace.” — Jeremiah 6:14

Real talk: I’m a little surprised to find out that quote originated not with Patrick Henry but with the prophet Jeremiah. Regardless, the sentiment resonates. To practice denial is to treat a wound carelessly.

We have reasons to deny, of course. When something seems unbearable, we find it so much easier to look the other way. In many instances, denial is a natural coping mechanism. But the longer we treat a wound carelessly, the more likely it is to fester.

From the outside, denial looks a lot like gaslighting. It is infuriating when those around us deny what we know to be true. Maybe someone diminishes the reality of our loss. Maybe a politician calls opposing viewpoints “fake news.” Maybe someone bright-sides our suffering, insisting on finding a silver lining in a tragic situation. “They’re in a better place.” “This will make you stronger.” “At least . . .” (The first rule of grief: any sentence that starts with “at least” should be outlawed.)

Denial seeks comfort in the face of the utterly uncomfortable. It is a subconscious effort to fix what can never be made right.

In the immediate aftermath of a tragedy or trauma, denial is a protective strategy. It keeps us from having to face it all at once. We allow in exactly as much of the horrible truth as we can bear and save the rest for another day.

But we cannot stay in denial. As time goes on and reality sinks in, saying “peace” when there is no peace does more harm than good. It betrays our soul.

When we are in the thick of denial, we can trust the process. Eventually, as Jesus promises, “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

Prayer: God, give us the courage to face the truth in ourselves and in one another. When that truth is too much to bear, hold it with us. Amen.

Ginna

Day 11: Saturday

Finding Grief’s Place in God’s Story

“She said to them, ‘Call me no longer Naomi; call me Mara, for the Almighty has dealt bitterly with me. I went away full, but the Lord has brought me back empty.’” — Ruth 1:20-21

After I lost my pregnancy, I spent a month reading every piece of miscarriage literature I could find. On some level, I needed to know that what happened to me was real. I needed to learn that other people had experienced the same things I had: the shock, the contractions, the numbness, the shortness of breath, the emptiness you rediscover in the pit of your stomach every time you wake up and remember your baby is dead.

One piece I came across was a series of emails between two writers for Slate magazine. The year before, the two women had worked side by side through their respective miscarriages, neither saying a word to the other about what she was going through. Both suffered in silence. Sadly, this is how we do grief sometimes. We draw into ourselves and miss the resources around us — sometimes a resource sitting at literally the next desk.

One of the women, Emily Bazelon, tells the story of a rabbi friend who called her when he heard she’d miscarried. He pointed her to Ruth, chapter 1, when Naomi returns to Bethlehem after the death of her husband and two sons. When the women of the town greet Naomi, she gives herself a new name: Mara, which means “bitter.” “I went away full,” she tells them, “But the Lord has brought me back empty.”

When I read this text, I put down the book and wept. Yes, that was exactly it. A week ago, I had been full; now I was empty. These words held all my loss.

It is healing to recognize ourselves in the pages of Scripture. Even the worst moments of our stories have a place in God's story.

Prayer: God, when we feel alone, send us your Spirit, send us your Word and send us one another. Amen.

Ginna