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Thoughts on Grieving

For years, I've described grief in the way I know it and have experienced it: I've found that grief comes in waves. Sometimes, these are small, gentle waves lapping the shore in the form of a comforting memory or thought. At other times, grief is a tidal wave of sadness, upending the world. That tsunami of sadness tosses us around until we feel like we can no longer breathe. When grief is there, it often feels like it will never go away. It is overwhelming, partly because we know that our world has changed. We are unable to find footing. We feel scared and alone. For those of us who have experienced a tsunami of grief, and I imagine most of us have, it is gut-wrenching. I remember thinking, for example, after the death of my mother over two decades ago, *I will never get over this.*

I was right. I have never *gotten over* that loss. In grief and in the process of grieving, we do not *get over* things. We may try to push the sadness away or sweep the uncomfortable feelings under the rug, but those feelings are there, and they hang around, even when ignored. We bring it all forward with us, and if we are able, we integrate the reality of loss into our "new normal." We still feel the sadness and anger of loss because truly, life *is not fair*, and we do the best we can to make sense of it all. We look for hope and we seek meaning.

The other day, I read an online article about a high school senior who publicly shared her sadness that she was losing out on her graduation, prom and the year-end activities she anticipated for so long. She was hurting. The article was accompanied by a photo of this student weeping near her school locker. The photo aptly captured an intimate moment of heartache. Most comments were extremely supportive, but a few people wrote things like "well, at least she's alive," "she'll get over it," or "my student is glad to be done with high school."

As a counselor, I've heard students say things like, "I'm sad but I have no reason to feel this way" or "I shouldn't feel depressed – I live the perfect life and I have everything I need." The truth is that we have our feelings, they are real, it is okay to feel them and there is no need to justify them. The young woman's anger, devastation and yes – grief! – are authentic. If you take a few moments to speak with a member of the Class of 2020 of any high school or college, you will hear these same refrains. If you listen hard, you can hear the collective wail of school-aged kids missing pals and teachers, of 8th graders missing out on their step-up to high school day, of high school students missing their spring sports teammates, of college kids now home with parents and missing their dearest friends and confidantes. Kids everywhere are grieving. And their parents are grieving, too.

We can empathize with these students and families while at the same time hold the idea that others in our world are also grieving. Grief is not a contest or a competition where one person's sadness is more valid than that of another person. There are people who have lost family members to illness, people who have lost jobs and financial stability, people who are scared and alone, people who feel overwhelmed and anxious. By now, some of us know people who sadly,

did not survive their battle with COVID-19. We are grieving loss of human life mightily. We are experiencing loss of normalcy, loss of physical connection and loss of time with people we love. No matter the loss, it is okay to be angry, to cry, to scream, to mope, to be irritable or to feel resentful. It is okay to acknowledge the sadness. This is our reality. This is our human experience. And who are we without our humanity? The less we judge others and the more we lead with our most compassionate and generous selves, we will find that we can support each other through the worst of times.

I think back often to the day my mother passed away. I was with her when she took her final breath. I remember realizing afterward that ultimately, it was a gift to be present for that moment. After her death, I found old letters written by my mom. I looked through boxes and found photos of her. I compiled all of these items into a memory book so I could see everything in one place – her smile, her handwriting, her words of comfort to me, her arms around her five kids in pictures, her and my dad together, her essays and drawings. I had to figure out how to manage that colossal tsunami of grief; I had to figure out how to both keep it with me but not let it derail my life. My sister and I would joke that mom's death was a "crime against humanity" and we would wonder, with sarcasm, "How can all those people go grocery shopping? Don't they know that mom just died?" We were reflecting the reality, through our own dark humor, that life does go on, and that the world will keep moving forward even though for us, a bright light was gone. The day finally came when I could mention mom's name without tears. And the same went for the rest of my family. Hurting as we were, we were getting on with life.

In a previous Friday note, I wrote about hope and resilience. For me, and maybe for some of you, finding hope in very dark times is part of the answer. We might wonder, *how will we get over this?* The truth is that we will not. We will carry it forward. Somehow, in some way, as we always do, we will persevere and embrace the grief, knowing we will eventually come out the other side. And if we do struggle, let's agree to tell someone. Reach out to someone, share the sadness, talk to a teacher or counselor, call a hotline if needed...but let's agree to take care of ourselves and others.

Many years from now, this incredible, amazing, big-hearted, kind, loving, generous Class of 2020, this class of kids who are hard workers, role models, volunteers, peer mentors, brothers, sisters, sons and daughters, will tell the story of the pandemic to their own kids and grandkids. They will remember how they figured it out, how they found pockets of joy amid the disappointment, how they created memories to last a lifetime over group texts and virtual events and car parades, how they found hope during a scary, grief-filled and sometimes hopeless time. They will remember how hard they worked to figure out the impossible: how they waded through problem sets, physics experiments, essays, chemistry equations and reading assignments...all through tears, frustration and thoughts of giving up. And they will say that they never did give up and that they made it. They will say that their teachers and parents and counselors and principals believed in them. But mostly, they will know that they believed in themselves.

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