

GRIEVING FROM A

Distance



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When a Pandemic Forces You to Grieve

From a Distance

BY CARLOS SANTIAGO

As the coronavirus claims lives, we wonder how to grieve from a distance. Usually we find comfort in community. What do you do when you face death alone?

AS SOON AS I GOT OFF THE PHONE, I knew I had to go. My best friend's mother was in the hospital. The prognosis wasn't good, and I couldn't grieve with my friend from a distance.

I boarded a plane the next morning.

When I arrived, I found the family crowded around her ICU bed. The only sounds were the rhythmic hiss of a ventilator, and a slow *beep . . . beep . . . beep*.

We sat for hours, searching for any signs of improvement.

"Did she take that breath on her own?"

"Did she just open her eyes?"

We became experts on pulse rates, breathing, and O2 levels and hurled rapid-fire questions on every doctor and nurse who came to check on her. As new family members trickled in to join the vigil, we updated them with a strange mixture of hope and loss.

By the time she passed away, family and friends filled every corner of her room and spilled out into the surrounding hallway. Everyone who wanted to be there was there.

It was a tough time of grief. But sprinkled throughout the pain were moments of laughter and lightheartedness. Siblings joked, cousins told stories, and everyone was reminded of the importance of making every moment count.

There was comfort in community. But what do you do when you are forced to face death alone?

WHEN A PANDEMIC FORCES YOU TO GRIEVE FROM A DISTANCE

The coronavirus has imposed a level of social distancing we've never seen in our lifetimes.

Just this week, I received the following text from a friend: *My cousin lost her husband to the coronavirus. Spoke to her yesterday. She's devastated. No visits to hospital. She's quarantined. No funeral. He's in line to be cremated. He's like number 300 and something.*

At a time when she desperately needs a hug, she's alone, forced to grieve from a distance to those who love her, surrounded by strangers in full protective gear.

CARING FROM A DISTANCE

Most of us would avoid attending funerals if we could. We try to fast forward through the pain, with platitudes such as, "He's in a better place" or "Life goes on."

Unfortunately, the current pandemic provides the perfect excuse to avoid the awkwardness altogether. We have no choice but to grieve from a distance.

But just because a funeral doesn't take place or we can't attend, it doesn't mean the pain of loss goes away. To those dealing with the death of a loved one, funeral cancellations caused by this pandemic prolong the grieving process and increase the likelihood of depression down the line.

Now more than ever, we need to go out of our way to be "present" in the lives of those who grieve. Here are a few ideas on how.

VIRTUALLY GRIEVE FROM A DISTANCE.

If a traditional funeral is not possible, a virtual one might be.

Many of us have already switched to online church services and are using video conferencing for work, small groups, or school. If you are tech-savvy, offer to set up the call or help people connect. The format doesn't need to be complicated, just provide a space for people to show their support.

Ironically, with most travel banned and people at home, a virtual service has the potential to be more widely attended.

HELP PEOPLE PROCESS THEIR GRIEF

Even if a funeral is not possible, we can still allow people to process their grief. It may feel uncomfortable, but we can call to tell them we're thinking about them. Don't worry about what to say; what's important is you let them know they are not alone.

And they sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great.

JOB 2:13

If they seem up to it, ask them to tell a story about the person they lost. Or if you can pray with them, do it. You don't need to preach a sermon or attempt to explain why their loved one died. Just show up, repeatedly.

STAY CONNECTED

Social distancing may be the best tool that we have to slow the spread of the virus, but it can easily lead to social isolation. Especially for those who are grieving.

Thankfully, there are many ways to stay connected while maintaining a safe physical distance.

When we were forced to cancel my wife's birth-

day plans because of the coronavirus, her sisters organized a surprise video call. Not only was she able to see family members she usually wouldn't, but each person also delivered a message of encouragement. She said it was the best birthday celebration she ever had.

Be creative. Write an encouraging letter to a friend and drop it in the mail. Or surprise a neighbor with a "cookie dash." Place a plate of cookies on their doorstep with a note, ring the bell, and run before they see you.

CAN WE HELP OTHERS GRIEVE FROM A DISTANCE?

There are many things to mourn these days. Even if no one you know has died, there is still loss— jobs, freedom, security, graduations, proms, sports, vacations, and even the ability to find certain items at the grocery store. These losses are real and amplified by loneliness.

Do your best not to minimize someone's loss through comparison.

As I boarded the plane back home after the funeral of my friend's mother, I couldn't identify any specific way I had helped. I didn't say anything profound or solve any particular problem.

The only thing I could say for sure was that I didn't let my friend go through it alone. Maybe that's all we need to do.

For more help, listen to "[Finding Hope in the Midst of Mourning.](#)"



When You're Primarily Grieving



- **HONOR SPECIAL DAYS AND HOLIDAYS.** When we get out of sorts, break our routines, etc., we sometimes stop celebrating or acknowledging important days/moments. Make it happen anyway.



- **CONNECT TO YOUR COMMUNITY** in small moments, allowing them to function as a community for you. Repeatedly. Get out of your house. Visit with others six feet away. Meet in virtual small groups.



- **GRIEFSHARE.ORG** and their Facebook community of “friendly, caring people so you don’t have to walk through the grieving process alone.” GriefShare groups are now meeting online.



- **WHILEWEREWAITING.ORG** specializes in helping parents who have lost a child.



- **PROBLEM SOLVE.** Explore options and take charge of what you can—and live with what you can’t. Here are three ways you can do that:
 - Ask God for help: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind.” (James 1:5-6)
 - Ask each other in your family for help.
 - Ask others how they’re handling similar hardship.



- **DON'T SKIP OVER GRIEF OR GIVE A RATIONAL JUSTIFICATION FOR IT**— as if we know what God is up to. The better path is to lament and rest in not knowing. As NT Wright reminds in a recent [Time.com](#) article,

It is no part of the Christian vocation, then, to be able to explain what's happening and why. In fact, it is part of the Christian vocation not to be able to explain—and to lament instead. As the Spirit laments within us, so we become, even in our self-isolation, small shrines where the presence and healing love of God can dwell.



- **INCREASE YOUR TOLERANCE FOR NOT KNOWING.** Faith is rooted in things unseen. Decide to rest, be calm, and reduce anxiety by trusting God with what you don't understand. Be self-controlled in your faith.



- **IF A LOVED ONE DIES, ASK** the funeral home to send pictures or videos.



- **STREAM** the funeral to family. Allow people to **PARTICIPATE/SHARE** remembrances while at a distance.



- Even if there is a burial, have a **DELAYED MEMORIAL SERVICE** once restrictions are lifted.



- **NAME THE LOSSES IN YOUR LIFE.** Put words on both sides of the ambiguity (have and don't have) and say it out loud to someone you trust.



- **CONFESS YOUR LIMITATIONS AND GRIEF TO GOD.** God is near to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34:18). Remember: God knows what it's like to be at a distance with us. Yet He is constantly seeking to close the distance.

Truth to Face Your Coronavirus Fears

SCRIPTURE CARDS

Download these cards. Cut them apart and place them in prominent places to remind you to choose faith throughout the day.

Fear Not

"For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."

- 2 TIMOTHY 1:7

"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

- PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

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Forsake Not

"Not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more as you see the day drawing near."

- HEBREWS 10:25

Sure. You might watch church online for a season out of wisdom and compassion for not spreading the virus. But don't lose contact with your local church family.

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Forget Not

"Bless the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits."

- PSALM 103:2

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Worship God, who is in control

"For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together."

- COLOSSIANS 1:16-17

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Suffer with others

“Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ.”

- GALATIANS 6:2

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Pray for an open door

FOR THE GOSPEL

“Always be prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect.”

- 1 PETER 3:15

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Exude Joy

"Rejoice in the Lord always;
and again I say, rejoice!"

- PHILIPPIANS 4:4

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“We are used to having our lives under control in North America, but a small bug is humbling the most powerful nations of the world. COVID-19 has exposed our illusion of control, and the loss of control sparks fear.”

- DR. MITCH KIM
(WHEATON, IL PASTOR)

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