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Arlington Street Church  
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### **Good Grief ~ *El Dia de los Muertos***

Gene, a former Catholic priest, was dying with AIDS. A few of us gathered at his home. Someone put on Gregorian chant. Gene was not amused. He said, "That's a little morbid, don't you think?"

Gene was fanatical about the flag in his front yard. With the heart of a Boy Scout, he raised Old Glory at dawn and lowered it at dusk. From his bed, looking out the window, he saw that someone had accidentally put up the flag upside down. "For g\*d's sake," he said, "I'm not dead yet. Go fix the flag!"

We all rushed outside to make it right, leaving Gene alone. We were gone maybe three minutes – the flag lowering and re-raising was hardly ceremonial – but when we returned to Gene's bedside, he was gone.

I think of Gene, and of his husband, Ernie, and the memories come rushing back – seeing them sitting close together, holding hands, in church; laughing with them over dinner; and, very close to the end, their beautiful wedding in matching white tuxedos. Sometimes, all of it seems unreal to me. Sometimes, it seems so real, I forget that Gene is dead.

*El Dia de Los Muertos* brings to us the blessing of remembering. Once a year, we build an altar to our dead. We mourn, and would be comforted.

Poet Dylan Thomas wrote, "After the first death, there is no other." He meant that every death recalls us to the first death, and to every other death we experience. Each time we grieve anew, we grieve again for all that we have lost. Grief compounds itself.

Grieving is like walking underwater, or through sand, or snow. It can feel like a limb has been severed, or like our heart has been cut out. Our sleep is disrupted, our

appetite is off, and our affect is depressed, or manic. We feel distracted and aimless and empty-handed. Sometimes, we fixate on disturbing images from the end of our loved one's life.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross identified the five stages of reacting to news of being terminally ill, which delineate the process of grieving. The stages are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance.

*Denial:* This isn't happening; I feel fine.

*Anger:* Why me? It's not fair. Who can I blame?

*Bargaining:* I'll do anything, give anything, to make this go away.

*Depression:* What's the point? Why bother?

And, if we're very lucky,

*Acceptance:* All will be well.

Dr. Kübler-Ross says the stages may come in that order, or come in no particular order, or that we may get stuck in one, or circle back to another. However we grieve, one thing is always true: Better now than later; what we resist persists. Until grief is given its day, and its long night, it will cut deeply into our choices and our capacity for new joy.

New York City psychiatrist Albert Waldman writes, "The first year is the most powerful, [most] difficult time.... You are experiencing about two-thirds of the life events with which there is some connection to the loss. You are repairing your self-image, the part of you that was intricately and extensively involved with the person, ... job, or thing that is no longer there." Dr. Waldman's specialty is treating people in recovery from addiction, helping his patients to live on without the "best friend" that turned on them and nearly killed them. It's a different kind of loss, but grief is grief.

When someone loses a loved one, we may not have a clue what to do, how to help. After my friend Stanley's wife was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, he was pushing a cart through the supermarket one day when he caught a glimpse of an old friend passing the end of the aisle. His friend had clearly seen Stanley, but slipped away without speaking to him. Stanley was devastated. When someone loses a loved one, doing nothing is not acceptable.

The very first, best thing we can do is *show up*. Years ago, on the very first day I was alone at the Brewster church, I took the call that a young father had died. I had just

graduated from Harvard Divinity School; I had not a clue what the minister was supposed to do. What would my grandmother do? I left the church, went home, and baked Nana's banana bread, then drove over to spend the afternoon with the grieving family.

The next day, I told my supervisor, Rev. Jim Robinson, what had transpired. I'd done well enough, he said. "But next time, forget the bread. Just go!"

Just go. This past Tuesday morning, I went to Maine to be with my friend Marty, whose wife, my friend Rev. Mary Harrington, had died early that morning. As I pulled up to their home, an older gentleman was also arriving. "I'm a neighbor," he said, gesturing up the shoreline. He shook my hand, shook his head a little, and pulled out his version of banana bread: a quart of maple syrup for Marty. "I'm sorry," he said.

What do you say in the face of death? "I'm sorry" is enough – even more than enough. If you show up and try to distract the survivors with small talk, you've defeated your purpose in coming. They'll feel worse, not better, after you've left. But if you can bear to just go, just show up, and then get really quiet, the healing of that terrible loneliness can begin.

In my deepest grief, my heart has felt like a wounded animal. The healing began when loved ones gathered 'round; said, "I'm sorry;" and just listened. When a five-year-old died in my Brewster parish, the trauma was so terrible that her mother needed to tell what happened over and over again. The end of her shattering story could not be changed, but, with time, it became clear that, somehow, she would survive. It felt like madness, but it was probably the best thing she could do to keep from going mad. Shakespeare wrote, "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak // Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break."<sup>1</sup> When we say, "I'm sorry," and then just listen, we might make the make-or-break difference in healing. If we're going to worry about anything, it shouldn't be about saying the wrong thing; it should be about failing to listen.

I know... The desire to try to make them feel better is overwhelming. Don't do it! Things never to say include: "I know how you feel." "Don't cry." "It will be all right."

Instead, create a safe space for their terrible pain. Even if they are feeling regret

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1 William Shakespeare, Malcolm in *Macbeth*

and remorse – “a hallmark of grieving,”<sup>2</sup> regret and remorse – let it flow so they can let it go. Just listen.

No surprise: I'm a huge fan of memorial services. Actually, I've attended some that I would have felt better to have missed. But readings and music the person loved, a good eulogy, and visiting with family and friends afterwards can make a huge, healing difference for everyone. As a friend, if there's any way possible that you can go to the service, please go; it matters.

Even more important, though, are the days and weeks after the service. After the sympathy cards and flowers and casseroles stop coming, when the house is suddenly empty, the hardest work of grieving begins: to make a new life, without the loved one ... or, more accurately, with a new experience of the loved one, which is the experience of memory.

Don't stay away! Whatever they tell you, there is nothing worse for someone who is grieving than to be isolated. Some solitude, some privacy, yes. Isolation, no. Stay in touch. If you're not nearby, call, call, call. Make a voice-to-voice connection. Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore, wrote of someone he loved who had died,

Those who are near to me do not know that you are nearer to me than they are  
 Those who speak to me do not know that my heart is full with your unspoken words  
 Those who crowd ... my path do not know that I am walking alone with you  
 Those who love me do not know that their love brings you to my heart.<sup>3</sup>

If you knew the person who died, talk about them. Don't think, “O, I don't want to remind my friend of their grief by bringing up their loved one.” Guaranteed they're thinking about them! Dare to enter into that loneliness with them, and tell a story, share a memory, or ask questions. “How did you two meet again?” or “I never met your brother. Tell me more about him.”

And what if they begin to cry? What if something we say makes them cry? Good! It is so much better to give a grieving friend the opportunity to cry with us, than to have them hold it together until we leave, when the floodgates open and they have to cry alone.

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2 Howard Whitman, “How to Help Someone in Sorrow,” from *The Christian Advocate*, 12/3/53, ©1953 by The Methodist Publishing House, Chicago

3 Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941)

It's entirely possible that the bereaved will say they don't want to do anything. Grieving is exhausting, and takes a lot of strength. But they have to eat. Even over protest, take them to breakfast, lunch, dinner. Sooner or later, they will feel better if they get out of the house. Even over protest, stop by and drag them out for a walk, or coffee. When my friend Bob's son died, a group of his neighborhood ladies – as he calls them – showed up and cleaned his house. They changed the beds, did the laundry, and took out the trash. Soon, they returned with groceries and had a big cooking party right there in his kitchen, making and freezing food for him. They inserted themselves into his shattered life and helped him begin to piece together something new from the wreckage. We can do simple, concrete tasks, even when our friend cannot, and so help to jumpstart their new life.

I always remember the story of a minister I never met, a man named J.T. Morrow, who served a parish in St. Paul. He visited a man who had lost his son. The man's hobby was refinishing furniture. When Pastor Morrow got there, he said “Come on. Let's go down to the basement.” Together, they sanded a table. When the minister was leaving, the man said, “This is the first time I've felt I could go on living.”<sup>4</sup>

Here are the closing words of poet Mary Oliver's *In Blackwater Woods*.

... To live in this world

you must be able to do three things:  
to love what is mortal;  
to hold it

against your bones knowing  
your own life depends on it;  
and, when the time comes to let it go,  
to let it go.<sup>5</sup>

My spiritual companions, may this Day of the Dead bring us and those we love some new measure of peace. A grieving friend recently said to Rev. Mark Belletini, “I'm not over the grief. But I just realized the sky is blue.” It is a beginning. And this is how the healing begins: just go; say “I'm sorry;” listen; and keep showing up. In this way,

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4 Howard Whitman, *op cit*

5 Mary Oliver, *New and Selected Poems*

even as they grieve, the bereaved can start to reenter the world. It's a world that betrays us by taking what we love; we are strangers in a strange land.<sup>6</sup> But it's also a beautiful world, because while there is life, there is still hope. It's a beautiful world, because, in spite of everything that conspires to the contrary, love conquers death.<sup>7</sup>

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6 Exodus 2:22

7 from the poem *Love Conquers Death* by Florence Earle Coates