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 Arlington Street Church
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For Our Veterans: Healing the Broken Heart

At 11:00 on November 11th, 1918 – the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month – the Allied nations and Germany lay down their arms, the fighting stopped, and “the war to end all wars” was over.

The number of casualties of World War I – both military and civilian – is estimated at over thirty-seven million. *Thirty-seven million!* Among all that can be said of the Great War, there is this: In its wake, there was untold grief and despair.

Nearly twenty years after the armistice, November 11th was declared a legal holiday, to be dedicated to the cause of world peace. Some 2,500 years earlier,¹ Lao Tzu, Chinese mystic, philosopher, and author of the *Tao Te Ching*, wrote,

If there is to be peace in the world,
 There must be peace in the nations.

If there is to be peace in the nations,
 There must be peace in the cities.

If there is to be peace in the cities,
 There must be peace between neighbors.

If there is to be peace between neighbors,
 There must be peace in the home.

If there is to be peace in the home,
 There must be peace in the heart.

¹ Lao Tzu lived in the 6th century BCE

Peace begins in the heart – your heart, my heart, one heart at a time: peace. In the spirit of Veterans Day, for our veterans, and for all those who waited for them at home, this is a sermon about healing the broken heart, and finding peace.

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Tim Lavery was thirty-eight years old, invariably described as “one of the kindest” and “most generous,” and a gifted musician. With a trail of ruined relationships in his wake, Tim was also a drug addict and alcoholic. One night in the summer of 1994, he lost control of his car on an empty highway. His mother, Carole Lavery, was awakened by the doorbell at 2 a.m. The police told her that Tim had been involved in a fatal accident.

Over hundreds of years, countless people have awakened to this nightmare. In the case of the death of soldiers, the survivors’ terrible loss is mixed with pride; unlike Tim’s death, their deaths are sacrifices for a larger cause, and not universally viewed as senseless. But the fallout is the same: unimaginable grief.

I want to share Carole Lavery’s story in the hope that we might gain new insight into the experience of grieving; better equip ourselves to live through our own grief; and help others in theirs. And while this story is about grieving after a death, we would do well to remember that there are countless kinds of loss, and every loss leaves behind grief. These are Carole’s words, as told to her nephew, John E. Welshons, author of *Awakening from Grief: Finding the Way Back to Joy*.

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“I immediately went into shock,” she says. “I was totally unable to cry. I couldn’t remember what the world ‘fatal’ meant.... *Fatal?* What does that mean? I felt like someone had taken a knife and stuck it into my heart.... I was numb....

“I went into denial. I saw all of the policemen standing in my house ... and I knew that it was true, but I was totally unable to accept it....

“The first two emotions you have are shock and denial. And for the first year after Tim’s death, I stayed in that state.... Everything I did was on autopilot....

“I believe now that ... shock and denial are given to us by G*d to protect us from being totally devastated. They kept me from going so far down into depression and despair that I couldn’t get out of bed....

“For the first few months, every night when I went to bed, I felt sick.... I couldn’t sleep. And I kept seeing Tim, in my mind’s eye, lying out on the highway by himself.

“... [And then someone] said to me ... ‘You have to remember, Carole, that what happened to Tim happened only once. You have kept replaying it ... in your mind. You’ve tortured yourself with it. But it [happened only] ... once....’

“I tried really hard to listen to that. I tried really hard not to [see] ... it over and over.... [and] finally, ... [the] words sank in, and I was able to stop it when it would ... start.... I finally was able not to think about that anymore....”

“I found myself going to the cemetery almost daily. That’s not something I naturally would do because ... I don’t believe that’s where our loved ones are after they die.... [But these] daily visits ... helped me to accept the reality of Tim’s death, slowly ... over time.

“I still felt horrible on the inside, and I began to realize that it was going to take a lot of time for me to be able to truly accept Tim’s death.... [H]e was so much fun.... [He] made me laugh. And I loved his music ... I just enjoyed his company....

“I had so many dreams for him.... [a]nd I knew he had so many dreams for himself. I found myself in shock, in denial, trying to accept what had happened, and now having to deal with disappointment.... I turned to G*d and said, ‘How did this happen? Why did this happen?’ ... I said, ‘...[W]hat am I going to do? I ‘m just a basket case.’

“I felt like someone who was trying to go downstairs when everybody else was coming up, and I was getting angry at the people who were in my way. There were people who were totally inept at helping someone in a crisis.... [They] would come up to me and say, ‘Oh, I know exactly how you feel....’ And everything inside me turned toward anger....

“... I ... had a period of great anger. I had a period of being angry with G*d. I questioned G*d, but more than that, I was angry with myself, ... as a mother.... I had to forgive myself, and that took a long time....

“Fortunately, there were some people who were really helpful. One of my friends would cry with me. When I would cry, she would cry.... Then there were special people who would come up to me and say, ‘Carole, I can’t imagine how you must feel.... But I want to tell you something. I miss Tim. His music was a blessing....’

“Others would come up and tell me how much they missed him because he was always so kind ... he always took time to be friendly and helpful. Those were the things that ministered to my heart and helped me a great deal....

“It took me two full years to begin to come out of denial and move back into reality and acceptance.... I had to learn that this was a time in my life, a season, when I was walking through ‘the valley of the shadow of death.’ I had to learn that I was walking through it, but I wasn’t going to stay there....

“Finally, I said to myself, ‘If I’m ever going to come out of this, I’m going to have to move forward. I’m going to have to let the past be ... past.... I took all of the books on loss and bereavement that had been given to me by well-meaning friends and I threw them on the floor and kicked them across the room. Because I realized, finally, that there was a subtle way in which they were keeping me caught in the grief; ... identifying myself as a ‘bereaved person.’.... I threw out the books.

“Gradually, over the years, with the help of my family and friends and G*d, I’ve moved through it... In order to be healed, we have to come out of our self-pity.... We have to come out of our own little worlds, and reach out to others. We have to start to help others. And that’s what I started doing. But it took me a long time. My healing process is still going on.”

Carole Lavery concludes, “Now I think of Tim and I smile. Sometimes I still get choked up.... But I had to learn to concentrate on the things that were lovely about [him], the things that were kind and pure.... I had to celebrate the beauty that Tim was in my life....

“So I can tell you today, ... I can wake up in the morning, and look outside and hear the birds and smile, and I can celebrate Tim’s life instead of feeling depressed and disappointed. I’m not saying that I’m totally over it. I never will be.... I will always miss him.... I will always love him.

“The most important ingredient in healing grief is love.”²

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Here, then, is the trajectory of grief:

Shock. Denial. Anger.

Family, friends, G*d ... time.

The decision to heal. Reaching out to others.

Remembering the good. Love.

When Arlington Street’s Stanley Moss died, I conducted his funeral at Levine Funeral Home in Brookline. Stanley’s partner, Gene Navias, and other family members were given a *kriah*, a button covered in black fabric with a torn black ribbon attached to it, a symbol from Biblical times³ for the rending of clothing to signify grieving. The *kriah* is worn for the seven days of *shiva*, and, sometimes, for all of *sheloshim*, the first thirty days of mourning.

I wasn’t a Moss family member, but I was devastated, and I wanted a *kriah*, too. I thought, then, and I think, now, that it would be so helpful to have a way to identify those who are suffering new grief, so that we could be especially respectful and tender towards them.

But perhaps the lesson – and one of the most important things we can remember – is that at any given time, most of us are somewhere on the trajectory of grief. We are all, always, in the great company of the bereaved.

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Beloved spiritual companions, may peace in the nations begin in our hearts, as each of us is called to the work of healing our broken hearts – our own, each other’s, and the broken heart of the world. Honoring our veterans at this Veterans Day, may we rededicate ourselves to peace.

² Carole Lavery in John E. Welshons, *Awakening from Grief*, pp. 125. Thanks to Kate Birney for this wonderful book!

³ Please see: Jacob for the presumed death of Joseph (Genesis 37:34); King David and all the men for the deaths of Saul and Jonathan (II Samuel 1:11), Job for his children (Job 1:20)

Grieving is frightening and terrible and complicated and fraught. In this beloved spiritual community, and beyond our great doors, let us say to one another,

I'm so sorry.
Let us join hands,
and I will walk this road with you.
May our broken hearts be opened,
and may we love one another with broken-open hearts.

Amen.