



NAVIGATING
GRIEF

reflections on my brother's death

JANUARY IS COLD IN NEW HAMPSHIRE.

Cold air, cold winds, blowing snow. It is cold and harsh weather for watching someone die—at least that was my experience when I visited my brother Chuck for the last time.

Chuck was at the end of his valiant battle with pancreatic cancer, a nasty disease that few survive. Unable to do anything more for him, the hospital staff sent Chuck home. He took his final ride in the family van. He climbed the steep, rough stone steps in front of his house as he leaned on me and on our other brother, Dave. He rested every two or three steps, mustering his remaining strength and making a supreme effort to climb his personal “Everest.” I wonder if, as he passed from the van to the house, he noticed for the last time the fresh air, the birds, the sun, and the clouds that he loved so much.

That last evening, his breathing became labored—alternating between moments of stopping and starting. We were waiting for death to come. It’s a hard kind of waiting. For a time we were focused on every twitch, our eyes glued on Chuck with uneasy anticipation. You can’t keep up that kind of vigil for long. The quiet talk gravitated to the sharing of memories of my brother’s humor and playfulness. It was a celebration of a life well lived and his impact on each of us. It was Chuck’s wife, Sally, who saw that he hadn’t restarted breathing that last time. “Chuck has stopped breathing,” she said. I took my brother’s right wrist and felt one beat, a second, and then nothing. His pastor had taken the other wrist. “He’s gone,” we said together.

My brother’s death jump-started a process of grief for our family that still continues. For me, it was most intense in that first year, with the culmination coming 11 months after Chuck died, when Sally lost her own battle with cancer. As grief came upon me, I knew I had felt this before. My father died when I was five years old, so living with a missing person has been a way of life. And death has visited regularly enough. Our first child was stillborn, prematurely. My wife’s mother died shortly after that. There was a miscarriage in between the birth of our two girls. My wife’s father died some years later. And there were others. In all of these experiences, I learned that it is hard to take in all that happens at the time of these events. “There is no real way to deal with everything we lose,” writes author Joan Didion in her book *Where I Was From*. I believe it is part of God’s design that enables us to protect

ourselves from the intensity and depth of such great losses. But quite often we keep up the defenses long after they are useful. That is what I do. That is what most of us do.

Dealing With the Pain of Loss

It strikes me that grieving is like housebreaking a puppy: you grab him by the neck and hold his nose in the evidence of his youth. But in this case, you as the griever are the puppy. You have to try to find ways to not run and to force yourself to face the wretched

Although determined from the beginning to face the pain of this loss, I could not force myself to do it. In the aftermath of death, I did what I always have done.

hole in your soul from the loss. I knew I would likely try to run from the pain of Chuck’s death. I would try to believe I was okay and that it somehow didn’t matter anyway. I had learned such strategies at a young age, starting when my father died. But wanting to grieve well, I made moves to avoid the avoiding: I put my brother’s picture where I would see it every day, and I played a song that reminded me of Chuck and his death. Yet I found myself diverting my gaze from the photo and hitting “skip” when that song came up on the CD player. Although determined from the beginning to face the pain of this loss, I could not force myself to do it. In the aftermath of death, I did what I always have done.

Friends tried to help. They spoke well-intended words, asked how I was, and talked with me—but all with little effect. They did not know my brother, and they were not there for any of this experience. My words cannot take them there. So I tended to keep my words to myself. I gave short answers. And I continued to do what I always have done.

My friends’ words were limited in impact. “God is sovereign,”

some offered. Others reminded me that God works all things together for our good. God is sovereign and he *does* work all things together for good, but reminders of such truth in the midst of one's grief may not be helpful. To the mourner, these words can come off as an escape from entering into the grieving person's experience and make it appear that the comforter is uncaring. Such reassurances may be more about the intended comforter avoiding the grieving one's pain than bringing comfort.

In the freshness of grief, it is not time for theology, teaching, or correcting. The gospel—rightly understood—is the help that is needed. In the aftermath of death and the resulting sorrow, we don't need facts as much as we need a person. We need a personal, alive, relating God—not information about him. And we need the whole gospel, not only the Jesus-paid-the-price judicial part, but also the you-are-in-relationship-with-God part. In these hard moments, we don't need more truth *about* God; we need more experience *of* him. And we can invite people into this experience of him through their experience of *us* as we are present, listening, accepting, and loving them.

A Breakthrough

His name is Ed. He was a student I had in class during a previous semester. I knew his name but not much else about him. At the end of class one day, I saw him come in and sit down. He was waiting for the lingering students to ask their after-class questions. I wondered why he was there. When all the others had gone, he came up and commented about my brother's death and asked, "How are you doing?" Others had asked that same question, and though I appreciated their concern, his question was different. Somehow I knew that he understood that there was no simple or clear answer to that question. And I knew Ed was willing to wait while I tried to find words to express the part of grief that was center stage at that exact moment. And then he asked if he could drop in again to see how I was doing. I said, "Yes." And he did. Each week or two throughout that semester, Ed stopped by after class and we talked. Some days I had to reach to find something to say because I had not thought about my brother or his death much, avoiding it all, I suppose. Other days there was something fresh that I needed to share with another person. Ed's consistent and caring presence helped me face my grief more than I would have on my own. Ed became a special friend to me.

A day or two before my brother's death, I remember searching through the Psalms looking for a passage that fit the moment. Almost everything I read talked of the demise of enemies and the victories of God's people. "My brother is downstairs dying. I know where he is headed, but this doesn't feel like victory," I thought. Then I came across Isaiah 12:2: "Behold, God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid; for the LORD GOD is my strength and my song, and he has

become my salvation." That fit, and it opened my eyes. The question was whether or not I would trust God, even as I looked death in the eyes while watching my brother die. This helped me realize that grieving is much like the experience of old-time navigators. To navigate the sea successfully, it was necessary to focus on an external reference point—the North Star or a lighthouse beacon, for example. Grieving well requires the

[God] also does what he has always done. He comes alongside, not to be the remedy to pain and sorrow, but to be present with us in dark times.

same thing: focusing on God as our external reference point. It requires trusting in him. Only then can we not be afraid. Navigating grief isn't about leaning on truth or learning lessons. Essentially, that would be trusting ourselves and thinking that if we could learn what we need to learn, then we'd be able to manage the crisis. This is not God's hope for us in the midst of suffering; rather he desires for us to trust him.

There is much more that could be said. To talk of the change in perspective that grief brought so that the inconveniences of life no longer looked so life-and-death in nature might be good. Or to dwell on how God seldom answers questions—even the questions that stand out boldly in a time of grief—might be beneficial. But maybe not. Maybe all such talk is the wrong thing to do, misleading in suggesting that there are answers and that grieving well is done by affirming truth and by trusting knowledge when what is really needed is to trust God. The remedy for me when I do what I have always done in the aftermath of death is to trust him—in the midst of the sorrow, the loneliness, and the often unrelenting pain. The remedy for you, too, when you do what you always do, is to trust God. Then we will be more aware of his presence. We will know better his love for us—the love that is always there, even in dark circumstances. And we will know better the reality of God, that he is the living God who relates and loves and cares. He also does what he has always done. He comes alongside, not to be the remedy to pain and sorrow, but to be present with us in dark times. And he weeps with us. And that is enough.

DR. DAN ZINK

Dr. Dan Zink is associate professor of practical theology at Covenant Seminary. He also teaches in the counseling department. He enjoys thinking, understanding the dynamics of life in the real world, pondering the shaping influence of families, exploring the intricacies of the human heart, tinkering with people's hearts for their good, trying to better see into his own heart, searching for words to encourage heavy pondering in others, and growing up.