

Grief in a Time of Isolation

By Ian Jennings

This is a desperately difficult time in so many ways. What a time to experience bereavement and endure life in isolation alone. The last funeral I conducted was for Christine who was a very committed member of the church where I used to be Vicar, St. Cuthbert's Fir Vale, Sheffield. Christine ran our Parents and Toddlers group for almost 20 years. Her husband Jeff had retired recently and they were enjoying spending more time together and seeing a lot of their little Grandson. Jeff went to visit his very elderly Mother for the weekend in Surrey and Christine stayed at home. On the Sunday afternoon their son, Simon called to see his Mum while Dad was still away and, tragically found her dead in the back garden of their home. She had not been ill so her sudden death was deeply shocking. It was a privilege to conduct Christine's funeral service. I saw Jeff twice after the funeral for coffee, catchup and prayer then we were instructed to self isolate because of the virus. Two months ago Jeff and Christine were sharing a full and active life together and now he is in lonely self isolation. That is a tough call and a deeply challenging time.

Her Majesty the Queen broadcast an Easter message in 2020. We are used to hearing her at Christmas but in her 68 year reign this is her first Easter message. Her Christian faith shone through her words and she said, "We need Easter as much as ever as dark as death can be, particularly for those suffering with grief - light and life are greater." When you are grappling with the raw reality of grief in a time of isolation holding on to the resurrection hope is hugely important. To live with the irrepressible hope that 'light and life are greater than darkness and death' requires inner resources to draw upon and resilience of spirit that is rooted and grounded in God.

John Donne was right, 'no man is an island, entire of itself.' Human beings do not thrive when isolated with others. This enforced isolation is a tough call for everyone but perhaps has a particular poignancy for those who are grieving the death of their life partner. There are huge mental health implications for this period of isolation. Our hope and prayer is that it will be over before too much time has elapsed. We are social creatures and it clear that this experience has brought out the best in so many who have been reaching out to those around through social media. When we are no longer change our situation we are challenged to change ourselves. Many are doing

that and are doing their best to look after themselves and each other. Even in a time of Corona virus we are finding ways of reaching beyond our own small island of isolation.

For those who have carried a burden of grief for some time and were growing through it are finding now that the jagged edges of grief that may have become less barbed with the passing of time, seem to regain the capacity to wound. Because we now live in a kind of vacuum and routine is disrupted there is much more opportunity of being alone with out thoughts and those thoughts often lead us back into the shadows. It reminds me of the verse by Elizabeth Jennings :

*Time does not heal,
It makes a half stitched scar
That can be broken and you feel
Grief as total as in the first hour.*

Many who thought they were in the process of healing now have that 'half stitched' scar broken again.

I, like many friends of mine, am currently longing to hug my family and friends. It is a deep yearning in the midst of lockdown. People in my age category and degree of vulnerability can no longer see our loved ones except on FaceTime or Zoom or some other online platform and whilst this is hugely valuable it is no substitute for a hug; a virtual hug just doesn't do the job! I know countless numbers of grandparents long to hug their grandchildren. The truth is we humans are wired for touch and that need for physical contacts remains until the day we die. I hadn't really thought about it before this enforced isolation has made me aware of my need to hug and be hugged.

There was a sad story on Today Radio 4 programme this week. Hannah and John had been married for almost 43 years but they both contracted corona virus. Hannah improved but John worsened and was taken into hospital. He died one day before their 43rd wedding anniversary. Hannah spoke with sadness that the last week of his life none of his family could be with John. 'Everyone was wonderful,' she said, 'my family, my church, the Hospital but nothing can alter the fact that we could not be together as he was dying, and now I am alone here and no one can give me a hug,' she said with tears.

The need to be hugged is fundamental to us as human beings. Dr Terry Kupers, psychologist and author writes, “physical contact is a requirement of being human. There is something healing about touch. It is not just correlated to being human - it is being human.”

At present we don't know when lockdown will end and still less when life will return to normal when we can hug and be hugged again. We need to build hope into our lives so that we can find a way through when anxiety threatens to engulf us. We need the buoyancy of a lively hope that is much more than wishful thinking. St Paul writes in Romans 15:13 'May the God of hope fill you with joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'

Our Queen is right, 'As dark as death can be - light and life are greater.' Our hope is in the God of hope. Our hope has its source and centre in God. That living hope sustains and inspires us through these difficult days. Hope wins in the end.



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*His first book is an account of his wife Barbara's illness
and death and can be bought from him directly or on
Amazon:*

https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Departing-Light-Growing-Through-Grief/dp/1729303846/ref=sr_1_1

Watch a video of the full chapter here: <https://youtu.be/UQoNTaAsmok>