



# Labyrinth of Grief

Living with awareness of loss

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ILLUSTRATION BY TERRI SCOTT

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**C**OME, YE DISCONSOLATE, WHERE'ER YE LANGUISH;  
come to the mercy-seat, fervently kneel. Here bring  
your wounded hearts, here tell your anguish; earth  
has no sorrow that heav'n cannot heal."

I choked slightly on the words to the hymn, unprepared for them. We had sung that hymn at my father's funeral 12 years ago. I slipped into this healing service to put my body where my faith is, to offer up my weariness with chronic pain issues, to admit my frailty and welcome a pastoral hand on my shoulder and a quiet prayer for healing. Revisiting grief was not on my mind when I left the house. Yet here I was, hearing again my mother's soprano in my ear when I was unable to give voice to those words as I stared at my father's closed coffin at the front of the church. How could she sing at all?

Mom had cared for Dad for years while Alzheimer's disease stole a sharp, humorous, bilingual, accomplished engineer and life partner of 56 years. In the time when he was aware of what the disease was doing to him, Dad grieved, and Mom grieved beside him. Once his

she selected in advance. "Shall we gather at the river?" "Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling."

Mom lived 12 years past Dad's death, her heart twisting with yearning for wholeness, then expecting never to find it again. "Whatever I could think of doing or

***Come, ye disconsolate. The lines of an unexpected hymn brought it all back.***

memory of their life together was gone, Mom grieved by screaming at God alone in the living room and writing entries of quiet desperation in her journal that make me sob as I read them now. After his death, she knew her children loved the father they lost, but she grieved in the isolation that no one else in the world knew *her* grief. She alone had lost *this* husband, this person to whom she had bound her life.

The hymn ended, and I blew out my breath, missing my mother as well. The wound is fresh. I can still count on one hand the months that have passed since I gathered at her graveside with 45 members of my extended family and sang hymns

wherever I could think of going," she wrote in her journal, "he still will not be there." My sister helped her rescue a dog, to whom she became very attached. One of my brothers moved in with her to interrupt the downward spiral of depressed loneliness. A person who could light a room merely by entering, he did cheer her. The two of them connived to escape a Chicago winter by renting a house in Florida and never went back, and life in the Florida sun cheered her even more. But by now it was clear that Mom had begun an Alzheimer's journey as well. Familiar foreshadows of drawn-out grief churned in my gut during my Sunday afternoon phone chats and visits to Florida. "How

do you think she is?" my sister would ask.

My brother had health issues of his own, and one day when he didn't come out of his room, Mom went in to check on him. He was still and cold—dead for hours by then at the too-young age of 59.

A mother does not recover from that. Neither does a sister. Some grief you see coming, and some grief clocks you in the head.

Unable to live alone, my mother had to move back to the family hub in Illinois immediately. Her entire peaceful Florida life was gone, including the dog. I flew to Florida and was there when my brother's kids arrived to go through his things, and one by one I found them turning toward a wall to cry because an item they'd picked up was one emotional trigger too much in the moment.

I did my crying in the bedroom. We were seven children. Now we were six. I was crumbling, but I was on "Mom duty." Make sure she ate and took her medications. Get her packed. Get on the plane to Chicago. Get her to the family funeral. Visit assisted living communities.

My brother and I had shared a love for fresh sugar snap peas. I couldn't eat them for a year after he died.

*Come, ye disconsolate.* The lines of an unexpected hymn brought it all back.

### Loss Stirs Up Loss

Before my father died, while his dementia was advanced, more than one family conversation included realization that his passing would be merciful. Even my mother could verbalize that it would be better for him than this existence where he remembered nothing of his life and offered only rare, unpredictable glimmers of vague recognition that family members were people he might have known in some way. His care needs were at a high enough level that he could not live with my mother any longer. His quality of life was low. We thought we were prepared. *I* thought *I* was prepared. Yet when he died, along with

the sense of rightness of the time at last, came the flood of grief that he truly was gone from this world. No more squeezing his hand. No more kissing his forehead. No more light in his eye if he *did* know who I was.

No more father in my life.

Of course aging, frail parents pass away all the time, and I am grateful that my father was a loving man who was always present in my life and left a legacy of faith and love of God. Still, this was my father who had passed away. For the first time, I saw personally that after the flurry of travel for a funeral, you are “back.”

Back home. Back to work. Back to deadlines. Back to normal activities.

But not back. The inner work has only begun, and we should not expect to return “back” to the starting point before the death occurred.

My father. My brother. My mother. The words in my mother’s journal ring true. We have our own griefs and we go on in our own ways. But we do not go back. What I have found most true is that each new loss stirs up afresh the losses that have come before it. When my brother died, I ached all over again for my father—and for everything my mother had already lost and I was helpless to do anything about. When my mother died, I ached all over again for my father and my brother and the widening absences in my family. Suddenly a world without my mother in it, even in a frail, diseased state, was unimaginable. Yet true.

And the grief journey, which is never complete, begins another segment.

### **An Awareness of Grief**

The image I find most helpful in the awareness of grief in my life and the expectation that it is not something to “get over” and “go back from” is a prayer labyrinth. I’ve had multiple opportunities to slowly walk a prayer labyrinth. Once I had an especially profound spiritual experience

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when I reached the center of a stone-lined path in solitude.

While some people might confuse a labyrinth with a maze, a labyrinth has only a single path to the center. It does not have dead ends, and there is no possibility of getting lost. Following the single path, with its many turns, leads to a center space designed for meeting God. Stay as long as you wish. When you’re ready, continue the path, which now leads outward.

Like a labyrinth, grief has many turns. Some of them are unexpected and tight. Some feel as if the path folds in on itself and takes me where I have been before. But always I am on the single path that moves me toward that unhurried center space where I know God will meet me and I can stay as long as I need. And the place where I exit the labyrinth is right next to the place where I enter it. That gives me comfort. Whether because of a fresh loss, such as the death of my mother a few months ago, or the stirring of a long-ago loss by the words of a seldom-sung hymn, I can enter the grief labyrinth again, knowing it will lead me to the healing space where God is. I do not have to worry about

knowing the way or losing my way.

“But we have this treasure in clay jars,” my youngest brother read at my father’s funeral, “so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies. For while we live, we are also being given up to death for Jesus’ sake, so that the life of Jesus may be made visible in our mortal flesh” (2 Corinthians 4:7-11).

Grief at once reminds us both of our clay jars existence and the extraordinary healing power of God at work in us, just as it was at work in the resurrection of Jesus.

### **WHY WE WEEP**

Because of those who are gone from our lives.

In gratitude to God

For his presence and blessing in our lives.

In memory of those who are no longer present.

Out of an indescribable knowing of God.

We weep because of the joy of our lives

And we weep because of the sadness in our lives

And sometimes when we can’t define the difference.

— Elizabeth, September 6, 2005

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