

**A Reflective Study Guide for**  
**The Grief Walk:**  
***Losing, Grieving, and Journeying on to Something New***

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## Introducing this Guide

This Guide can be used either by yourself as you read through the book alone or as you study it with a group. Either way, as I say in the Introduction, ‘I encourage you to take the time to lay my words aside and be with your experience. It’s only when we allow ourselves to experience our pain that our grief walk can take us to something new.’ (18, 265, 22)

In his Foreword Rob Ferguson says that he found himself ‘thinking, lamenting, crying, and laughing... I surprised myself with the depth of some of what rose to the surface for me. Ancient griefs, recent disappointments, and the ambivalent feelings that came, like fish to breathe the air again.’ (8, 114,8) It may be so for you.

- One way of honouring your stories of loss and grief is to keep notes or a journal and to record the questions, responses, and feelings that emerge.
- You may find it helpful to share and explore your reflections and questions with a trusted friend or spiritual companion.

If you are working through this guide with a group, members of the group may serve that purpose.

For those using this guide in a group setting I suggest these group norms:

1. We *listen* to each other with care, respect, and attention. Paul Tillich said that ‘the first duty of love is to listen.’
2. We use *I statements*. For example, ‘I understand... I experience... It’s like this for me....’ Remember that grief is a unique experience – unique as our fingerprint. We speak from our own experience and avoid generalizations.
3. We aren’t talking about abstract ideas. ‘Grief is first and foremost the cry of a wounded and broken heart.’ (18, 267, 22) *We assume that everyone in the group is grieving.*
4. We respect the *privacy* of others. We say as much or as little about our experience as we choose.
5. We maintain *strict confidentiality*. What others share in the group stays within the group. We may share with people outside the group our own learnings, experiences, and questions, but not what others have said.

### **The Preface, and How I use certain Words**

Isabel spoke of her need for ‘Someone who would walk with me. Not people who would talk at me and give me answers, but simply listen to me and walk with me.’ (9, 127, 9)

- To what extent does Isabel’s comment resonate with you?
- I wonder, what does ‘walking with a person in their grief’ actually mean – how does it look, what does it involve?
- What do the words *grief*, *loss*, and *bereavement* mean to you – what comes to mind when you hear them? (12, 170,14)
- Would you define those words differently, and if so, how?

## 1 – Introduction

‘Grieving is as natural as sleeping when we are tired and eating when we are hungry. Yet, for many of us, grief is alien. We push it away and think that in time it will disappear.’ (15, 217, 18)

- How alien is grief to you, and do you see it as something that’s alien to others in your community?
- When you think about grief in your own life, is it something that you tend (at least sometimes) to push away and hope that it will somehow disappear?

‘We create a grief box in which we confine the grieving person and wait for them to emerge fixed and whole again.’ (15, 227,19)

- Does the image of a ‘grief box’ speak to you?
- If it does, what does the box look like?
- In what ways does it confine you?

‘I’ve discovered that when, instead of stifling my grief, I honour it, I don’t become despondent and depressed. On the contrary, after a time I grow more hopeful. This doesn’t eradicate the pain, but I’ve found that we can begin a journey on which loss and grief enriches the tapestry of our lives.’ (17, 248, 20)

- To what extent can you conceive of viewing grief in this way – or is this a foreign idea?

I end the Introduction with the question, ‘If we do not lead people to the love of God, where is the hope of which Scripture speaks?’ (18, 270, 22)

- How do you respond to that question?

## 2 – Our Lives are Laden with Losses

Nicholas Wolterstorff speaks of the *neverness* that's part of grief ... *Never again*. (19, 288, 23) I describe it as 'the sting of grief, be it the loss of a person through death or some other form of loss.' (20, 288, 23)

- What springs to mind when you read or hear those words *never again – neverness*?

The losses that come to mind when you reflect on the phrases *never again – neverness* may well be ones that are readily acknowledged as losses, such as the death of someone close to you. Yet our lives are laden with countless other losses. I name a number of possible losses. (20, 294, 24)

- As you look through the list, which ones have you experienced?
- It's not an exhaustive list, so what other losses do you wish to add?

The Roman poet Ovid wrote, 'Suppressed grief suffocates, it rages within the breast, and is forced to multiply its strength.' (23, 333, 26)

- Do you have any comment or observation from your experience?

'Jan learned not to be afraid of her grief, not to bottle it up, though she acknowledges that this can be hard.' (23, 330, 26)

- How familiar is Jan's experience?

We often minimise our experiences of loss and attribute our reactions to other causes. When we do that it can affect us emotionally, spiritually, or even physically. David depreciated his loss, comparing it to what his mate was going through. (24, 330, 27)

- Do you recognise this tendency in yourself?
- If you do, what do you want to say to yourself, and
- What might you want to do for yourself?

In this chapter I introduce *disenfranchised loss and grief* and suggest that disenfranchisement occurs for several reasons (24, 349, 32).

- Which reason/s for disenfranchisement are you most familiar with – either in your own experience of grief or in what you have observed in others?
- Drawing on your experience, what is the most powerful reason for disenfranchisement of loss and grief?

### 3 – Experiences of Disenfranchised Loss and Grief

In this chapter I share a number of experiences of loss and grief, many of which never make it onto our radar screen at all.

As you read through this chapter, note the losses that you identify with and the impact that they have on your life. Perhaps they are losses that you have never acknowledged as losses before. If a narrative resonates with you in a particular way, or for some reason you react to it strongly, ask yourself:

- What in my experience does this remind me of?
- What might this be saying about my loss and grief?
- How does this help me understand and appreciate my losses and/or other people's losses?

‘Change and transition, however positive, has an undercurrent of loss... We underestimate the impact change can have on people's lives, including our own.’ (62, 941, 58) Take time to be aware of the changes you are living with in:

- Your relationships
- Your finances
- Your health
- Your faith community
- Your sense of belonging
- Your work and/or ministry
- Your hopes and dreams
- Your expectations
- Your beliefs
- How you see the world
- What matters to you ...

Then there's that one change that none of us can hold back: we are ageing – one day closer to death.

- Thinking about those different areas of your life, to what extent do you acknowledge the challenges that change brings?
- How easy do you find change?
- Is it something that you welcome – or resist?
- And where do you see loss and grief in all that?

## **4 – Understandings and Misunderstandings about Grief**

### **Our Loss and Grief is Unique – so Forget the Rules**

No two people grieve in the same way. How we grieve is influenced by various dynamics.

- Looking through the factors I suggest (65, 1407, 62), which ones have most strongly influenced your ‘style of grief’?

You may notice that the way you grieve at various times in your life changes, or how you grieve over various losses is different.

- What are your observations?

### **There’s No ‘One Size Fits All’ – so Forget Stages in Grief**

- How do you respond to the idea of ‘stages of grief’?

### **We Wax and Wane – so it’s Okay to Retreat from Time to Time**

I talk about our need for respite from the pain of grief. As T. S. Eliot wrote, ‘humankind cannot bear very much reality.’ (71, 1129, 67)

- Is that a new idea to you?
- Does it connect with your experience?
- How have you gone about finding respite?

### **A Continual Presence Which can Ambush us – so Forget the Timeline**

I use the image of a large iron nail, embedded in the trunk of a tree to describe my experiences of grief (72, 1149, 68) and of grief as ‘a new character in the story of our life.’ (73, 1149, 68)

- What image or metaphor would you use to describe your experience of grief? (You might want to draw it).

Grief can ambush us.

- What triggered a grief ambush for you and how did you respond?
- What might you do next time a grief ambush happens?

### **Continuing Bonds – So Forget about Having to Let Go**

‘We can continue to “have” what we have “lost”, that is, a continuing, albeit transformed, love for the deceased. We have not truly lost our years of living with the deceased or our memories.’ (75, 1193, 70) Our relationship to the person who has died hasn’t ended but changed. Sometimes we foster these bonds without realising that’s what we’re doing.

- What’s your experience of a continuing bond with those who have died?
- How, if at all, do you express and experience such a continuing bond?

Here are some suggestions of things you might do that others have found helpful. None are right or wrong, and you may have other actions that you have found helpful.

- Light a special candle.
- Paint, draw, or embroider a piece that in some way recalls the person.
- Write them a letter or a poem.
- Plant a tree or shrub.
- Erect a simple memorial
- Visit a place that has a special connection with them.
- Attend an annual service that prayerfully remembers our dead (many faith communities hold these services either at the beginning of November or near Christmas).
- Have a memories box, and put in it items that have special significance.

### **Grief Doesn't get Closed Off – so Forget about Closure**

- How does it feel when people talk about bringing *closure* to your grief?
- And what about the idea of *moving on*?

### **Our Life has Changed – so Forget the idea of Returning to Normal**

‘We must learn to live with a new normal.’ (80, 1264, 74)

- What does this new normal look like in your life?
- How do you describe it?

### **We Grieve in Our Own Way – so Forget the Stereotypes**

- How would you describe the way you grieve? Remember, there's no right or wrong about this.



## 5 – Experiencing Grief

‘A significant loss can affect every facet of our being,’ and there are various reactions that we can experience – all of which are quite ‘normal.’ ‘That doesn’t mean that in grief we will experience all these reactions, but if we recognise some of them in our grief, we can know that we aren’t peculiar.’ (85, 1379, 79)

In this chapter I identify reactions that are commonly experienced. As you read through the chapter and reflect on your own grief note which reactions are familiar to you.

- In what way have you have experienced them in the different facets of your being? – Bodily  
– Emotionally – Cognitively – Behaviourally – Spiritually

C. S. Lewis wrote, ‘An odd by product of my loss is that I’m aware of being an embarrassment to everyone I meet... Perhaps the bereaved ought to be isolated in special settlements like lepers.’ (86, 1379, 79)

- What experiences have you had of grief making lepers of people?
- In caring for others who are grieving, how can we diminish the sense of isolation, and how have others done that for you?

## 6 – What do I say? What can I do?

- What's it like when someone opens up to you about their grief and pain?

Think of a specific occasion when this happened.

- How did it feel?
- How did you react?

Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote, 'To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench...' (108, 1750, 98)

- Has someone done that for you?
- If they have, what did it mean to you?
- How was it when you sat with another on their mourning bench?

In this chapter I offer *Some Dos and Don'ts*.

- Which ones resonate with you most loudly and what other *Dos and Don'ts* would you like to add?
- Take time to give thanks for the people who were, as Hilary Smith describes them, your *soul friends* (118, 1899, 106) in times of grief – those who were 'healing voices and loving presences.'

## **7 – Grief is about Love and Attachment**

Colin Murray Parkes said, ‘The pain of grief is just as much part of life as the joy of love: it is perhaps the price we pay for love, the cost of commitment. To ignore this fact, or to pretend that it is not so, is to put on emotional blinkers which leave us unprepared for the losses that will inevitably occur in our own lives and unprepared to help others cope with losses in theirs.’ (123, 2023, 110)

- To what extent do we ignore this fact, or pretend that it’s not so?

Then, I wonder, why do we allow ourselves to love deeply, knowing that eventually we will lose, through death or some other form of loss, what or whom we love. Think about your earliest attachment relationships.

- How would you describe these relationships in terms of the security, comfort, and protection they offered you?
- In what way has your grief been shaped or affected by your experiences of attachment?
- To what extent has God acted as a secure base in your life and how have you experienced that in tough and painful times?

### **8 – *God and our Grief – But what Kind of God?***

- How do you perceive God – how do you think of God?
- What images and/or names for God do you most naturally use?

I express an ambivalence about the phrase ‘Almighty God’ and Richard Lischer questions the attribute ‘good’ in reference to God. (129, 2125, 116)

- What images or descriptions of God do you have difficulty with or questions about?

‘If I had to put my understanding of Christianity into one word it would be *with*.’ (137, 2249, 123)

- What does *with* mean for you in your experience of grief and in your relationship of God?
- In your times of grief, how have you experienced God?
- What platitudes and clichés around loss and grief do you challenge (or, if you could, banish)?

## 9 – Words for our Grief – A Gift from the Psalms

Beth Allen Slevcove describes laments as ‘the prayers offered after the chair has been pulled out from under the people of God.’ That’s why they are loaded with tough questions: ‘Where are you, God?’ ‘Why aren’t you protecting and providing for us?’ (148, 2454, 133)

- When it feels that the chair has been pulled out from under you, how okay is it for you to express those tough questions?
- What place does lament have within the life of your faith community and in your relationship with God?
- How might people respond if your faith community advertised: ‘You are invited to a good lament – this Sunday at 10.00am?’ (160, 2460, 143)
- I wonder what occasions might be particularly appropriate for offering a time or service of communal lament.

Mindful of a loss that’s part of your story; take time to prayerfully read a psalm of lament, such as Psalms 10, 13, 22, 35, 43, 88, 102. Read the psalm through several times, very slowly. As you read it allow your loss to have its rightful place in your life. Acknowledge your loss and allow yourself the grief that accompanies it.

- As you read the psalm: what words or phrases stand out – which ones do you instantly connect with?

You might compose your own lament. If you do so, refrain from editing your writing or judging the thoughts and feelings that emerge. The biblical model varies, and the different elements are not always easily distinguishable (as it is in grief), though here’s a pattern that you might follow.

- **Address God:** Address your lament to God, using the name or image for God that’s right for you.
- **A complaint:** Pour out your honest, raw emotions to God, even what you or others may consider ‘inappropriate’ ranting and raving. Let God know how you truly feel.
- **A request:** Ask God to act. Tell God what you want and need God to do. In the psalms there are no ‘pretty pleases.’<sup>8</sup> You may be able to bring to mind a time when God has been with you in some special way. If so, stay with the memory – if not, that’s okay – but don’t rush on. It may be some time before you’re in a position to engage in the next step.
- **An expression of trust and praise:** This is the point in your walk when you are able to affirm (or at least begin to affirm) that God has heard you – then an expression of gratitude and praise naturally flows from the healing and transforming work that’s beginning to take place.

## 10 – Walking with Job – A Story of Losing and Grieving

‘Suffering of any ilk can be overwhelming. These experiences often strike me as too profound, too significant for ordinary words. Sometimes all I can offer are simple actions and rituals that transcend words. I’m learning to be honest about that and I allow a hand held in silence or a gentle hug to express what I have no words for.’ (167, 2773, 150)

- Has it been like that for you in times of loss and grief?
- How do you offer comfort when words seem so inadequate; when it seems there’s nothing to say?

‘Friends often mean well, though their responses are inappropriate because they don’t understand the nature of loss and grief. At other times friends’ behaviour isn’t so benign. As we walk through our grief, we may well lose some friends.’ (169, 2799, 152) This was Job’s experience (Job 19:13-15,19) ‘Friends who know how to come close and sit with a person who is grieving, to share the silence and hear the questions, to share tears and recognise the pain are a treasured gift.’ (169, 2809, 152)

- What is your experience of friendship in times of loss and grief? Whose responses have been unhelpful or inappropriate? Who have known how to share the silences and pain?

‘Therefore I will not restrain my mouth; I will speak in the anguish of my spirit; I will complain in the bitterness of my soul. (Job 7:11) Or, as Malcolm puts it, ‘Convert to anger; blunt not the heart; enrage it.’ (172, 2854, 155)

- From your experience of Christianity, to what extent is anger towards God allowed – and, do you allow yourself such anger? Perhaps consider what you were taught about this when you were young and how that’s influenced you.

Throughout *The Grief Walk* I emphasise the importance of giving ourselves and others the freedom to question. ‘Questions reverberate throughout the book of Job and of all questions ‘Why’ may be the most searching. How we you respond?’ (173, 2873, 156)

- How do feel about this emphasis on questions?
- To what extent is it an approach that’s accepted and encouraged in your faith community?
- In what ways has your spirituality– your relationship with God – been shaped and reshaped by experiences of suffering, grief, and loss?

## 11 – The Easter Walk

‘The day between Good Friday and Easter Day is given over to waiting; waiting in the dark. This is called Holy Saturday. It’s a place and time where we hang in limbo, waiting for something to happen, questioning and doubting, knowing that we are powerless to influence the outcome. Holy Saturday has about it a sense of abandonment.’ (180, 2997, 162)

Take time to be in this place of waiting and un-fulfilment – the place where you don’t know the outcome and you’re powerless to influence how things will play out.

- Where is that place for you?
- What do you see?
- What do you hear?
- How does it feel?
- What do you need to say to God?

‘Resurrection is to be experienced in the present stuff of life, including the grief we are presently undergoing.’ (183, 3047, 166) ‘Resurrection reveals the light of God within the darkest night. It’s a gradual, subtle, inconspicuous work of God and the place of waiting, our Holy Saturday, is a place that we may well have to return to many times.’ (184, 3064, 167)

- How have you experienced gradual resurrection – in what ways have you known this imperceptible, subtle, inconspicuous work of God?

You might ask a trusted friend or a spiritual companion to help you look in the rear-vision mirror and see how you have changed as a result of your life-experiences.

## 12 – A Choice – Do we go Through the Pain or Around it?

‘We are presented with a choice: to either enter the pain or seal it off, to go through it or around it. I don’t say this lightly, for I know only too well that entering our pain can be frightening. Will it overwhelm me? Will I ever emerge from it? What might it do to me? And yes, it’s tempting to numb the pain with distractions, with noise, pills, alcohol, or activity. We can’t live with the intensity of the pain all the time. We move in and out of it, but the fundamental choice remains: how do we choose to respond?’ (186, 3090, 168)

- I wonder if you recognise in yourself the temptation to numb the pain – or, perhaps, to push the grief aside, bury it, circumvent it.
- What are you most afraid of if you choose to fully enter your pain?

Frederick Buechner thinks that it’s in those times of pain that we are most alive. (189, 3144, 172)

Philip Bennett makes a connection between wounding and blessing. (190, 3144, 172)

- What do you think?
- What have you to say about Frederick’s and Philip’s assertions?

After reading this chapter I suggest you sit with this parable.

A king once owned a large, beautiful, pure diamond of which he was justifiably proud, for it had no equal anywhere. One day, the diamond accidentally sustained a deep scratch. The king called in the most skilled diamond cutters and offered them a great reward if they could remove the imperfection from the treasured jewel. But none could repair the blemish. The king was sorely distressed. After some time, a gifted jeweller came to the king and promised to make the rare diamond even more beautiful than it had been before the mishap. The king was impressed by his confidence and entrusted the precious stone to his care. With superb artistry, he engraved a lovely rosebud around the imperfection, and he used the scratch to make the stem.

- How does this parable speak to your experiences of loss?

If you are able to identify the creation of new beauty from a loss, you may wish to acknowledge it in some way.



### 13 – Our Search for Meaning after Loss

- Has your sense of meaning – your purpose in life – ever been threatened or radically changed by a loss?
- If so, in what ways did it impact on you?
- How did it manifest?
- Thinking about the understandings of God that have shaped your sense of meaning – how have they changed over the years, and how would you describe them now?

Viktor Frankl wrote, ‘I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: *The salvation of man is through love and in love.*’ (198, 3300, 180) Viktor is thinking primarily of his love for his wife, but I wonder how this might be applied to God who is Love?

- How might God be the ultimate meaning in our lives?

Reflecting on Paul’s affirmation in Romans 8:37-38, I observe: ‘There is a paradox in all this. There is suffering and pain, *and* God is love. We know loss and grief from the day we are born, *and* God is love. The Christian faith offers no promise that we will be spared pain and suffering, only the assurance that nothing ‘will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.’ (199, 3499, 181)

- How comfortable are you with this paradox?
- In what ways does it speak to your relationship with God in the face of suffering, loss, and grief?

At the beginning of this study I referred to the question I posed at the end the Introduction: ‘If we do not lead people to the love of God, where is the hope of which Scripture speaks?’ (18, 270, 22) In this chapter I come back to it. ‘To be tethered to God who is love or, using an image I offered earlier, to know God as our ultimate attachment and secure base, gives us a fundamental sense of trust and security that enables us to explore this changed world that we now inhabit.’ (200, 3322, 182)

- How do you sit with this question about the love of God?
- What place does it have your meaning system?

Viktor Frankl and Joanne Guy found new meaning and purpose by discovering new goals. Joanne wrote, ‘I look at the things I can do and decide what is important to me and live for that.’ (202, 3360, 184).

- What can you do?
- What’s important to you?
- What do you live for?

## 14 – Hope Emerges

Vaclav Havel wrote, ‘Hope is not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.’ Lucy Hone says: ‘[Hope is] the fuel that fires us to move forward in the world.

How do you describe hope?’ (205, 3426, 186)

- Identify a specific experience of loss which someone else has experienced.
- With that mind, how might you serve as an agent of hope in that situation?
- How do we present and live out the hope encapsulated by Paul in Romans 8:37-39?

Paul’s picture of hope is cosmic in its scope – calling us to stand on tiptoe, eager and expectant. ‘He envisions God transforming and making new all of creation, and the future glory that awaits us is much greater than the suffering we are presently experiencing.’ (208, 3480, 190)

- How does this shape your life – or is this just a fanciful notion?

I end the book with this quote from C. S. Lewis: ‘The best is perhaps what we understand least’ (210, 3509, 192)

- What do you make of these words?