

Courage

Montgomery Hospice Memorial Service

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We are gathered today in honor and memory of all of your loved ones and to honor the love and care that you gave them. As I reflected on what words to share with you today, I kept coming back to courage. The courage it may have taken to choose Hospice care; the courage it took to watch someone you love struggle with illness and then watch them die; the courage it takes to grieve.

Courage was needed when you first received the diagnosis of serious illness. Often, the painful days and months that followed were filled with treatments tried and failed, hopes raised and dashed; options considered and discarded. For some that part of the journey was very brief, perhaps only a matter of days from diagnosis to gone. For others it was an incredible long and painful experience.

For many here today, it wasn't an illness like cancer or heart disease, but the agonizing decline caused by Alzheimer's or other dementias. Slowly, little by little, you watched your loved one slip away. The once vibrant personality gone and the ability to know you, their loved ones, lost.

Whatever the path that brought you to Montgomery Hospice, it may have been fraught with worry, love, fear, questions, perhaps some guilt and regret. But courage was also there at the heart of your experience. Someone wrote: "True courage is not the absence of fear – but the willingness to proceed in spite of it." Sometimes that courage allowed you to stand up to those who wanted you to continue seeking treatments that made your loved one sicker than the disease they were meant to cure. Sometimes courage was needed when you had to be speak softly with family and friends who didn't understand that Hospice wasn't "giving up" but a loving choice to gentle the journey from here to there.

As you know, grief started the moment you received the diagnosis of terminal illness. But for the most part, you put those feelings aside as you focused on caring for your loved one. After the death a new type of grief begins. The reality of death must now be experienced and courage is needed in the face of such devastating loss.

If you have attended a workshop or group with us, you know we often use metaphors and rituals in our work with grieving people.

Rabbi Earl Grollman wrote:

Death brings a choice.

It can lead you to the edge of the abyss.

Or you can build a bridge that will span the chasm.

In my experience serious loss does lead many of us to the edge of the abyss. An earthquake has just hit our world. Someone we love has died. For some the quake is at the epicenter of our world; for others some distance away. If the epicenter was further away, perhaps your abyss is shallower and more easily traversed. But for some the quake has created a personal Grand Canyon. On one side of the canyon is life, as we knew it when our loved one was alive. But they are gone and the very landscape in which we lived is completely changed. We need courage now as we stand at that abyss. On the other side of this personal Grand Canyon is a new reality; life as it will be when we can breathe again; where there is joy; where we can feel like ourselves again. In the beginning it can feel overwhelming. We can't see that new reality and we doubt our ability to get there. We struggle, stumble and fall. Mary Anne Rademacher said, "Courage doesn't always roar, sometimes courage is the quiet voice at the end of the day saying 'I will try again tomorrow.'"

To traverse this personal grand canyon we have to build a bridge or forever be lost in a dark and lonely place with regret and fear our constant companions. For some this bridge will seem like the Bay Bridge, long and difficult to build. For others more like Memorial Bridge or perhaps even a foot-bridge. Because everybody's grief is different, everybody's bridge will be unique. For families who are grieving, this can be a very difficult time. We are grieving different losses and grieving in different ways. What some find helpful, others will find intolerable. Patience, gentleness, grace and courage will allow us to honor these different ways of grieving, these different kinds of bridges.

After much trial and error, back and forth, we reach that new reality where we feel more like ourselves again. For many there will still be times of intense grieving, though they won't last as long, nor come as frequently.

Robert Benchley wrote: "Death ends a life, not a relationship." How then do we continue our relationship with those who have died? It takes courage to redefine ourselves and our relationships. Three things that can be helpful are: **Remembering, Honoring and Connecting.**

1. Remembering. In the beginning our remembering may be very focused on the death because it is so overwhelming. It is so overwhelming that for many griever's it blocks out all other memories. This is normal, but it is also scary. A mother who was in one of our Courage to Grieve groups described her grief as this huge black ball ever present before her eyes. It was so huge she could not think of or remember anything of her daughter before her sudden death. Over time and with the help of a counselor she learned that she could move the ball ever so slightly to get glimpse of her daughter before her death. Eventually she was able to move that ball completely out of the way in order to do other things, like enjoy her grandchildren, or sing. One of our jobs as survivors is to carry the story of our loved ones forward so that others will know who they were and that they mattered. Each story is unique and our ability to remember their lives is how we stay connected even after death.

Emerson wrote:

In this universe nothing is ever wholly lost
That which is excellent remains forever a part of this universe.
Human hearts are dust,
But the love which moves the human heart
Abides to bless the last generation

Take time this holiday season to say their names, share stories, laugh together, light a candle, and hold each other in love and compassion.

2. Honoring and Memorializing. How do we come to grips with these terrible losses? One way is by honoring and by meaning making. Perhaps you will participate in a walk to find a cure for cancer in honor of your loved one. Perhaps you will live your life differently because of the love you were blessed to share. You may want to volunteer at your local library because he loved to read. She might have been a huge Redskins fans and each time you gather as a family to watch the game, you'll feel her presence. Did you love to take hikes together? Then helping to keep your local park and trails clean maybe your way of honoring. Maybe you'll plant a memorial garden. Whatever and however this happens it allows us to make the world a prettier, kinder and gentler place. A poem from Noah Gottlieb reads:

Mom,
walk in the world for me.
I don't want my
death to diminish your life.
I want you to live better,
and love better because I was here.

3. Connecting. Three points of connecting are friends and family, enjoyment, and groups. In the beginning you may have many offers to have dinner or go to lunch with friends, to stay connected. But often in the beginning we are not ready to accept these invitations. By 5 or 6 months those calls maybe fewer and further between. Then we need the courage to call those who said "Call me if you need anything." If you have been a caregiver for a long time, it can be difficult to ask for what you need. After a death we reevaluate our friendships and let some go. And we find new ones. Staying connected to others helps us to find our way back to ourselves and can restore our faith and hope.

Staying connected to enjoyment or pleasure is really hard in the beginning. But as the weeks pass, it is important to allow yourself and your family moments of joy. About four months after the death of his six year old son, Gregory Floyd wrote in his book *A Grief Unveiled* :

"We allowed ourselves to have fun. Without guilt.... We had to learn by experience that it did not insult Johnny's memory to have a good laugh or a good time or a good night out. We gave ourselves permission to realize how much we have and not only how much we have lost."

Each time you reach out for enjoyment or fun becomes a building block of hope. At first it will be very hard and feel very strange, but you will get through it. After all you have already survived what seemed impossible. At the end of the first year after Johnny's death Gregory Floyd wrote:

"And so I live with loss. I do not deny it. It is there, sometimes felt and sometimes unfelt, sometimes raging and sometimes still. I am alive not in spite of this loss but with this loss. I can laugh, sing dance, and even praise with a hole in my heart."

Another point of connecting is through groups. It maybe your church group, a community choir, a book club, a hiking group, an artistic organization or something else. Through connecting with others we can build new skills, remember old ones and find new people to share our story with.

A Jewish prayer says: "We do best homage to our dead by living our lives fully even in the shadow of our loss."

It is through these and similar activities that we continue the bonds and nurture our relationships with our loved ones. It is through writing about and talking with them that we sort through our experience, express our feelings, and hear their voices inside of ourselves and in the voices and faces of each other.

In closing let me share with you a poem by John O'Donohue entitled

On The Death Of The Beloved — *John O'Donohue*

*Though we need to weep your loss,
You dwell in that safe place in our hearts,
Where no storm or night or pain can reach you.*

*Your love was like the dawn
Brightening over our lives
Awakening beneath the dark
A further adventure of colour.*

*The sound of your voice
Found for us
A new music
That brightened everything.*

*Whatever you enfolded in your gaze
Quickened in the joy of its being;
You placed smiles like flowers*

*On the altar of the heart.
Your mind always sparkled
With wonder at things.*

*Though your days here were brief,
Your spirit was live, awake, complete.*

*We look towards each other no longer
From the old distance of our names;
Now you dwell inside the rhythm of breath,
As close to us as we are to ourselves.*

*Though we cannot see you with outward eyes,
We know our soul's gaze is upon your face,
Smiling back at us from within everything
To which we bring our best refinement.*

*Let us not look for you only in memory,
Where we would grow lonely without you.
You would want us to find you in presence,
Beside us when beauty brightens,
When kindness glows
And music echoes eternal tones.*

*When orchids brighten the earth,
Darkest winter has turned to spring;
May this dark grief flower with hope
In every heart that loves you.*

May you continue to inspire us:

*To enter each day with a generous heart.
To serve the call of courage and love
Until we see your beautiful face again
In that land where there is no more separation,
Where all tears will be wiped from our mind,
And where we will never lose you again.*

Thank you.