

A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in the Rituals of Grief

(based on grief memoir by Amanda Held Opelt

Ezekiel 34:11-16, Ephesians 1:15-23 by Patty Friesen (Nov. 26/23)

Slide 1 – those at a graveside. A quote by Edna St. Vincent Millay, “Where you used to be, there is a hole in the world, which I find myself constantly walking around in the daytime and falling in at night.” On this Memorial Sunday we remember our loved ones who have died and say their names aloud and light a candle in their memory. Those on line please submit your names and Benjamin will give them to an usher. Also for those who cannot come forward – please raise your hands for a mic to say your loved ones’ name and a deacon will light a candle for them. In today’s scriptures Ezekiel reminds us our Shepherding God binds up our sorrows. In Ephesians, Paul reminds us that Jesus, God’s child who died has been given authority over the universe in which God fills everything with light, love, life. The main purpose of this image is to give us confidence in the power of God, who fills all in all, including all life and all death for all time.

Many Christians still think of heaven in spatial terms as mansion or a park. We fail to adjust our imagination of heaven to suit this cosmic picture of God’s power and glory. If anything could comfort us, it is this cosmic picture of God’s presence with us in all things.

In her book *A Hole in the World: Finding Hope in the Rituals of Grief*, Amanda Held Opelt memorializes her grief over the sudden death of her 37-year-old sister, spirituality writer Rachel Held Evans. I’ve appreciated Rachel Held Evans’ books in our church library as she wrestled with her evangelical faith. Her younger, quieter sister Amanda, bravely wades into her grief in a honest way and looks to rituals to help us step our way through our grief. I’ll be using her words.

For months after the sudden death of my sister, I felt like a zombie. There was a constant ringing in my ears and time seemed like it had come to a grinding halt. I couldn't keep track of anything. I was constantly losing my keys, my purse, my phone. For months, I would forget what I was saying mid-sentence. I would get mixed up in meetings at work and stumble through presentations. And then, when friends or colleagues would show concern or ask me if I was okay, I would feel insulted and embarrassed that the facade of fortitude wasn't holding up like I thought it was." (p. 40)

The death of our loved ones leaves a hole in our lives and in the world. When a loved one dies, we die a little too. But this death to self, at least in the spiritual sense, is a familiar motif for those of us who read the Bible. This is precisely the paradox that grief introduces. We are no longer who we once were. Our old selves have died. You may not like who you are for a while, maybe a long while, after grief.

I do not think we can say of grief, "This, too, shall pass." There is no going back. A new landscape has been carved by grief's rushing water and if we are to survive, we must make a home in it, however that might look. For a time, it may feel like a wilderness. But there is an invitation to wisdom and acceptance in this wasteland. There is a new you to discover, and it may be a holy encounter. And in fact, the wilderness is a great place for death and rebirth, getting lost and then being found. (p. 48)

We move into our own afterlife. It is life after the life of the one we love. We are never the same again (p. 35). It used to seem strange to me that family members of the deceased are listed in the obituary as "survivors." The term seems to imply that you were struck by the same malady as the one who died, only you pulled through it somehow while they succumbed. The

term survivor denotes some kind of disaster, a shipwreck or a car crash. It indicates a near miss, a brush with death, or a close call of some kind.

Grief is like water. “It follows gravity. It finds the lowest part of you and hollows it out even more. It exploits your weaknesses. It seeps into the empty spaces. It branches out from the headwaters of the death into hundreds of daily tributaries. Few areas of your life remain untouched. New losses are discovered almost daily. Life progresses without the one you love in it, and you miss them all over again with every new season and every turn in the road. (p. 41)

I understand the term survivor a little better now. Grief is, in many ways, a fight for survival. You do battle with the death of your loved one and try to wage war against hopelessness. Instead of quitting, you get up and put one foot in front of the other. You go to counselling. You pray. You cry on the shoulders of friends and take a walk. You binge-watch TV and change your kid’s diaper. Perhaps most importantly, you give yourself grace. You endure because is the only real option. (p. 45)

No one knows how to act or what to say when faced with the atrocity of death. Rituals tell us what to say. They tell us how to act. They give us another step. Here are a few. The Jewish faith has powerful rituals for death like *Shiva* - meaning the 7 days that those who mourn are not left alone but people stream in and out of the house sitting on low stools to symbolize being made low by grief, feeding and visiting with the bereaved. It is called the intrusion of Shiva and most of us would find it an intrusion to have people around for 7 days but death itself is the real intruder and what comfort there is not to be a host to these people but to just be together. After 30 days is another marker to the end of wearing black and special prayers in the synagogue and then after a year, a candle burns for 24 hours in memory of the loved one. Are there ways we Christians may want to adopt some of these Jewish grief rituals?

Slide 2 – Mom with cousins. Food is a universal ritualistic response to grief - featuring not only nutrition for the body but symbolic meaning to life and the importance of our community gathering around us to eat together. This is Mom at her brother's funeral last month eating with some of her 40 first cousins who were at the funeral. Indigenous people feast together after a funeral as a way of each taking home a bit of the grieving family's sorrow so it can be borne by all. Traditional Jewish practice calls for the meal of condolence, the first meal served after the burial which includes bread, the staff of life and also hard-boiled eggs to symbolize the continuous nature of life. Greek Orthodox serve a condolence dish of wheat, sesame seeds, walnuts, almonds, raisins and pomegranates. The dish is full of nourishing ingredients: protein, carbohydrates and antioxidants. The seeds symbolize the life of the departed. Just as John 12:24 says, "Unless a kernel of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces many seeds."

In the most powerful, holy and enduring 2000 year old grief rituals there is, we gather together as Christians to remember Jesus 'life and death. We eat bread to remember that he fed us while he was alive and continues to feed us after his death. We drink juice to remember the sweetness of his life and love.

Nowadays at a funeral, we often serve the favourite foods of our loved one as a reminder of what comforted them in life. Funeral food is not about being healthy - it's about comfort - for earth hath no sorrow that loads of butter and chocolate cannot cure. Opelt says, I can honestly say that food, brought me back to life after grief, almost as much as Scripture, prayer and counselling. The daily ritual of scrambling an egg, of blending a spinach smoothie, of microwaving a hearty stew prepared by a friend - this moment-by-moment choice to be present in my body, to nurture my body and to honour my body and all it had been through was vital to

my recovery. Meals became a liturgy to me. On the days when I could think of nothing else to do but cry and fret, I would remind myself, “there’s one other thing I can do today - eat.”

Slide 3 – Grandma’s Cookie Recipe on her gravestone – Just to lighten things up a bit here is a gravestone on which is written Grandma’s Christmas Cookie recipe. Every time someone asked her for her cookie recipe she said, “Over my dead body.”

I love when people share the humour and memories of their loved ones at funerals. There are fewer people nowadays connected with any kind of faith or community and they are struggling. They are calling the church for ideas of what to do to help them through death. What if the church invited society back into public acknowledgement of death and grief? Back to traditions, back to rituals, back to eating, back to communal ceremonies of sorrow. What if our church buildings were places where the whole spectrum of human emotions was not only recognized but indulged, tended to, shepherded, surrounded by community and supported with holy habits?

With holy habit this Memorial Sunday, we will name our loved ones who have died and light a candle in their memory. Every year someone is going through something they have never gone through before. Maybe we can help our community grieve even as we try to find our way through our own losses.

Let us pray...Our loving God who knows our every sorrow, thank you for the gifts of our community and our rituals to give us spiritual comfort in our time of physical separation from loved ones. Be with us, hold us, comfort us. Amen.

Lighting and Naming