

For the past 15 months the whole world has been living through a Dark Winter, a time when our abilities to cope have been stretched to the limit. The world as we have known it has been turned upside down and we have come face to face with just how fragile life can be. On top of that we have lived through the cruel reality of isolation in all aspects of life. We were proud and rightly so, when the term, Covid 19, was given to the silent predator, but today we realize Covid 19 is not a single solitary enemy, instead, it's more like a family because now its cousins called variants have begun to assault us.

The pandemic is our country's third leading killer. Children are being orphaned. Husbands and wives are becoming widows and widowers far too soon. Much loved people of all ages have died without family at the bedside while doctors, nurses and other hospital staff have had to become surrogates for family members in order that patients don't die alone.

The number of losses overwhelms us. Between 500,000 – 600,000 deaths and counting. 2.5 million women exited this country's work force. Jobs lost, people on furlough from their employment. People are unable to hang out with friends. Funerals, as we have known them are different or nonexistent. We have been cut off from our family members, unable to hug our grandchildren. And as you are well aware, loneliness abounds in our hearts and souls.

We rejoice over the life saving impact of vaccines and are eager to move on to what's next in life, but vaccine takes time to work in our bodies, and our ability to deal with and process thoughts, feelings and emotions which have surfaced during the pandemic also takes time. So we need patience: patience to allow grief to have its own timetable in order to complete its work within us. You and I are trying to stay afloat in a sea of losses. The word lose means to cease to have, to be deprived of someone or something badly missed which one regards to be essential for wellbeing. Perhaps most telling is that the

word lost means unable to find your way, not knowing where you are. If you have experienced Covid fog, you know what I mean. Disorientation overcomes a person. I remember driving into Hallam, NE after the Hallam tornado. I had been to Hallam a number of times. I knew my way around the Town, but that day I couldn't find my way because the street signs were gone and so many familiar buildings had been destroyed. I was lost smack dab in the middle of that little town. Feeling like you're lost can be part of grief, for you see, grief isn't one dimensional. Grief is a constellation of feelings, emotions, actions, guilt, memories, deep sorrow, yearning, anger and yes, even relief. Think of the deep sorrow of family members left behind when the ventilator stops beeping. Think of the deep sorrow of missing ones we love at night, because you and I know nighttime is prime time for loneliness to come calling. You know what it's like to see the empty place at the dinner table or the vacant space next to you in bed. Think of the deep sorrow of not being able to have a proper funeral or have it delayed. There is a misguided notion that who and what we've lost and our deep sorrow about those losses should be dealt with in short order and folks will just move on. I'm thinking of the typical employee benefit of having three days off following the death of a family member and how limited family leave short circuits the grieving process. I'm thinking about callous remarks from friends, co-workers, even family members who say "Aren't you over that yet? We need to be reminded that grief is not a moment in time, neither is it a destination. Grief is not an over and done with experience; it's a lifelong journey. We're in it for the long haul.

The fabric of life as we have known it has been torn apart and as I said moments ago, it's not unusual to feel lost and unable to find our way in the face of deep sorrow, neither is it unusual to ask for help when we need it. In fact, to say "Help" may be the bravest thing we will ever do.

There are indications that the world's dark winter may be coming to an end as we hope for light at the end of the tunnel when it comes to the pandemic. That light appears to be here in the development of vaccines which have been used to inoculate masses of people. Yet, I ask you to ponder other considerations. Is it possible to inoculate against the pain of losing someone or something you love? I think not. Are there any pills or shots capable of healing a hole in a person's soul? I don't believe so. The world yearns to return to normal and yet Covid has set the bar so high that we have begun to ask, what is normal? Will the old normal ever appear again? The worst thing about Covid is not knowing how and when it will end. I have faith it is going to end. How, when or what it will be like is unknown because we're not going back to the way things were. We don't know what has been lost so that complicates our grieving. We know part of what we're grieving for but the rest is unknown. Whether Covid and company goes away or emerges as the new normal, it is incumbent on us to learn to make friends with our grief, in other words to learn to live with it because change is part of life, and change brings some forms of loss, and loss produces grief. When my sister's son Zach was five years old, he went to visit my brother's house. Zach went inside, looked around and said to my brother, "Uncle Wayne, did you move?" Wayne said "No Zachary, we didn't move, why did you think we did?" Zach said "Because there used to be a dish of candy sitting on that table. Zach occupied himself for the next half hour by looking around the house for the dish of candy. He never found it. Life keeps moving the candy dish on us, and takes us to places we would rather not go and experiences we would rather not go through, but it produces opportunity as well.

Dr. George Everly, PhD, faculty member at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine, studied three diverse groups of people who endured chronic adversity and discovered that the most resilient people in those groups possessed a common denominator: a specific resilient attitude which is best captured in a maxim "life is a journey, not a destination." Everly goes on to say that if we define our lives in relation to a vaccine or herd immunity, we will surely be disappointed. They will never arrive fast

enough. But if we see the pandemic as a yet undetermined segment of our journey that must be endured, we may not only survive psychologically, we may actually grow stronger. I like to think of this pandemic as a milestone in our lives. Let's ask ourselves What we're learning from it?

Consider that we are learning the importance of generosity, gratitude, humility and how individuals are stepping forward with acts of kindness to make life better for people they've never met. A prime example is how the gift of food has fed hungry people impacted by Covid. Hope abounds.

There is also the need to feed people's spirits and emotions, to attend to the holes in people's souls so in the midst of our grief we become strong enough to accept the challenge of doing something such as developing creative connections with other helpers. I encourage you to become bearers of hope.

Hope is a remarkable property of the human mind. Hope nurtures creativity, flexibility and sees potential in new possibilities. Hope enables us to keep searching for the candy dish. I know now is still a cold and dangerous time for many of us- in our own lives, in our communities, in our nation and in our world. And yet just as the buds of spring have turned into the blossoms of today, Hope is stirring and bursting into our lives.

We become bearers of hope by telling stories about the pandemic and other losses in ^{LIVES} our life. Take time to listen when others tell their stories. I believe part of the legacy the pandemic leaves us is a mutual responsibility to make sure stories are told in order to help our grief and that of future generations become more palatable. Songs, books, movie scripts, dissertations, research papers will be written about a time like this. It will be cleansing for our souls to share our hope and grief with future generations so they may know the living consequences of the pandemic; Hope encourages of us to tell the world that what is broken can be mended. Hope tells us that we have new opportunities to celebrate. Your life is a song. What new verse or verses will you sing? Your life is a book and hope helps you write the next chapters.

Hope helps foster personal relationships and interactions even in the midst of a pandemic. Physical distancing doesn't mean you have to stop social interaction. I encourage you to write letters, put your memories down on paper, keep a journal, tell family stories around the dinner table. Create a digital trail through videos and emails, because those who come after us will ask questions. Sharing of this magnitude takes the edge off grief and reinforces the reality that each of us is not alone. We are all in this together.