

Our culture does not do death well. We struggle to have honest conversations with family members about end-of-life care, power of attorney, etc. Surprisingly, 68% of Americans do not have a will at all! (Reid Kress Weisbord, *Rutgers University – Newark*, David Horton, *University of California, Davis* article of 19 May 2020, THE CONVERSATION, retrieved from the internet) Apparently there is a lot of denial. But there are no exceptions when it comes to death. None of us get out of here alive!

Even mourning is challenging. The pressure is that we move on quickly from loss and hurt, keep our griefs to ourselves, remain strong always, and get on with life.

But mourning is something that is vital to our health, something we owe to ourselves. Without mourning our only choice is to grow hard and bitter in the face of disappointment, rejection, and loss. And these will always make themselves felt.

We have many things to mourn in life: we are forever losing people and things. Loved ones die, relationships die, friends move away, a marriage falls apart, a love we want but can't have obsesses us, a dream ends in disappointment, our children grow away from us, jobs are lost, and so too one day our youth and our health. Beyond these many losses that ask for our grief there's the need to grieve the simple inadequacy of our lives, the perfect symphony and full consummation that never comes this side of the grave.

The Church offers us 2 feasts at the very beginning of November – All Saints and All Souls, to help us with this. It offers us examples of heroic living in the Saints, and great hope in the commemoration of All Souls. We remain connected to those who have gone before us. And both feasts remind us of the reality of death – and encourage us to prepare properly for it.

I would make 2 suggestions/requests here. First, PLEASE make a will – for the sake of those who will live on after you. It's a basic act of charity. I've seen families torn apart over the simple fact that there was no will. Please spare your children/heirs this additional sorrow upon your death; please do what you can to avoid the fracturing of your family after you are gone. And second, please prayerfully consider leaving 10% of your estate to the church. Catholics do not do tithing very well. At least in death we could do something good for the parish that we will ask to administer sacraments to us in our illnesses, and send us off to God with prayer in a funeral. We have 30 plus funerals a year. Rare is the person who made any provision at all to leave anything to the church. This could be a huge help to our finances.

As for the mourning that comes with death, there is no simple formula and the formula is different for everyone. Grieving, like loving, has to respect our uniqueness, what we're comfortable with and not comfortable with. But some things are the same for all of us.

First, there's the need to accept and acknowledge both our loss and the pain which with we're left. Denial of either, loss or pain, is never good. The frustration and helplessness within which we find ourselves must be accepted, and accepted with the knowledge too that there's no place to put the pain except, as the poet Rilke says, to give it back to earth itself, to the heaviness of the oceans from which ultimately comes the saltwater which makes up our tears. Our tears connect us still to the oceans that spawned us.

Next, mourning is a process that takes time, sometimes a LOT of time, rather than something we can achieve quickly by a simple decision. We cannot simply will our emotions back to health. They need to heal and healing is an organic process. What's involved?

In many cases there's the need to give ourselves permission to be angry, to rage for a time, to allow ourselves to feel the disappointment, loss, unfairness, and anger. Loss can be bitter and that bitterness needs to be accepted with honesty, but also with the courage and discipline to not lash out at others. And for that to happen, for us not to lay blame and lash out, we need help. All pain can be borne if it can be shared and so we need people to listen to us and share our pain without trying to fix it. Pride is our enemy here. We need the humility to allow others to see our wound.

Finally, not least, we need patience, long-suffering, perseverance. Mourning can't be rushed. The healing of the soul, like the healing of the body, is an organic process with its own non-negotiable timetable for unfolding. But this can be a major test of our patience – and hope. We can go through long periods of darkness and grief where nothing seems to be changing, the heaviness and the paralysis remain, and we're left with the feeling that things will never get better, that we will never find happiness and lightness of heart again. But grief and mourning call for patience, patience to stay the course with the heaviness and helplessness. The Book of Lamentations tells us that sometimes all we can do is put our mouths to the dust and wait. The healing is in the process of waiting.

Henri Nouwen was a man very familiar with mourning and loss. He actually lived at the seminary for a year when I was a student. I shared meals with him in the dining room many times. He was a deeply insightful man – but very needy emotionally. He was an overly-sensitive soul who suffered from depression. It left him emotionally paralyzed to the point where he sought professional help. All of which he writes about in his books; I'm not revealing any confidences here. He wrote his deeply insightful book, *THE INNER VOICE OF LOVE*, while working through a major depression. There he gives us this advice: "The great challenge is *living* your wounds through instead of *thinking* them through. It is better to cry than to worry, better to feel your wounds deeply than to understand them, better to let them enter into your silence than to talk about them. The choice you face constantly is whether you are taking your hurts to your head or to your heart. In your head you can analyze them, find their causes and consequences, and coin words to speak and write about them. But no final healing is likely to come from that source. You need to let your wounds go down into your heart. Then you can live them through and discover that they will not destroy you. Your heart is greater than your wounds."

We are greater than our wounds. Life is greater than death. God's goodness is greater than all loss. But mourning our losses is the path to appropriating those truths. The leafless trees and more somber tone of the All Souls Liturgy are great reminders of this important work. Blessings to you all as we walk this Paschal Path together....(adapted from Ronald Rolheiser, June 18, 2018)