



*Your Story*  
**MATTERS**  
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Columnist

**Navigating the muddy waters of grief**

Loss is part of life. No one escapes it. Grief will come for us all at one time or another.

Nobody gets to claim the trophy on having suffered the “most grief.” There is no such competition. Ultimately, the worst grief is your own — the loss you are personally experiencing. Grief is quite simply, the death of something or someone. Whether that is from the death of a loved one, a job, routine, a relationship, gatherings, friends, financial security, or safety, the origin(s) of your grief may remain relevant, personal, and deserve acknowledgement.

2020 has been a year of collective grief layered on top of the many grief situations that arise day to day for each of us personally. COVID has triggered grief en masse across the world, and yet has also impacted each of us as individuals. While solidarity and empathy create a necessary buffer for our grief, how we process loss is ultimately unique and often solitary.

When wildfires engulfed my home state and the smoke laid down a heavy, eerie blanket, it all felt a bit too close. This on top of COVID, political unrest, division, and disruption made optimism hard to grasp. Gratitude and grief were close companions coexisting day after day as stories were shared of devastation, perseverance, despair, and hope. A whole host of paradoxical emotions. And then tragedy struck my hometown of Sisters as we lost four young lives known intimately by our small community in a period of two weeks.

I have had my stack of losses just like most people, but it can be hard to claim grief sometimes — to feel justified to name it. For me, this is complicated at times by a sort of survivor’s guilt. How can I claim to be grieving amid so much privilege? Am I justified to grieve while others face incomprehensible loss?

While some grief can feel identifiable and concrete, this has also been a year of grief not so well defined or as it is so termed, *ambiguous grief*. It is the loss of what is less tangible — our boundaries, our safety, our sense of balance, the sense of routine, and predictability.

In my professional life as a mental health provider, as

the layers of grief compound for the communities I serve, I grieve my ability to provide reassurance and resources that not so long ago seemed so much more accessible. I grieve the capacity that seems to be overstretched for so many — capacity for joy, spontaneity, stress, compassion, grace, and resilience. As people max out their threshold or “hit a wall” so to speak, they often withdraw and the empathy our world so desperately needs becomes harder to inspire.

We must be careful not to judge one another for how we choose to grieve. While we may be facing similar losses, it is so important we make room for each other’s process. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross first named the five stages of grief in 1969: *denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance*. Years later, her colleague, David Kessler termed the sixth stage of grief, *finding meaning*. While these stages describe patterns, it is important to know that grief is by no means linear and emotions can shift without predictability. Grief is also not “a journey,” as it is often called. A journey implies a final destination. Grief evolves, but does not end.

Finding meaning amid loss can soften the hardness of it all. It goes further than acceptance and allows for the possibility of hope.

Finding meaning does *not* mean we have to ascribe to the sort of toxic positivity that suggests we must be grateful for our traumas or losses because it makes us “stronger.” It does not

mean we have to believe things happen for a reason. Our loss does not have to be called a test, or karma, or “an opportunity.”

I do not think there is necessarily a deep meaning to somebody losing everything in a fire, losing a child, suicide or somebody dying behind a sheet of plastic apart from their loved ones. You do not have to understand why loss happens to find meaning. Finding meaning also does not mean we get to bypass the pain of loss by some sort of spiritual transcendence. We have to feel to heal.

What can be meaningful is our personal journey following loss. The “meaning” is not the loss itself, but what transpires within us thereafter. Perhaps we grow in compassion, in wisdom, in empathy, in grace. We can feel grateful for who or what was once in existence and grasp the possibility of our lives being meaningful despite the loss of such.

Our resilience through grief is made stronger when we come together. If we are not careful, we can become too territorial in our grieving process and polarize ourselves against others. Acknowledging each other’s grief with grace and not judgment is paramount. Honoring the grief in others can also help us process and honor our own grief. Showing up for each other in ways big and small with a smile, a meal, a note of encouragement, a prayer, a donation, a moment of silence, a phone call, or simply listening can mean the difference between despair and hope.

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PHOTO BY JERRY BALDOCK

**Olivia Rychard in for a score during Outlaws softball action against Crook County.**

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