

Personal Testimony About Dealing with Loss and Self-Care

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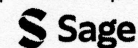
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Abstract

As an interfaith hospital chaplain and a Christian, navigating the profound emotional terrain of grief and loss is both a professional duty and a deeply personal journey. Attending the funerals of two close friends has brought out the interplay between my role as a spiritual caregiver and my own vulnerability. In reflection, I realize the importance of self-care and the reminder that in offering comfort and empathy, I must first find it within myself.

Keywords

Grief, loss, self-care, hospital chaplain

Attending the funerals of two close friends this past year was a transformative experience for me. Both friends were not just colleagues but fellow travelers in the mission to serve God's family. As a hospital chaplain, I have been a presence for many families to navigate their grief but facing the loss of my own friends pushed me into a realm of emotional and spiritual confusion that was surprising and frustrating.

In my role as a chaplain, I try to offer comfort and compassion to patients and families dealing with the loss of a loved one. The framework provided by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—guides my approach to understanding and supporting those in pain. I have seen how these stages manifest uniquely in everyone. Despite this knowledge, when faced with my own loss, I was unprepared for the emotional peaks and valleys.

Attending the funerals of my friends felt like being transported to a dark room within my heart, a place where the usual lights of understanding and control seemed faint. Though I had the training and experience, in my own grief, I found myself wrestling with questions and emotions I thought I had already addressed in my own journey.

The chaplain's role is not to fix or heal in a medical sense but to provide a safe harbor for spiritual and emotional comfort. This is reflected in the biblical reference to being present, as the angel was to Abraham—"Here am I" (Gen. 22:11). The chaplain offers a compassionate ear and a space for the spiritual dimensions of loss—often a disconnection from purpose and meaning. While the doctor attends to physical needs, the chaplain tends to the spirit, an integral part of holistic care.

Henri Nouwen in *Spiritual Formation: The Way of the Heart* (2010), describes the heart as the place where God dwells; where we grapple with our emotions and think about life's

deepest questions and experiences. When I faced the loss of my friends, my heart felt mixed up and confused. Despite knowing the intellectual and spiritual principles of coping with loss, the emotional and spiritual reality felt overwhelming.

Reflecting on my journey, I realized that the deaths of my own parents years earlier had introduced me to various rooms in my heart, some of which felt locked or hidden. Alzheimer's took my mother away gradually, and in those moments of confusion and disorientation, I encountered rooms within myself I did not know even existed. Afterwards, ironically, these experiences allowed me to become more empathetic and understanding for others.

My current grief mirrored this experience, revealing areas of my heart that still needed healing. Though I had the tools and training to navigate these emotions, I had to recognize and accept that God's presence, which I had seen offer comfort to others, was also with me. Embracing this realization helped me find my way out of the darkness and guided me toward spiritual readiness and most importantly, recognizing the value of self-care.

This intertwining of personal loss and fulfilling the chaplain's duty reinforced the importance of finding peace within myself before offering it to others. It highlighted the necessity of not shouldering grief and loss alone but sharing it with others particularly those with the gift to be a non-judgmental presence.

In the end, I learned that the journey through loss is not one of isolation but of connection—both with others and

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with the divine. This experience has underscored the transformative power of self-care, the necessity of a positive spirit, and the profound truth that, in offering comfort to others, I must first seek and find it within myself.

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