



John's Story

Key Reflections:

- John relishes describing his life with Mary and is very present to the joy they shared and indeed that he still experiences. He moves directly into describing her final hours and literally plunges into deep grief.
- “Fighter pilots are not supposed to cry. I found out that’s not true. I’m not a fighter pilot anymore.” John distinguishes his role as a pilot from his role as a loving husband and is able to give himself permission to respond authentically to his heartbreak.
- “Mary’s urn has place of honor on the shelf at home above the TV so she can watch her sports.”

Questions:

- As John describes his companion of 59 years, he smiles as he shares memories. As his story shifts to her final hours, his grief is nakedly apparent. What is your reaction to his raw emotions? Is it unsettling to see emotions swing so rapidly from one extreme to another? How does this reflect your own experience? Your own sense of control?
- John makes a clear distinction between what is expected of him in his role as a pilot and what is his reality as a man faced with the loss of his beloved. Are there roles in your own life that have carried different expectations? Have you been able to make shifts as needed? Is it necessary?
- John smiles as he talks about the place of honor of Mary’s urn. Clearly, her presence in this way comforts him. In what ways do your memories and keepsakes bring you comfort and a sense of continued relationship? Does his use of present tense bother you? Comfort you?

Notes:



Barbara's Story

Key Reflections:

- “Had my own darling father die... found him on the floor of his bathroom and four and a half hours later I was teaching class... and I’m thinking, now why was I proud of that?”
- “I don’t think we have a language for grief; both directions. I don’t think we know how to express it to one another, and I don’t think we know how to receive it from one another.”
- “I remember when my grandmother died. I can remember her coffin sitting in her house on the sofa for two days. And we would go up and touch her and kiss her and talk to her, oh my goodness. I think 99 percent of my friends would freak completely.”

Questions:

- What do you think Barbara’s source of pride was about? Was it a familiar reaction or a surprising one to hear?
- Have you actively coached yourself in some way with your grieving or drifted with the flow of the experience or asked for advice from those around you?
- What has surprised you most in your own reaction to loss?
- What has your experience taught you about supporting others who are grieving?
- Has your experience taught you how to better receive gifts of time, attention and support from others? How to offer it in a way that might be more acceptable to others?
- What are some of the most kind, tender ways that another person has been with you in your own grief?

Notes:



Hendrika's Story

Key Reflections:

- “We love to still talk about our son. He is as real today as he was six years ago.” People think that it’s just better not to talk about him - to let it go.
- “When somebody asks how many children I have, I want to say three but that requires an explanation because only two of them are here... a lot of times I’ll take the path of least resistance and say that I have two kids and throw up a little apology in my heart.”
- “It was hard. People would see you and say, ‘How are you?’ and I would try to launch into the story, they would look at their watch and say ‘Oh gosh, I didn’t realize I have to go.’”
- “We were worried that people would think that we were trying to replace Ben with another child.”

Questions:

- Hendrika articulates a number of ways in which she must choose between acknowledging her son and other people’s feelings. Have you had this experience? How do you navigate between the guilt, anger, sadness this creates?
- Do you experience your loved one as continuing to be real in your life? Is that a comfort for you? Do you have others who can share that experience?
- There are layers of loss here—the loss of a child, disillusionment when friends can’t cope, having to maintain a public response while continuing to be Ben’s mom privately. Others talk about a crisis of faith. What layers do you find yourself confronting?
- Hendrika speaks of her son often in the present and continues to talk about him for years after his death. Does that fit your experience? How do you react to that?

- Hendrika describes some clear ways in which many people just can't companion someone over time, but suggests practical ways in which they might help. I'm struck by her ability to accept what people can offer and her seeming ability to accept their limitations. What has been your experience in this regard?

Notes:



Chris & Sarah's Story



Key Reflections:

- “No one wanted to talk about Noah and he was all consuming to us. We could think or talk of nothing else. We needed validation that he had been here—that his life mattered. We needed to hear his name spoken. People just couldn’t go there with us.”
- “I’d ride my bike until the physical pain was punishing as a way to drive out the emotional pain but it just doesn’t go away.”
- “‘Pat’ answers just made me nuts. People would say that God needed another angel in heaven and I just could not understand that kind of a God. It took a lot of hard work, soul searching and being part of a church that wasn’t afraid to ask those hard questions with us.”

Questions:

- Particularly in the death of an infant, people do not know what to say and fear is palpable. Adding to the shock and the sense of unfairness of innocent life ended, there may be few or even no memories to share to validate the life lost. Does Sarah’s comment about the all-consuming need to hear Noah’s name, to know he mattered and would be missed resonate for you? If not, what has worked for you?

- Chris found himself on grueling bike rides in an effort to let physical pain drive out the heartbreak of Noah's death but learned that the pain just doesn't go away. Have you found yourself over-working, overeating, self-medicating, volunteering universally, saying 'yes' to every invitation to distract yourself? Can you identify what has been helpful and what has been avoidance behavior?
- Sarah talks about taking on the hard work of grief, of not accepting easy, 'pat' answers but instead wrestling with the tough questions that Noah's death created in terms of faith and hope, essential criteria for living a meaningful life for her. Ultimately, we need a sense of purpose and hope to walk alongside our losses. How is this playing out in your own life? Have you found a safe place for these deep questions in your own experience?
- Has a core belief of yours been challenged by your loss? How have you managed that challenge in your grieving process? Are you finding/have you found a way to reconcile that belief in a way that produces hope and/or a way forward?

Notes:

Story Based

(Note: Best used for general public and grief groups, either as a standalone or with some theme-based material at your discretion.)



Paula's Story

Key Reflections:

- “I was so taken with this idea in life that there’s a right way to do things, and to excel, that I tried to grieve well, and I put tremendous pressure on myself. I can to this well. I’ll grieve better than anybody has ever grieved.”
- “I think of grief often like a great searchlight. And it will shine light on other things in life that have been problems beforehand.”
- “Many people live without much community - they live pretty isolated.” We need to learn to form communities, to find someone with whom you can have an honest conversation.
- “Pain needs to be moved... it needs to get from the inside of us to the outside of us. Journaling was my way of doing this from the start. I never intended to write a book.”
- “I started watching people for the first time in my life. And there were people that I saw who generated so much warmth and so much love, and I began to ask myself how did they do that? They told me that at some point in life I learned to see the beauty in exactly what I’ve been given. When you turn inward and see what really can never be touched, and what never died, and what remains unbroken, then you have the ingredients that will take you. They define the path.”

Questions:

- Have you felt pressure to grieve right? From yourself? From others? What would “grieving right” look like?

- Has grief functioned as a searchlight in your life? What has been illuminated? How have you addressed this?
- D'Arcy's journaling as a coping mechanism helped move her pain from the inside to the outside. What are ways that have been helpful to you or might be helpful?
- We often hear that time heals all wounds. What do you hear in D'Arcy's story that supports/denies this 'truism'?
- At times we all choose the easier way out of fear, exhaustion, stubbornness, a sense of inadequacy, etc. Given that, can you be kind to yourself when you do this and reset? Do you have a trusted ally who can help when you can't do this for yourself?

Notes: