

Grief

Continued from Page 2D

When Charlie Brown responded to some disappointment with his characteristic “Good Grief!” he was actually close to telling the truth we need to tell ourselves.

Can grief be “good”? As a natural response to the enormity of loss, I suppose it could be called good. Yet, the expression Charlie was using identifies the jarring jumble of emotions that spill out when we are “at a loss for words” and “lost” in our sorrow. It doesn’t make sense so we say things that make no sense. “Good Grief!” is like saying “Happy Hell!” or even “God be with you.”

When my mother was dying she said, “I’ll love you forever.” It cut into me like a knife. Love and death in the same room, in the same breath. How was I to go on with that, to carry that with me as I lived, loved and breathed? It was nearly 30 years ago and I haven’t worked that one out. Again, no place to go with that love.

Some say mom is waiting in heaven for me. There’s nothing comforting about that. She’s not here, with me, so she’s supposed to be somewhere I can’t reach and still loving me? I wouldn’t want that for her and I sure don’t want that for me. So, I’m left missing her, grieving her loss, but still feeling our love. That’s all there is, so I have to live with that. Doesn’t matter if I don’t like that.

Maybe that’s what the burden of grief means—carrying it, the memory, the love, the person you knew, while working it out. How do we do that? Talk about it; tell stories; think, feel and appreciate life and living. Truthfully, I don’t think grief ever gets “worked out” any more than life is ever “figured out.”

Faith helps many people. But I think it’s best to be honest, completely realistic. Someone is gone for good and that doesn’t feel good because it’s not. We may have to live with loss but we never have to “make it all better” by imagining a way out of grief.

Grief isn’t something we “get over” or even “get through,” in my opinion. It’s a part of being human, something we have to carry, heavy or not.

When my grandmother was dying I sat by her bedside and read her the poetry she loved. It made her smile. The morning she died, my dad came into my room and opened the curtains to let the light in. He said, “This is the day the Lord hath made; let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

He found comfort in those words, though neither he nor I felt any gladness at all.

Grief is funny that way, because it’s not at all funny. It’s just natural.

Chris Highland served as a Protestant minister and interfaith chaplain for many years. He is a teacher, writer, freethinker and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife Carol, a Presbyterian minister, live in Asheville. Learn more at chighland.com. His new book, “A Freethinker’s Gospel,” is available from Pisgah Press. Chris will be teaching a course through the Great Smokies Writing Program this spring.