



THE SCHOOL OF GRIEF COURSE

WEEK 3:

The Power of Witnessing Grief



Notes from the The School of Grief Course
taught by Dr. David Page.

A handwritten signature in white ink that reads "Dr. David Page". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the name.

Week 3: The Power of Witnessing Grief

Nobel Prize winner, Jewish writer and Holocaust survivor, Elie Wiesel, writes, *“For the dead and the living, we must bear witness.” Grief requires witnessing.*

Having our grief witnessed is the first of seven needs grievers have in my School of Grief Model for helping those in grief. It’s a powerful experience for a griever to have their grief witnessed. In fact, witnessing grief is the cornerstone, which the other six elements are built upon. This need is so fundamental that if you don’t get your grief witnessed, it becomes impossible to progress on your grief journey.

Hardwired to Have Our Grief Witnessed

Human beings are social and emotional beings designed by God to live in community with others. As emotional creatures, we have an innate need to have our grief witnessed by others. This need is hardwired within us, since our emotions bond us to one another, and those connections are the key to our survival.

We want everybody to see our grief and respond to what has happened to us. When a child is injured, let’s say they skin their knee, they look to their parents for help. That help often comes in the form of a boo-boo kiss, a light kiss on the injury to make the pain go away. Kids want their injury to be seen, their pain to be heard and validated by their mom, dad, and everybody around them, and so do we.

My friend, David Chrzan, a pastor, and adventurer, broke his femur in his right leg while riding his mountain bike in a canyon in Orange County. I visited him in his hospital room after his surgery to repair his leg.

After discussing the circumstances of his accident and prayer, I was getting ready to leave when he asked me, “Would you like to see my scar from the surgery?”

“No, that’s okay,” I replied.

He was insistent on showing me his scar as he turned on his side and lifted his hospital gown, revealing a footlong incision with stitches on the outside of his leg just below his hip.

“The surgeon inserted a couple titanium rods into my leg that will graft with the broken bone as it heals,” David explained.

“That’s cool,” I replied.

Maybe it’s a guy thing, but we like to show our scars as a badge of honor after our accidents. I was the same way with my family and friends after my motorcycle and bicycle accidents. We want to have our pain witnessed and validated by others. It’s the same way with grief; we need our pain witnessed.

David Kessler, the author of *Finding Meaning*, writes, “Each person’s grief is as unique as their fingerprint. But what everyone has in common is that no matter how they grieve, they share a need for their grief to be witnessed. That doesn’t mean needing someone to try to lessen it or reframe it for them. The need is for someone to be fully present to the magnitude of their loss without trying to point out the silver lining.”

We begin to witness grief by acknowledging a person’s loss and letting them know they are seen. It’s saying, “I see you and hear your pain. Your grief is real. It’s genuine.” Witnessing people’s pain empowers them to feel supported and less alone. Observing grief allows griever to focus on grieving their loss rather than grieving the loss of the support they need most.

It’s important to create space for griever to share their painful feelings. Witnessing someone’s grief is one of the greatest gifts you can give to someone in grief. Ask about their loved one, then listen and let them talk. I feel honored when someone shares their pain and grief with me. When we see our sadness reflected in the eyes of another, we know our grief matters. We get a glimpse, maybe for the first time since our loss, that we will survive, and that a hope-filled future is possible.

Witnessing grief is about meeting people where they are and accepting them without trying to change them. We come with no agenda, judgment, or shame. Witnessing grief helps people develop a sense of comfort during the painful and negative feelings that accompany loss.

Can I Get a Witness?

This phrase is commonly used in African American churches and has a spiritual connotation: When the pastor asks, “Can I get a witness?” he’s asking the congregation for affirmation which is often met with a response of “Amen!” I’ve had the privilege of preaching in a predominantly black church and it’s inspiring to receive encouraging participation from the congregation. It made me a better preacher when they would say, “Amen” or “Go on.” The word amen means “it is true” or “so be it.”

Witnessing affirms the griever and declares their loss is true and genuine. It’s simple: When someone tells you their story about loss, your job is to witness their grief. Be present with them without thinking about yourself and what you might say next. Just listen and witness. Our world needs more witnessing. Can I get an amen?

A Unique Way of Witnessing Grief

I love how one tribe in particular witnesses’ grief when someone in their village dies. Kessler was touring Australia when he met a researcher that shared about her study of the Indigenous people’s way of life in northern Australia. On the night someone dies, everyone in the village moves a piece of furniture or something else into their yard. The next day, when the bereaved family wakes up and looks outside, they see that everything has changed since their loved one died, not just for them but for everyone in the village. This shows the grieving family that their loved one’s death matters. It’s a tangible witness as it makes the loss visible. Our world needs more furniture movers.

Witnessing Grief at a Funeral

Funerals are vital for having our grief witnessed. I never realized how meaningful a personalized funeral that accurately reflects your loved one's life could be until after my daughter's death. After meeting with families and performing hundreds of funerals, I'm convinced that a funeral ceremony done well can be the first step toward healing for a bereaved family. Funerals, memorials, and graveside services matter. Something magical happens when others gather to see, hear, feel, and witness our grief.

The funeral is the oldest and most familiar ritual in the world. Rituals unite us. Funerals are for the living, for those who remain. It's an important psychological step within the grieving process and helps bring closure. Funerals allow us to pay tribute to our loved one's life and help survivors face the reality of death. Funerals assist us in beginning the mourning process, expressing our beliefs, thoughts, and feelings, and saying goodbye to our loved one. Funerals give people an opportunity to support the family by demonstrating their love and respect for the deceased.

Significance

When loss happens, the first thing we need to do is establish the significance of that event. Significance is a key concept in witnessing grief. The hardest part of grieving is finding a way to establish significance. Friends and family are not comfortable with talking about death, pain, and loss. Yet, we want people to know about our loss and respond to it in an empathetic way without trivializing it.

Doug Manning, author of *The Funeral*, gives *three levels of significance* that need to be fulfilled after loss. *First*, we need to establish the significance of our loss. This is what has happened to me. The first thing we think about when someone dies is ourselves. This sounds strange, doesn't it? We think, "What's going to happen to me now?" That's not selfish; it's survival. God designed us with a tremendous capacity to survive. We need to share what happened to us because of our loved one's death.

The *second level* is the need to establish the significance of the person we have lost. We want to tell everybody about the person we lost and show photos of them: "I need to tell you who this person was, what they meant to me, and how significant they were."

The *third level* is the social significance. This is one of the major reasons for having a funeral and why funerals are so important. The funeral is a time to gather so friends can tell us how much our loved one meant to them.

Funerals provide a network of support for grieving families. Funerals have become the new family reunions. Relatives you haven't seen in years travel great distances to attend the service. On the other hand, when a family decides not to hold a funeral or service, it's a missed opportunity to have their grief witnessed, and for their friends to show their love and support. Failing to have a memorial service can lead to an increase in unresolved grief for years to come.

There should be a rule that everyone in the world should have a personalized funeral service. Why? Because I believe in the dignity of every human being. God created each of us in His image and therefore, every person has value. All people matter to God. Every life is worth remembering and celebrating. To deny a person a funeral is to deny them an act of dignity. In addition, the primary importance of a funeral is for those who remain.

Crow Funerals

Yes, crows hold funerals for their dead, which are unique social events that can be loud and dramatic. Crows witness the grief of another fallen crow. A crow funeral can happen at any time. Farmers bear witness after shooting unwanted crows in their fields. Powerline workers see them should an unlucky bird zap itself and drop.

Occasionally, the funerals occur in a city park. All it takes is one dead crow plus one fellow crow to spot it and release an alert, harsh and urgent — Caw! Caw! Within moments, a mob of crows arrives and settles onto branches or whatever aerial perch allows good viewing of the corpse and the surrounding scene.

For a short time, the birds remain quiet and still, only to break into a chorus of shrill calls. Back and forth, silence and aggravation for about 15 to 20 minutes until nearly all at once the ink-black birds launch and disperse, leaving branches to quiver. Crows exist in community much like mammals do.

Both scripture and folklore connect crows, ravens and jays, to human life and death. God sent a raven to instruct Cain how to bury his brother, Abel. A group of crows is known as a “murder,” a label dating back to medieval times when crows feasted on slain soldiers lying in battlefields.

The Value of a Funeral

A funeral is an important way to have your grief witnessed. Jackie’s funeral was a tremendous celebration of her short life. She was so full of life and joy. I wanted everybody to know what a special little girl she was and that her life was not lived in vain but had significance.

My fondest memory of the service was having our grief witnessed by nearly a thousand people including our closest friends, family, and church. I’ll never forget that day for as long as I live. The love and support were overwhelming. Following the service, they had an impromptu reception line for our family as people came up and hugged us. Folks were unbelievably kind and compassionate toward our family that day as they witnessed our grief. This demonstration of love and empathy helped carry us through the darkest time in our lives. I didn’t know if I could do the eulogy, but God gave me strength. The memorial service was lovely and marked the beginning of our healing.

Should Children Attend Funerals?

Funerals are valuable for children as well as adults. My son, Joshua, attended his grandfather’s funeral at eight years old. It was important to Josh to be at the service. I think your child’s wishes are a helpful guideline when making your decision.

It was an open casket funeral, which is rare these days, and he wanted to go forward at the end to see his grandpa in the casket. Both of my kids attended Jackie's funeral service. Joshua was nine and Jessica was seven. I couldn't imagine not letting them be there to say goodbye to their sister.

There is no right or wrong age to attend a funeral. Young kids can benefit from being involved in a funeral and having a chance to say farewell to their loved one. Let your child know what to expect at the funeral. Prepare them ahead of time as to what it will look like, how to dress, and what the schedule of the day will be. As I've talked with adults about this topic, many were denied attending funerals as children and wished they had been allowed to do so.

Witnessing Grief at a Wedding

My daughter, Jessica, got married recently. This was a big deal for the Page family. She is the first of our three children to do so. I asked her if she wanted me to walk her down the aisle as her father or if she wanted me to perform the wedding ceremony as a pastor and wedding officiant. "Dad, I want you to do both," she replied.

She asked seven girls to be her bridesmaids. I wondered who her maid of honor would be. She decided Jackie, her younger sister, would be her maid of honor. I got a bit teary eyed when she told me. Matt, her fiancé, hand carved a small wooden bench that held a frame with Jackie's photo in it and a bouquet of flowers. Engraved on the bench were the words, "Jacqueline Brooke Page." The bench, photo, and flowers were positioned right next to the bride where the maid of honor normally stands.

Witnessing Grief During the Holidays

It's extremely important to have your grief witnessed during the holidays. The holidays are associated with family. The most wonderful time of the year can also be the most difficult time of the year for those who grieve. It's at this time we became acutely aware of the void in our lives. How do we have Christmas without Jackie? To make matters worse, Jackie's birthday was on December 20th. She was our Christmas baby.

Church services went on, Christmas carols were still sung, and people wished everybody a Merry Christmas. But my thoughts were on Jackie, fixed more on her departure than on her arrival five years prior. Christmas was different that first year without our daughter. We hung a stocking for her, talked about her, lit a candle in her memory, and shed many tears. Sometimes, showing up for something is the best you can do. We showed up that first Christmas and that was good enough.

Talk About Your Loved One

Maybe the best way to have your grief witnessed during the holidays is to talk about your loved one. We talk about the weather, food, sports, and work. We talk about everything else... except the elephant in the room. We all know it's there. It has hurt us all. But we don't talk about the elephant in the room. I encourage you to introduce the elephant in the room.

Oh, please, say her name. Please say “*Jackie*” again. For if we talk about her death, perhaps we can talk about her life. Nothing brings relief like hearing a good story about your loved one.

Memorialize Your Loved One

Find a way to remember your loved one and memorialize them during the holidays. It might mean lighting a candle, writing a letter to your loved one and placing it under the tree, or creating an ornament with your loved one’s picture on it and hanging it on the tree. I know someone who created a memory book of their loved one. Create a new tradition in memory of your loved one. You can donate to a favorite charity in their honor. I do this each year for the HEART Africa ministry. You can also go online and create a tribute page for your loved one. These are all ways to express your love for your family member or friend and to have your grief witnessed.

Include the Children

Children feel confused, powerless, angry, and anxious during the holidays because of a death in the family. Kids grieve differently than adults. Our children need their grief witnessed during the holidays, as well. Be honest with them. Explain that it’s okay for them to cry and for adults to cry, and that although they are feeling sad right now, they won’t always feel this way. Figure out which part of the holiday tradition is most important to them. Try to involve them in memorial rituals. For example, ask them to draw or write their favorite holiday memories of the departed loved one.

Witnessing Grief During Milestones

I recently graduated from Biola University with my Doctor of Ministry degree. It was the culmination of years of research, hard work, and perseverance.

On the morning of my graduation ceremony, I couldn’t help but think of Jackie and my dad. I made a video that I posted on my social media platforms expressing how sad and disappointed I was because they couldn’t be there to witness my accomplishment. Although they weren’t there physically, I felt their presence with me.

My success was due to their influence on my life. Jackie became my motivation to keep going when I wanted to give up. I started the program after she died to grow personally and become a more effective pastor, better able to serve those I work with in ministry. My dad supported me in all my ministry endeavors. I felt Jackie and my dad both smiling down on me from heaven as they witnessed my milestone with great pride that day.

Witnessing Grief During Birthdays and Anniversaries

It’s tricky going through birthdays and anniversaries after a loss. My wife and I give two cards to each other for every birthday, one from us and one from Jackie. We also give two cards to each other on Mother’s Day and Father’s Day, and our wedding anniversary. I write Jackie’s card like she used to write, the typical handwriting of a five-year-old. Jackie’s birthday is always a special day in our family. We’ve had birthday cakes before, and we’ve lit candles in her honor.

A Witnessing Grief Exercise

I like to use an exercise I learned from Paul Denniston, founder of Grief Yoga. I have people pair off at their tables and stand face to face with their partner. The first person who shares put his hand over his heart, looks the other person square in their eye and says the other person's first name out loud, and then says, "I witness your pain and grief, and I see your healing." This was a powerful exercise. I've seen people moved to tears as a result of doing this exercise. And later they share that it was the first time they ever felt their grief witnessed.

3 Tips for Witnessing Grief in Others

Below are 3 tips to help witness grief in others and provide a compassionate presence:

Depend Upon God for Help

When feeling overwhelmed, remember that God is with you in your pain. Don't run away from the discomfort but take a deep breath and lean into the sadness knowing God designed your body to grieve. Tears are welcome. Words are not necessary at first. Trust God to give you the appropriate words to say when the time is right: "The Holy Spirit will give you the words to say at the moment when you need them" (Luke 12:12).

Acknowledge the Pain

When witnessing a griever in pain, realize you don't have to fix them. Rather, seek to create a compassionate space for them without taking on their pain. Let them know that God sees them in their pain and so do you. Recognize that your presence alone, along with touch, is more powerful than words. Acknowledge their pain and validate that what they're going through really hurts. Let them know they don't have to hide or rush through their grief.

Show Empathy

Let grievers share their pain from their heart without judging or embarrassing them. Encourage them to express their feelings and embrace their pain. There's no need to look for a silver lining, but instead, perhaps share a good memory or story with them about their loved one. Let them share their feelings openly and remind them you are merely there to listen. People don't need our sympathy; they need empathy. Witnessing grief is to show empathy for how those in grief feel.

It takes enormous courage for a person to have their grief witnessed and to truly be seen when they feel wounded inside, when their heart is vulnerable and hurting. It also takes courage to witness the grief of another and view their tears and pain. As you witness grief, you become an openhearted healer. You give your family member or friend an incredible gift. Even though the act can be an emotionally exhausting experience; it's worth it. They will forever be changed.

May we first seek to understand, then to be understood. This approach supports the other person in their pain. It's what we all want and need, to be understood, valued, and affirmed in our grief. We all need to have our grief witnessed by someone who cares. I witness your grief, and you witness mine.

May we seek to witness the grief of others and have our grief witnessed within a caring community because healing comes in community, not in isolation.

In our next session, we will talk about the second need of grievers, which is to feel our feelings. God is the creator and giver of emotions. He created us to grieve and designed us to feel our feelings and express our emotions.