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THE GIFT OF PRESENCE IN GRIEF

By Cindee Snider Re

Grief is the natural emotional response to losing what is precious and valuable.

Such loss changes us. Losing my only sibling when I was 35 and he was 32 changed me. Caring for five kids with significant long-term illness and living with my own changed me. Marriage at the breaking point changed me. Walking (twice) through a child's brush with suicide and through another's painful journey of addiction changed me.

There was a distinct *before* and *after*. Each new grief left its mark, reminding me again and again that I was not in control and could do little to protect the ones I love. It brought me face-to-face with my weakness and insufficiency. As the language of my grief grew, I collected (or wrote) touchstones of hope, words that grounded and comforted me—words I would repeat to myself over and over when it became difficult to breathe and insurmountable to think.

- *Cherish these 12 seconds.* (Tony Re)
- *Sometimes all we need to do is breathe.* (CSRe)
- *Always, everywhere God is present.* (A.W. Tozer)
- *I can do anything five minutes at a time.* (CSRe)
- *Grief is a holy madness.* (Patricia McKernon Runkle)

DISCOVERING THE GIFT OF PRESENCE IN THE MIDST OF GRIEF

Words are a gift to me, but *presence* is the life-giving gift in the midst of grief. The afternoon and evening of my brother's funeral visitation were my first experience with the gift of presence. I could not bring myself to approach his casket or stand in the receiving line next to it, so I walked among the hundreds of people patiently standing in a line that stretched out the door, through the lobby, out into the parking lot, and halfway around the block. I remember very little from that day, except

the tender presence of my friend Deb. She quietly took my hand and stood beside me through it all.

My second experience with presence dawned gradually during my kids' many hospital admissions. My only responsibility during those long weeks was to care for the child in front of me. Everything else fell away, and I began to understand what a gift unhurried presence could be. During difficult nights, those rooms became a sanctuary for vulnerable conversations and questions like this one: "Mom, if you had known about your illness, would you have had all of us?"

"Oh, Baby...no, never, but I'm so grateful that choice wasn't mine, because I wouldn't have wanted to miss knowing any precious one of you."

ALWAYS, EVERYWHERE GOD IS PRESENT

As our medical story grew to include medical trauma, I learned to step outdoors for a few minutes whenever possible. Often, I would sit completely still under our wide white oak. Some days, I closed my eyes and listened to the birds singing and the squirrels scampering through the trees. Other days, I watched the barn swallows and little green bees. In that slow unfolding, grief did not abate, but I began to sense God's presence. A.W. Tozer said it best: *Always, everywhere God is present...* Those words rang true. God was with me in every lament, through every loss, and in the "holy madness" of each new grief, and *He will be with me everywhere, always.*

PRAYER

Heavenly Father, in the lament of loss and the holy madness of grief, we need You. Comfort us, care for us, and hold us together when it feels like we are shattering. In the slow unfolding of Your presence, may we learn to care for others through the ministry of presence, comforting others with the comfort we have received from You. Amen.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

- What is your most poignant loss or deepest, most difficult grief?
- Have you experienced someone's presence amid grief? How did they comfort you?
- Have you experienced God's presence in grief? How did He meet you? How did He comfort you?
- Is there someone in need of your ministry of presence? What is stopping you? How could you begin?