

## Grieving, like dying, takes as long as it takes

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PETER MIKELIC  
OPINION

"We are the only species whose fate is not simply a mute fact of our existence," wrote Toronto-born essayist, Michael Ignatieff in *The Needs Of Strangers* (Picador), "but a painful problem whose meaning we attempt to understand."

On Jan. 1, 2004, I lost a colleague to lymphatic cancer at the premature age of 58. The abrupt death of Wolf Belzing — preacher and teacher, husband and father — is not a passing I can take lightly. He was my friend for 32 years.

I miss our lively conversations about the work we shared as pastors and the reminiscing of our years together at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Saskatoon.

I long for the humour which enlivened us, the similarities and differences which defined us, making us who we were for each other.

Another chapter begins for many who counted him as a friend, the substance of which will be drawn from the pages which preceded his untimely demise.

We will be challenged not only to confront his death with comfort, peace and hope, but to find fresh meaning and purpose in life without him.

While pain accompanies the road more and more travelled, its stubborn intensity and frequency a recurrent companion, it teaches us to surrender to it by letting go of our fear of it.

Pain can only be anchored and lessened by those who have suffered its

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consequences, who have experienced it as a condition of life and not only as a yearning or reason for death.

This doesn't mean that we should not seek pain control through medication when facing the physical agony of cancer or another mind-numbing illness.

While managing pain is our goal, we cannot guarantee that our loved ones will have agony-free dying. We can only promise that pain will be compassionately shared.

Grief is a survival issue. People do indeed die from broken hearts. Surviving spouses run a high risk of not making it through the first year of bereavement and unresolved grief can set the stage for serious illness.

It hurts to let go, but it's much more painful to hold on. That may seem unfair, but grieving, like dying, takes as long as it takes, and the work can be lengthy and laborious. Our mental and spiritual health, our emotional and psychological well-being require that we face our human losses, especially of those whom we love the most in this life.

Grief isn't an illness from which we recover or a disease that requires popping pills. It is a God-given process of feelings and sensory conditions which are utterly personal. No one can judge how much grief is enough for another individual.

There are positive, healthy and constructive ways to mourn, just like there are negative, sick and detrimental ways, which only end in more suffering.

Every time a loved one dies, there's a sense in which we lose a little hope for a better future. Because a human being has been torn from our lives, we feel frustrated and angry, sad and confused. We suffer regret for things done and left undone, for words said and unsaid. Feeling our own fragility and vulnerability, we mourn our own mortality.

Whenever I drift toward forgetting my creaturely transience, I wake myself up with a good piece of literature, scripture or poetry.

Recently I found this one, written by Sue Ellen Ballston: "Today is yesterday's tomorrow — full of lost dreams no longer hoped for. Quit dreaming, you fool, and live today. Live now. Live this moment."

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How true! Our loved ones would not have wanted it any other way. Neither would God!

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