

Growing up with grief

By [Laura Kelly Fanucci](#)

July 31, 2016

My older brother died 25 years ago.

I was ten years old. I grew up with grief.

All week I expected that the anniversary would hit hard. When someone you love has been gone a long time, you get used to the strange, unpredictable nature of anniversaries. Sometimes another year passes by without great sorrow; instead there is gratitude for the good of life. Some days wallop without reason, bringing anger or anguish, tearing open wounds you thought had long scarred over.

I expected the worst this year. Twenty-five is a looming anniversary after all, too many years to wrap your arms around and carry anywhere without crying out in pain. And I am still thick in the throes of grief from the death of my daughters. A half-step closer to my own heart than the death of a sibling. They are flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone. Their absence gnaws at the fiber of my cells.

But the morning of the anniversary I woke with a quieter peace. Not acceptance at death or resignation at suffering. No. When I opened my eyes, I remembered that I grew up with grief.

A few months ago I gave birth to twins, [who both died within two days](#). Grief is not a foreign body that invaded when my daughters died. It took shape inside of me when I was on the brink of becoming a teenager. It formed the core of who I am.

For 25 years I have been mourning the death of my brother. Grief has walked with me in making a good, grateful, God-seeking life. It taught me that sorrow shapes joy and suffering defines hope.

If Jay had not died, I would not be the person I am today.

So I have to hold these tensions together: the longing for a world where the young do not die and the embrace of a life in which growth still comes from loss.

This contradiction in terms can make for muddled living; I will not pretty it up. I will never pat it into tidiness to match someone's thin theology that "everything happens for a reason."

For 25 years I have fumbled when someone asks, "How many siblings do you have?" Society's simple questions, small talk designed to pass the time or to sort out the contours of a stranger's identity.

But for so many of us, the simplest questions are the hardest. Try asking me how many children I have. Watch me sort through the stories, assess the situation in an instant, take stock of my own mental state. What do I have energy for today: truth-telling or an easier lie? What part of my heart do I want to share: the depths of who I am or the surface that won't be scratched?

Most of the time I opt for vulnerability instead of self-protection. A resentful heart makes for bitter living. (And worse writing.) I feel a deep calling to tell the stories I know so that others can enter into their own lives with eyes wider open. This is the vocation of a writer, after all.

But I have grieved for decades enough to know that grief is a complicated companion. What does it mean to mourn when so much of the world seems to go on in blind ease? How does death not steal the joy of life?

In his book [*Lament for a Son*](#)—which is without question the best book I've read on the death of a child—Nicholas Wolterstorff tackles the thorny questions head-on. He stares Christian faith in the face and asks how it will make sense of the gaping wound left by his son's death. Of all surprising places, he finds meaning in the Beatitudes.

"Blessed are those who mourn." What can it mean? One can understand why Jesus hails those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, why he hails the merciful, why he hails the pure in heart, why he hails the peacemakers, why he hails those who endure under persecution. These are qualities of character which belong to the life of the kingdom. But why does he hail the mourners of the world? Why cheer tears? It must be that mourning is also a quality of character that belongs to the life of his realm.

Who then are the mourners? The mourners are those who have caught a glimpse of God's new day, who ache with all their being for that day's coming, and who break out into tears when confronted with its absence...The mourners are aching visionaries.

The Stoics of antiquity said: Be calm. Disengage yourself. Neither laugh nor weep. Jesus says: Be open to the wounds of the world. Mourn humanity's mourning, weep over humanity's weeping, be wounded by humanity's wounds, be in agony over humanity's agony. But do so in the good cheer that a day of peace is coming.

Blessed are those who mourn because they bear prophetic witness to the world. They refuse to stay silent and accept what should not be. They pull back the veil between life and death. They see through the present darkness. They love beyond boundaries. They weep with God.

Blessed are those who mourn. And blessed are those whose deaths open our hearts to grieve. For they teach us what it means to love.

Originally posted at [Mothering Spirit](#)