Grieving my daughter’s suicide in a time of wider grief

My years of experience as an undertaker didn’t make it easier.

by Thomas Lynch in the December 2, 2020 issue

(Illustration © tadamichi / iStock / Getty)

“Blessed are those who mourn,” says Jesus, “for they shall be comforted.” To which Donald Trump, the boon of latter-day Good Newsers, appends, “People are dying.” Then, drawing from the dry socket of his humanity, “It is what it is.” The sacred and the simpleton are thus aligned among Christian triumphalists. One man’s beatitude is another’s balderdash.

Here in the autumn of an abysmal year we are wondering what to make of more than a million deaths worldwide, going toward a quarter of them here in the United States, from a pestilence that threatens to overwhelm our mainline theologies, our bodies politic and intimate, the customary emotional registers of grief. Likewise, we had a summer of racial injustice and the outrage and reckoning that proceed from a long-neglected account marching toward amends. In one dire week we had hellfire and high water—a conflagration that destroyed people and property from California

to Washington and hurricanes that flooded the Gulf Coast with deaths and devastations.

In early July my long lost and cruelly afflicted daughter leapt to her death from a bridge in California, adding a deeply personal desolation to the general bereavement. Over a holiday weekend her lifeless body lay without identity in a county morgue—“Jane Doe #102” they named and numbered her—until the medical examiners traced her back to a family of origin in southeast Michigan. She had estranged herself from us all for 15 years, beset, we supposed, by depression and mental illness, as the tightening spiral of schizophrenia made her more and more separate in her helplessness and ours.

After years of deepening isolation and a disabling closed head injury when she fell from her horse, the voices and delusions and the stay-at-home order and quarantine moved her to flee her willful solitary confinement, escaping the idyllic remove she had achieved to run across the country in search of what we can never know. We can’t know whether impulse or planning, the coincidence of method and motive and madness or something else, got her to enact the final, fatal, symptom of her illness. Nor can we know if she ever saw in the jump she took the beckoning, welcoming arms of a comforting Savior who promises to free her from fear and pain.

By getting the dead where they need to go, my years as an undertaker have instructed me, *the living get where they need to be*. We deal with death, the idea of it, by dealing with our dead, in the flesh and in the fact. “Grief work,” to borrow Erich Lindemann’s trope, begins with the large muscle, heartbreaking, heavy lift the lifeless bodies of the dead require. Whether we get them to the ground or fire, the grave or crematorium, they do not get there on their own. The shoulder work, the shovel work, the bearing and witness work—these are the first labors of the living in grief.

And so it was for my family as it was for the hundreds of thousands of other families this year. We got our dead home to let her go again, into the abyss we chose—the opened ground—for every one of us, a heavy lift.

The bewilderments of love are plentiful. Grief is the other side of the coin of love. Bereavement is a far country at the edge of oblivion. The only way around, alas, is through it. We are upheld by the condolences of helpless friends, of family who, like us, haven’t a clue.

But after the corpses and mourners, we need a story, a narrative nimble enough to endure our doubts, our existential queries, the whence and whither questions that present themselves: Where did we come from? Where are we going? Here the life of faith, whether held to or vanquished, comes into play. Our theodicies are comfortless, their vindications hollow, harrowing.

Of all the sympathies that came my way, one rang truest to my brokenheartedness: the friend who wrote to say the grip of pestilence prevents our gathering, our mute embraces, our helpless attendance to each others' loss, that it forbids our doing what our souls surely want to do—"to sit with you in silence before the mystery of it all."

I've been sitting in silence before the mystery for months now, endeavoring to turn my grievances into thanks, to lave myself in waves of gratitude rather than fear.

The spiritual life is not a theory, proclaims a fellowship I'm in. We must live it. Our cloud of witnesses keeps filling with the faces of the ones we love.

If you are having thoughts of suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255. Additional resources are available at Speaking of Suicide.

A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title "Silence before the mystery."