

# Giving voice to Grief & Loss

By Ken Robinson

'For everyone born, a place  
at the table...ccs 285

Through our growing years the realisation dawns that there are major experiences of loss or setback which change our world. Perhaps the family pet dies or a close relative dies. When I was 8 years and a few months old my paternal grandmother lay sick in a bed in our house for many weeks, with my mother caring for her daily. Then one day when I came home from school she wasn't there. "Where's Grandma?" I asked. "She's gone away for a while" was my mother's reply. That didn't satisfy me. I had an idea of what had happened. I knew my mother read the 'Births, Deaths, and Marriages' section of the newspaper every day. The next day or the day after, when my parents weren't watching, I searched the paper and there it was, the announcement of the death of Ellen Robinson, nee Broadway. That has remained so sharp in my memory through seven decades I know it was the painful awakening to one of the great losses and mysteries of life. I don't recall a provision for a young boy to cry about such things. Such tough things were not shared with children in those days. The idea was to protect the child. I expect my sadness was very personal and I learned my first lessons about stoicism. Such a shame, but we know a lot more now about handling death and other big losses. You might be asking yourself what events led to your awakening about death, and how did you handle it.

In 1969 Elisabeth Kubler-Ross published the first guide to the stages of death and grief - *On Death and Dying*. It was revolutionary, insightful and controversial. Fifty-two years later issues surrounding death, terminal illness and human interventions to prolong or end life are very much with us and controversial. For the most part, however, in our society there is great compassion, understanding and care for those dying and those grieving.

Even the process of writing this personal story to share with you has surprised and freed me. After typing the two paragraphs above I took a small break but my mind continued to process. Tears began to flow and feelings of gratitude surfaced from a deep reservoir within. Many faces flashed through my mind. The tears were for my grandmother, but also for the

many others who have touched my life and are now departed, a few whom I never knew personally but whose life efforts lit up my imagination and stoked the fires of motivation in my life. All were fully human with typical human frailties but some noble or loving parts of their life became embedded in my mind and heart. Some who have inspired me were rascals or worse in some ways but there was a core passion for truth and the betterment of humanity. Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela and Robert J. Hawke are examples.

That freeing of my unfinished grieving for my paternal grandmother opened another unanticipated door. Later in the day my thoughts turned to my maternal grandmother's death. I realised I was feeling anger and frustration rather than tears and gratitude. She had gone to hospital for a simple procedure in 1963 but died through medical error, which was then covered up (told to my mother in graphic detail by the distressed matron of a small adjunct hospital where my grandmother was sent to be out of sight). My mother was so distraught she could not respond when requested to go to the morgue to identify her mother. That task fell to me. I tried to persuade my mother to seek legal action. She never would – "it won't bring her back!" I was struck by the injustice of it all. Today, as a result of telling this story I have been able to connect the anger I felt then with a more recent hospital error that seriously, but not permanently damaged my wife Pat. I pursued the hospital with a furious resolve, providing extreme detail, until they reluctantly but formally admitted their error and committed in writing to changes in their systems nation-wide. They reported to us later when the changes were completed. Perhaps now I will further complete my grieving for the untimely loss of my maternal grandmother.

I now understand better my fascination with the two houses where my grandmothers had lived. In recent years since returning to live in Perth in 2008 I have found ways to be invited inside and explore each house, even though they have long been owned by other people. I realise now I had never properly said goodbye to either grandmother, or consciously grieved my deep loss. I know the unwinding will continue as

emotions blocked and stored inside me all these years are released. There will be a cascade of small discoveries and new emotional freedoms, and my life energies will be more available for connecting with others and life. Such is the power of grieving and giving voice to it.

Scripture bears this out in 2 Samuel with the story of David, himself a very gifted and fallible human being, going through the stages of grief at the deaths of Saul, Israel's first king, and Saul's son Jonathon, who was David's best friend. David disapproved mightily of some aspects of Saul's life and leadership but grieved for himself and the nation at the loss of his mentor. He called on all Israel to grieve and remember Saul and Jonathon as great leaders and warriors. In so doing David strengthened and shaped the identity and hopes of the nation.

It's not unusual that ancient peoples have in their own time discovered things about being human that we in the 21st century feel is a new breakthrough in our time. Now we all know about PTSD (post traumatic stress disorder) and the great benefit of counselling, the form of which does not avoid the trauma but in fact approaches it directly along with all the associated emotions, thoughts, questions, actions etc. We understand that appropriate work can avoid awful, long term reactions to the trauma. If we don't do that work we can cling to that which has been lost in ways that prevent us moving forward to meet the new day in life. In some way David understood at least some of these principles.

## GRIEF AND LOSS

Death is one form of loss. There are many kinds of loss that impact us, and in truth there are many losses that bring on a degree of grieving. Daily life includes the potential for difficult and sad experiences, but most days include only small and transitory examples, like the flat tyre which wasn't on the crowded schedule (or forgotten birthday, missed appointment, computer glitch, cancelled meeting with a friend etc.). We kind of know how to get through those things, finding solutions and awaking the next day refreshed and optimistic about the new day. But even these simple, mundane things offer opportunity to review the spirit and manner with which we handle them.

Hopefully, in time, we learn to be less offended or upset and more accepting of the imperfections and vicissitudes of life. Even further, there is a curious and marvellous freedom that can come from learning to accept such troubles as an opportunity to observe yourself in action and to sometimes choose better responses. It's part of the process of learning to accept our own imperfections. When we accept our own imperfections it is much easier to accept the imperfections of others.

There are major losses - the loss of a house in a bushfire; the loss of the regular company of a friend

who moves far away; the loss of a job from a company collapse, to name a few of the many. Young people from Hong Kong had planned to study then return home. Now they grieve for their country and most feel they can never go home. Multiple types of loss surround us in our communities.

Then there are losses relating to our own actions – loss of a friendship through abuse or taking friendship for granted; excess charges for failure to pay a bill on time; loss of confidence or self-respect from repeating mistakes. There are losses associated with our dreams, hopes, and plans. Sometimes huge investments of personal determination, time and resources fail. Parents have hopes for their children. Athletes dream of outstanding success. Years are devoted in preparation for one event at the Olympic Games. Most do not achieve the full height of their dreams.

All of us in one way or another have to face up to losses in the form of failed or unrealised hopes. The possibilities are endless, but the impacts are similar. Every loss registers with a degree of shock or alarm in us. What have I done wrong? What element did I miss? How can I change this outcome? Do I continue this way or must I quit and pursue a different course? Is this something to do with who I am? What is wrong with me? These questions can spiral downward into hopelessness and tragedy. But they also open the door to an open, honest look at self and new life. Facing loss and giving voice to grief or lament is almost always a moment of choice, a fork in our developmental road.

It is one thing to handle losses or setbacks in normal times. Living through a pandemic, or a world war, or a great depression brings with it a prolonged, heightened awareness of loss, and also a prolonged, heightened level of anxious alert. As weeks, and months and even years drag on, the impacts can be exhausting and debilitating.

While minimisation of Covid-19 cases, hospitalisations, and death are at the core of massive efforts throughout the globe, the losses are ever so much more extensive due to the protective actions taken. Restriction of travel brings loss of crucial connections and often increases isolation. On the other hand requirements to stay home may bring loss of freedoms that allow people to manage the stresses and demands of life. Vaccinations bring freedom, and then with a new variant they might not, and there is no knowledge yet of how soon we must be vaccinated again. Uncertainty and insecurity increase.

Our wonderful, modern society is not always helpful to us. It is wonderful when it provides information we desire such as accurate weather forecasts, or fitness data via a watch, or foods to meet special medical needs. But our wonderful, modern society is dreadful when it promises to give us what we desire in the form of guaranteed freedom from pain, freedom from risk via insurance, superannuation and government benefits.

We appear to be much more in tune with media

messaging than actual risk in our modern life. When medical leaders tell us accurately the risks of the life-saving vaccines we react hysterically and many refuse out of fear. When media tell us that all kinds of medicines, such as aspirin, or birth control pills, are beneficial we relax. When possibilities to travel are offered we are excited. We seem totally unaware that the risks of many medications, car travel and numerous other things in life are vastly greater than the risks of the vaccines. We seem happy to be convinced that some form of general anaesthesia, where pain is always dulled and only good feelings remain, is a better life than conscious awareness of and dealing with the full palette of life's colours, including risk and pain.

Life is risky. Every day we take many risks. I regularly see children making major judgments about when to cross the road between the vehicles. Mostly I silently congratulate the child on great observation and judgment for one so young. Occasionally I am alarmed. But it's the necessary learning process in growing up happening daily around us in plain sight.

Pain is mostly good because it is a signal to act. Pain and awareness of risk are crucial aspects of living if life is to be meaningful and fulfilling. Learning faith, trust and good judgment begins with the beginning of life itself. The painfulness of grief or loss is a signal to pause, reflect, review, and possibly change. If we face it, and unwrap it, we find one of life's great gifts.

## WHY GIVE VOICE TO GRIEF AND LOSS?

There is something softening about struggles or suffering being shared. We give up illusions and appearances of self-sufficiency and independence, and discover that all humanity share similar experiences. As grief, hurt, pain, losses or setbacks are shared we find peace in the shared strengths and frailties of humanity. We not only become more real but others emerge to share their journeys with us. AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) has long demonstrated the power of open, honest sharing of struggles as well as successes, together with disciplined restorative steps, also shared with others.

Recovery from grief and loss is enhanced by sharing being part of the process. In sharing we hear our own voice. We acknowledge and own what we have said. Partly it's about getting perspective on the world and perspective on self. Self-critiques can be merciless, especially when alone. It is very easy to conclude that the world doesn't care, or that the world will not accept someone with failures, and especially not someone who has chosen a bad path. The presence of one or more other persons, receiving the sharing without judgment or hollow platitudes, allows support and exploration to occur. We have opened ourselves to the blessings of community.

Unfortunately much of society ridicules failure and is quick to exploit weakness to its own advantage.

Times of loss are indeed times of vulnerability. They are also times of being open to the deeper truths of life. Times of loss are frequently thin places.

Wilderness images appear frequently in the Bible, describing times of extreme challenge where normal resources are not available, and people turn to God as the only remaining source of support. Wilderness places are thin places, where the veil between this world and the eternal world is thin, and the Sacred often feels closer. Community of Christ knows such places. Our reunion experiences are often thin places. Let us recognise that times of significant loss may also be thin places.

Community of Christ is called to be a safe community where persons can experience the love and peace of God, and explore the truths of their lives and of life itself. Can we rise to the challenge to be an open, non-judgmental community, willing and ready to be present and hear when someone needs to express their loss?

We aspire to be such. We sing *Draw the Circle Wide* (CCS 273) like we really mean it. I am especially touched by Shirley Erena Murray's hymn *For Everyone Born* (CCS 285). *For everyone born, a place at the table..for woman and man...for young and for old... for just and un-just...abuser, abused...with need to forgive...a new way to live...to live without fear, and simply to be, to work, to speak out, to witness and worship...for God will delight when we are creators of justice and joy.* This is a full vision of God's kingdom. I pray God will guide and empower us to bring portion of this vision to life.

*"Community of Christ," your name, given as a divine blessing, is your identity and calling....Do not be afraid to go where it beckons you to go. Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God's shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life.* (D&C 163:1-2)

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At Community of Christ, Ken held a full time position as a minister for 30 years. He served as an Apostle in the church in the Pacific Field and Great Lakes Field for 16 years and was a member of The First Presidency for 11 years.

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