

Grief

the price we pay for love

Anne Bonnefin interviews Wendy Ballard

Anne: In your roll as chaplain and minister in Community of Christ at The Green Cathedral I know you are called on frequently to minister to many who are encountering grief and loss. What do you try and remember to share with people who are going through these times?

Wendy: There are so many forms of grief. Right now there are people in grief over the loss of their jobs, or the loss of their mobility or the loss of their independence. There are so many ways people experience grief. Primarily I minister to people who have lost their loved ones but I was talking with someone on Sunday whose family is in Sydney, and even the teenagers are struggling with the loss of freedom, restrictions with their schooling and being able to be out with their friends. So there is even the loss of normality now. There are so many different forms of loss. And there is also anticipated grief for some people, particularly when they are watching their loved one die.

When I go to see people in grief, I try to remember that every loss is different. Some people have watched it come for a long time, some it's just come so suddenly, some it's come tragically. I always try and remember that I'm going there to hear their story however there are times that they either know my story or it does come up in conversation and I am aware that sometimes the fact that they see you there and that you are still getting up each day gives them hope that they will somehow get through it. Even as late as yesterday I visited with a lady at three in the afternoon, whose husband had died. She was still in her nightie and dressing gown. She said "I just could not get dressed today," and I said "That's totally ok."

So I know people all cope differently and I always try and remember to tell them, "Even though many books have been written how to do this, you actually have to figure this out for yourself and there is no right or wrong way." So the man who tells me I still sleep with her nightie under my pillow - am I going crazy? I say "No, no, no that's not crazy if that helps you. That's totally ok." And also people really need permission, not just in that raw time when a loss has just occurred because, in that time the loss is the focus of everything, but as

time goes on you know people still need to be able to talk about that loved one and share. So it's not like well that was the loss then and we are moving on now. We need to remember that they need to be able to talk about their loved one.

The one thing I often quote is "Grief is felt by people every single day somewhere, but sometimes it comes really close to home." So no-one escapes grief if you are in relationship with others. In a community the size of mine what I find is sometimes people are in the front row and others are behind and supporting them and at other times they are in the front row and others are supporting them. Sometimes you are the one needing the healing presence and at other times you are the one who is giving it to someone else. Sometimes people say to me "I don't want to see you anymore." Because they think they only see me at funerals. And I've thought - well living is part of our dying and dying is part of our living, so we are going to keep meeting like this. We can't have one without the other.

Anne: How do you feel when you are ministering to people that way? Do you feel it is an honour?

Wendy: I use the word privilege, because it is such a privilege to be in people's lives in that raw time and cry with them, listen to them, shake your head in disbelief with them, to hear and tell their loved one's stories. And when I say privilege, it is not a throw away word, I really deeply mean it. It is almost Sacred Space and its painful space sometimes, and at other times its beautiful space. I feel a real call to this type of ministry and I have for a long time.

Anne: So when you are ministering you really try and honour how they see life and what is important to them but you also offer your own perspective?

Wendy: If I am speaking with someone who doesn't have a faith or they question the existence of God, or ask why God lets bad things happen to not only their loved ones, but to the others. This gives me an opportunity to share my faith and belief, in the midst of the mystery that is God and I also tell them that "I know your loved one now knows the answers to what

lies beyond the mystery." I sometimes quote a line from the song, 'Lean on Me', with lyrics to say, 'Please swallow your pride, if I have faith you need to borrow.' Encouraging them to lean on me, or someone else, if they can't find the faith to believe in the promise of Eternal Life.

Anne: Often we find ourselves confronted by death - it can be a place we've never been before - and we all need to work this out for ourselves. Which brings me to ask about your own experience of grief and loss with the death of your son and how that has been for you?

Wendy: When I got that call at 1:00 in the morning to say Luke had died I rang the house, and the ambulance chaplain answered. I pleaded with him to tell me it wasn't true and he said "I'm sorry to tell you that it is true, but he said I need you to know that God is present and that your son rests in the arms of Jesus." What a gift that he said that to me in that moment. What a gift he came into the house that night and was able to minister to Luke's wife also. When I'm called to the hospital when someone is dying I always try and think of how he blessed me that night and I always send a quick prayer to God, 'Help me find the words.'

I think the thing I've had to learn is that we've all lost the same person but we all lost someone different in our lives. We lost a son, Eme lost her husband and life partner, Mel lost a brother and his mates lost the ring leader of their group. I remember Luke's wife said to me one day "I know he was your son but he was my future." and it really hit home to me that we all felt loss but it was different for all of us.

Anne: Do you feel this sometimes more than others?

Wendy: It is the anniversary of Luke's death next week on the 13th August. And I could never previously understand when people remembered someone on their birthday or anniversary of their death and yet I can feel it coming because I can feel the heaviness and it's because I/we re-live that night and morning and days afterwards and somehow I/we let that grief honour the love - because if it didn't hurt then it didn't matter.

Anne: How do you feel supported?

Wendy: Our choir recently sang for a palliative care service and I was there to give ministry with the choir. I didn't go there with my own grief in my head yet at some stage, it hit me, and when it did, I let the emotions come. When one of the choir sitting next to me saw my tears, she squeezed my hand ever so tightly - so I took the opportunity in the service to light a candle for my loved one. I felt a release and relief afterwards. I felt nurtured. We don't do this on our own - most of us, it is the company of others - sometimes I'm supporting them and sometimes they are supporting me.

My faith, our faith, has been our biggest strength. We are in this together. Luke is still a part of our life every day. We talk about him every day - but his spirit is here with us - and all around us. We didn't let him go - we take him with us into every tomorrow.

Anne: Has your experience made relationships even more special?

Wendy: Absolutely and it has made us aware not to regret not saying things and showing people how much we love them. We always think we have tomorrow to say things and sometimes we don't. Life seems to go in a blink of an eye really. I think the way that we talk about Luke gives people permission to talk about Luke. We love talking about him and love hearing people say "That wild child of yours." or "He was so funny." " He made a difference in my life" It's nice.

Anne: What helps you?

Wendy: What blesses me is helping someone else. I find comfort supporting other people.

I felt in the early days after Luke's death, that we were bathed in prayer. I knew there were so many people praying for us. I believe in prayer in the sense that it changes us. When you say to someone "I'm praying for you." it gives them strength so I think that and this big love that we have, a Love bigger than life, it goes beyond this life, if you know what I mean, so that love is still there.

Anne: How has this experience changed you?

Wendy: I think it has made me aware to be more compassionate for others. and to hang in there with others when they are going through stuff. You know - it's not just a moment in time - grief goes on. It's where I think I fall down some times, and I try really hard to hang in there with people or to still be in touch with people.

Anne: What does 'hang in there' look like?

Wendy: People just don't die and you get over it. It's next week, and its next month and its next year and here is me three years and here is you four years. It might have changed. I do say to people "The only way through grief, is to grieve." and it's not like you get through it. It's not like you get on the other side of it. It's just that you take that with you. I don't think that you get through grief, you live through it. It's all part of our journey. Having said that I can now talk about Luke and not become a blubbering mess. It's definitely made me more compassionate and more empathetic. More than anything, I've learnt that we don't always have tomorrow.

Anne: Many of us are blessed to have you in our life today Wendy.

Wendy: Oh I'm just me.

Anne: Well you are enough.

Wendy: Yes I am enough.

Wendy Ballard is a Congregational Support Minister for Community of Christ, Australia and Pastor at The Green Cathedral Ministries Congregation on the NSW Mid North Coast. She lives in Forster with her husband Barry and daughter Mel and is expectantly awaiting the birth of her first grandchild.