



Walking through death with a loved one can be incredibly isolating and unsettling. But we can experience God's very presence in life's dark and deep valleys. Beautifully honest and theologically rich, Whitney reveals the mysterious way that God ministers to and transforms us through death and suffering.

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O N E

On Learning in the Dry Land of Loss

It felt like the world had divided
into two different types of people,
those who had felt pain and
those who had yet to.¹

—MICHELLE ZAUNER, *CRYING IN H MART*

A journal entry six months after Mom died . . .

Friday, June 25, 2021

These tides of grief are so unwelcome. I wish I could find an island to wash up on for a while, to bask in the goodness of a warm sun just far enough from these waves. I have tasted

1. Michelle Zauner, *Crying in H Mart* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2021), 160.

it, sweet breaks from the pain, remembrances of joy. But the tide always comes for me again. It is always inconvenient.

This morning, it was swim lessons. Mom, you were the first one to plunge Cora's little baby face beneath the water now six years ago. I was terrified, but you insisted it would be fine. You taught swimming lessons as a teen; you wanted to teach her. And now she's finally getting it. She's plunging her whole head beneath the water to dive for plastic treasures, coming up for air and approval, wearing a beaming, toothless smile.

Momma, how you would celebrate her! How I ache for that over-the-top praise of yours, for Cora and Charlie and Ruby to hear it, to grow up with it seeping into their bones.

"Your grandma always knew you could do it," I say now, a sorry replacement for you. "She cheered for you louder and harder than anyone, do you know that? Do you remember that?" Lord, help them remember that.

I should write an article today. I should care for the baby today. I should put on makeup and stop crying, or stop crying and then put on makeup. I should do a thousand things, but all I want to do is crawl back into bed and ache. Maybe I'd fall asleep and see you in my dreams again, so real I hate to wake up. I hate remembering you're not here, Mom. I hate how that reality has gotten more real, more believable, over the past six months. I see your picture by my lamp when I wake up—the one of you holding newborn Cora, when you still had hair—and I remember why it's there, that you're not.

Yesterday, I thought I was okay. I remembered how hard it was, how much you were hurting, how tough our relationship was at times. I'm glad that part is over. But I still wish you were here for me—how selfish—and for Alli and for our kids. I wish you were a phone call or a FaceTime away. I wish I could believe that you're looking down and cheering from heaven. I think you're probably doing something better, consumed with the glory of doing what your soul was created to do. If you're cheering us at all, it's toward the true finish line, eyes fixed on the Author and Perfecter of our faith.

I know I can make it there without you here. But, boy, I wish I didn't have to.

The death of a parent is like losing the backdrop to your life halfway through the play. These people were the tangible reference points to where you came from and who you've become. They're your biggest earthly influences, for better or worse. To continue living motherless or fatherless in a world that's full of them feels, for a while, like walking around with your skin peeled off.

Yet, like sin itself, losing parents is common to man. If life goes as we have come to expect it in this broken world, in the order of time, each of us will bury our parents. We will have been prepared for this, or so we thought, by saying goodbye to pets when we were kids and to grandparents as we grew older. As the Mandalorian might say, "This is the way."²

2. In the television series, the heavy metal-clad Mandalorian and others in his order of service regularly say to one another, particularly about difficult things they must do: "This is the way." Jon Favreau, producer, *The Mandalorian* (2019-2023), Disney Plus.

But none of these losses is made easier by being commonplace. None of us is ever *ready* to witness the slow demise of a loved one or a sudden shocking departure. No—losing my mother’s presence on this earth has blown a chasm in me that will never be closed. I was not at all done being mothered at age thirty-three. I see now that I never will be.

But this is to say that death is something we will all face. Sometimes it springs on us. Sometimes it gives us years of warning and worrying. Too often, it comes out of order, taking a child from a father, a mother from a young family, a friend from college days.

It is an utter tragedy when children die, full stop. It is shocking when young adults in the prime of their lives are taken, when spouses and children are left behind too. And it is an odd sort of shock to lose parents in their fifties or sixties.

They were *almost* so many things: *almost* retired, *almost* on that vacation, *almost* or, in my case, *only briefly* a grandparent. They had a good many years; they should have had many more.

In my inner circle of friends, I am among the first to go through this losing of a parent, though I know I will not be the last. I had been walking with the possibility of Mom’s death for more than two decades by the time it came, but I still kept it at bay for as long as I could. When her death had come and gone, I emerged from the fog with a new perspective.

Weeks later, a friend was talking about her father who had treated her cruelly growing up, saying she didn’t care if he ended up in a nursing home when the time came. My entire body bristled in response, and tears filled my eyes. There is nothing inherently wrong with the ’round-the-clock help many families

require to care for loved ones, especially when their end stages stretch over many months or years. What made me ache was the indifference in her voice, which I know was a cover for so much pain.

“I know it will be hard,” I told her, “but if I’ve learned anything from walking through those final days with my mom, it’s that you don’t want to miss it if you have the chance.”

As believers in life after death, we have the opportunity to love even those who have not loved us well, to the very end. We can extend improbable grace because, “The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you [and your loved ones], not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

People change in unimaginable ways when death draws near, and we can be changed too through witnessing it. At least two of my grandparents were saved in their final days. People showed up to have the conversations and, by the work of God’s Spirit amid deadly diagnoses, they were ready to receive it.

I am convinced that walking with our parents through their deaths is one of the kindnesses God has woven into our reality, stained as it is by sin. Just as we tend to become aware of our parents’ fallibility before our own, we can rehearse our own mortality by being confronted first with theirs.

We don’t need to wonder if we are “called” to walk with our parents through the sunsets of their lives; 1 Timothy 5:3–4 notes that such care is a primary outworking of godliness and “is pleasing in the sight of God.” Rather, engaging in this process offers us a hands-on form of sanctification as we seek to serve at life’s end the

people who gave us life.³ That's not to say it is easy. The dying process does not cause the difficulties in our parental relationships to disappear. Rather, it tends to expose them. But what is brought into the light can, by God's grace, also be dealt with, endured, and forgiven. Maybe it can even begin to be healed.

This is also true of all opportunities to draw near to the dying. Yes, it may come at a cost. It will take time and emotional energy to sit in the ash heap with your coworker as her new cancer diagnosis sinks in. It may stir up fears about the safety of your own child to put yourself in the shoes of the one who recently lost hers, to weep alongside the Spirit that groans with us in prayer.

But there is richness to be reaped here. Whether you offer the ministry of presence or of dropping off presents on the front-door stoop—just don't stay away. The darkest corners that seem the farthest from God are the places He delights to be and to work. These are also the places He desires to send His workers, for, to tweak a phrase from Matthew 9:37, the harvest is plentiful, but the co-sufferers are few.

This rehearsal of hardship is also necessary preparation for each of us, one that many of us miss out on in an effort to avoid thinking about death at all. But fully facing our loved ones' mortality helps us live within our own limitations as humans. I trust it will also help each of us, one day, face our own walk across the waters with more courage, remembering the faces of those who have gone before.

3. "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (Matt. 25:40).

NUMBERED DAYS

Facing our loved ones' deaths sobers us about the brevity of our own lives. In Psalm 90, Moses writes from the perspective of watching an entire generation expire in the desert:

*The years of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away." (v. 10)*

In light of this, Moses—somewhat surprisingly—concludes that life is still very much worth living. He sees the boundary lines of birth and death, of sickness and frailty, as guardrails that keep us living for what truly matters in the years we have left. And he prays:

*So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom." (v. 12)*

This gift of perspective is tucked inside the deaths of those around us, inside the rhythms of one generation giving way to the next. But far too many of us—myself included—have spent more time worrying about and fearing it than we have spent listening to its lessons.

Theologian J. Todd Billings writes in *The End of the Christian Life* of how his own terminal illness helped shape in him a more robust theology of death. He concludes that modern Christians

have been shielded from the natural realities of death, in part by living in neighborhoods and worshiping in churches that are filled only with the young.

When we block out the groans of others, we find ourselves unprepared when the time comes for our own groaning. We lack language for grief as we stand near the graves of our loved ones. We wonder why we didn't live differently, why we didn't understand that life is indeed short. . . . But the path of Christian discipleship involves honest and regular reminders of both our mortal limits and those of our loved ones and neighbors. The path of Christian discipleship involves moving *toward* the wound of mortality, not *away from it*.⁴

In this way, facing our parents' mortality before our own is a gracious part of God's design. This is especially true if they are believers. Like Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, we can rehearse the reality of our parents' journey toward the Celestial City even as we traverse our own.⁵ We can look forward to—truly long for—the day when we will be reunited with them in glory. And we can live the days until then in light of this dawning reality.

To the end that thinking about death—that hearing another person's story of walking near it—might embolden you all the more to engage, I offer my somewhat ordinary experience. I know only my own, and I trust that, as writer Jacqueline Woodson says, "The more specific we are, the more universal something can become."

4. J. Todd Billings, *The End of the Christian Life: How Embracing Our Mortality Frees Us to Truly Live* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2020), 12.

5. We've been reading Helen L. Taylor's *Little Pilgrim's Progress: The Illustrated Edition* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2021) with our children.

“Life,” she adds, “is in the details.”⁶

So, a few details: On my mother’s side, my great-grandmother lived to be one hundred years old. My grandma died two weeks before her eighty-eighth birthday, and my mother died at age sixty-three—two years after burying her own mom. Though modern medicine would tell me that each generation can live longer and more healthfully than the one before, my family tree tells another story.

While it’s not prophecy, it is a story I want to heed. It’s one that chastens me from triumphalism and guards me from being fatalistic too. I don’t know the number of hairs on my head or days of my life, but God does. Knowing they are limited—though I know not their number—prompts me to pray, then, with the end of Psalm 90:

*Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.*

*Let your work be shown to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.*

*Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us,
and establish the work of our hands upon us;
yes, establish the work of our hands!” (vv. 15–17)*

6. Sona Charaipotra, “National Book Award Winner Jacqueline Woodson Talks Brown Girl Dreaming,” Parade.com, November 26, 2014, <https://parade.com/356078/sonacharaipotra/national-book-award-winner-jacqueline-woodson-talks-brown-girl-dreaming>.

A WORD ON THE REALITY OF DEATH

There's a reason we don't like talking about death. I am not going to pretend there is no fear as death draws near, whether it's our own or that of a loved one. We intuitively quake before it and rail against this last enemy.

Our minds cannot fully grasp what's beyond our present reality, let alone on the other side of death. When we lack coldhard facts in a world that demands them, fear flourishes. As for our hearts, death is a harsh reality for those it leaves behind. It threatens to break us asunder, to shake us to pieces, to make target practice out of our hearts, poking holes in the faith we thought was firm.⁷

But often, when we go to the Bible in the wake of death asking "Why?" its overarching storyline answers us with a different question: "Who?" Our grief and lament lead us, however painfully and slowly, to the Man of Sorrows Himself, a Savior so "acquainted with grief" that it defined Him (Isa. 53:3). He faced death when it took His friend Lazarus. He faced death as it took His own life. And He faces the fullness of it for us and with us.

Yes, Christ rose again, declaring (incredibly!) victory over death. But He still wept, *really wept*, at the tomb of Lazarus. He still cried, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" during His own death on the cross (Matt. 27:46). Even after resurrection, "He who broke the bonds of death kept his wounds," writes Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff in *Lament for a Son*.⁸

7. "I was at ease, but he hath broken me asunder: he hath also taken me by my neck, and shaken me to pieces, and set me up for his mark." (Job 16:12 KJV)

8. Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987), 92.

We too will be wounded when it comes to take those we love. We too will cry out. We will weep at the bedsides and gravesites of our beloved. We will tear up at the grocery store. We will cry at the playground and in the car. We will stumble on a memory and curl into a ball intermittently for months and years and lifetimes, even if we know that, one day, our Savior will wipe away every tear.⁹ There is no tidy theology that will keep those tears from falling.

But our suffering in death need not be deepened by surprise. Paul used the phrase “do not be surprised” in his letters to the first-century churches while addressing the concepts of fiery trials and the return of Christ. John also told his readers not to be surprised if the world hates them.¹⁰ They knew that being surprised by something that feels so theologically unsettling would only add to the weight of their sorrow.

Likewise, if we do not understand and have not tested the doctrines we claim—that God has pointed the arrows of His wrath not at us who deserve it but at His own Son to save us—then every trial can feel like a double trial, leaving us to wonder whether God is truly *for us* in the midst of it.¹¹ Death can leave us particularly vulnerable to this way of thinking, especially when it strikes sooner than our modern life expectancies predict. The grief that accompanies it hits each of us so uniquely that it can be disorienting and dangerously isolating.

9. Revelation 21:4.

10. See 1 Peter 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 5:4; and 1 John 3:13.

11. Rev. Kevin Twit, campus minister at Reformed University Fellowship at Belmont University, made this comment while introducing the song “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go” on *The Hymn Sing* album (Indelible Grace Music, 2010).

This is when it matters to believe in a Savior who not only conquered death, but also *experienced* it. “Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows” (Isa. 53:4a).

The promise in the valley of the shadow of death is not that we won’t walk through it—there is no avoiding it—but that God is *with us* when we do (Ps. 23:4a). We are perhaps too familiar with Psalm 23 for this truth to bowl us over, but it should. In the valley of the shadow of death, God’s with-ness both changes us and comforts us (v. 4b). And it lifts our eyes to the day when we will dwell in His presence forever (v. 6b).

If God’s presence is promised in this valley of death, shouldn’t that change our perspective of it as disciples of Christ? If God’s story is all about His desire to dwell with us—and about us receiving a desire to dwell with Him in return—that makes the place where His presence is promised the climax of the story. It’s not to be skipped over. It is to be soaked in.

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