



Grief Notes

Walking through loss

The first year after bereavement

Tony Horsfall



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*To all who grieve, in whatever way –
may you know God’s comfort
and find strength for every day.*

*And those who help others who grieve –
may you know God’s wisdom and compassion
as you accompany them.*

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Foreword

I first met Tony Horsfall when we were both students at London Bible College. We played on the college football and rugby teams together, and I was always impressed with Tony's friendliness and consistency. What you saw was what you got. He was a man of integrity and never afraid to express his opinion, and that straightforward approach made him many friends.

I graduated a year ahead of Tony and moved to Canada to marry my wife, Carolyn. Over the next 40-plus years, Tony and I didn't have regular contact, although I would hear about him and his ministry from fellow students.

God has a wonderful way of bringing people back into your life when the time is right. Tony and I reconnected, and he came to a seminar I was conducting not far from his home. The friendship was reignited, and it has been my privilege to 'draw near' and walk alongside Tony through the final days of dear Evelyn's illness and then through his grief journey after she died.

Tony has not changed much in the near 50 years since we were students together. What you see is still what you get. He is, maybe even more, a person of integrity and a man of God. I am very moved by the honesty, vulnerability and insight he brings to this book. But that's Tony Horsfall.

In this touching and inspiring book, he shares from his heart as a 'wounded healer', making his own wounds a gift for those who hurt. You will find that his words will validate the many emotions of grief,

which many people are afraid to express lest they be thought of as 'weak'. Believe me, it takes someone of strength and authenticity to say, 'I'm hurt, but I am healing.'

May everyone who reads this book find encouragement to know that God cares about us, even in our brokenness, and promises to 'draw near and walk alongside'. May you feel the presence of the Lord Jesus, the 'man of sorrows', who was 'acquainted with grief' and has promised to be 'with us'.

Thank you, Tony, for sharing from your heart and for allowing me the privilege of being a companion on your journey.

Dr Bill Webster, executive director, The Centre for the Grief Journey

Introduction

Grief did not begin for me on the day my wife Evelyn died. It started four years earlier in 2016, when we received the diagnosis that, after an absence of five years, breast cancer had returned and was ‘not curable, but containable’. Yes, treatment was available, but it would not take away the cancer, only delay the inevitable.

Of course, we believed that God could heal her. We received much prayer and sought opportunities to be prayed for, often with the anointing of oil. There were special experiences of God’s nearness, like when we prayed together in the church on Holy Island, and Evelyn – not given to emotional display – began to shake with the sense of God’s presence. But we remained realistic too. Perhaps the four years we had together after the diagnosis were a gift, the answer to our prayers. Maybe our prayers were only delaying the inevitable, but they gave us precious time.

The first round of treatment for Evelyn was horrendous. She not only experienced the usual loss of hair, sickness and fatigue, but frequent nose bleeds and the need for blood transfusions. A change to tablets was easier to deal with but made no impression on the cancer. Then she was given a third drug, again by infusion. More hair loss followed, as well as blackened fingernails and toenails, and this time painful lymphoedema in her left arm. How much she suffered, but always bravely and without self-pity or complaint.

All the while our world was becoming smaller – restricted and uncertain. It was hard to plan anything, and we grew increasingly limited in what we could do. It was like watching a row of dominos collapse, one

piece hitting another until none were left standing. Grief had already taken hold in me as I watched her suffer and her world shrink before my eyes.

For years our routine was to go out on Saturdays for coffee and shopping. We enjoyed various locations on a sort of rota basis, but our most frequent haunt was Meadowhall, a large shopping centre on the edge of Sheffield. Normally we would get there early, then go our separate ways for an hour or so, before meeting up for coffee and to read the newspaper. It was a happy, relaxing routine we both enjoyed.

Gradually, though, even this little tradition became harder to maintain. Evelyn could not walk as far, so we reduced our shopping time. Occasionally she would hire a mobile scooter from the shopping centre or take her tripod with wheels to help her walk. Eventually when that became too much, we were reduced to a quick half-hour visit for a coffee using a wheelchair, then back home. In the end we could no longer make trips like this at all. The domino effect was at work.

When the cancer spread into her spine at the start of 2020, we entered another stage of loss. Hope of a cure was now gone and being nursed at home soon became impossible, even though we tried. Evelyn's ability to care for herself was decreasing rapidly, and she was losing her independence. This increased as we went together into the local hospice, and then a care home. I had decided to accompany Evelyn, because visiting was not allowed during the pandemic, and the thought of being separated was too much to bear. Over the weeks she became immobile, needed a hoist to get in and out of bed and lost control of her bodily functions. Watching all this was hard, and tears flowed freely. My grief journey was well underway.

Evelyn eventually died on 13 July 2020. I use the word 'died' deliberately, for that is the hard reality, and it cannot be softened by saying she 'passed away' or, even more inanely, 'she passed'. Nor do I like to say I 'lost' her, because I didn't lose her. No, she died, but not in a way that meant it was the end. She died with the confident expectation of

life in heaven, of entering into the presence of the God she had loved and served all her life. That strong belief tempers my sense of loss. She is most definitely in a better place, free of suffering and pain, at home with her Lord.

It is we who are left to grieve her death who may have some hard days ahead of us. It is uncharted territory, and we do not know what challenges we may face. We do know, though, that God will not leave us nor forsake us, but will accompany us every step of the way on the journey of grief. I will not walk this road alone, and I invite you to walk with me in the hope that my experience will be an encouragement to you should you ever walk this path yourself.

Perhaps at this point I should explain that what I have written is based on the notes I kept and the postings I made online during the first year of my bereavement. To this I have added insights I gained from scripture along the way, and from my readings around the subject of grief. I have been greatly helped on my journey by regular conversations with two good friends – Bill Webster, a hugely experienced grief counsellor based in Canada, and Debbie Hawker, a psychologist and member care specialist here in England. Bill has kindly given me permission to quote freely from, and paraphrase, his written materials, for which I am profoundly grateful.

This first year of my bereavement – July 2020 to July 2021 – took place during the coronavirus pandemic in the UK. It was thus lived out under heavy restrictions and months of harsh lockdown, which of course had a major impact on the shape of my grief journey, as it did for thousands of others. Everything was intensified and nothing was normal. The usual support systems were no longer there. But by the grace of God, and with the help of many amazing friends, I managed to come through, although sometimes it was touch and go.

It is my prayer that this combination of real-time personal experience, the wisdom of scripture and the insights of grief counselling will be a help to others who are called to walk this path that no one chooses to

take. Writing *Grief Notes* has certainly been a helpful form of therapy for me, and I trust it will strengthen you also. I am not a grief expert, and everyone's grief is expressed differently, so your path will not be the same as mine. Do not compare yourself to me. Yet there may be similarities, and there may be insights that will help you. Sometimes it is helpful simply to know that others have walked this way before.

JULY 2020

Responding



13 July

Evelyn passed away peacefully in the early hours of this morning. I had prayed with her last night before I left Cherry Trees, the care home where she was being nursed. Although at that stage she was not able to communicate much, at the end of my prayer she blurted out, 'Thank you, Jesus, you led me all the way.' These were the last words she spoke, and they gave me great assurance that she was ready to go home to be with Jesus. The home called me just after 2.00 am, but when I got there, she was gone. It was hard to see her lying there, lifeless, her skin cold and the colour of bone china. Even though expected, her death was still a shock. I packed her things and tidied her room as I waited for the undertaker to arrive. I spoke to my son Alistair in Australia, as I knew he would be awake. Then, with great dignity, she was taken away, and I was alone. I will never see her again on this earth.

A time for everything

You may be familiar with the great passage in Ecclesiastes 3:1-11 with its 14 statements about life, realities that are as true now as when they

were when first written centuries before Christ was born. It begins like this: ‘There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens’ (v. 1). Then comes the first punchline, describing the most universal of life experience, and it hits you hard in the stomach – ‘a time to be born and a time to die’ (v. 2). In a culture that likes to pretend that death is not real and can be avoided, we are pierced by the raw reality that there will come a moment in time when death touches every one of us.

Death is inevitable. There is a time to be born. There is a time to die. No one lives forever, and sooner or later we will become familiar with the reality that we – and those we love – are frail, finite creatures with a limited timespan on planet earth. We can celebrate births and birthdays with joy and gladness, but inevitably we shall also mourn the death of loved ones and grieve their passing with tears of sadness.

Grieving is painful, for as we read here there is also a time to weep (v. 4). Of course, we would prefer life to be all sunshine, every day filled with fun and laughter, but the shadow of death is never far away, especially as we get older. Grief is the price we pay for loving, and our tears reflect the pain we feel when we lose someone dear to us.

Grief is not permanent, however. We may never completely get over it, but we do come through it. There is ‘a time to mourn and a time to dance’ (v. 4). It may seem impossible when we are in the midst of grief to think that we could ever be happy again, but we will be. Slowly, with the passing of time and the brave work that grieving well requires of us, we will emerge into the brightness of a new day. Joy will return. That has to be our hope, for without such a prospect we may well stay submerged in the darkness of loss forever.

This truth gives us belief that we can find a way through our grief and come out the other side to live again. Yes, even to dance once more!



Understanding grief

According to Bill Webster, grief is ‘the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship we have lost.’¹

Within that cluster of emotions, we may find shock, numbness, confusion, lack of concentration, anxiety, panic, anger, guilt, fatigue, sadness and yearning. No two individuals experience grief in the same way. We all have our own unique cluster because we are all different people, and our relationships are different. Each person’s response is different because of the many factors that make up the background to the loss.

In considering our loss we must ask about the relationship, ‘What did this person give to me? What did the relationship mean to me? How will my life be different without them? What have I lost?’ The death of someone we care about hurts very much. It affects us emotionally, physically, mentally and spiritually. The loss of a spouse is one of the most difficult experiences we ever face.

15 July

Today has been busy making practical arrangements. It helps to have something concrete to do, although in this time of pandemic, nothing is straightforward. The new government scheme ‘Tell Us Once’ is really helpful as the information about a death is passed on to those who need to know. There have been lots of phone calls to make as well, informing other people. They have already been to remove the hospital bed we had at home when we looked after her here, and also the wheelchair with which we made many visits to the hospital.

¹ Bill Webster, *When Someone You Care About Dies* (Centre for the Grief Journey, 2015), p. 4.

17 July

Friends called round to see me today; we can meet outside if socially distanced. It was Alan's birthday. How strange to sign his card with just my name. That's a first, and a gentle reminder that things are different.

If you ask me how I feel right now, I will say two words – relief and release. Relief that Evelyn is suffering no more; release that the responsibility of caring for her has been lifted from me. Those are not comfortable emotions, but that honestly is how it feels right now.

18 July

I phoned some of Evelyn's friends from her nursing days in Scotland, and they appreciated hearing from me. I cried as they told me stories of her life before I knew her. Who would have thought that she failed her nursing exams the first time because of too much socialising? She never told me that!

21 July

As Evelyn's health deteriorated, Jenny used to help us once a week with housework, but for family reasons had to stop. Now things are sorted at home she can come again and is delighted to help me. Today is her first day back. I am so relieved and see this as a provision of God. It will help me such a lot as I start rebuilding my life. These small things really matter. Evelyn and I had clear responsibilities when it came to the home. I did the finances, cut the grass, tried my hand at odd jobs (usually without success), but housekeeping was her domain. Cooking, washing, cleaning, gardening – these responsibilities she revelled in, and did well. What will I do without her? There is so much that I don't know, so many things that bewilder me. It feels like a mountain to climb. One step at a time then.

22 July

In my spare moments I have been trawling through our photo albums to select some suitable pictures to use in my tribute to Evelyn which I will share at a Zoom thanksgiving on Saturday. Needless to say, the tears have flowed freely as I have been reminded of her as a girl and teenager, then wife and mother. What a smile! No wonder I fell in love with her, and as I see her again in the years of our courtship and early marriage I am smitten once more. I remember at the time being challenged by some words supposedly from the great missionary Hudson Taylor: 'God gives his best to those who leave the choice to him.' He certainly gave me the best when he gave me Evelyn. We fitted together so well, like a hand in a glove.

25 July

This afternoon we held a thanksgiving service for Evelyn's life via Zoom, which meant that people all over the world could tune in. We had some serious technical difficulties to begin with, but got there in the end, and it was so comforting to hear different people from various stages of our life share their appreciation for Ev (as I call her). There are so many unusual aspects of grieving during a pandemic, so being able to experience this has been a bonus. Under normal circumstances we might not have thought of this way of connecting with friends in far-off places like Malaysia, where we lived for many years early in our marriage.

27 July

Tomorrow is the funeral, and I'm nervous about it. How will I feel when I see the coffin? What will my response be when it is lowered into the ground and covered with soil? These are unusual times for mourning. It will be in the open air at the graveside, so we are not limited for numbers, but there will be no singing, no hugging and no get-together afterwards. Will people come, given the fear of

contracting the virus? It seems strange that the grave is less than 200 yards from where we lived in Brierley for most of our married life. And in the same cemetery are the graves of my parents and my sister and her husband.

28 July

A wet and blustery day, but dry enough for the funeral at 1.00 pm. About 70 gathered, and it was a great service, ably led by our pastor, Ashley Guest. He knew Evelyn well and gave a moving tribute. Again, it was good to see people whom we had known over the years, including some of her work colleagues. I felt surprisingly calm throughout, perhaps even a bit numb, almost like a bystander. I so wanted to hug people, and to be hugged in return! A few family members came back to the house afterwards, but that was all. I wondered how I would feel when everyone had left and I was left alone, but I was fine. I know for some this moment is very difficult, but I got through it alright.

I am not at all superstitious, but during the service a white feather floated down from the sky, hovered around and, despite the blustery conditions, found its way right into the grave. Our daughter Debbie noticed it too. I don't know if it means anything, but it seemed unusual.

30 July

Having been together for 46 years, it seems so strange to be without Ev. I am happy enough in the house without her, having already had a month here by myself when I was recovering from the coronavirus. Seeing each day the chair where she normally sat has not phased me either, but deep inside I feel like something is missing. It is as if I have lost an arm and a leg. Part of me is gone; it is so strange. Last night I tiptoed to the toilet for fear of waking her. Today it seems like she is still in the care home and will come home soon. None of it is rational, but it is how it feels.

31 July

It has to be done. Evelyn's possessions have to be sorted out. The first stage has been alright, getting rid of old shoes and clothes she didn't wear. I've tidied up the bedroom she was using during her illness and got rid of a lot of papers that are not important. I've also returned surplus medicines to the chemist. But I will leave it there for now and leave the rest for another day. It is too painful to continue.

To die is gain

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-24

The apostle Paul felt squeezed between life and death. On the one hand he might be put to death for his faith, which would mean entrance into the presence of Christ. He saw this as a glorious prospect. On the other hand, there was still work for him to do and he felt the responsibility to finish the task before him. This dilemma leads him to say, 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain' (v. 21).

This scripture brought amazing comfort to both Evelyn and I as we contemplated her death. Since being a young girl growing up in Inverness, in the highlands of Scotland, her life was given to Christ. She dreamed of becoming a missionary nurse and prepared herself for that calling by training well. As it happened, she didn't do the nursing part overseas, but she did become a missionary; after we met at London Bible College, we served together in Malaysia, on the island of Borneo. There, for eight exciting years, we helped the emerging churches, packed with young people, to become established. Then,

when we returned home in 1983, she partnered with me in pastoring a church in West Yorkshire. Later, she would return to nursing, eventually working with elderly mentally ill patients. Her greatest achievement was to help in the opening of a purpose-built Christian nursing home and to be the first matron. As a wife and mother, friend and colleague, she reflected the likeness of Christ and sought to serve him according to her gifts.

Now the second part of Paul's statement is true. She is in heaven with her Saviour, free of suffering and pain, and rejoicing in the glory that surrounds her. We miss her, but how could we deny her such a blessing? Knowing this certainly softens the blow of separation and moderates the pain of our loss.

Death is not the end, but a new beginning. For those with faith in Christ it brings the promise of heaven and ultimate healing. This is the lens through which we understand her dying, and this certainty can be yours as well.



Grief and mourning

Grief and mourning are common terms to describe feelings and behaviours following a loss. Although sometimes used interchangeably, grief and mourning represent different parts of loss. While grief describes the thoughts and feelings experienced following a loss, mourning covers the outward expressions or signs of grieving. Grief is internal; mourning is external.

Grief includes an acute phase, which happens shortly after a loss is experienced. Symptoms of acute grief can include sadness, heartache, confusion, longing to be with the deceased, intense thoughts and memories of the person, anxiety, guilt and anger. These feelings

and thoughts are a normal reaction to losing someone. Often there will be a difference in how men and women express their grief, with women tending to be more expressive of emotion than men, who may deem crying to be a sign of weakness. National characteristics also play a part. British people, for example, like to keep a stiff upper lip and maintain their dignity. Other cultures are the exact opposite and may encourage weeping and wailing as a normal expression of grief.

While grief refers to the internal experiences of loss, mourning is best defined as acts or outward expressions of grief. Some common examples of mourning can include things like funeral customs, associated rituals, appropriate dress code, the way emotions are expressed, sharing memories or stories about a loved one, the length of time given to mourning and so on. These aspects of the mourning process are also hugely impacted by cultural norms and values, which themselves give structure to the grieving process.

Grief can mean different things for different people and there is no right or wrong way to grieve. Over time, grief typically decreases and may become more of a background feeling rather than a dominant, continual one.



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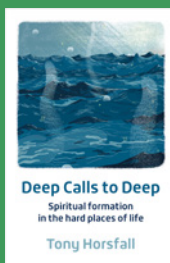
In **Grief Notes** Tony Horsfall charts the first year of his grief journey since the death of his wife from cancer. Month by month he tells the unfolding story of walking with and through loss, weaving this together with biblical teaching on grief and insights gained from grief counselling. With a poignant mix of honesty and humour, Tony shares the challenges of rebuilding his life and reflects on how he has seen God meet his needs as he wrestled with grieving in a time of lockdown and pandemic.

'If you too are grieving a loss, you will appreciate Tony's great honesty, vulnerability and warm humour. Read of gold nuggets found in dark places and how Tony's faith sustained him. To those supporting the bereaved, and grievers everywhere, this is a valuable read, and I highly recommend it.'

Ruth McAllen, founder of teardroptogrief.co.uk



Tony Horsfall is an author and a retreat leader with a lifetime's experience in mentoring others, including church leaders and missionaries, both in Britain and overseas. His book *Deep Calls to Deep* was reissued in 2021 because of its emphasis on lament and its relevance post-pandemic. *Grief Notes* describes the author's own experience of crying out to God from the depths.



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