



THE BEFRIENDER

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When Do Grieving Parents Reach Closure?

by Rev. Al Miles

“When do grieving parents reach closure?” asked the pastor of a recent conference I led on the topic of caring for mothers and fathers who experience the death of a child. There were about 100 clergy, church educators, and laity in the audience from a variety of Christian denominations. The minister understood the long-term aspects of grief that this type of loss engenders, she said, but she still desired to know when closure is actually achieved.

It’s a question I’ve been asked countless times by both laity and professionals from various fields: when do grieving parents reach closure? Almost every time I respond with a question of my own: What does closure mean in this context? The reason for my follow-up query is because many well-intentioned people erroneously equate the concept of closure with the idea that, at some point in time, mothers and father grieving the death of a daughter or son will (or should) forget all their pain and sorrow and move on with their lives.

This is certainly the message hundreds of grieving parents say they’ve received from people following the death of a son or daughter. Devastated by their loss, many parents speak of an added burden: that of receiving unsolicited (and unhelpful) advice from well-meaning family members, friends, professionals, and strangers. Let’s consider three such stories from the 19 years in which bereaved parents have been teaching me how to better care for them after they’ve suffered the death of a child.

“Everyone kept telling me I needed to bring closure to the grief I was feeling over Barbara’s death,” recalled Stan, looking back a decade to the year following the murder of his 21-year-old daughter by an ex-boyfriend. The devastated father tried to give people the benefit of the doubt. “I understood how the death of a young person, especially due to violence, would make most people very uncomfortable,” Stan acknowledged. “But suggesting that I should somehow finish my grief seemed very callous.

The pressure Stan received from others to bring a swift completion to his grief, he says, began almost immediately. At Barbara’s funeral service, which occurred five days after she was murdered, the hurting father recalled being approached by a couple named Bill and Joyce, who were also his long-time neighbors. “They were always more than willing to help others in need,” Stan pointed out. But as the grief-stricken father stood near his daughter’s casket moments before the start of the service, Joyce and Bill walked up to him and suggested that he should quickly get on with his life. “I couldn’t believe my ears!” raged Stan. “Here I was at my daughter’s funeral, and I had these long-term neighbors offering me nothing but empty dribbles: ‘You had Barbara for more than two decades,’ Bill and Joyce proclaimed. ‘Now it’s time to let God have her. Seek closure to your grief as soon as possible.’ I know they meant well, but their advice added to the pain I was suffering.”

Kay, a 30-year-old woman whose son, Kyle, died at birth, explained why she felt imprisoned by the way well-meaning family members and friends used the term closure. She especially had vivid memories of the visit she received while still in the hospital from her best friend, Mary Beth.

“The doctor had just told me of Kyle’s death,” Kay remembered. “And one of the nurses on duty asked if I’d like Mary Beth, who was in the waiting room, to visit. We’d been friends for 25 years and had always been very sensitive to each other’s needs. So I readily agreed to have Mary Beth come into my room.”

However, instead of receiving the compassionate and sensitive support she was used to getting from her best friend, Kay says Mary Beth offered her a series of trite phrases. Each statement, the grief-stricken mother said, seemed to be designed to highlight the importance of Kay bringing a quick closure to her loss.

“Before Mary Beth had even given me a hug, or offered any words of condolence, she began instructing me about how vital it was to work toward closure,” Kay lamented. “There I was in this cold and dark hospital room, feeling as though my heart had just been ripped to shreds by the news that my only child had died, and my best friend kept spitting out empty and insensitive statements. ‘The faster you bring closure to this tragedy,’ Mary Beth stated, ‘the sooner you’ll heal.’ ‘Remember, as a Christian, we should not grieve as one who has no hope.’ ‘God will never give us more than we can handle.’ I didn’t find her advice helpful in the least.”

Equally troublesome, Kay revealed was the response she received from her siblings. Kay’s brother told her closure would help take her mind off, what he called “the road of misery caused by excessive grief.” He went on to say that grieving too long could lead to a psychological breakdown. And Kay’s sister warned her that if she didn’t seek immediate closure to the grief she was feeling, then people would perceive her as being “selfish.” Kyle was now in a much better place, the sister declared. So Kay needed to “let go.”

“My siblings are loving people,” Kay insisted. “But they didn’t have a clue as to how to care for me after Kyle died. So, like Mary Beth, they offered empty and meaningless statements in an effort to comfort me. They meant well, but, in reality, I wish they would have just sat silently and allowed me to cry, curse, ramble, scream and do whatever else I felt I needed to do.”

Suggesting to fathers and mothers that they bring closure to the grief they feel following the death of a child can be especially detrimental as this grief continues over time. The belief held by many friends, family members, and professionals – that long-term grief is some kind of indicator that the parents are mourning abnormally – has brought added consternation upon these hurting individuals. In reality, it is both normal and healthy for parents to grieve the death of a child – forever.

Misconceptions about long-term grief continue to persist. Larry, a 64-year-old healthcare professional, knows this all too well. In 1980 his 22-year-old son, Paul, died after living 15 months with cancer. The proud father is still overcome by his loss.

“Paul and I were like two peas in a pod,” Larry confessed with a smile. “My wife used to describe us as her ‘identical twins separated by 22 years!’ We did everything together: camping, fishing, sports, even Paul’s paper route. We discussed politics, religion, and the stock market. And we thoroughly enjoyed staying up all hours of the night watching Bob Hope movies. I love my son with all my heart – and I always will.”

People were very supportive the first couple of years following Paul’s death, Larry affirmed. But, as time has gone on, the hurting father says he’s felt pressure

from others to bring closure to his grief. One way the pressure has been revealed repeatedly, Larry explained, is in the way people equate the concept of closure with the idea that all the sorrow caused by Paul's death needs to somehow be forgotten.

"It's been a 20-year struggle," is how Larry describes the way he's had to endure the unsolicited advice of people who've suggested that he should have reached closure years ago. "What do these people mean by 'closure' anyway?" he wonders. "Do they really think there'll come a time when I'll forget my son's life or death? Do they actually believe one day I'll no longer feel the pain of my loss? I miss the great times Paul and I shared. And I think all the time about how he'd be now as a middle-aged man – his hopes, fears, joys, sorrows. I dream about being a grandpa to his children and great-grandpa to their kids."

Larry is emphatic in offering his views about the term closure. "I don't ever see a time when I'll stop loving, missing, or thinking about Paul," he concluded. "And why would I want to do that? If closure means forgetting my son, then I want nothing to do with this concept."

Because of our compassion, friends, family members, and professionals desire to provide effective and sensitive care to parents grieving the death of a child. We truly want to help. However, it's vital that we know what to say and do – and what not to say and do – as we reach out to these hurting individuals. We must be very aware of what is meant by the concepts we espouse.

One such concept needing our careful attention is the matter of encouraging parents to seek closure after they experience the death of a child. As caregivers, we must never equate this concept with the idea that someday bereaved fathers and mothers will complete their grief and forget all the pain caused by their loss. It is both healthy and normal for these parents to undergo various aspects of grief for the rest of their lives. ■

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The Reverend Al Miles serves as coordinator of hospital ministry for Pacific Health Ministry at The Queen's Medical Center in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is the author of Domestic Violence: What Every Pastor Needs to Know (Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000).

A Note From the Interim Director In Friendship

In a listening ministry of care, we offer spiritual gifts to those we befriend. They are the gifts of presence, prophecy and healing

I have heard a version of the following story from several BeFrienders:

A BeFriender visits a woman each week. The woman has health problems that keep her from attending church. Each week, she laments to her BeFriender about her isolation and how no one cares for her. "I thought I knew who my friends were, but this just goes to show you can never count on people," she grumbles week after week.

I have been thinking about our role as BeFrienders and BeFriender coordinators. In our mission statement, we say that BeFriender Ministry is "a listening ministry of care." Why is that important? Because, by practicing our listening ministry of care,

we offer three spiritual gifts that people need: presence, prophecy and healing.

Presence

Presence is perhaps the easiest gift of ministry to understand. If we want to bring a listening ministry to those we befriend, we must be present – physically, emotionally and spiritually. We make ourselves physically present to the befriended person on a regular basis by visiting or calling. From our training, we know that we must practice emptying our cups in order to be emotionally present. Our task, as we practice Level I Mutuality, is to be patient, unanxious and open.

When I was interning as a hospital chaplain, I realized I stopped listening to people very carefully once I had become familiar with their story. If I knew what their problem was, I didn't need to listen anymore, because I was ready to move on to fixing!

My supervisor suggested I could stay present longer and be more helpful if I worked at staying curious. In BeFriender Ministry, we teach that this is the listener's role in Level I Mutuality – understanding the speaker's story.

- I could use minimal encouragers: smiling, nodding and interjections such as “Wow!”
- I could ask open-ended questions: “What did you do then?” “How did you feel after that?”

I learned that by being curious, I became more present. By practicing these steps I became more open, interested and caring.

Prophecy

Prophecy might seem to be a strange gift of ministry for a BeFriender or a coordinator. We often think of prophets as people who predict the future. Actually, in the Jewish and Christian faiths, prophets tell the truth – about two things in particular:

- God's hope for our relationship with God, and
- God's hope for our relationships with each other.

The listener's role in Level II Mutuality is to offer feedback. When we practice Level II Mutuality, what we say may turn out to be prophetic. We are telling the truth, as we see it, about the befriended person's relationship with God and with others. In the opening story, what might the BeFriender offer the isolated woman? What truth might the BeFriender lift up about her relationships? The “I feel ____ when ____, because I ____” stem is a useful way to communicate the BeFriender's observations:

- “I feel sad when you complain each week that your friends have abandoned you, because I have felt lonely myself. I'm concerned about you, because I hear you say you are isolated. I am wondering if I could help you think of ways you could reconnect with your friends.”

Because genuine prophecy always calls us back to right relationships, it is one way for us to be spiritually present to the people we befriend.

Ironically, prophecy is discerned to be true only with the passage of time. That is one reason it is so helpful to offer Level II feedback with humility – “This is what I see; I wonder whether another approach might be useful” – rather than make arrogant diagnoses followed by sweeping prescriptions (“You are doing/or feeling the wrong thing, and you should do/feel this instead.”).

Healing

By offering the gifts of our presence and our prophecy together in the practice of

our ministry, we can participate with God in giving the ultimate gift of ministry – healing. We can contribute to healing by helping in the restoration of right relationships. We can help renew hope.

Presence, prophecy and healing are three powerful gifts of ministry. May we offer them boldly and humbly.

- Gail Dekker

Hear Our Prayer

“Hear Our Prayer” is an occasional feature of The BeFriender on prayer. You are invited to share your prayers (original or with attribution), devotions and thoughts on prayer.

I wonder if many of us who yearn for a deeper relationship with the divine periodically experience a sense of vulnerability in our prayer lives. When we risk sharing more deeply and honestly with one another, we may feel a twinge of vulnerability and almost instinctively pull back or shut down a little bit in order to feel less exposed. Perhaps unknowingly, we sometimes do the same with God.

Dictionaries define vulnerability as being open to being wounded or hurt and open to criticism, temptation, etc. (emphasis added). Believing, as we do, in a God who is a God of life, love and liberation, why would we ever feel vulnerable in prayer? Surely we know that God isn't going to hurt, tempt or criticize us.

Perhaps the vulnerability we sometimes feel in prayer is because an authentic and deepening relationship with The-One-Who-Is-With-Us-And-For-Us requires that we be ever more open with and to God. This growing openness requires that we share more of ourselves, including our brokenness – the fears, resentments and pettiness, etc., that reside within all of us – as well as our wholeness.

Another reason we may feel vulnerable in prayer is because our prayer relationship with God is radically and uncontrollably open-ended, while our relationships with friends, families, coworkers and strangers are much less so. Though occasionally we may be surprised by how someone responds to us, we know, for instance, that when we greet someone they will usually greet us in return. We also know that when we ask a question or share one of our experiences with another person, we are likely to get some type of recognizable response from them.

But in prayer, we are encountering both Ineffable Mystery and Ultimate Surprise. While believing that God responds to every prayer, recognizing how God responds is often beyond us. At times we may feel disappointed – and vulnerable – because our prayers seem to have fallen on deaf ears, as we are unable to recognize a positive change in the prayed-for person or situation; in fact, things may seem to have taken a turn for the worse. At other times we wonder if what looks like a truly surprising answer to prayer – whether it is a new job, a new relationship or restored health – was indeed a response to prayer (a God-incidence) or just a coincidence.

A sense of vulnerability may initially cause us to pull back from God. Pulling back, however, can actually be the impetus for walking deeper into the relationship in a one-step-backward-two-steps-forward manner. When stepping back we can pause and catch our spiritual breath and then step forward and once again reach out to our God, to Ultimate Vulnerability. We can share our vulnerable and open heart with God's

vulnerable and open heart and walk together on the open-ended journey of life.

Unlike some people who may indeed seek to hurt or tempt or criticize us when we are feeling vulnerable, God's desire is to heal, empower and encourage us. And so, like a host of biblical figures and countless people throughout the ages, we can continue to pray in spite of and through our feelings of vulnerability as we share more and more of ourselves with the Vulnerable One whose love and compassion for us knows no limits. ■

- Gary Egeberg

*Gary Egeberg is from Minnesota. He facilitates local and national workshops on prayer, spirituality and emotional health. He is the author of several recent books, including *The Pocket Guide to Prayer* (Augsburg Fortress Publishers; 1999) and *From Self-Care to Prayer: 31 Refreshing Spiritual Tips* (Twenty-Third Publications, 1999). Gary has also been a BeFriender Day presenter in St. Paul on the topic of emotions.*

A BeFriender's Story

The situation described in this article is fictionalized, drawn from a composite of real situations.

Being a BeFriender is not always easy. Ending a relationship can be particularly hard, especially if the relationship has been a challenging one from the onset. The following composite illustrates some of the difficult behaviors that can be encountered in setting boundaries and in ending a BeFriender relationship.

The Situation

"Kay" had requested a BeFriender because she was new to the community and having difficulty adjusting after a major geographic change. Kay, a single retiree in her early sixties, and her BeFriender had met three times in six months. In their first meeting, the BeFriender guided a discussion about expectations and left with the understanding that she would call Kay every other month to set up a time to meet together. At the end of six months, they would evaluate whether they needed to continue. The BeFriender also told Kay that if anything significant came up between their bi-monthly visits, that Kay could call her.

During the six months, Kay called the BeFriender more than 25 times. Usually, the BeFriender's answering machine picked up the call, and Kay would simply say, "This is Kay. Please call me." The BeFriender routinely returned the call within 48 hours, except for two times when she was out of town on family vacation trips and once when her two small children were ill. Each time the BeFriender called back, Kay would say she just needed to talk.

In their fourth meeting, the BeFriender expressed openness to continuing the relationship if it seemed to be mutually beneficial, and they talked about Kay's original goals and her progress toward them. Kay said she wanted to continue with the BeFriender but complained that the BeFriender had not been responsive enough in the past months.

The BeFriender told Kay she had tried to be responsive but that she felt that the frequent phone calls had not honored the boundaries they had set together. The

BeFriender let Kay know that she needed the boundaries to be respected if the relationship were to continue. Kay said she wanted to be able to call the BeFriender whenever she needed to or the relationship was worthless to her. After more discussion, Kay and the BeFriender were at an impasse about appropriate circumstances for Kay to initiate calls, so the BeFriender recommended that they end the relationship.

The rest of their conversation unfolded as follows.

The Rest of Conversation

After the BeFriender has suggested that they end the relationship ...

Kay1: You're blaming me! That's not very Christian, is it? You don't want to meet with me anymore because you've over-committed yourself, and you don't want to own up to it.

BeF1: You're hurt by what I said.

Kay2: You BeFrienders should just have a standard line that you use with everyone to end the relationship, don't you think? Wouldn't that be better than blaming? How am I supposed to feel when you blame me?

BeF2: It sounds like you wish I'd responded differently.

Kay3: You should say something like, "I'm sorry. My schedule has gotten too busy to meet with you anymore." Now that would be Christian, wouldn't it?

BeF3: You're very clear about what you wanted to hear from me.

Kay4: Yes! That's just common sense. Blaming me doesn't give me any closure. The right thing to do would be to make me feel good about ending the relationship. That would be more respectful.

BeF4: You feel that I haven't shown you respect?

Kay5: No! I tried to find out right from the start how this was going to work. You should have been more specific. If I couldn't ever call you, you should have told me that right away.

BeF5: You're really frustrated because we had different understandings about the boundaries.

Kay6: Yes, we understood them differently, because you never told me what they were! How can I know if you don't tell me?

BeF6: I'm sorry that I wasn't clear.

Kay7: How much training do you get to be a BeFriender? It must not have been enough! What kind of training was it? Don't you get any training in how to end the relationship in a respectful way?

BeF7: I got about 35 hours of training in things like listening skills. Yes, part of the training was about how to end a relationship.

Kay8: I never would have guessed that from the way you've treated me. Who trained you?

BeF8: Our pastoral minister is a BeFriender coordinator, and he trained us.

Kay9: Does that person decide who gets to be a BeFriender?

BeF9: We decide together – the BeFriender coordinator and the BeFriender.

Kay10: Well, they need to make better decisions. What are the criteria?

Women like you with young children shouldn't be allowed to be BeFrienders, should they? It seems like you're proof of that.

BeF10: People in all kinds of different life situations are BeFrienders.

Kay11: You're not hearing me! You should be paying attention to your responsibilities at home and not taking on this kind of responsibility if you can't keep your commitments! Right?

BeF11: You're not feeling heard.

Kay12: I'm getting too upset. I can't talk about this anymore. I think I'll call this coordinator person. [Kay abruptly leaves. The BeFriender does not try to stop her.]

Reflection

Use the following questions to put yourself in the shoes of the BeFriender and reflect on this conversation. After you have reflected on these questions for yourself, see the sidebar for "Thoughts from the National Office Staff."

If You Were the BeFriender ...

1. **Assumptive world.** What insights, if any, has this conversation provided into your own assumptive world? Did your assumptive world become an obstacle in the conversation? If so, how?
2. **Empty cup.** What filled your cup before the conversation began (based on the situation described)? During the conversation? How easy or difficult was it for you to empty your cup? Why?
3. **Mutuality.** At what points were you able to practice Level 1 Mutuality? Level 2 Mutuality? Where might you have responded differently? Where might a different level of Mutuality been appropriate?
4. **Awareness.** What did you notice about Kay's style of communicating? How did that affect your style of listening and communicating?
5. **Ministry reflection.** How does this BeFriender relationship help you understand your ministry? What question did it elicit for you to bring to your ministry reflection group?
6. **Faith reflection.** What new insights into your faith does this BeFriender relationship, and this conversation in particular, provide?
7. **Follow-up.** Will you follow up with Kay? If so, how?
8. **Self-care.** What do you need, if anything, as a result of this situation? ■

Thoughts from the National Office Staff

Barb Schwery and Barb Bottger are certified workshop leaders and consultants on staff with the national office of BeFriender Ministry. Each has served as a BeFriender coordinator in a parish setting. Here are their thoughts, from a coordinator's perspective, on the conversation between Kay and her BeFriender.

Barb Schwery

As a coordinator, I'd consider this to be a good opportunity for continuing education sessions on evaluation and closure for the group (without referring to the situation with Kay and her BeFriender, of course). In the sessions, I would highlight the following points, perhaps using role plays from the manual (VII.L5.10-12, in particular). I would cover the same points with the BeFriender in one-on-one supervision as they apply to the specifics of the relationship and meetings with Kay:

- Early and ongoing evaluation is helpful in a BeFriender relationship.
- The BeFriender indicated that she met with Kay three times in six months. Initially, weekly meetings can be helpful in building trust and understanding needs.
- Although the BeFriender usually returned calls within 48 hours, two days seems like a long time for someone to wait for a call from their BeFriender.
- Leaving the church's phone number rather than the BeFriender's own home phone number is an appropriate way to maintain good boundaries.
- Be wary of saying "You can call me anytime" or something similar. The person being befriended can easily take that offer literally.
- Level I is important, but there are situations where Level II is also appropriate – and this seems to be one of them. The BeFriender did a good job of paraphrasing, but it would have also been appropriate to offer Level II feedback ("I feel ... when ... because ...") about the events that had occurred with Kay.

Barb Bottger

As a coordinator, what would I do?

- Even if I was just learning about this situation, I'd invite the BeFriender into one-on-one supervision. I'd also make sure that clergy and staff who are part of the BeFriender leadership team are made aware of the situation.
- It sounds like the BeFriender attempted to set up boundaries, but the boundaries weren't clear to Kay. I'd want to ask the BeFriender how much clarity there was about boundaries like "call me if anything significant comes up."
- It would be appropriate for me to either meet one-on-one with Kay or for me to accompany the BeFriender on the next visit. The purpose would be to try to clear up misunderstandings and end the relationship amicably.
- The BeFriender seems to feel defensive because she finds Kay to be overpowering. This doesn't sound like a mutual relationship.
- I would ask the BeFriender to present this story in a ministry reflection meeting to allow BeFrienders to get in touch with their assumptive worlds around the issues that arose.
- I would think about offering continuing education to my BeFriender group on boundaries and self-care and on ending a BeFriender relationship.