

Love Stories in Grief by Jesse McElheran, MEd



'Love Stories in Grief' presented by Jesse at Pilgrims Hospice Sunflower Luncheon, September 2015.

I work with those in grief. I talk about life and death on a daily basis, and I can tell you one thing that I've learned working in this field: it is my absolute pleasure and honour to do this work because I get the great gift of spending my days listening to love stories - because grief stories are ultimately love stories.

Love stories come in all shapes and sizes. Some are filled with a fiery passion. Others love stories develop slowly, over time. Some love stories have ups and downs. Others are steady and stable. Love stories can be filled with anger or disappointment. They can also be filled with joy and happiness. Each love story is unique and each grief is also unique.

I want to share with you just a few of the loves stories in grief I have been privileged to hear.

- He called in to speak to someone about his grief and feels that he isn't managing all that well. He tells me about his wife dying two months ago. When I ask her name, I hear his voice wobble with emotion, "Emma, my beautiful Emma." They were married for 62 years. He told me how he knew he would marry her from the moment he saw her at the dance hall. He told me how he misses her voice the most in the morning. He shared with me his grief. He shared with me his love story.
- Her mom was an ER nurse and hardly home when she grew up. When she was home, she seemed more interesting in watching TV or spending time with her friends. She tells me how affection was rare and sometimes shown in surprising ways, like a new outfit or special toy. She tells me how things changed when her mom developed dementia. Her mom needed her now and constantly wanted to be close. She saw sides of her mom that she didn't know existed. She found a way to love her more fully and found moments of affection that healed some of her hurts from childhood. She shared with me her grief. She also shared with me the newfound love of her mother.
- He was the youngest of three boys. His oldest brother was killed in a car accident when he was 14. He was 18 now, and fighting with his mom and his remaining older brother. He was being reckless and putting himself at risk. He hated that they were telling what he could and could not do. He missed his brother but had no one to talk to. He learned to appreciate his mom and his brother's worrying, when it was reframed as coming from

a place of fear for possibly losing him as well. While he still struggled with being told what to do, he now saw that they did it because they loved him so much and wanted to keep him safe. He shared with me his grief. And he shared with me the love of his family.

While heartbreaking, these stories all demonstrate the power of love. The truth is that we grieve because we love. Our lives fundamentally change when we lose someone. We become new versions of ourselves. This process can be scary and unwelcomed but is part of life. And a part of life people are increasingly forced to do alone, and with little support.

My job is to listen to love stories. My job is to be present to those who find themselves in a new and unfamiliar territory, and often without the person who would have previously supported them with this change. By listening to these love stories, I can give those in grief the space and time to begin to figure out their world without their loved one in it.

I encourage you to face the fear many of us have about grief. Don't be afraid to say their loved one's name. They are already thinking it. Don't be afraid to call and check in. They are looking for someone to show that they care. Don't assume that because you don't see the tears that the grief work is complete.

My message is: don't be afraid of grief. To be afraid of grief is to be afraid of love. Love is one of our greatest gifts, one that should be cherished. So please support those you know who are grieving, and please support the work of Pilgrims Hospice, so we can support those in grief as well.