



Lost in Authenticity – Pastoring in a Pandemic

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Start with Grace

None of us has ever practiced ministry (or anything else) in a pandemic. And, none of us had much time to prepare for practicing ministry in a pandemic.

So, let's start with grace. Offer it all the time. To yourself. To your students. To your colleagues. To your quarantine mates. To those whom you love but aren't quarantined with. Again, to yourself. We will all forget things. We will likely forget what day it is. We will likely forget someone's milestone birthday, anniversary or grief date. We will send emails with a plethora of typos. We will likely have a sense of wanting to control something, *anything*, when it feels like we have lost control of everything. We will likely text the wrong person. We will likely feel tired a significant amount of the time.

Here's the gift of grace in all that: it's totally normal and appropriate. The technical term for pandemic brain is "allostatic load," defined as "the wear and tear on the body which accumulates as an individual is exposed to repeated or chronic stress." Our brains, hearts, and muscles can only handle so much information and stress at one time. Anyone who has survived trauma or is grieving can attest to how allostatic load changes us. We forget things we typically would not. We feel tired even when we get good sleep. We have pain in our bodies not caused by physical injury. This is all normal. It's also now the current normal for everyone.

In other situations of grief and trauma such as a natural disaster, car wrecks, or school shootings, there are those who bring reserves-chaplains, first responders, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Red Cross, counselors, etc. In a pandemic that's no longer the case. There is no one who is unaffected by this, which is both daunting and comforting. We are truly all in this together in a way society has never been before in our lifetimes.

Thus, we are back to grace. While assuming is typically a negative practice, in this case, I challenge us to take on assuming as a positive spiritual practice. Assume everyone is tired. Assume everyone is giving 100% of whatever percent they have that day. Assume we will all be misunderstood. Assume we will all need to apologize more often for misunderstandings. Assume the best of intentions. Assume we need to be reminded we are loved and missed in social distancing. Assume we are all grieving something and someone. Assume there is enough abundant grace to go around.

Grateful Lamentations

Another spiritual practice I've found especially helpful with students and colleagues is what I call Grateful Lamentations. We name what we are sad about or missing each day: roommates, graduation, trips, visiting significant others, family, eating dinner in restaurants, parents who are furloughed, independence. Then we name what we are grateful for: safe shelter in quarantine, technology to stay in touch, fun mail, recovery from Covid-19, pets, food delivery workers, healthcare workers, those making and donating masks, health insurance, employment, Some Good News, free Broadway shows and museum tours. This has been authentically powerful, as some days our losses feel small, and other days massive. And, it's important to remember it's never fruitful to compare grief and loss. We can be devastated for our seniors who are not celebrating the graduation of their dreams, while also mindful that hospitals are lacking PPE and the Covid-19 death toll could be tragically high. All

of this is true, and it is healthy to model holding multiple emotions for our students. As a society, we don't hold seemingly conflicting things well. Yet we are called to weep and rejoice together, and these days, often both happen within the same hour.

Creative Care

It is also important to remember that grief, traumas, and mental health issues having nothing to do with Covid-19 or quarantine will likely be exacerbated by it. The reality of hospitals having no visitor policies feels counterintuitive yet is imperative for public health and safety. However, it also means sick, scared people are also going to feel more isolated. So, we have opportunities for creative care practices utilizing technology (zoom fatigued as we may be) to be present with and for each other. For example, since it's not safe to take home cooked food, have dinner delivered from a local restaurant, or send gift cards for local restaurants. Since it's not safe to offer childcare for colleagues who need a break, offer to Facetime with their kids instead. Record video messages for folks to listen to when they feel up to it so as not to risk waking them by calling their hospital room. For those who struggle with mental health, trauma recovery, and chronic grief, this is a crucial time to encourage each other to take advantage of telehealth with providers and counselors, as fear, anxiety, and isolation often feel heavier in a pandemic. Even non traumatic grief may be more difficult right now, as we have more time to miss loved ones due to not being able to gather for holidays such as Easter and Mother's Day. Take good care and utilize all counseling and self-care options available for mind, heart, and soul-tending.

I've included various resources for you and your students, and hope you find some that are the right fit. In the meantime, wash your hands. Do what you've always been called to do. Nap when you need to nap. This is likely months and months before we have a more public sense of routine again. So courageously grieve your losses, practice mindful gratitude for the countless gifts in your life and encourage others to do the same. Trust that those entrusted to your care know you love them. Most of all, cling to the promises that God will never leave us alone and this pandemic will not last forever. For in life and in death and in Covid-19, we belong to God.

***Please note: "This was written in response to collective grief and trauma in the pandemic, not current civil unrest. The lack of naming grief and trauma from racism is reflective of calendar dates and specific writing prompt, not my commitment to discussing and dismantling the sins of white supremacy." Rev. Ashley-Anne Masters*

Suggested Resources:

Links:

[Allostatic Load](#)
[How the Expectation of Strength Harms Black Girls and Women](#)
[Anxiety & Depression Association of America](#)
[American Psychological Association](#)
[Trauma-Informed Care Resource Center](#)
[National Alliance on Mental Illness](#)
[Modern Loss](#)

Apps:

Calm
Headspace: Meditation & Sleep
Mindfulness
Insight Timer Meditation
Relax Meditation: Guided Mind
Bloom: CBT Therapy & Self-Care
Mindshift CBT-Anxiety Canada
Therapeer: Peer Support Groups
PTSD Test (PCL)

PTSD Coach
Moodpath: Depression & Anxiety
Youper-Feel your best
BetterHelp-Online Counseling
Talkspace Online Therapy
Meditation by Mindbliss
Our Bible

Podcasts:

[Unlocking Us](#)
[Terrible, Thanks for Asking](#)
[Grief Out Loud](#)
[The Mindfulness & Grief Podcast](#)
[Therapy for Black Girls](#)
[The Hilarious World of Depression](#)
[The Happiness Lab](#)
[The Mental Illness Happy Hour](#)

Books:

All Our Losses, All Our Grievs, Anderson and Mitchell
Anxiety: The Missing Stage of Grief by Claire Bidwell Smith
Braving the Wilderness by Brene Brown
Full Catastrophe Living by Jon Kabat-Zinn
The Body Keeps the Score by Bessel van der Kolk
Trauma Stewardship by Connie Burk & Laura van Dernoot Lipsky
Learning to Walk in the Dark by Barbara Brown Taylor
Posttraumatic Growth by Tedeschi, Park, Calhoun
Saying Goodbye by Ruth Burgess
Moments of our Nights and Days by Ruth Burgess
Sacred Rest by Sandra Dalton-Smith
Soothe Your Nerves: The Black Women's Guide to Understanding and Overcoming Anxiety, Panic, and Fear by Angela Neal-Barnett
The Boy Who Was Raised as a Dog by Bruce D. Perry
Supporting & Educating Traumatized Students by Eric Rossen
Teens Who Hurt by Kenneth V. Hardy & Tracey A. Laszloffy

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