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Paper 3: Grief Journal

My first recollections of experiencing grief began when I was just 4. In 1974, three deaths in my family were so devastating that the effects continue to reverberate within my family to this day. As a 4-year-old, my memories of that time were vague regarding the causes of death, but the depth of grief and emotion I witnessed within my family left a lasting impression. The funeral that probably had the most profound emotional impact on me that year was the death of my father's nephew Allen Malloy. The sounds of the women in my family screaming and crying and the men wailing in agony while a New Orleans style Brass Band played the slow dirge of "Precious Memories" at the final viewing has profoundly impacted my mind, and I have never forgotten it. The experience taught me that grief has a sound, and when you love someone, their passing hurts so profoundly that words are inadequate to describe that depth of emotion. Sometimes the only option one has left is to cry, scream or moan intensely. The last of the three deaths in my family that year was the most devastating in terms of its lasting effects since it happened right before Christmas. On Christmas Eve of 1974, my father received a phone call that would forever change his life. My uncle Melvin, his youngest brother, died tragically when he sustained injuries from being hit by an MTA train. Christmas in my house was never the same after that year. I envied my friends whose parents decorated their apartments, gathered for parties, and celebrated the season by giving gifts and enjoying the presence of family and friends. After age four, I never experienced the overwhelming joy, anticipation, and celebration that one would associate with Christmas.

Looking back at that time through the eyes of an adult, I remember my father carrying a deep sense of grief, loss, and detachment near the holidays. I received Christmas toys as a child, but it was never accompanied by the kind of joy and intentionality that I saw amongst my friend's families. Growing up, I never mentioned this very noticeable distinction to my parents. I knew instinctively it could be a subject that caused some discomfort, so I just avoided the question altogether. One day while riding in the car with my father, he offered me the explanation for the Non-Christmas Christmas I had experienced my

whole life. My father began his answer by offering me an apology. He explained that before 1974 Christmas was always a considerable time of celebration in our family. Somebody hung lights, trees were decorated, gifts were wrapped, and my family enjoyed the holidays together. Once the sudden death of my uncle happened, my father lost his holiday spirit, and since that time Christmas was always marked with an overwhelming sense of grief. Sensing a rare moment of transparency, I asked my father, "How did you feel when Uncle Melvin died?" My father replied, "I have a hole in my heart." Noticing that his feelings were set in the present tense, I clarified the question. "You mean you felt like your heart had a hole in it back then?" my father answered, "I feel like I have a hole in my heart right now; I've just learned to live with it."

I was confused by his answer since my father, in my eyes, was the strongest man I had ever known. He was John Wayne, the strong, silent type. I never saw him cry or publicly express grief. However, I watched in amazement as he preached the funerals of his brothers and sisters, close family friends, and church members that were with him from the inception of his pastoral ministry. Watching my father in those moments suggested that the most important thing for a leader to do in those moments of grief and loss is put their head down, keep their hands on the plow and keep pushing. Subsequently, my brothers and sisters and I also adopted that same kind of duty before grief behavior. When confronted with grief and loss, we continue to preach, serve, minister, and place the needs of the church and the people before our families and ourselves. Who will give a crying towel to the person that dries everybody's tears? Over time, my growth and spiritual development have led me to understand that we don't need to repeat past mistakes or mythologize our parents' actions that may have seemed noble in our underdeveloped minds but can now be identified as destructive behavior. Perhaps I'm more passionate than my dad, but I've learned to cry, weep, grieve, and say, "I love you." Over the years, I have experienced many seasons of grief and loss. Growing up in Brooklyn, N.Y., during the height of the crack cocaine era, I watched my community decimated by the ravages of drugs and violence and cried tears over the caskets of my friends that were closer to me than my biological brothers. Some of them even grew up in church with me, but eventually, the pull of the streets and the allure of fast money led them down a path from which there was no return. At one point in my life, these deaths happened so often that I developed a protective shield of hardness around my heart. As a teenager, I didn't realize it. Still, the coldness of heart that people often associate with urban youth is an attempt to shield themselves

from the random deaths of friends and the capricious violence we witness daily. You must be hard to survive and can't show weakness, or you can become a victim. After one has experienced so much grief, one begins to internalize the codes of the streets and embrace the modes of survival. The irony is that the streets and the church shared the same kinds of principles and unwritten rules, "be strong," "Don't cry," and "Keep it moving." This expressed grief is a sign of weakness and suggests an inability to be a strong leader.

April 7, 2020, at 4:11 P.M., one of the most influential men in my life closed his eyes on this side of glory. It was the day my father died, and the grief, pain, and loss I feel are still unimaginable. My father died during the height of the Covid 19 Corona Virus Pandemic, so the anguish of his loss was compounded by the fact that we weren't allowed to have a complete homegoing celebration in his honor. My family was allowed to sit and comfort one another, but his congregation and the community he served for 50 years were only allowed to have a parting glimpse of his remains and keep moving. As difficult as it was to process the crying, screaming, and wailing I saw and heard at my cousin's funeral in 1974, I wish we would have had the opportunity to grieve that way. Covid robbed us of that opportunity, and I think my family will carry that pain for the rest of our lives.

By 2023 I had succeeded my dad as lead pastor of our church, and the difficulties of navigating a church through the pandemic while also grieving the loss of its founder didn't leave me with much time to grieve. I read a quote by author James Baldwin: "Children will rarely do what we tell them to do, but inevitably they will always do what they see us do. This quote accurately describes my behavior from 2020-2023. I put my head down, put my shoulder on the plow, and kept pushing. Preaching, serving, and ministering became my escape from the grief I was feeling inside. When I signed on to pursue my Doctorate at Alliance University, I thought I was coming to get a degree and discovered that God brought me here to begin my process of healing. Dr. Ron Walborn, Martin Sanders, and Rob Reimer ministered to me in a way that has set me on a path toward healing and has given me effective tools to teach and share with the people I am blessed to lead. I'm not completely healed from the pain of losing my dad, but I can testify that by the grace of God, I'm better today than I was in 2020. When I asked my father how he felt when my uncle died, he said, "I feel like I have a hole in my heart." I sincerely believe that he held on to that hole as a badge of honor and a sacred space for the memory of his brother that no one would ever be able to fill. In his lecture on "Grieving the Seasons of our Lives," Dr. Ron Walborn, like my

father, acknowledged that grief often feels like a hole that can not be filled, but then he suggested that the hole is a space, an indication that God has more for us in the future. The best kind of vessel is an empty vessel yielded to God. As I move forward in my life and ministry, that space will always remind me that God is my source and will provide all my needs. My willingness to pour will never be outmatched by his ability to fill me up. Bread of heaven, feed me till I want no more. Amen.