

## My Key Points (and Jumping-off Points) from Kessler article --

- David Kessler wrote a book on grief with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, *On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief through the Five Stages of Loss*. His own book explores a sixth stage in the Kübler-Ross model of grief: the human need and desire to make *meaning* of grief experiences. He is a trauma expert with experience working in LA hospitals and the Red Cross, and his website is [www.grief.com](http://www.grief.com).
- We are feeling a number of different griefs, all at the same time. We are also *all* suffering these griefs, so the present moment of intersecting global crises is significantly different than the more common experience of grief as a somewhat isolated experience for some number of us. Whole congregations (*and* their leaders) are feeling a number of different griefs right now.
- Anticipatory grief: grief about losses that may be sustained, or definitely will be, in the future. Grief about an *unknown* future. "Our primitive mind knows something bad is happening, but you can't see it."
- *Acceptance* is "where the power lies." Our faith tradition doesn't call it "acceptance," but it offers a strikingly similar form of consolation: "Do not be afraid" is said repeatedly in the Bible to prophets, priests, kings, ordinary people, Jesus' mother, everyone. Jesus prepares his followers for his death and resurrection, and breathes on them the Holy Spirit: in all of this, nobody is rescued from loss (often enough, at least for the apostles, they aren't even saved from the violent loss of life), but their *relationship* with these losses is changed by the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Physical and mental symptoms of grief.
  - To overcome anticipatory grief, Kessler advises basic mindfulness methods for "coming into the present"
  - He also recommends basic cognitive reframes that usefully balance thinking, such as noticing a negative or distorted thought, and bringing a balancing reframe thought alongside it (don't try anxiously to delete or ignore negative thoughts: acknowledge them, even validate their wisdom or insight, but then bring a balancing perspective *alongside* them)
  - Let go of what you cannot control. Again, biblical perspectives may help us in our work with congregations. "Who is this, that even the wind and the seas obey him?" Well, he is certainly not *us*, at least in this respect! Only God has power over some of the things that worry and grieve us, and even God in Jesus does not always deal with them by eliminating or automatically defeating them.
- The worrying open-endedness of this grievous time. Again, for our congregations, we are built for this very thing: our baptismal identity prepares us for lifelong struggles against evil, division, violence, despair. Our faith assumes assaults by "the powers and principalities," including the powers of Sin and Death, throughout our baptismal journey together. The Israelites found their identity in a decades-long, multigenerational wilderness experience. The first followers of Jesus spent the rest of their lives making sense of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. Ours is a long-haul faith.
- Kessler advises dealing with feelings in turn, "in an orderly way," allowing each feeling to have its moment in your authentic and systematic self-treatment for grief. We find order

in our communal life together. Our practices together can help us name and experience our feelings, comfort one another, be there to listen and encourage one another, and finally make meaning of everything that is happening, with God's help...

- Final note from Bob Deits's work: your grief is the worst there is. Let go of the futile comparison game in which you punish yourself for "feeling this way when others are suffering more." Help the others in any way you can, while normalizing and working gracefully with your own grief. Yet again, our *shared* experience of grief as congregations can be helpful here. This isn't just my own personal grief about a personal loss unique to me. We are all in this together, and no matter how well acquainted some of us are with some of the things going on (for example, a person of color will not be surprised for the first time, or even the thousandth time, by what's going on now), each and every one of us is experiencing *valid* grief that is worth our loving attention.
- Renee Bolodis-Cox is an expert on mental health, specifically working with survivors of trauma. She is based in Redmond, Washington. In her assessments and work with trauma survivors, she focuses on four things: triggers, emotions, physical symptoms, and cognitive issues. She notes that two of the four are largely out of the person's immediate control (triggers and emotions), while the other two (physical and cognitive) are accessed more easily, and can be worked with directly. So she assesses how someone is doing on all four dimensions, and then focuses first on physical and cognitive methods (like those mentioned above) to help the person work through their trauma. For a whole system like a congregation, how can we focus on the physical and the cognitive, again beginning with the ideas mentioned above?

### **Breakout Discussion Questions/Prompts**

1. What are some of the losses your congregation has sustained?
2. How have members of your congregation expressed grief? (These are just your subjective observations and ideas - you don't have to have this exactly right.)
3. What are some questions you have about your own role as a congregational leader in all of this (your hopes, fears, wonderings)?
4. What might YOU need from your congregation?
5. What ultimate meaning are you beginning to make from all of this, in your work with your congregation? How is all of this related to your larger mission as a church?