

Crushed Hopes

Grieving the Losses

Jim, Esther, Jack, Debbie, and Jenny gathered for lunch following the morning worship service. These single adults are actively involved in the ministries of their church. Their lives are busy with demands from their employment. Jack's accounting office has shown steady growth since he opened it five years ago. Jim and Esther anticipate the beginning of another school year while Jenny prepared for additional training as an Intensive Care Unit Nurse.

After placing their orders, Jenny began to share some of the challenges she faced during the past week. Friends were celebrating some of life's milestones—one became a grandfather and another youngest child graduated high school. Jenny began to feel old!

Coping with these events might have been easier had not Jenny's house sustained substantial damage in the recent storms. She quickly learned that she needed to research procedures involved in the repairs if she was to make a wise decision and avoid unscrupulous contractors. She was also using many vacation hours to be present for inspections and repairs. She longed for someone with whom to share these responsibilities.

The others at the table were apprehensive as Jenny began to talk. They wondered if the restaurant was the appropriate place and if it was a "female thing" that would leave Jack and Jim feeling uncomfortable. These fears soon vanished as they began to identify with some of Jenny's feelings. Before long, it was difficult for one to complete a sentence before someone jumped into the conversation.

An outsider might look at the persons gathered around the table and see them as individuals with great jobs, filling leadership roles in the church, earning enough money to travel, living in great locations, and having fewer responsibilities since they are never-married adults. However, except for friends, they have no one with whom to share frustrations and challenges of work; no one to share the responsibilities for the chores around the house; and no one to help carry the financial obligations.

The group of friends, however, left this lunch feeling less isolated and knowing that others experienced similar challenges and feelings. Fortunately, they have found individuals who understood and valued the events (or lack of events) that come as the result of hopes and dreams that remain unrealized.

Crushed hopes and broken dreams are examples of disenfranchised grief—grief based in losses that are not typically recognized as grief-worthy events. For never-married adults, crushed hopes and broken dreams center around marriage. Yet, it is important to identify, name, acknowledge, and grieve each loss separately.

These losses include the hope of establishing family traditions, and a life-long spouse and a person with whom to experience emotional and sexual intimacy. Other losses include the challenges of living on one income, a sense of security that another person's presence provides when "things go bump in the night," and having someone to depend on when ill or during times of extended recovery. Much of North American culture recognizes marriage as the rite of passage into adulthood. For women who never experience this passage, they often feel as if they are considered as less than adult. Men often feel as if their sexual orientation is questioned.

First, never-married adults may need to identify the losses they have experienced. Individuals cannot grieve losses until they are identified. Few counselors or pastoral caregivers have the tools to assist in identifying these losses.

The second step in the grieving process is to acknowledge them as real losses. Since these losses are rarely discussed, it is easy to think that no one else has experienced similar losses. One woman suggested that if she talked about her crushed hopes and broken dreams, she often felt as if others thought of her as a "whiner." Acknowledging to yourself that you have lost hopes and dreams takes you another step in the grieving process.

Third, name the loss. It is easy to group the losses under the big umbrella of "marriage." Yet as stated above, the losses are many and diverse, reflecting many of the social and church expectations that everyone will form a traditional family. Naming the crushed hopes and broken dreams is a major step in grieving them. You cannot grieve a loss until it has a name.

The final step is to grieve the loss. Everyone experiences the loss of hopes and dreams. Yet we rarely talked about, let alone, grieve these losses. It is difficult to talk about crushed hopes and broken dreams—they are personal and differ from individual to individual. However, the grief they cause is as valid as grief experienced as the result of tangible losses such as death, divorce, illness, and unemployment.

As individuals grieve crushed hopes and broken dream, there are four goals. First is relief from expectations. For never-married adults these include the expectation that everyone will marry. Statistically it is impossible, making it necessary for many to live in the tension of continued hope for marriage and the realization that it may not happen.

The second goal is the recognition of feelings. Never-married adults need to know that others recognize their feelings as legitimate and valid. Loss hurts—no matter the cause or if others understand the loss. While not everyone can be sympathetic, each person can be empathic and willing to "companion" others as they work all the way through the difficult feelings grief creates.

Reforming hopes and dreams is the third goal of the grieving process. These hopes and dreams reflect life as a never-married person for this season, however long it lasts. Hopes

and dreams are important to life since they give shape and serve as motivators for continued action.

The final step is to revision future stories that include a season of singleness. This includes thinking and planning for retirement, and considering difficult questions regarding health issues and living arrangements. If never-married adults are to live life as effective and contented persons, visioning a future that is contented and happy is a vital ingredient.

Jenny found that as she began to risk sharing her feelings with other never-married adults that many of them experienced similar feelings. Suddenly, she felt better realizing that her feelings were normal. Eventually, she began talking with other friends, both single-again and married. What amazed Jenny was that all of them experienced crushed hopes and broken dreams. It wasn't that misery loved company so much as it was the realization that other individuals experienced crushed hopes and broken dreams. Interesting that loss-so dreaded and often intangible, served as the common ground among so many people.