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**Touchstones Project**

**Small Group Discussion Guide**

**Grief**

**Preparation:** (Read the *Touchstones Journal* on the theme and the questions below.)

**Business:** Deal with any housekeeping items (e.g., scheduling the next gathering).

**Opening Words:** “‘You’ll get over it….’ It’s the clichés that cause the trouble. To lose someone you love is to alter your life forever. You don’t get over it because ‘it’ is the person you loved. The pain stops, there are new people, but the gap never closes. This hole in my heart is in the shape of you and no one else can fit it.” *Jeanette Winterson*

**Chalice Lighting** (James Vila Blake), adapted.

(In unison) Love is the spirit of this church, and service is its law. This is our covenant: to dwell together in peace, to seek the truth in love, to serve human needs, and to help one another.

**Check-In:** How is it with your spirit? What do you need to leave behind to be fully present here and now? (2-3 sentences)

**Claim Time for Deeper Listening:** This comes at the end of the gathering, where you can be listened to uninterrupted for more time if needed. You are encouraged to claim time ranging between 3-5 minutes and to honor your time limit.

**Read the Wisdom Story**: Take turns reading the following wisdom story.

*The Mish-Mash Heart*

*from Love Connects Us, adapted*

At a multigenerational event at a Unitarian Universalist congregation, everyone was encouraged to create a heart. They were given some construction paper and some glue, and some markers to design their heart. Emily worked diligently to create the most perfect, beautiful heart she could. It even had glitter in the shape of diamonds all around the outside.

As she was helping to clean up, she noticed the heart of one woman who was around the same age as her grandmother sitting at a nearby table. It was a mish-mash mess of odd colors and had pieces that were ripped and torn glued haphazardly upon it. Parts were wrinkled and crinkled, and there was even a little hole in it!

Thinking there was something wrong, Emily offered to help the woman fix her heart. But the woman merely smiled and explained that there was nothing wrong with her heart; it merely revealed all the things which had happened to her in her life. She said there were happy times here: the beautiful colors and designs represented when she first met her husband, their wedding, and the birth of each of their three children. There were other beautiful parts, too, which stood for watching her children taking their first steps on their own, riding a bike for the first time, and graduating from college.

“But what about all the rips and tears and wrinkles?” Emily asked. “Why are they there?”

These were for the sad times in her life, the woman explained. The time her best friend was stricken with measles, the time someone lied or did something to hurt her feelings, the hole that was left when her husband died, and the grief that overwhelmed her. “In fact, every time a person comes into my life that I care about,” she explained, “they take a piece of my heart with them.”

This distressed Emily, thinking of the woman having to give part of her heart away to others. “But what happens if you give it all away?” she asked. “You’ll be left with nothing.”

“No, I won’t,” the woman responded with a smile. “Because you see, they give me a piece of theirs as well.”

Emily looked down at her beautiful, perfect heart with the glitter and the designs she had worked so hard to make. Then she looked again at the woman’s mish-mashed heart with the jagged colors, rips, and wrinkles. Without hesitation, Emily ripped a piece off of her perfect heart and handed it to the woman.

“Thank you,” the woman said as she placed it with her mish-mash heart and tore off a piece to hand to Emily. And then Emily glued the new piece onto her heart. She thought that now her heart looked even more beautiful.

Source: <https://www.uua.org/re/tapestry/children/loveconnects/session3/161723.shtml>

**Readings from the Common Bowl:** Group

Members read selections from Readings from the Common Bowl as follows. Leave a few moments of silence after each to invite reflection on the meaning of the words.

“What I need is the dandelion in the spring. The bright yellow that means rebirth instead of destruction. The promise that life can go on, no matter how bad our losses. That it can be good again.” Suzanne Collin

“Absence is a house so vast that inside you will pass through its walls and hang pictures on the air.” Pablo Neruda

“Grief lasts longer than sympathy, which is one of the tragedies of the grieving.” Elizabeth McCracken

“Grief does not change you…. It reveals you.” John Green

“We must know the pain of loss; because if we never knew it, we would have no compassion for others, and we would become monsters of …self-interest. The terrible pain of loss teaches humility…, has the power to soften uncaring hearts….” Dean Koontz

“You will lose someone you can’t live without, and your heart will be badly broken, and the bad news is that you never completely get over the loss of your beloved. But this is also the good news. They live forever in your broken heart that doesn’t seal back up. And you come through.” Anne Lamott

“A …facet of our aversion to grief is fear. … If we are to return to the richly textured life of soul and to participation with the soul of the world, we must pass through the intense region of grief and sorrow.” Francis Weller

“Life is full of grief, to exactly the degree we allow ourselves to love other people.” Orson Scott Card

“The work …is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and to be stretched large by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That’s how much gratitude I can give. …Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.” Francis Weller

“Grief, I’ve learned, is really just love. It’s all the love you want to give, but cannot. All that unspent love gathers up in the corners of your eyes, the lump in your throat, and in that hollow part of your chest. Grief is …love with no place to go.” Jamie Anderson

“I still miss those I loved who are no longer with me but I find I am grateful for having loved them. The gratitude has finally conquered the loss.” Rita Mae Brown

“Life Lesson 3: You can’t rush grief. It has its own timetable. All you can do is make sure there are lots of soft places around—beds, pillows, arms, laps.” Patti Davis

“Grief is like a swallow…. One day you wake up and you think it’s gone, but it’s only migrated to some other place, warming its feathers. Sooner or later, it will return and perch in your heart again.” Elif Shafak

“The highest tribute to the dead is not grief but gratitude.” Thornton Wilder

“To love means to open ourselves to the negative as well as the positive—to grief, sorrow, and disappointment as well as to joy, fulfillment, and an intensity of consciousness we did not know was possible before.” Rollo May

“Grief turns out to be a place none of us know until we reach it.” Joan Didion

“When someone dies, the initial stages of grief seem to be the worst. But in some ways, it’s sadder as time goes by and you consider how much they’ve missed in your life. In the world.” Emily Giffin

“It is a sad truth in life that when someone has lost a loved one, friends sometimes avoid the person, just when the presence of friends is most needed.” Lemony Snicket

“To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die.” Thomas Campbell

“If you’ve got to my age, you’ve probably had your heart broken many times. So, it’s not that difficult to unpack a bit of grief from some little corner of your heart and cry over it.” Emma Thompson

“It’s so curious: one can resist tears and ‘behave’ very well in the hardest hours of grief. But then …one notices that a flower that was in bud only yesterday has suddenly blossomed …and everything collapses.” Colette

“Your memory feels like home to me. So, whenever my mind wanders, it always finds its way back to you.” Ranata Suzuki

“What we can do is work …to meet our life with compassion and to receive our suffering without judgments. This is a core piece in our apprenticeship with sorrow.” Francis Weller

“Never. We never lose our loved ones. They accompany us; they don’t disappear from our lives. We are merely in different rooms.” Paulo Coelho

“When a child dies, you bury the child in your heart.” Korean Proverb

“When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.” Kahlil Gibran

“The more your identity was wrapped up with the deceased, the more difficult the loss.” Meghan O’Rourke

“For someone grieving, moving forward is the challenge. Because after extreme loss, you want to go back.” Holly Goldberg Sloan

“I don’t know why they call it heartbreak. It feels like every part of my body is broken too.” Chloe Woodward

“Life seems sometimes like nothing more than a series of losses, from beginning to end. That’s the given. How you respond to those losses, what you make of what’s left, that’s the part you have to make up as you go.” Katharine Weber

“A home is not a place. It’s not a country or a town or a building or possession. Home is with the other half of your soul, the person who shares in your grief and helps you carry the burden of loss.” Tillie Cole

**Sitting in Silence:** Sit in silence together, allowing the *Readings from the Common Bowl* to resonate. Cultivate a sense of calm and attention to the readings and the discussion that follows (*Living the Questions).*

**Reading:** “When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.” *Henri Nouwen*

**Living the Questions**

Explore as many of these questions as time allows. Fully explore one question before moving to the next.

1. What were the earliest significant deaths that you experienced? How did they affect you?
2. What were you taught about how to grieve when young?
3. What has been helpful when you were grieving? Why? Harmful? Why?
4. Grief is how we feel, mourning is what we do. How do you make sense of this difference?
5. What have you learned about grief?
6. Robert Benchley wrote, “Death ends a life, not a relationship.” Has this been true for you? How?
7. What are some of the cultural messages about grief? How might these impact people who are grieving?
8. Why do some people seem to have difficulty interacting with those who are grieving?
9. What has grief taught you about love and loss?
10. How can our congregations help those who are grieving?

**Deeper Listening:** If time was claimed by individuals, the group listens without interruption to each person for the time claimed. Using a timer allows the facilitator to also listen fully.

**Checking-Out:** One sentence about where you are now as a result of the time spent together and the experience of exploring the theme.

**Extinguishing Chalice:** (Elizabeth Selle Jones) We extinguish this flame but not the light of truth, the warmth of community, or the fire of commitment. These we carry in our hearts until we are together again.

**Closing Words:** (Rev. Philip R. Giles)

(In unison) *May the quality of our lives be our benediction and a blessing to all we touch.*