

All Souls 2019

MILESTONES OF GRIEF

Those who have had opportunity to travel to places afar, where European History has a few more centuries under its belt, will likely be familiar with that beautiful little emblem of history: the milestone.

On the front of your order of service is a photo of a milestone in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

It is eroded and chipped and pockmarked. Lichen covers one side of it, and the writing on it has been blurred by the harsh weather it has withstood. It resides in a corner of a very old graveyard in Harvard Square. And it has come, over time, to mark not only geographical distance, but also the passing of chronological distance.

In Europe, the distance measured by a milestone tends to begin at a city or town. They were constructed both to reassure the traveller that the proper path was being followed, and to indicate the distance travelled. Ultimately, milestones measure the gap between where the person is now, and where they once were.

The journey into grief is characterized by milestones. It is a journey that leads us away from the familiar, from the life we knew. The death of one we love takes us into strange and unknown territory. It is a journey we have not chosen, to a destination we know not.

For some, that journey begins with a diagnosis of terminal illness. Grappling with the impending reality is something which we share with the companion of our heart. The journey into grief begins while our loved one still lives. For others, this is a journey that is thrust upon us without warning, in one, unforgettable moment. No time to pack or prepare, it begins now.

There is no map that will plot our course, but milestones will mark the way. Some of them we will anticipate, others will take us by surprise.

We find one waiting for us very early on. When the reality of death means we must correct ourselves for using the present tense when referring to the one we have loved so much. The transition from "is" to "was," is a milestone we will reluctantly pass, for it refuses us the comfort and protection from pain that denial gives. For others embarking on this journey, mentally assigning ourselves a new designation such as "widow" or "widower" marks another significant step. Or when someone asks how many children we have.

Some milestones are easy to see in the distance. And whether we want to or not, we move inexorably towards them. These are the dates on the calendar that, in years gone by have been reasons for celebration. Birthdays, anniversaries, and Christmas. Let's not forget

Christmas. This time of the year when even the advertising world seems determined to remind us of our loss. All those images of happy, complete families are a jarring dissonance with our reality. While those around us seem to obsessively link Christmas with presents, for us Christmas is about absence. The space at the table is a symbol of a much larger gap.

And then there is the first anniversary of death. For some of us, this marks the beginning of a very different year, in lots of ways a harder year. The fantasy that our loved one is simply away and will soon return, can no longer be sustained. Now comes the hard task of living in the gap that they have left behind. Our most recent memories are no longer recent.

Some of these milestones we will stop at, steel ourselves and breathe in and out as we mark them intentionally. Sometimes we will have the strength required to honour both the past and the present. Other times – and maybe even unexpectedly – we will do our level best to avoid a milestone. This might mean that we take a detour for a while. For all who grieve, detours are sometimes necessary. We need the respite they offer. But the milestone awaits.

Some milestones will be small, and almost unnoticeable. We may pass them before we have noticed them. Perhaps the first time we really laugh. Or the when the first thing we think about upon waking, is not the gap.

We might be surprised at moments of nourishment and even joy that meet us on this journey. Little homes and hamlets along the way, where the light of love and friendship beckons us in; where we enjoy times of respite and refreshment.

In the journey of grief, one thing is certain: no two people will take it the same way. In Europe, milestones were constructed both to reassure the traveller that the proper path was being followed and to indicate distance travelled. The milestones of grief are all different shapes and sizes. Sometimes close together, other times far apart. There will be moments when we are suddenly struck by the distance we have travelled and become aware of how good that feels. At other moments we will feel overwhelmed by how far there is yet to go. This often bears no relationship to the passing of time. No two journeys are the same.

The tears of one will be matched by the anger of another. The need to speak, or the need for silence. Sometimes we will have companions who walk alongside us, whose presence makes the journey easier to bear. Other times we will be intensely aware that even when walking in a crowd, this part of the journey we take alone.

A milestone is two sided. It measures not only the distance travelled, but the distance still to go.

And as the work of grief is attended to, and little by little healing finds a place within the traveller, they will notice that the milestones have a new significance. While they will always measure the gap between what is now, and what once was, they also indicate that another city lies ahead. It will not be same city we left. It may have some similarities, familiarities, or we may choose it to be completely different. But contained within this new city are warm places. Places of hope and simplicity and comfort. Places in which a new home can be built.

It is my prayer for you, that as you pass the many milestones in this complex journey of grief, you will find moments of respite and refreshment and encouragement. That in attending well to grief and honouring the one you love, you will find places of warmth and friendship and hope.

Amen.

The Reverend Sarah Park
All Souls – 3 November 2019