

Voices: Filling the empty places of loss

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Walking in my neighborhood, I notice updates my neighbors have made in their older homes—new paint, roofs, landscaping, mailboxes. Our homes are 40 years old. So, they have endured several lives and facelifts.

One thing I notice is almost every home has lost a shrub here or there due to extreme weather in North Texas. We neighbors tend to have an empty spot in the flower bed where our gardenia or boxwood died.

I see people usually place some object in that barren space—a green metal frog, a birdbath, bench, wind spinner, pottery, a hanging basket on a shepherd's hook, concrete angels and garden flags.

Whatever we use to fill the emptiness tends to become what the house is known for. For example, I live in the “concrete angels” dwelling. Angels mark the spot my rosebush died.

Funny, we are not known by our brick or roof color, but by recent change and by what makes us unique now.

Walking along and thinking, I was able to take that idea and make a broader application.

A new life after loss

When we humans experience loss, we often are shocked and empty for a while, but what we do to make a new life becomes our identity, our fresh start.

We lose or relinquish our jobs, perhaps lose spouses and children, or lose our health. We plan for good things in life, but relationships and opportunity may not pan out. As we age and retire, life takes us in directions we were not expecting.

Dreams dissolve. Options narrow. So, what do we do? How we answer that question may direct or define the rest of our lives.

In my senior adult Sunday school class, members learn from other people at the same stage in life. We share one another's pain in sad times, and also the next steps in healing, learning real life lessons from one another's lives. Those are a real plus of being in a Bible study group.

When her husband died, one friend began a business helping senior adults with daily tasks such as running errands, making lunch and driving to doctors' appointments.

Several women in our class volunteer in schools and the church food pantry.

Singing in choirs, traveling and spending time with grandchildren are popular pastimes.

Mission trips, theater productions, home renovation and home building, moving to a new place, even taking courses in seminary are commitments I see friends enjoy.

While doing what they always wanted to do, my friends become identified with their new start in life, with who they are *now*.

We all need hope and renewal

Renewed people are known for joy and energy, which gives hope to all of us that we, too, can find our calling. New tasks and responsibilities can

become that “fresh coat of paint” or “a new roof” on the house in the latest landscape of life. Without change and growth, we deteriorate.

This week, I went to the doctor, and she asked about retirement plans.

“I might retire next year,” I answered.

Then the doctor advised, “Only retire if you have something definite to do every day, and you will do it.”

I caught the idea that maintaining present activity was necessary to keeping up my current level of health. Suddenly not working when our bodies have been used to work can cause shock to the system and health decline.

People, and especially older people, need exercise—physical and spiritual.

Read and learn about current issues younger people face. The younger generation is not living in 1975 or 1985, as we did. Learn enough about sociology and politics to empathize with the immigrant, the single mom, the unemployed, the mentally ill, the abused.

A good place to start, especially if we have experienced loss, is with prayer: “Lord, here I am, in this ‘somewhere’ place within your plan. Though I may be near the end, what would you have me do next?

“Open the doors of opportunity. Lead me to those who can provide knowledge, skills and connection. Give me a new joy in my service, using me powerfully in your kingdom. Draw me to those who are asking you for the things I offer to you.”

What do I have to offer now?

If you have suffered, grieved and recovered, you are in the best place to be

of service, because you understand human suffering. You have experienced the power of God to heal.

God will not waste one tear you have shed in mourning. He will redeem it all. He will use it all for his creative mercy and glory, because he is that kind of saving God.

“Use me now” is a prayer God answers. We ask in humility, ready to do the hard things Jesus does in the world.

When we put him in the place of what we lack or have lost, we are remade amazingly in wholeness and set on a new path.

The later years truly can be days of God’s presence and grace for us and for the people we serve. It is not that we figure out how to start over, but that faithful God finishes his perfect work in us, even as we transition in life.

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