

# Getting older isn't for the weak

Terrance Klein November 22, 2017 America Magazine

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Have you ever daydreamed of living your life backward? Admittedly, it is not something that a healthy and happy young person would do. No, the springtime of life is all about hastening forward, eagerly anticipating the next birthday and the opportunities it brings. Indeed, the younger one is, the more anything at all seems possible. But the autumn of life has arrived when you no longer look to the future with eager expectation. Whether or not you are happy and at peace with your life, the future has become more a scene of fear than fantasy. Why? Because each year coming will mark losses, decline, even deaths.

The autumn of life has arrived when you no longer look to the future with eager expectation.

This is when we begin to speak of “holding back time.” Yet it should not be a sad time of life. If we have lived well, this is when we begin to notice the changes of the seasons more than we did when we were young. We take note when flowers bloom and the first signs of autumn can be seen. We treasure time spent with loved ones more than we did when we were young. And we are grateful for having learned, to some extent, what deserves our now treasured time and what does not.

It is in these years that the daydream of living life backward appears. Ponder the fantasy a little. Whatever this past week has been like, surely you could do it better by going backward. You would know what to look out for. And let us presume that going backward is like going forward. You forget most of what is distant. So it won't be long at all before you will be living through episodes that you have entirely forgotten. You won't be able to draw upon hindsight then. So why is it still attractive, this idea of moving backward in time? Because everything that once withered away comes back into bloom: your hair, young health, your strength. Each year would see the return of those who were lost to you over the decades. Everything you have watched scatter to the wind like dust would again be solid and splendid.

The future demands faith. Either we summon it and nurture it, or fear will rule our final days.

Eventually you would return to those now cherished days of childhood, when life held some frustrations but very few fears. There are your parents, looking after everything that was needed, filling your life with security and strength. The worries of life are on their shoulders, but they are also young and strong. The coming Christmas will be their chore but yours to cherish as a kid.

Of course, traveling either way through time, all things pass. What is more, in either direction, the story will be one of gain and loss. So what is really the allure in daydreaming back through your life? Security, I suspect. By going backward, you know exactly where your life is going, and that removes the great burden in every age of life: uncertainty about the future. Not knowing the future, we must climb ever so carefully, but we can glide back through the past because we know that even the worst of it will pass.

Dear frightened friends, since we belong to Christ, we have no reason to fear the future.

We close another liturgical year by celebrating the Solemnity of Christ the King. The focus of the feast is that the future belongs to Christ. It will see the dawning of his kingdom.

For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet.  
The last enemy to be destroyed is death.  
When everything is subjected to him,  
then the Son himself will also be subjected  
to the one who subjected everything to him,  
so that God may be all in all (1 Cor 15:25-28).

Dear frightened friends, since we belong to Christ, we have no reason to fear the future. No diagnosis, divorce, disaster or death can separate us from him. Whatever is pried from our grasp in this life will be returned to us in his future, in the life of the cosmos to come.

I myself will look after and tend my sheep.  
As a shepherd tends his flock  
when he finds himself among his scattered sheep,  
so will I tend my sheep.  
I will rescue them from every place where they were scattered  
when it was cloudy and dark (Ez 34: 11-12).

Do we draw great comfort and solace from this feast? That depends upon our faith, how strong it is. If we truly believe that the future, our future, belongs to Christ, the champion who loves us, we can live the passing days in peace. With great faith, life is all about savor and surrender. This week an older parishioner repeated something, which he had heard an even older parishioner say, for herself, many years ago: "Getting old isn't for the weak." Indeed it isn't. The future demands faith. Either we summon it and nurture it, or fear will rule our final days.

We cannot choose which way we would like to move through time. It flows in one direction: forward, where the Son of Man is coming in glory, where he will gather his own to himself. The choice that lies before us is singular. On which side of the Son of Man, right or left, will we stand? That is the great business of the time we have left, however long or short.

***Readings: Ezekiel 34:11-12, 15-17 1 Corinthians 15:20-26, 28 Matthew 25:31-46***

# **Have you ever had the spiritual wind knocked out of you?**

Terrance Klein November 15, 2017 America Magazine

The Rev. Terrance W. Klein is a priest of the Diocese of Dodge City and author of *Vanity Faith*.

As kids, we called it “getting the wind knocked out of you.” It happened because you jumped out of a swing at the highest point of its arc and landed, full-body, onto the earth. Or you fell off the roof of a backyard shed while playing Fort Apache. Or you collided with someone else while playing football or basketball or baseball. Kids collided a lot back then—and not because they were staring at smartphones! Besides the pain of impact, there was a sudden fear of not being able to breathe. The first time is the worst. You don’t know what’s wrong; you cannot fix it yourself, and there is no parent in sight. Most of us learned from an older kid to take short, little breaths.

As kids, we called it “getting the wind knocked out of you.”

I am not sure if our bodies grow out of the childhood malady or we simply stop doing the sort of crazy things that kids do.

Adults, though, have a spiritual experience that is a lot like getting the wind knocked out of you. It happens like this: On a given day you are busy with the things that typically occupy your days. You are the industrious woman of Proverbs, mastering the 21st-century equivalent of distaff and spindle, namely, smartphone and SUV. You know what the Lord—or life itself—has asked of you, and you are busy with your responsibilities.

Then, without warning, suddenly you cannot explain to yourself why you live your life the way that you do. You cannot even understand what you’re doing on that day because the spiritual wind has been knocked out of you. This is not the result of some terrible calamity like a diagnosis or a divorce. It is more akin to a midlife crisis but one situated within a single day.

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Caught in the moment, you begin to wonder, maybe I made some terrible mistake or wrong turn, somewhere way back? What am I doing here? With these people? It is a horrible feeling, especially when “these people” are your spouse and children. You briefly entertain the thought of running away, taking to the open road, but the terror of the great unknown is even worse than the suffocating fear of the moment. Besides, how do you run away from yourself? You keep on doing whatever it is that you are supposed to do, what everyone expects of you. You fold the laundry; you return your calls; you pick up the kids. You are so very grateful that others cannot see your spiritual panting. You will just push through

because you have learned that, like getting the wind knocked out of you, this, too, will pass. You only hope that it will be a long while before it comes on again.

I am not sure what those without faith, without a world of meaning, do at such a juncture. Maybe they shop if they have the money. American life is predicated on the notion that the right purchase can change everything. Some people turn to chemical fixes, which are available in virtually every price range. Opioids were developed to alleviate physical pain. Clearly, people are turning to them to address spiritual maladies.

Those of us who believe are not immune to getting the spiritual wind knocked out of us.

Those of us who believe are not immune to getting the spiritual wind knocked out of us. Scripture calls it “the noonday devil,” this midlife crisis in the middle of the day. I am prone to the affliction in crowded places, like airports. So many people pass by, in sour moods and slovenly clothes. How can God love all of these people? And if God cannot love them, then how can God love me? Then, how can God be God? Then, how can there be a God? And there went my wind!

As horrible as it is in the moment, getting the spiritual wind knocked out of you is part of life. It is a reminder that the wind within us, which animates us, is not truly our own. If it were, it could not be so easily knocked out of us. We call the God whose eclipse we experience in such moments the Holy Spirit. *Spiritus* is Latin for breath, what separates the living from the dead. We take this breath for granted until it is withdrawn. Then we grope in terror.

When the Spirit is knocked out of you, you understand that it was never really yours.

Believers turn to prayer, even if it is half-hearted. And, when you are panting, what more can be expected? And—you know what—it is enough. Small breaths, little tasks and the moment will pass. And we will be the richer for it. Why? Because to see for a terrible, brief moment the meaninglessness of life is to know that the meanings we impose upon our lives are no stronger than we are. They can wobble without even a push!

When the Spirit is knocked out of you, you understand that it was never really yours. That is when you pray, which is a way of resolving to push on, to look for a meaning beyond yourself, beyond your own life. An older church would have called this “making an act of faith.” It is what we must do in order to breathe in the Spirit. We are all Peter Pans and Wendys when it comes to the spiritual life. We look down, get scared and start to pant. We begin to fall out of the sky. We need to look ahead, to trust and to breathe deeply of the Spirit. Then we can fly again.

**[Readings: Proverbs 31:10-13, 19-20-30-31 1 Thessalonians 5:1-6 Matthew 25:14-30](#)**

## **My daughter died by suicide 14 years ago. This is what I've learned.**

**Tom Smith** September 21, 2017 America Magazine Tom Smith was the director of pastoral services for the Diocese of Belleville, Ill., until he retired and is now the chairman of the board of the Karla Smith Foundation, founded in memory of his daughter.

She died by suicide. More precisely, my daughter's bipolar disorder killed her—because sometimes a mental illness is fatal. I no longer say she committed suicide, because she did not commit a sin or a crime when she pulled that trigger on Monday, Jan. 13, 2003. She died at age 26, after three years of relative stability attending Oklahoma State University, with straight A's and a promising future.

Karla stopped taking her medications because of the side-effects, but also because she wanted to complete her memoir with the help of a fresh experience of mania. She got the mania, but three months later it thrust her into the deepest depression of her life. On Christmas Day 2002, she told us that she was not worth the chemicals that made up her body and that she was a burden on the universe. I no longer say she committed suicide, because she did not commit a sin or a crime. Three weeks later, three days after being prematurely released from a behavioral treatment center in Tulsa, she ended her pain by ending her life.

My grief continues.

The grief today differs from the first few years of missing her. It is not that time heals all wounds. But time plus grief work can lead to assimilation, to the ability to experience life beyond the suicide. I will never forget her death, and I will always miss her. I still wish she had not found that hidden .22-caliber rifle. I still regret not driving to Tulsa the weekend before she died to be with her. I still feel the anger at the treatment center for releasing her too soon. I am still lonely for my only daughter whom I did not walk down her wedding aisle and whose children will not play catch with me in the backyard. I am still haunted by why she did it. She still belongs here at our house, at least for Thanksgiving and Christmas with her mother and twin brother, his wife and two sons. I still need to talk to her about politics, religion, theology, history, literature, writing and relationships.

She still belongs here at our house, at least for Thanksgiving and Christmas. All of these emotions still show up uninvited. The difference between then and now is that now they are periodic and less intense. When they do emerge, they are familiar. Fourteen years ago, all of these feelings were attacking me at one time with vicious claws, five-pound sledgehammers and never-ending body blows that left me broken and unable to process what was happening to me. I went through the motions of living but with the emotions of dying.

Today, when I think of Karla, I relish her life more than I mourn her death. I recall driving the three-hour trip from Tulsa to Antlers when she was 9 years old and I was conducting a parish council workshop. It was a luscious spring Sunday, and we talked and sang the

whole time going and returning; we sang all the verses of “This Old Man,” then started making up our own rhymes. I recall the time when she was in college, and I sent her an article I was working on. I was quietly expecting a “Good job, Dad.” She sent it back with margin notes, word revisions and questions that challenged my thinking. I could see her teaching English literature and composition at a university some day.

Today, when I think of Karla, I relish her life more than I mourn her death. I remember the two of us sitting on the living room floor the August before she died, listening to her Harry Chapin CD, “Behind the Music.” It was my introduction to the album, and I soaked it up along with her commentary and intense delight. I still play that CD, enjoying it and loving her but now without the dark sadness that used to harmonize with Chapin.

We learn more about life and love by coping with the difficult times than by smiling through the happy times. We do not have to create suffering; life will deliver it in many shapes and sizes. The Gospels say, “Take up your cross.” That is how we learn, by cross-bearing, sometimes carrying our own, sometimes sharing the weight of another’s.

I have learned a few things bearing the cross of Karla’s suicide. My perspective on everything changed. What can be worse than her death? Other losses, disappointments and suffering bow to Jan. 13, 2003. Personal and family health issues, dissolved dreams and even world tragedies do not smother my core like that .22-caliber rifle did. If I can assimilate that bullet, I can handle anything else. I am grateful for this new perspective.

I know now that death and resurrection is the fundamental rhythm of life as well as a profession of faith dramatized by Jesus of Nazareth. I have experienced her death and my resurrection, and that dynamic process of rebirth is embedded in everything and everyone: in a glowing sunrise and sunset, in the life cycle of every species, in loving relationships, in the Eucharist, in our own death. Karla’s death opened the door to the depths of this hope-filled reality.

Karla also taught me compassion, even in her suicide. Every Thursday night for the last 12 years, my wife, Fran, and I meet with people who have loved ones with a mental illness or who lost someone to suicide. I see their pain, and I recognize the confusion, fear, anger, loneliness, grief and loss. I want to connect with their eyes and their broken hearts to assure them that a new perspective and resurrection is possible for them. I know that Karla’s compassionate eyes see them, too. Bearing crosses is a community effort.

On the other hand, I wish I had learned these life lessons in another school. Fourteen years later, I still want my daughter back.

## *Dealing with the death of a loved one*

Source: <https://www.muchloved.com/gateway/death-of-a-loved-one.htm>

The death of a loved one is an event that all of us is likely to experience during our lifetimes, often on numerous occasions. Whilst lives are often transformed by such loss, it does not necessarily need to be for the worse in the long term. Dealing effectively and positively with grief caused by such a loss is central to your recovery process and your ability to continue with and fulfill your own life for the better.

We have put together some notes in this section to help you understand some of the emotions you are likely to go through after the death of a loved one and to offer some suggestions on how best to cope and deal with these emotions.

**What is Grief? Am i Grieving?... I am Grieving** - You'll grieve in your own unique way, and a general pattern will emerge as you do so. Those around you may be full of ideas about how you're supposed to grieve, and how not. You may be told that grief comes in clear-cut stages and you may even be given a name for the stage you're supposedly going through. You may hear advice like "Be strong!" or "Cheer up!" or "Get on with your life!" rather than be encouraged to allow your grief to run its natural course. It's important for you to be clear that this is your grief, not theirs. You'll grieve in no one's way but your own.

**Grief is about more than your feelings**—it will show up in how you think. You may disbelieve this person actually died. You may have episodes of thinking like this even long after they died. Your mind may be confused, your thinking muddled. You may find it difficult to concentrate on just about everything. Or you may be able to focus your attention but all you can focus on is the one who died, or how they died, or your life together before they died.

**Physical responses are also to be expected.** You may experience tightness in your throat, heaviness across your chest, or pain around your heart. Your stomach may be upset, along with other intestinal disturbances. You may have headaches, hot flashes, or cold chills. You may be dizzy at times, or tremble more than usual, or find yourself easily startled. Some people find it hard to get their breath. You may, in addition, undergo changes in your behavior. You may sleep less than you used to and wake up at odd hours. Or you may sleep more than normal. You may have odd dreams or frightening nightmares. You may become unusually restless, moving from one activity to another, sometimes not finishing one thing before moving on to the next. Or you may sit and do nothing for long periods.

**Some people engage in what's called "searching behavior"—you look for your loved one's face among a crowd of people, for instance, even though you know they've died. You may become attached to things you associate with your loved one, like wearing an article of their clothing or carrying a keepsake that belonged to them. Or you may wish to avoid all such reminders.**

**Many grieving people want to spend more time alone.** Sometimes they're drawn to the quiet and safety they experience there, and sometimes it's a way of dodging other people. Even venturing out to the grocery store, a shopping mall, or a worship service can feel uncomfortable. There are some people, however, who want to be around others even more than before. You may find that you're jealous of people around you who aren't grieving. You may envy what they have that you don't. You may resent how much they take for granted when you now realize that nothing should ever be taken for granted. You may become critical in ways that are unlike you. Fortunately, this shift is usually temporary.

**Some grieving people report unusual happenings that are not easy to describe yet seem very real.** You may be going about your daily life and suddenly have a sense of your loved one's presence. Some people report having auditory or visual experiences related to this person. At times the loved one offers a message during a dream or time of meditation. Try not to worry if something like this should happen to you once in a while. Such experiences are more common than you might think. Research also indicates that people's responses during times of personal loss will be influenced by how they're raised, their genetic make-up, and society's expectations. Consequently, some people are naturally more feeling-oriented as they grieve, while others are more oriented toward using their thinking processes. Some respond outwardly, while others keep to themselves. Some want to have a close network of friends around them, and others prefer to be independent.

**Ordinary, healthy grief has many possible faces and can express itself in many different ways.** You are your own person, with your own personality, your own life experiences, your own relationship with the one who died, and your own understanding of life and death. So you should not expect a "one-size-fits-all grief" that will suit you. You're too unique for that. Despite your individual uniqueness, you'll probably discover an overall pattern to your grief as it progresses. It often begins with a time of shock and numbness, especially if the death was sudden. Everything seems unreal. This is usually followed by a time when pain sets in. Sadness, loneliness, helplessness, and fear may come over you in powerful waves. Anger and guilt may do the same, and continue for awhile. In time there comes a slowly growing acceptance of what has happened, but it's not necessarily a happy acceptance.



**It's common to feel listless and lifeless, discouraged and sometimes depressed.** Other strong emotions can still pop up. This is the winter of your grief—a long, slow, dormant period. In actuality, something is beginning to grow, but it's hidden deep underground. A time of gradual reawakening eventually occurs, though you can't always predict when. Energy begins to return. So does hope. Finally there comes a time of renewed life. You're not the same person you were before—you'll be different, having been changed by this experience, having grown. You'll forge a new relationship with the one who died, a relationship that transcends time. This entire process is very fluid. It may not feel very orderly. These time periods will flow into one another almost imperceptibly. But when you look back, you'll recognize what's happened: by going all the way through your grief, you've taken the path toward your healing.

**The story of the "bird on the branch"** - A tired bird was resting on a branch for support. It enjoyed the view from the branch and the safety it offered from dangerous animals. Just as it had become used to that branch and the support and safety that it offered, a strong wind started blowing and the branch started swaying back and forth, with such great intensity, that it seemed that it was going to break.

But the bird was not in the least worried for it knew two important truths. One was that even without the branch it was able to fly and thus remain safe through the power of its own two wings. The second is that there are many other branches upon which it can temporarily rest.

This small example represents the ideal relationship between ourselves and our relationships, possessions and social and professional positions. We have the right to enjoy all these, but cannot as long as we are dependent on them and are afraid of losing them. They are all in a state of change and can disappear at any time.

Our real strength dose not lie in those external ephemeral things, but rather on our two internal wings of love and wisdom. These must become our security base, our source of enjoyment and happiness.

**Two Key principles to remember dealing with the death of a loved one:**

**1. Accept that loss is a basic part of our life cycle** - Whatever is born must die. Whatever grows must decay. These are universal laws. We tend to forget that these physical bodies are mortal. Everything we see around us will one-day decay and cease to be. That includes all plants, animals, people, buildings, cities, the planet earth, the sun and even the galaxy. Everything in the physical universe is temporary. When this fact is understood and accepted, we will begin to seek other, inner sources of security and happiness.

**2. Confront death** - We need to ask, "what is death?" What is the nature of that energy, that power, that consciousness which, when it was in that body, caused it to think, speak, move, love, feel and create? Now that it is gone, there is a mass of cells that will soon decompose.

**What is life? What is its purpose?** - A number of us have been forced by the death of the loved one to investigate these questions. Death forces us to look deeper into the nature and purpose of life. Reexamine our life values and goals: Contact with death awakens us to the fact that someday we too will die. This generates a number of questions. Will we have fulfilled our life purpose? Why have we come here to the earth? Why have we taken this physical body? Is our life part of some greater process? If so, what does it require of us? How can we live our lives more in harmony with that purpose? Answering these questions might motivate us to change our life style, live a more meaningful existence, improve our character, purify our love, or investigate the deeper truths of life. We may also discover that life is more meaningful when we value others and their needs.

**How can I help a friend with the death of a loved one** - Someone you know may be experiencing grief - perhaps the loss of a loved one, perhaps another type of loss - and you want to help. The fear of making things worse may encourage you to do nothing. Yet you do not wish to appear to be uncaring.

Remember that it is better to try to do something, inadequate as you may feel, than to do nothing at all. Don't attempt to sooth or stifle the emotions of the griever. Tears and anger are an important part of the healing process. Grief is not a sign of weakness. It is the result of a strong relationship and deserves the honour of strong emotion.

When supporting someone in their grief the most important thing is to simply listen. Grief is a very confusing process, expressions of logic are lost on the griever. The question "tell me how you are feeling" followed by a patient and attentive ear will seem like a major blessing to the grief stricken. Be present, show that you care, listen.

Your desire is to assist your friend down the path of healing. They will find their own way down that path, but they need a helping hand, an assurance that they are not entirely alone on their journey. It does not matter that you do not understand the details, your presence is enough.

Risk a visit, it need not be long. The mourner may need time to be alone but will surely appreciate the effort you made to visit. Do some act of kindness. There are always ways to help. Run errands, answer the phone, prepare meals, mow the lawn, care for the children, shop for groceries, meet incoming planes or provide lodging for out of town relatives. The smallest good deed is better than the grandest good intention.

A well-known psychologist, William Worden, Ph.D., has explained the tasks of grief. Working through your grief can take many, many months or years.

**1. *Accepting the reality of loss*** -When a loved one dies, people often experience a sense that it isn't true. The first task of grieving is to come to the realization that this person is gone, and that reuniting with him or her, at least in this life, will not happen. Some families tell us they sense their loved one's presence through sound, sight, smell or touch. Whether or not these experiences are "real" is a matter of belief. However, they are common and not a sign that one is "going crazy".

**2. *Working through the pain of grief*** -One of the goals of grief counselors is to help people through this difficult time, so that they do not carry their deep pain with them throughout their entire life. Those people who allow themselves to feel and work through the deep pain find that the pain lessens. Some things may prevent this experience. Friends, relatives, and co-workers may give subtle or not so subtle messages to "pick yourself up and go on" as if nothing has happened. Or, sometimes family members cut off their feelings and deny that pain is present. Allow yourself the time to cry or to be angry. Many people find these feelings appear while going through their daily routines such as grocery shopping or driving to work. Know that these experiences, though very hard, are normal.

**3. *Adjusting to an environment in which your loved one is no longer present***  
Your loved one had a special place in your heart and in your family. They can never be replaced. But bereaved families can eventually adjust to the absence of a loved one. This process might involve finding new ways of interacting with your surviving family members and friends.

**4. *Withdrawing emotional energy and reinvesting it in other relationships***  
Many people misunderstand this task and believe it means forgetting about their loved one. They believe that this would be dishonoring their loved one's memory. This task is simply a continuation of the first three tasks. It involves the process of allowing yourself to make relationships with others. It does not mean that you care any less about your loved one or that you will not keep your special memories.

**5. *Rebuilding faith, beliefs and values that are tested by the loss of a loved one.***  
The loss of a loved one can test your faith and philosophical views of life. Talking with a spiritual leader or advisor such as a rabbi, priest, minister or holy person may be helpful since they have experience counseling others who have experienced a loss. Many bereaved families, whom we have known over several years, can remember their loved one and smile. Sometimes there is still sadness, though it does not come as often and is not as draining.

Over time and through these "tasks", you will begin to remember your loved one without experiencing the unbearable pain. It will be a different kind of sadness. Do not hesitate to seek professional help. Counselors are trained to assist you in working through these tasks and other issues you may be facing. It is okay to ask for one session with a therapist to see if you both will be able to work together.