

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

In remembering those now gone, we see each other

Kyle Kooyers *Associate director, Kaufman Interfaith Institute*

“To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

In his book, “Lament for a Son,” Christian philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff welcomes readers into his own deeply personal journey of grief following the tragic death of his 25-year-old son, Eric. This profound invitation, to sit on the mourning bench, lays at the heart of a raw and vulnerable work that ultimately gives voice to many who seek to honor the lives and grieve the loss of their loved ones.

As Wolterstorff shares the anguish, lament and wonderings of his own mourning, he returns repeatedly to the individuality and distinctiveness of loss. He writes, “Each death is as unique as each life. Each has its own stamp. ... Death is the great leveller, so our writers have always told us. Of course they are right. But they have neglected to mention the uniqueness of each death — and the solitude of suffering which accompanies that uniqueness. We say, ‘I know how you are feeling.’ But we don’t.”

Amidst the vast experiences of trauma, violence and loss, even on a personal level, unfolding around our country and community, the uniqueness and subsequent solitude of grief or trauma can often create the sense that a person is alone in their journey of loss. They can become invisible, even to the people standing right in front of them. Wolterstorff reflects, “I have been daily grateful for the friend who remarked that grief isolates. He did not mean only that I, grieving, am isolated from you, happy. He meant that shared grief isolates the sharers from each other. Though united in that we are grieving, we grieve differently.”

To dispel this isolation and give voice to people’s unique experiences, they need space and support to process loss in their own distinctive ways — to be seen in the individuality and particularity of their own pain. “As each death has its own character, so too each grief over a death has its own character. ... The dynamics of each person’s sorrow must be allowed to work themselves out without judgement ... my sorrow is not your sorrow,” writes Wolterstorff.

With this diversity of experience in mind, for the past five years, local hospice care providers have combined efforts to create space and support for working out sorrow experienced differently across various faith communities.

In 2014, during the lead-up to Grand Rapids’ Year of Interfaith Service, then-Mayor George Heartwell challenged different organizations and congregations to work together, bridging communities through service. Several area hospice agencies responded by forming the Interfaith Hospice Coalition. This group collaborated around the best ways to meet the religious, spiritual and secular end-of-life needs of a diverse West Michigan community.

The coalition reached out to leaders from different faith communities to learn about

IF YOU GO

What: We Remember 5th annual interfaith memorial service

When: 6 p.m. Sept. 11

Where: Dominican Center at Marywood, 2025 E. Fulton St., Grand Rapids

Information and registration at:
InterfaithUnderstanding.org

the practices and preferences of various traditions and cultures that ultimately inform end-of-life care. This journey of learning led the Interfaith Hospice Coalition to create an annual interfaith memorial service, giving voice to those who have lost loved ones over the course of the year and who are looking for a thoughtfully inclusive space to process that loss.

Now in its fifth year, We Remember: A Community Interfaith Memorial continues to be a service where, out of a shared human experience, people can gather to support and uphold each other. Using the language of many traditions — prayers, songs, reflections, music and readings from sacred texts — the service gives language to grief, mourning and celebration of life as together we remember those who have passed away.

For Wolterstorff, the collective and significant act of remembering transcends faiths and prevents us from not only losing sight of those who have passed, but also those who grieve among us. He notes, “... one of the profoundest features of the Christian and Jewish way of being-in-the-world and being-in-history is remembering. ‘Remember,’ ‘do not forget,’ ‘do this as a remembrance.’ We are to hold the past in remembrance and not let it slide away. For in history we find God.”

Certainly, as the Interfaith Memorials of years past have shown, this power of remembrance is very true for many religious, secular and spiritual traditions. In history and in our remembering, we find our collective identity, we see ourselves and we see each other.

This year’s Community Interfaith Memorial Service will take place Sept. 11 at the Dominican Center at Marywood. Following the service, tactile activities such as memorial fires, flower planting, kite flying and the meditation trail will provide more embodied forms of remembering a loved one.

May we continually enter the brave work, embodied by those in the hospice profession, of seeing and coming alongside of those who suffer among us — those who beckon us, in Wolterstorff’s words: “Over there, you are of no help. What I need to hear from you is that you recognize how painful it is. I need to hear from you that you are with me in my desperation. To comfort me, you have to come close. Come sit beside me on my mourning bench.”

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