



## **Making Friends with Grief**

Bentley deBardelaben-Phillips

“There is some strange intimacy between grief and aliveness, some sacred exchange between what seems unbearable and what is most exquisitely alive,” writes psychotherapist Francis Weller in his book, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*.

The more years I am given to live, the more I understand his words. Like most people, I have faced profound challenges in my life. Not long ago, I had a bout with cancer. Thankfully, I am now cancer-free. Still, that diagnosis disrupted a life I thoroughly enjoyed. Additionally, it forced me to face mortality, as such diagnoses do, whether I wanted to or not.

For me, that disturbance arose during a simple examination with my physician when the phrase “you may possibly have kidney cancer” was gingerly uttered. In an instant, grief reemerged, reminding me of our longstanding, often-wrought-filled relationship.

While I tried to shield my mind and heart from the shock of my doctor’s words, as well as from any anxiety of a fast-approaching grief, I was unsuccessful. Both were things I needed to accept and move through to arrive at healing.

In *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*, Weller invites his reader to consider reenvisioning grief “not as an event in our lives but as an ongoing conversation that accompanies us throughout life.” While I was open to Weller’s invitation, I still wanted to resist it. I needed to set the terms and control the situation. Unfortunately, that was not an option. Cancer was present, like



it or not.

Weller further writes, “grief and loss are with us continually, shaping our walk through life, and in some real way, determining how fully we engage our lives. This shift in perspective invites us into a prolonged period of learning the ways and styles of grief. In essence, we are asked to take up an apprenticeship with sorrow.” Thus began my journey as an apprentice.

As an ordained minister and seasoned sage, I felt that with decades of professional and personal experience, there were few things left in life that could possibly disrupt my inner peace, my grounding. HA! How arrogant was I? As one of those things did manifest.

That said, I am deeply grateful to a dear friend who invited me to read Weller’s book within months of receiving my diagnosis. Fortunately, it has been a helpful tool for me in navigating the emotional and somatic highs and lows once such news was delivered, and the journey towards healing began.

Now that I am cancer-free, having passed through the “dark nights of the soul,” I have a greater appreciation for life and living. I feel more alive. My ministry has been enriched. My perspective on grief has been enhanced by the wisdom provided in Weller’s book.

While I am aware that this resource might not be to everyone’s taste, I invite you to consider reading it. It is filled with insights, rituals, and ancient truths that were a balm to my weary spirit. Additionally, it helped me understand the different ways one grieves.

In case anyone is wondering how my apprenticeship is progressing, I am pleased to note I consider grief an ally—one I trust will make me stronger and better equipped to face life’s challenges as they present themselves.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge my husband, family,

friends, pastor, and community for their love and support during my health crisis. Lastly, I am grateful to have developed a faith that anchored and carried me through this unexpected adventure.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

The Rev. Dr. Bentley deBardelaben-Phillips serves as the Minister and Team Leader for the Education for Faithful Action (EFA) Team in the National Setting of the United Church of Christ.

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