



PRESENT COMFORT

MEDITATIONS ON
MODERN LOSS AND GRIEF

JULIE YARBROUGH



More Praise for *Present Comfort*

“Julie Yarbrough attends to grief in a way that provides for us all. There is personal, private grief over loss suffered alone. There is also shared, collective grief over the large calamities suffered by all. Grief provides us a way ahead, difficult though it may be. And Julie provides us both thoughtfulness and companionship for the journey. These reflections and resources of the spirit reorient and remind us that we are not alone and not without direction.”

–**Dr. Gil Rendle**, Consultant, Author & Sr. Vice President
of the Texas Methodist Foundation (retired), Author of *Quietly
Courageous: Leading the Church in a Changing World*

“With the rich resources of Scripture, poetry, and stories, *Present Comfort* is a marvelous exposition of one of the grand themes of the Bible; that “God is with us,” especially in the darkest and most difficult times in our lives. This is simply a wonderfully “hope-full” book for all of us in uncertain and challenging seasons in our lives.”

–**Tom Locke**, President, Texas Methodist Foundation

“In her newest book, *Present Comfort*, Julie Yarbrough gives us rich language to understand the complexity of grief. Weaving scripture with personal experience and insights, she invites us not only to face our grief, but to embrace it. In today’s climate, *Present Comfort* can be just that: a comforting companion for a weary soul, a reminder that we are not alone as we walk through the valley.”

–**Lisa Greenwood**, Vice President of Leadership Ministry,
Texas Methodist Foundation

“In *Present Comfort* Julie Yarbrough eloquently gives voice to the experience of loss, both personal and societal, and provides reassurance of God’s steadfast presence in each moment. Individuals and groups alike will find *Present Comfort: Meditations on Modern Loss and Grief* a powerful compendium for working through the layers of grief to find a place of trust and joy we thought unimaginable.”

–**Rev. Connie L. Nelson**, Perkins School of Theology,
Southern Methodist University

“Julie Yarbrough’s extraordinary work invites us to encounter the very presence of God through biblically grounded insights into the nature of grief that engage the mind and touch the heart as she takes us on a journey toward spiritual and emotional wholeness. *Present Comfort* is an essential resource to help us faithfully and deftly navigate the path of life.

–**Dr. Robert Hasley**, Founding Pastor of St. Andrew
United Methodist Church, Plano, Texas

“In this exceptional volume of meditations, Julie Yarbrough has provided a fountain of wisdom, insight, honesty, and hope. This book of meditations can be diligently read as a whole volume or digested in daily doses to renew our reliance on God, who is with us as a present comfort in time of grief.”

–**Dr. William B. Lawrence**, Professor Emeritus of
American Church History, Perkins School of Theology,
Southern Methodist University and Research Fellow, Duke
Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition

“With each turn of page, readers of *Present Comfort* will come to know Julie as a new friend who has a vulnerable, compassionate, and courageous heart—just like them. They will be informed about new varieties and components of grief in our modern world and will be comforted by hearing the presence of God in new contexts that lead them to *live and move and have their being* in love that is stronger than death.”

—**Dr. Fran Tilton Shelton**, Founder of Faith & Grief Ministries and author of *No Winter Lasts Forever: A Memoir of Loving Bob and Loathing Alzheimer’s*

“Julie Yarbrough takes us on a thoughtful and sacred journey to the inner recesses of the most fundamental of human experiences—grief. Gently, she encourages the reader to release fear and examine grief’s complexity as an individual and communal phenomenon. For those of us who have wept the bitter tears of loss, this book is a welcome balm to the soul.”

—**Dr. Maria A. Dixon Hall**, Chief Diversity Officer and Senior Advisor to the President for Campus Cultural Intelligence Initiatives, Southern Methodist University

“Julie Yarbrough draws from her personal experiences and her deep Christian faith to offer an excellent resource for one who is living with grief. I commend it to clergy and counselors as they will find rich and helpful resources for their own vocations in working with people who are struggling with grief.”

—**Bishop Michael McKee**, North Texas Conference of
The United Methodist Church

“Julie’s newest work is many things: wise, biblical, poetic. But, most of all, it’s truly helpful. There are certain writers who radiate comfort. Julie is one of those. And *Present Comfort* could not be more timely.”

–**Rev. Paul Rasmussen**, Senior Pastor, Highland Park
United Methodist Church

“In her new book, *Present Comfort: Meditations on Modern Loss and Grief*, author Julie Yarbrough beautifully and masterfully explores the human experience of loss and grief through the spiritual lens of Hope, Grace, and Peace. She invites us to connect with the spirit of who we are and who we were created to be, inviting us to know the everlasting love of those we grieve and that they will always be with us in spirit and love.”

–**Rev. Caesar Rentie**, Vice President of Pastoral Services,
Methodist Health System of Dallas

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MODERN LOSS AND GRIEF

JULIE YARBROUGH



Plano, Texas

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This book is printed on acid-free, elemental chlorine-free paper.

ISBN 978-1-953495-04-4

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O God, in mystery and silence you are present in our lives, bringing new life out of destruction, hope out of despair, growth out of difficulty. We thank you that you do not leave us alone but labor to make us whole. Help us to perceive your unseen hand in the unfolding of our lives, and to attend to the gentle guidance of your Spirit, that we may know the joy you give your people.

Amen.¹

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INTRODUCTION

When we pause from time to time to reflect on the events, occasions, and turning points that have formed and shaped us through the years, the faithful presence of God is the golden thread that weaves our life into its divine whole. And whether our perspective is one of clinical objectivity, emotional subjectivity, or one of an abandoned or tentative faith that has been shaken or stirred by the events of life beyond our control, when we take the panoramic view of where we have been and all that we have experienced over a lifetime, we discern with remarkable spiritual acuity that through every trial and triumph God is and was and shall forever be the invisible presence that is always with us, “Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made” (Romans 1:20).

A shocking succession of senseless acts of anger and aggression reflect the momentary social and spiritual imbalance in the world. It seems as if we are confronted with random acts of violence, school shootings, mass slayings, and natural disasters almost daily. Then suddenly our world is upended by a global pandemic that threatens the very fiber of our civilization. Unless we live apart from the mainstream of society, our lives are continuously affected by dire reports of tragedy and death.

As a society, we are forced to grieve more often and more publicly. At the same time, we grieve with an overwhelming

desire for deep comfort. We find that comfort as we live into the presence of God, “My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest” (Exodus 33:14).

At this moment in time, in this day and age in which we live, our lived present has an urgency attributable in large part to the agitation, noise, and insistence of social media and a twenty-four-hour news cycle. To survive the daunting challenges unique to the twenty-first century, we must notice God’s presence at work in the world. Perhaps more than ever, we desperately need a daily experience of the very real presence of God.

Within the Word of God, we discover much more than the transient comfort of the world, which can never fully satisfy the heartache of our inmost being. Rather we find the enduring comfort for which our soul yearns only in the sustaining presence of God. We are assured that God loves us, that God cares about us, that God walks alongside us in our grief, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” (Psalm 23:4 ESV).

God is present to us—here and now—in the present. When we grieve, we ask, indeed we expect that God will be here now. Our need for God’s presence inspires our most fervent prayers, “Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me” (Psalm 51:11 NIV). God meets us where we are today, not at some later time. God is never distracted, delayed, or deterred. Because we are God’s beloved children, we have God’s complete, undivided attention. God is reliable. God is perfectly faithful. God is fully present to each one of us individually and personally, “But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence forever” (Psalm 41:12).

The presence of God is a gift to our lives, a gift of pure love that is unearned, unmerited, and undeserved, a present that fills our soul and makes us whole. When we receive a hand-crafted gift offered from the heart, we admire it, we

appreciate it, we value the thought, time, and effort put into its creation and the love expressed in its giving. We are asked to do nothing more and nothing less than to receive the gift of God's presence with unending gratitude for the grace of the Giver, "From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace" (John 1:16).

At times, our best expression of love is simply the gift of our presence. When one we love is grieving, often the only thing we have to offer is ourselves. In the very silence of being there, being present, wordlessly we express our care and support. And within our presence, there is the gift of God's presence, "For 'In him we live and move and have our being'" (Acts 17:28).

Present Comfort reflects on some of the more difficult grief issues of our day from the perspective of Scripture, including collective grief, collateral grief, survivor torment, outcast grief, unresolved grief, and reconciliation, to name a few. Perhaps one of the most complicated iterations of grief is triggered by the emotional fracture of suicide. Though *Present Comfort* offers many verses of Scripture and meditations that address aspects of personal trauma and tragedy, it does not specifically focus on the profoundly personal emotional and spiritual effect of suicide on those who survive. The book is intended to help identify and resolve many of the issues that may arise from the devastation of loss through the comfort and support of Scripture.

Like you, I have faced death in the first person. Although I am not a therapist or professional, I have immersed myself in understanding my life-changing encounter with grief since the death of my beloved husband. The hope is that *Present Comfort* will inspire spiritual insight and a deeper understanding of the presence of God to those who grieve and provide perspective for those who desire to share in the language and heart of grief. May each whisper of God's comfort be an assurance of the presence of God.

O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O LORD, you know it completely.
You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
Where can I go from your spirit?
 Or where can I flee from your presence?
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
 if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
If I take the wings of the morning
 and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
 and your right hand shall hold me fast.
If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
 and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
 the night is as bright as the day,
 for darkness is as light to you.
—Psalm 139:1-12

P A R T I

GOD PRESENT
WITH US

UNISON GRIEF

For those around the world who are helpless onlookers to the destruction of a global pandemic or intentional acts of senseless violence, when life-altering events occur, our first impulse is to join hands and hearts across continents and the continuum of life to grieve in unison the death of each life lost to incomprehensible devastation. Whatever our faith conviction about the power and presence of God in the world, instinctively we reach within ourselves to pray individually and as one for the comfort of each person who survives and grieves.

As media saturation inevitably seeps into every crevice of the details, the word *mass* grabs our attention: mass infection, mass attack, mass destruction. And while *mass* may describe the scope of an event, there is a gaping emotional void when victims of unbridled contagion, personal and national terrorism, catastrophic weather events, and oppression of every kind are lumped together as part of an indeterminate *mass*.

Every person included as part of a media-described *mass* is a human being, whether alive or dead. When life ends because of an inexplicable *mass* occurrence of disease or disaster, we are painfully reminded that each individual has a unique story, “We spend our years as a tale that is told” (Psalm 90:9 KJV). Grief defies every assumption of *mass*

because above all else, grief is individual and personal. When there is shared trauma, we are compelled to react and feel beyond the sweeping generalities of *mass* and grieve both individually and in unison the sacred loss of each human life.

We grieve as one when we hear a daughter describe the heartbreak of being able to do nothing more than look through a window because of restrictions imposed to prevent the spread of a viral infection, unable to be with her mother while she is dying alone. We hear a distraught mother say through the uncontrollable tears of a shattered heart, awash in disbelief and grief, “I don’t know where my son is,” only later to learn that he died in a mass shooting.

While it is impossible to ignore the tectonic social and moral change evident in life all around us—for better or for worse—with borderless illness and mass slayings there is a certain aggregate confusion that echoes the anger, frustration, and conflicted emotions of chaos. The psalmist David expressed his human fear, “For I hear the whispering of many—terror all around!—as they scheme together against me, as they plot to take my life” (Psalm 31:13).

We grieve as one when we consider the ripple effect of sudden, unexpected loss on those who survive—not only family members, but also friends, colleagues, neighbors, school friends, church communities, and on and on. For each individual who dies, there are hundreds, perhaps even thousands of people whose lives are unalterably changed by the cruel, untimely death of one they know and love. With renewed reverence for life and spiritual respect for the mystery of death, we grieve as one each living, breathing soul—each father, mother, child, son, daughter, wife, husband and every other relationship of spirit and bond that connects us one to another.

We grieve as one when we honor the meaning and value of each life made for a specific purpose in the divine order of creation, made in the image of a loving, caring God. As one we pray that God will comfort those who grieve, “both low and high, rich and poor together” (Psalm 49:2). We pray that God will give strength and courage to all those whose hearts are broken. We pray that the destructive power of a viral epidemic or willful brutality will be overcome through God’s infinite goodness, mercy, and grace.

Who will contend with me?

Let us stand up together.

Who are my adversaries?

Let them confront me.

It is the LORD GOD who helps me.

—Isaiah 50:8-9

We grieve together—in unison, as one—fortified by the comfort and strength of our faith to endure through the power and presence of God, “No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13).

In you, O LORD, I seek refuge;

do not let me ever be put to shame;

in your righteousness deliver me.

Incline your ear to me;

rescue me speedily.

Be a rock of refuge for me,

a strong fortress to save me.

You are indeed my rock and my fortress;

for your name’s sake lead me and guide me,

take me out of the net that is hidden for me,
for you are my refuge.
Into your hand I commit my spirit;
you have redeemed me, O LORD, faithful God.
You hate those who pay regard to worthless idols,
but I trust in the LORD.
I will exult and rejoice in your steadfast love,
because you have seen my affliction;
you have taken heed of my adversities,
and have not delivered me into the hand of the
enemy;
you have set my feet in a broad place.

Love the LORD, all you his saints.
The LORD preserves the faithful,
but abundantly repays the one who acts haughtily.
Be strong, and let your heart take courage,
all you who wait for the LORD.

—Psalm 31:1-8, 23-24

WHERE IS GOD?

When acts of random violence kill innocent people, wound and maim dozens of others, and bring an entire city to its knees, our heart is overwhelmed by the questions of large-scale grief, “Who did this?” “Why?” “How did this happen?” When an elusive virus erupts, causing a pandemic that holds the entire globe hostage, we want to know what caused it and how it could spread so quickly.

When people die violently, suddenly, or unexpectedly, the human heart is changed in ways unlike any other grief. The immediate shock of the moment co-exists with anger, outrage, and fear. A sense of helplessness seeps into every corner of our being and shakes the very foundation of our life and all that we hold dear. We insist on answers when there are none, we question and probe our faith, “If the LORD is with us, why then has all this happened to us?” (Judges 6:13). From the depths of our minds and hearts, we hear within our being the unspoken question, “Where is God?”

The assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas on November 22, 1963 caused an outpouring of national grief that will forever be part of that city’s humanity. Tourists still visit the grassy knoll to live into one of the singular moments that altered the history of the United States. When the infamous events of September 11, 2001 occurred in New York City, the question “Where is God?”

hung in the air like the thick smoke that overcame countless victims on that horrific day. Americans everywhere were momentarily paralyzed by shock and dark grief because of incomprehensible acts of terrorism perpetrated on a single day which forever changed lives across the nation, indeed across the world. The sights, the smells, and the palpable fear that permeated an ostensibly invincible city seemed to challenge every intimation of the presence of God.

After the bombings that targeted participants in the 2013 Boston marathon, one commentator remarked that Boston is a tough city that would survive and be stronger. Though cities rebuild and infrastructures recover, the grief of urban tragedy leaves an emotional blot on the community psyche and a scar that survives over many generations. Museums, monuments, fountains, gardens, and squares remind us of our loss and civic vulnerability to willful terrorism, even as they do the cathartic work of thoughtful remembrance. And though memorial structures do not answer the question “Where is God?”, they remind those who visit and spend time there that each individual life is sacred.

Intellectually and spiritually we know that God does not cause violence. God does not visit us with disease, plagues, or pandemics. God does not plot against us, plan our harm, or punish us. Whatever our faith conviction, scripture assures us that the very nature of God is loving, kind, benevolent, compassionate, and merciful. When we suffer the pain of grief because of the human free will choices made by ourselves or others, we seek an outlet for our blame and indignation. If we pause to reflect and pray, we may direct our outrage and heartache toward God. Though God seldom provides us with an explanation for what has happened, we are never reproached for our outpouring of tangled emotions. Rather,

through the power of God's presence, God moves us beyond the unanswerable "Why did this happen?" to the comfort and tentative hope of "How will I go on?". Though we may wrestle with our questions for a while, at last we are compelled by life to concede that we may never understand what happened. Our future lies in how we choose to go on. This is God at work in our lives—God present, God for us, especially when we suffer the trauma of unimaginable shock, loss, and grief, "He who rescued us from so deadly a peril will continue to rescue us; on him we have set our hope that he will rescue us again" (2 Corinthians 1:10).

Where is God? "My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, 'Where is your God?'" (Psalm 42:3). How do we know that God is present to us in the unalterable circumstances of life?

- God is in the outpouring of loving-kindness as strangers spontaneously reach out to help other strangers.
- God is in families suddenly brought closer together by a greater understanding of the gifts of life and love.
- God is in the strength and wisdom of leaders, first responders, professionals, and volunteers.
- God is at the heart of each act of worship when those who seek meaning in tragedy gather in community to call on the power and comfort of a loving, caring God.
- God is in all the anonymous acts of tender care that bear witness to the love of God for us all.

- God is in each moment of self-sacrifice, selflessness, and quiet heroism.
- God is in each whispered prayer for those whose grief is newer than ours.
- God is in life’s worst tragedies when we are inspired to new heights of human goodness and compassion for others.

We find our power over evil, disease, destruction of life, and death in the presence of God.

For the righteous will never be moved;
they will be remembered forever.
They are not afraid of evil tidings;
their hearts are firm, secure in the LORD.
Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid;
in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.

—Psalm 112:6-8

God is the strength within our grief, the victorious right hand that comforts us and guides us toward renewed hope, recovered love, and belief in the future, “Do not fear, for I am with you, do not be afraid, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my victorious right hand” (Isaiah 41:10).

God is here, God is with us. In God’s abiding presence we are comforted through the unlimited sufficiency of the grace of God, “Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

O love of God, how strong and true!
Eternal, and yet ever new;
Uncomprehended and unbought,
Beyond all knowledge and all thought.

O love of God, how deep and great!
Far deeper than man's deepest hate;
Self-fed, self-kindled, like the light,
Changeless, eternal, infinite.

O heavenly love, how precious still,
In days of weariness and ill!
In nights of pain and helplessness,
To heal, to comfort, and to bless.

O wide embracing, wondrous love,
We read thee in the sky above,
We read thee in the earth below,
In seas that swell, and streams that flow.

We read thee best in Him who came
To bear for us the cross of shame;
Sent by the Father from on high,
Our life to live, our death to die.

We read thy power to bless and save
Even in the darkness of the grave;
Still more in resurrection light,
We read the fullness of thy might.

O love of God, our shield and stay
Through all the perils of our way!
Eternal love, in thee we rest
Forever safe, forever blest.²

THE LOVE OF GRIEF

Grief is perhaps the most equal-opportunity experience in all of life. It is the great leveler of emotions, place, and time. At some age, at some time in life, everyone will know the sorrow and pain of grief. Grief is indifferent to our race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation. We are not emotionally insulated from grief because of where we live, how educated we are, or how much money we have or do not have. Grief does not care whether we wear a business suit, a uniform, yoga pants, a T-shirt, or a clergy robe.

The most fundamental truth of grief is this: we grieve because we love. If we did not love, our hearts would not be broken by death. The greater our love, the deeper and more profound our grief.

- The love of grief is passionate—we cherish and memorialize those lost to us in death. We remember and never forget.
- The love of grief is compassionate—it reaches out, reconciles, restores, and builds up.
- The love of grief is infinite—amid the very worst of our grief, we glimpse the enormity of God’s love and presence to us all.

- The love of grief is resilient—it is why we endure the suffering of loss and persevere in hope. Despite every evidence to the contrary, love never fails.

When we look into the depths of an international health crisis, a planned assault on innocent human life, and each instance of tragic, senseless death, we are compelled to consider questions about love that linger beyond the immediate moment of shock and heartbreak. Would we forego the love we shared with the one now lost to us in death simply to avoid the pain of grief? No, surely we would not deny the joy and glory of love only to avoid the possibility of loss—it is simply unimaginable. If we take a step back for a moment, we see in our grief perhaps the most heartfelt expression of love beyond death. Grief comes from love. Grief springs from love. Grief arises from a surrendered, selfless love. Grief is the eternal connection of our love to the one now lost to us in death.

Though it is not always so, we may find within the love of grief our best response to life's worst tragedies. Without fully understanding the *why*, we seek some redemptive value so that death will not have been in vain. We harness our grief-born love, first to change our own heart, then slowly to change the world. And if not the whole world all at once, we start where we are to be an influence for good, trusting that one small swell of love shared with others will one day become a sea change of spiritual outreach and compassion.

After the final words of comfort and encouragement are spoken, the flowers wilt, and the last casserole is delivered and consumed, what we discover is that grief never leaves us where it finds us. We are forever changed by the experience of death when it visits us individually and personally. Grief may leave us disillusioned with life. Grief may leave us

angry, fearful, or even hate-filled. Or grief may leave us more convinced than ever of the goodness of life. As we experience violence, disease, and tragic death with ever-greater frequency in our current culture of self, grief may enable us to love others more deeply despite the certainty that evil is present in the world.

The inadequacy of our human resources inspires us to pray. We pray that God will overcome the power of evil in the world in which we live, “And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil” (Matthew 6:13 RSV). We pray that we may be agents in the world of the comfort found only in the presence of God, “How precious is your steadfast love, O God! All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings” (Psalm 36:7).

If you enjoyed this excerpt of
Julie Yarbrough's *Present Comfort*,
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