

Who has eyes to see? Who has ears to hear? Can we learn to speak the truth about work-related harm and death, grief and trauma?

A pastoral counsellor pointed to faith's alternative view of work-related death and grief when she defined evil as "anything that is destructive of life or health or impairs potential, functioning, relationships, or creativity".¹ She defined evil as a power that has agency – destructive agency that invades, or violates or enters into life or health.

After a traumatic event, normalising a victim's symptoms as symptoms of grief may obscure the underlying spiritual reality of injustice. Focussing on anger as an emotion may obscure the way that anger constructs a spiritual relationship of resistance by the victim, to the victimiser. By ignoring the spiritual reality of evil and its destructive capacity to invade and embed itself in the heart and soul of the victim, there is a danger of ignoring their deeply problematic relationship with the victimiser and leading them into a false refuge of victimhood.

When the victimising event is understood as a consequence of the evil arising from society's idolatry, it brings into focus the gospel conviction that the power of God's love is the only power able to transform and heal evil's destructive power. I came to this belief when my personal formation for ministering to grieving people as a Uniting Church minister blinded me to the need for my own healing from wounds caused by violence. I had failed to see my personal agency dissipate as I became enmeshed in the same alienating spirit that oppressed those who were the primary victims of destructive violence. I had been blind to the capacity of evil to hide its destructive spirit within my ministerial 'good works', and so failed to see the depth of unjust suffering experienced by a person whose sense of self was shattered by a loved-ones' work-related death.



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The professional language of 'grief and loss' seems too bland for the reality of widows bereaved by a work-related death - a reality I became too familiar with in my ministry with those bereaved by a work-related death. The language of 'grief and loss' shifts their focus from the unjust death of their husband onto the widow's personal psychological and emotional state. But for many of these widows, their heart yearns for justice, a yearning that measures injustice from the depths of an abyss.

For most widows whose husband's death was work-related, the shadow of death fell across a treasured dimension of the loving relationship they shared in their marriage, destroying taken-for-granted bonds of love. The widows drew attention to how their husband's death made a rent in the fabric of their families. Their husband's death also meant that he was no longer there to carry out familiar routines that were foundational to maintaining order in their lives together. It is not surprising that these widows are weighed down by the destructive force their loved-one's death has brought to others' lives, children, grandchildren, parents, siblings, workmates, friends.

The language they use to describe their reality is not the language of 'loss'. It is not as if something has been misplaced or forgotten. Nor are they describing 'grief' as if they were experiencing a changed psychological state. They describes an annihilating

¹ M. Davis, 'Perspectives on evil: structures of evil encountered in pastoral counselling' *Zygon*, 43/3 (2008) p.667.

power that has violently robbed them of their loved-one's life and devastated the relationships of all those who were connected to him in love. Death is a nihilistic, chaotic, even violent spirit in their lives and that of others whom they love, and who shared with them their loved-one's life and death.

Several widows reflect upon the impact of their loved-one's death in vividly physical terms. While the language of 'grief and loss' renders neutral the destructive reality of death's presence, these widows' language indicates that death has assaulted them and robbed them of some vital part of themselves. They seek to name an unseen but painfully experienced destructive reality. The final dimension of death's destructive power and perhaps its ultimate seductive illusion is the temptation to those broken-hearted by the death of a loved-one to think about suicide as a means to join their loved-one. Perhaps not surprisingly, several widows gave voice to death's assault on them with anger: anger that still cried out for justice and healing up to ten years after their husband's death.

With their anger, these widows give voice to their awareness that both their loved-one's death and their own plight is profoundly unjust. Paradoxically, the love that joined these couples together in marriage as husband and wife has not been silenced by death, but now these widows' love gives voice to lamenting their husband's unjust work-related death. Lament gives voice to their experience of injustice through a form of speaking that is truth-telling. The world is not as it pretends it is, for it causes innocent suffering; it cheats and steals; and it denies the power of death to destroy. Only when people know that the full measure of the reality of their experience of injustice has been named are they able to grieve fully, for much more has died than their loved-one.

Wright suggests telling the truth discloses God's alternative order of mercy and justice. 'Truth is what happens when humans use words to reflect God's wise ordering of the world and so shine light into its dark corners, bringing judgment and mercy where it is badly needed. Empires can't cope with this. They make their own 'truth', creating 'facts on the ground' in the depressingly normal way of violence and injustice.'² Can we learn to speak the truth to power about unjust death in the public world of work?

Perhaps, as Resner suggests in his commentary on one of Luke's parables about a widow, 'God continues to send prophets to call us to account, but they take the unusual form of our contemporary widows ... Who has eyes to see? Who has ears to hear? Who is not so entangled in institutional blindness to see that we keep creating structures and processes that work directly against the core values of God's kingdom?'³ These are the questions that call the church to listen to stories of injustice and suffering from work-related deaths. For in these stories, truth is named and God's intention for justice and healing mercy is revealed to our contemporary circumstance.



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² T. Wright, (2012). *How God became King: getting to the heart of the gospels*, London, SPCK, p.145.

³ A. Resner, 'Widow's mite or widow's plight: on exegetical abuse, textual harassment and learning prophetic exegesis'. *Review and Expositor*. 107 (2010). p.553