

Mourners find comfort, solace and renewed faith in parish grief support groups

With the help of a life-changing support group, Lorraine Young's Catholic faith transformed from a distant stranger to an intimate source of comfort and solace as she grieved the loss of her husband.

Holy Week chronicles Christ's journey through suffering. In a similar way, [*Grief as a Journey*](#), an eight-to-10-week support group, helps Catholics come to terms with the death of a loved one and their own suffering.



Robin Young, husband of Lorraine

Through meetings, prayer, Mass and other activities, [*Grief as a Journey*](#) played a major role in helping Young overcome the death of her husband, Robin, and return to the faith of her childhood.

"God showed me the grief group and all the beautiful people who were suffering in the same way I was," Young said. "He caught me so that I wouldn't get too hurt too badly."

After decades away, Young came back to the Church in the summer of 2016 and she began to attend Mass regularly. At that time, Robin had just completed chemotherapy for lymphoma and his cancer was in remission. Months later came the devastating news that his cancer had returned.

“When he got sick again, I was already in the stages of being thankful to God for calling me back,” Young said.

“For some people it would have been ‘God, how can you do this now?’ but I had the opposite reaction. God obviously knew what was coming, and now He prepared me for it. No one’s ready for that kind of thing when it happens, but now I had a really strong, renewed faith.”

Robin died in July 2017. Two months later, Young saw an item about a grief support group at her parish, St. Teresa’s in south Edmonton. Originally she joined a non-denominational program called GriefShare, and then the Archdiocese of Edmonton created [*Grief as a Journey*](#) with a Catholic focus.

Young participated in [*Grief as a Journey*](#) twice, in the spring and fall of 2018.

“A week after Robin died, I was absolutely lost. I didn’t have a clue,” said Young. “I needed something to find a way to deal with it. I had been reading some books and stuff but I just needed to talk to other people who had a clue about what was going on and what I was going through.

“What the program does is that it gives you permission in a very real way to deal with grief.”

Above all, what kept Young returning to the [*Grief as a Journey*](#) group was the way it helped her connect with others and share her experience at an intimate and understanding level.

That first year after her husband’s death, Young found it difficult to connect with people. They could sympathize with her pain, but not understand it. The [*Grief as a Journey*](#) group helped her process the emotional difficulties of losing her husband of 12 years.

While the program has only been around for a year, it has been a source of consolation for other Catholics who have lost a loved one.



Clint McElwaine

Matthew McElwaine took his own life age 41 amidst depression and anxiety. McElwaine's suicide came as a shock to his family, especially his father, Cliff, who turned to [Grief as a Journey](#) for help.

"All the times I let Matthew down would come crashing through me," Cliff McElwaine said.

"Getting through that guilt was the big thing for me."

McElwaine participated twice in the the [Grief as a Journey](#) program at St. Theresa's Parish. The group provided an outlet to express those feelings of guilt and to come to terms with the family tragedy.

"Matthew forgiving me – that was a big step and the group helped me get by that," he said. "Even if I did stumble a few times, that was his decision. I had made some mistakes in life, but that was my journey."

"Sharing that with people and watching them go on with their lives, seeing that journey was as tough as mine – there was a real kinship there. The group did whatever they could to make you feel like you could speak. I'm in a much better place now, and so much of it is due to that group."

The Mass at the end of the [Grief as a Journey](#) program is especially poignant. Group members light candles and present photos of their lost loved ones. Letters written to their loved ones are sealed and prayers are offered for them.

McElwaine said it's a moving experience that brings many tears. Young agrees.

"It's a beautiful way to remember those that have passed, and to recognize the

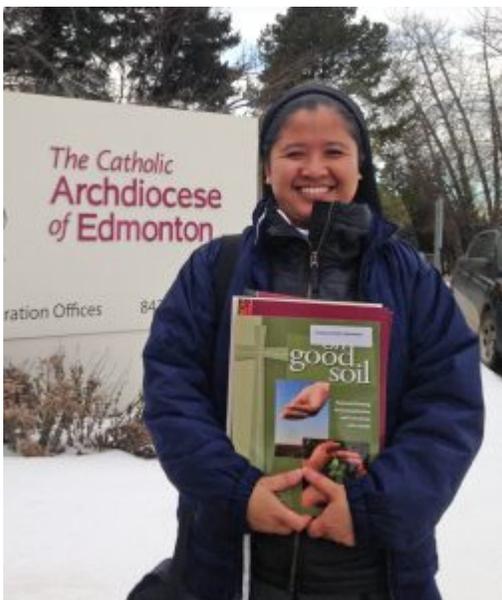
people that are going through the grieving process,” she said. “It’s a situation that everybody is going to go through; at one time or another it will happen to all of us. But it’s nice to be recognized.”

It’s the intensity of that Mass that impacts many [Grief as a Journey](#) participants.

“We find there’s a lot of healing in that Mass,” said Marie Dafoe, who facilitates [Grief as a Journey](#) programs in Edmonton. “Sometimes we have people who have not gone to church in some time, because they feel angry at God. I said to one lady who was hesitant that she should come to the Mass with her family and just sit at the back if she doesn’t feel comfortable. Then by the end she was right up at the front with all of us.”

A retired oncology and palliative care nurse, Dafoe found a new opportunity to help people through [Grief as a Journey](#).

“As a nurse I always felt the highest honour was to be with someone in their final hours before they met our Lord,” Dafoe said. “I wanted to help people through this, to rekindle their faith and see the goodness of God.”



Sister Adrialen Vallecera

Sister Adrialen Vallecera, with the congregation of the Religious of the Virgin Mary, is also a facilitator for [Grief as a Journey](#) at St. Teresa’s. As a teenager, she lost her mother 25 years ago. Her father died seven years ago. Sister Vallecera said facilitating the support groups has helped her own healing.

“Even though it was not a recent loss, it turned out to very enriching for me at the same time,” she said.

“At the end of the program I felt there was something mended in me. I revisited and looked within my heart and it brought many reflections on what the years have taught me.”

Sister Vallecera said the [Grief as a Journey](#) program taught her the universal nature of loss.

“It gave me a sense of belonging, that no matter how distant that experience was, I was connected to the group because they were also going through that loss,” she said. “Now when we see each other in the parish, we wave our hands and know we are connected.”

Eleven parishes in the Edmonton Archdiocese currently offer the [Grief as a Journey](#) program: [St. John Bosco](#), [St. Theresa](#), [St. Thomas More](#), [St. Agnes](#), [St. Anthony](#) and [Santa Maria Goretti](#) in Edmonton, as well as [St. Anthony](#) in Lloydminster, [Our Lady of Perpetual Help](#) in Sherwood Park, [Holy Trinity](#) in Spruce Grove, [St. Michael](#) in Leduc, and [Our Lady of the Angels](#) in Fort Saskatchewan. For more information contact the individual parish.

For Lorraine Young, the two-year anniversary of her husband’s death is coming up soon, and she may return to the program as a source of comfort.

“Sometimes you think if you can get through that first year milestone, you’re going to be OK. But there’s going to be a second year, a third year; God willing how long you live, you’ll still have to deal with that loss. The wound heals but the scar is always there,” Young said.



Clint McElwaine and his deceased son Matthew

“Knowing that the second year is coming up I know I’m going to need their help and support again. Not the same extent, I don’t need to be carried. But it’s

nice to have someone to hold your hand as your dealing through this, and that's what it feels like being there."

Cliff McElwaine has also been invited to return to the [*Grief as a Journey*](#) this year, but he says he's at the stage where he must learn to move on and return to his daily life. He spends much of his time watching over his two grandchildren, with the memory of their father Matthew not far behind.

"I need to go back to doing the things I used to do," Cliff said. "It's like my son has given me the permission to enjoy life again."

With the help of [*Grief as a Journey*](#), McElwaine said he's continually reminded of one of the last things Matthew said to him: "I know you'll take care of the kids, Dad."