

Bird by Bird

How we transform grief — one small act of kindness at a time.

By Jan D. Dixon



Overwhelmed. That's how I feel. 150,000 deaths from COVID-19 as of Friday, July 31. I can't wrap my head or my heart around that number. It's horrific. But it's hard to take in that much suffering and loss in one sentence — in one lonely statistic.

I tend to go numb. Try to think about something else. Anything else. That's when I know I need to take a step back and break this down — to personalize these losses. And yes, our First UMC church family knows people personally — Stuart Porter and Cheryl Stauffer — who died from this terrible disease here in Cortez, Colorado.

My son-in-law, who teaches physics at a high school on Long Island, nearly

broke into tears when he told me last week that eight of his students have lost someone in the last two months to COVID-19 — grandfathers, grandmothers, an uncle, an aunt, a neighbor, a close family friend. Besides grieving the loss of their senior year celebrations, they were caught in a more personal grief.

So how do we grieve this tragedy together? How do we honor those who have died? How do we go on? One way to respond is by showing up — and by doing something.

Tuesday, I volunteered to help with the Navajo COVID Relief Project. My job was to break down large bags of rice, placing four-cup portions into small bags. These were later added to individual boxes of food and household supplies and shipped off to those on the Navajo reservation who are most in need.

I remember when Pastor Jean first started this project, which is in it's fourth week and running, that she felt overwhelmed. That's when she asked for help, and an army of volunteers showed up. They started by breaking down all of the supplies our church had ordered and putting them into individual portions and bags. These were placed in individual relief boxes. Bag by bag. Box by box. We found a way forward.

This reminds me of a story that writer, Anne Lamont, tells about her brother when he was 10 years old. He had been given three months to write a report on birds and had put it off. It was due the next day. "He was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead," she writes. "Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said, 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'"

We move forward in these days of a pandemic by transforming our grief, by breaking it down into small acts of kindness – the things we can do. A morning prayer. A call to check on a friend. A donation to a food bank.

Most of all, we stand in solidarity with all of those who are hurting, grieving and afraid. We reach inside our hearts to feel the truth of this moment. Let it wash over us. Soften us. Remind us that we are all in this together.

And we wait. We wait on God, who is bigger than all of our small acts of faithfulness, to give us words of encouragement and hope. Like Anne Lamont's father, we hear God's voice whispering: "Bird by bird, my friends. Just take it bird by bird." ###