“You Could Buy More Storage”
Princeton University Annual Service of Remembrance
February 21, 2026 - Rev. Theresa S. Thames

Recently, I visited my wireless service provider. Before walking into the store, I said to myself, ‘I am not upgrading my phone. I am not buying accessories. I do not need the newest version of anything. I just want to know why my phone is so slow.’

The technician was pleasant and efficient. After a few clicks, she looked up and said, almost casually, “You could free up space by deleting some photos. Maybe clear out some of these old contacts.” And before I could stop it, a tear slid down my cheek.

Delete photos. Delete old contacts.

But those are not “old contacts” and pictures. They are birthdays and late-night text threads. Fierce selfies and blurry conference pictures. Life moments captured in a square. They are voicemails that end with, “Call me when you get this,” and “I love you.” They are conversations that no longer have a reply.

Delete them?

I left the store overwhelmed, not by anger but by the suggestion that memory is excess. And I kept thinking: Is that what we are supposed to do with grief? Clear space? Delete what hurts so we can move on?

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Each year, we gather in this chapel because we understand that memory and love are sacred. Not digital storage, but the people and moments we carry in our hearts with reverence. This annual Service of Remembrance is not perfunctory. It is not something we squeeze in between other important things. This *is* the important thing. In a place that values forward motion, we intentionally stop. We pause and remember.

Journalist and CNN commentator Anderson Cooper has become a public voice around grief through his podcast *All There Is with Anderson Cooper.* After losing his father, brother, and most recently his mother, he began asking what grief actually does to a life. It is nearly impossible to listen without tears because Cooper gives people permission to speak about what so often makes us uncomfortable, life after loss. In one episode, he talks about our “capacity for grief.” Capacity. Storage for grief.

Researchers now tell us what many of us already know deep in our bones: grief changes you on a cellular level. Grief rewires our neural pathways and alters how the brain understands “we” and

"us."[1] When someone dies, the "we" changes. The "us" shifts. Our brains must relearn the architecture of belonging. According to Dr. Mary-Frances O'Connor, a leading researcher on grief, "When a loved one dies, our brains change epigenetically."[2] She describes the grief as almost physical in that the brain must update its understanding of reality.

O'Connor likens it to phantom limb pain; the body knows something is missing, yet still reaches. You know they are gone, and yet your heart still reaches. You turn to tell them something, send a text, and expect their voice. The body remembers even when the mind understands.

While I deeply respect the work of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, grief is not a five-step process we complete. We don't get over or move through grief. Grief resists efficiency, ignores timelines, and is sometimes inconvenient. Grief is nonlinear and shows up in the living room as well as at Trader Joe's. Time does not erase pain, nor does time make it better. However, time creates space and opportunity to build capacity and to dare to keep living.

Elaine Pagels, faculty emeritus in the Religion department, after losing her husband and young son, wrote near the end of her memoir, "Sometimes hearts do heal, through what I can only call grace." The heart heals, sometimes, by grace. Healing is not erasing memories or pretending everything is fine, but it can be an expansion.

The depth of your ache is evidence of the depth of your love. Love does not shrink after loss; it stretches. Sometimes painfully, but even a broken heart can still beat and grow. Stretching increases our capacity not only to grieve, but eventually to feel joy again. We can feel both grief and joy simultaneously without negating either.

And this is where Rumi, the Sufi mystic and poet, shares a deeper truth, that "The wound is the place where the Light enters you." This doesn't mean that the wound is good or loss is easy, but love has marked us. Where love has marked us, light can still enter.

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In a community like ours here at Princeton, grief can become quiet as we return to work, to deadlines, to research, and to all the many responsibilities. Yet we know someone is missing - an office door remains closed and a seat in a classroom is empty. A voice or perspective is absent from the conversation. And still, the world keeps moving.

This annual gathering interrupts that movement and invites us to stop. Please know we are not here to fix grief, but to hold our grief together. While we will not have the same grief as the person sitting on your pew, we know our own. Because of our knowing, we enlarge the "we" and

[1] "Healing Your Brain After Loss: How Grief Rewires the Brain." American Brain Foundation, 29 September 2021, https://www.americanbrainfoundation.org/how-tragedy-affects-the-brain/. Accessed January 2026.

[2] Haring, Chris. "Grief Explained From a Neurobiological Perspective." *Death With Dignity*, 28 May 2023, https://deathwithdignity.org/news/2023/10/the-neurobiology-of-grief/. Accessed January 2026.

redefine us, making room for one another's beautiful pain. Sometimes, the most sacred act is when someone sits beside us without pushing us to feel something else.

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My friends, the heart is not a device that needs clearing, but an organ that stretches. If your heart feels heavy today, that is love with nowhere else to go. If tears come, let them because they are the overflow of your memory. We are here because we know love, have loved, and are love. Love does not end at death, but it strengthens us to dare to keep living.

If you were wondering, I did not delete the photos, text messages, or contacts. And neither should you.

Amen.