

Ambiguous Loss

Pauline Boss, PhD, coined the phrase *ambiguous loss*, a term that describes the pain of a loss that is either physical or psychological but not both. Examples include having a parent with dementia, where he/she is present physically but not psychologically; or having a loved one who is missing for one of many reasons but is not confirmed as having died.

As those who love prodigals know, there is a huge loss of spiritual connection that is sometimes combined with loss of contact and/or worries over issues of safety.

- The prodigal may simply no longer live the Christian life with no other concerns.
- The prodigal may have abandoned faith completely, rebelling against everything he/she was taught to believe and embrace.
- The prodigal may live in a very dark place spiritually.
- The prodigal may be making choices that make no sense.
- The prodigal may be addicted, so the person you once knew is totally altered.
- The prodigal may be living in a way that not only endangers himself/herself but the family and others and cannot be with you.
- The prodigal may be in jail.
- The prodigal may be estranged, so you don't know where he/she is or if he/she is alive or not.

There can be a loss of

- Dreams for the future, for what might have been.
- Being a part of the prodigal's everyday life.
- True fellowship that you can only have with another Christian.
- Making memories.
- Getting to know the prodigal as an adult.
- Understanding.
- The prodigal's personality.
- Commonality of goals.
- Tradition.
- Time together.

There is also the grief that comes because of the danger of eternal consequences.

However, while those suffering from ambiguous loss in the secular realm have very little hope for the resolution of the situation, Christians who love and pray for a prodigal have extreme hope, because God Himself works on the resolution when we pray. We have hope of restoration of relationship physically and spiritually; we have hope that true fellowship will be restored.

As Tim Sturgill, someone my husband and I know, once wrote regarding a Christian's hope: "Yes, it's rooted in the Greek word for hope, which actually means a favorable, and confident expectation. Biblical hope is the emotion that accompanies faith. They are tied together." When non-Christians say they hope something will happen, doubt is implied; but when a Christian says he/she hopes something will happen, faith is implied.

While you may be experiencing ambiguous loss, you still have hope. Pray to our God who loves your prodigal more than you do and has the power to deliver and save!