

meaning and purpose to his life, a meaning centered in love and responsibility and service.

Suffering has the power to transform and to redeem. To say so is neither to justify suffering nor to detract from its pain. It is simply to acknowledge that if to be human is to suffer, so also to be human is to be subject to the possibility of growth and transformation which may be born of pain and suffering.

Christian theologian Dorothy Soelle sums it up well when she writes: "Suffering makes one more sensitive to the pain in the world. It can teach us to put forth a greater love for everything that exists." ¹⁹

PART IV

THE CRISIS OF LOSS AND GRIEF

THE HOUR OF LEAD

This is the Hour of Lead —
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons recollect the Snow —
First — Chill — then Stupor — then the letting
go —

Emily Dickinson

Blessed are they who mourn, for they shall be
comforted.

The Gospel of Matthew

Deep sorrow is . . . a prelude to redemption.

Abraham Heschel

H. R. was in his early eighties but vigorous and apparently in good health when his wife of fifty years died after a long struggle with cancer. Like most marriages theirs had known some difficult times, but they had been deeply devoted to each other especially during the last fifteen or twenty years. H.R. had cared for his wife during her long illness, and after her death he missed her very much. I had many long conversations with him during which he poured out his grief. He was depressed; he felt that he had no reason to keep on living; he was lonely; he had little energy and little interest in anything; his life was empty. He tried to resume some of the activities he had enjoyed before his wife became ill — meetings at the church, contacts with friends. His son in another city invited him for an extended visit, but he did not feel well enough to accept the invitation. Nothing worked. His doctor suggested that he go into the

hospital for tests to try to determine what was wrong. He did, but they found nothing. Shortly thereafter he died suddenly of a heart attack. The attending physician wrote that his heart ruptured. He died literally of a broken heart five months after his wife had died.

H. R. was my father. For five months he suffered from acute grief as a result of the loss of my mother. His grief was complicated by his age and by the fact that for the year-and-a-half of my mother's illness, Dad's life was centered entirely on her. He took her to the doctor or the hospital for treatments, he made her feel as comfortable as possible at home, waited on her, and hoped and prayed for her recovery. Except for its extremity, however, his grief is not atypical. We all experience those same feelings of sadness, depression, loneliness, emptiness, despair and many other emotions when we have suffered a great loss.

The loss can be of someone close, or of something else. We experience other kinds of losses more frequently than death, but since we mostly associate grief with death we don't usually think of other losses as a source of grief. But they are.

We know loss when we move to a different city or a different neighborhood and lose friends, familiar surroundings, groups and institutions to which we have been attached.

We know loss when we change jobs, even when the change is a promotion, because we may miss our friends and attachments from the old job.

We know loss when we lose a job or when we retire. In both instances one day you are busy and active and making a contribution as part of the work force, and you are with productive people, and the next day you no longer have a

meaningful job, and you have lost contact with your friends from the workplace.

We know losses as we grow older, the loss of energy, of memory, of our ability to do certain things we once did, of some of the hopes and dreams and expectations we once had.

We know loss as our children go off on their own; or as young adults we know loss when we leave home to go to college or take a job.

We know loss when we lose a part of our body through surgery such as a mastectomy or colostomy or when we become paralyzed as a result of an accident.

We know financial loss and perhaps the loss of a sense of financial security through a bad business deal or an unwise investment or the collapse of the stock market.

Many of us know the loss of a spouse through divorce, and with that the loss of the friends we had as a couple, sometimes the loss of a house and other property, and perhaps the loss of time with our children. We may know the loss of financial security, and of a lifestyle made possible by some degree of affluence. This certainly is true for many women after a divorce. One reason divorce is so traumatic is that it involves multiple losses.

Our list could go on. The important point is that any loss can trigger the emotions we call grief. When we experience loss we tend to go through a particular process, one documented by studies of people experiencing loss. The phases of this process describe the course of grief in response to all types of loss, but the more acute the loss, the more deeply we will experience each phase. We will usually feel the loss of a person more deeply than we do the loss of other things. But "any form of loss is at root experienced as a loss of a

part of the self. A portion of the very fabric of our existence is ripped."¹

There is really no way to avoid loss, as Judith Viorst has made clear in her excellent book *Necessary Losses*.² The experience of loss is part of being human. The only way we can avoid loss is to avoid attachments, but to do that is to avoid life, or at least a truly human life. The person who eschews close friendships, who never lets herself care deeply about another, may succeed in avoiding the pain of parting and loss. But such a person also misses out on some of the deepest joys of life.

To be human is to know loss, and, indeed, the more fully human we are, the more loss we will know and the deeper we will feel the losses; for the more we love and care, the more we have to lose. All the things to which we become attached are transient; they pass; they decay; they die. And when we lose someone or something we love, our response is grief.

Grief is so very difficult to handle because it is not one emotion, but many. My father experienced sadness, depression, bewilderment, despair, helplessness, loneliness, emptiness, meaninglessness, and probably guilt. All of these are common to grief. What we call grief is a cluster of emotions. We experience them in varying degrees of intensity according to the importance of our loss, and we experience them in no particular order or pattern.

We may wonder if we are losing our minds. Some time ago I spoke about loss and grief to a group of divorced and widowed persons. A woman came up afterward to tell me that she had experienced all the feelings I had described when she lost her husband a year before. She thought there was something wrong with her, that she was losing her

mind. She was relieved to know that her actions and feelings were normal. She said she only wished someone had told her so at the time.

Grief can be described as a process of three phases. The first stage is shock, numbness and disbelief. The second is suffering, intense psychic pain. The third is recovery or the completion of mourning. This chapter will deal with the first two stages. The following chapter will treat the third stage and the way a liberal faith can help us in times of grief.

First, some caveats. For the purpose of understanding the emotional dynamics of grief, it is helpful to distinguish three phases of the grieving process. But it should be noted that we do not move automatically from one stage to the next. Sometimes people get stuck in the second stage, suffering, and never get to the stage of recovery. My father was a case in point. Also, the stages overlap. We do not suddenly cease to feel intense psychic pain and one day find ourselves recovered. Moreover, there is no one timetable for the process. We each have our own timetable for each loss we experience. For various reasons when the loss is of a loved one, many find it takes at least a year before they can begin to recover. Usually one has to live through holidays and birthdays and other special days at least once without the loved one, before the intensity of suffering subsides.

A loss may come suddenly, cataclysmically, or gradually, over time, as when someone dies of cancer. When death comes gradually, friends and loved ones may experience what is termed anticipatory grief. That is, they may feel all the emotions of grief in advance of the actual loss. Chronic marital problems over months and years may also give rise to anticipatory grief. However, those who mourn in advance

also mourn after loss, though usually not as intensely as do those who experience a sudden loss.

With the caveats that grief seldom follows a systematic sequence and that we may undergo the emotions of grief in many combinations and in differing degrees and forms, we can nevertheless say that grief tends to follow a characteristic pattern.

Numbness

When a significant loss occurs, we experience intense pain and disbelief, but then a kind of numbness sets in as a response to the shock. Numbness protects us from the full impact of our loss by dulling our emotions. Numbness and disbelief keep us from realizing the full extent of our loss. When we first learn that our loved one has died, we usually do not comprehend the full meaning of what we have been told. It takes time to assimilate the terrible news.

May 22, 1982, was a Saturday, and I had agreed to perform three weddings that day. After the first I was home having lunch when I received word that my father had died unexpectedly a thousand miles away. I talked to my sister who lived much closer to our hometown, and we made some necessary decisions. Then I performed the other two weddings and the next morning conducted the Sunday service before flying to Missouri on Sunday afternoon. I could not have done those things in a composed way had I not been protected by numbness, an absence of feeling, and by a lack of full realization that my father was indeed dead.

I see the same phenomenon at work every time I respond to the death of a church member. The bereaved nearly always make the necessary arrangements, help plan the memorial service, and go through the service and reception afterward in a composed manner. People often remark about

how well so-and-so did, and they are greatly relieved that they did not have to deal with a weeping, despairing person or family. But in fact the survivors deserve neither credit nor blame. They were able to carry on because they were protected by the perfectly normal and natural initial reaction of numbness.

This phenomenon occurs in other forms of loss as well. A woman told me about her reaction to her divorce. She did quite well for the first several weeks, she said. She went about her work as usual, made a number of important decisions about living arrangements and future plans, and then rather suddenly she was overwhelmed by loneliness, sadness and emptiness.

The Emotions of Grief

Numbness does not last. After a few days or a few weeks, it is replaced by wracking emotions. We feel empty, alone and isolated.³

Emptiness, Loneliness, and Isolation. We feel empty because we have lost a part of ourselves. The word *bereavement* comes from *reave* meaning *to be dispossessed*. Something important has been taken away. Each time we lose something or someone, our self is diminished. C.S. Lewis wrote of the death of his wife that it left him feeling like "an empty house."⁴ We all receive our identity and our sense of meaning to a great extent from our relationships with others. When our identity is tied very closely to one person, the loss of that person can leave us especially empty, lacking any sense of who we are and what our purpose in life may be. That, I am certain, is what happened to my father.

That also happened to a man I knew who retired from a job of forty years. His work clearly was an important part of who he was as a person. Without it he felt empty within. Mourning the loss of his job, he was mourning the loss of his identity and his sense of being a contributing member of society.

James Carse calls grief a "cosmic crisis," using the word cosmic in its Greek meaning of an ordered world. Because we derive our sense of meaning from our relationships to others and to significant communities, loss, particularly the death of someone close to us, disrupts the order of our world.

It is not simply that there is one person less to cope with; it is that we live in a universe that makes no sense. The cosmos has lost its fundamental order. As a result, our own lives lose their meaning.⁵

Loss, then, leads us to a spiritual crisis, "a situation in which it is necessary to make a fundamental decision concerning the course and content of our lives."⁶ People who suffer a serious loss will have to rebuild their lives, as anyone who has lost a spouse by death or divorce will testify. Loss requires a reaffirmation of the self, sometimes a new definition or a new understanding of who we are. If reaffirmation or new definition does not occur, griefwork cannot be completed.

The grief-stricken person experiences loneliness because she has been cut off from someone she loved. When the loss is of a spouse or member of the immediate family, that person is no longer there in the house with you, no longer there to talk to, to do things with, to eat with. When the loss is of a parent, you may now have the sense that you have been left alone in the world. You are now the older generation of your family.

Loss also brings isolation. The grieving person feels the need to be alone and may even be afraid to go out in public for fear of breaking down. American society does not help in this regard. We don't invite grieving people to social functions because we don't want someone there who might dampen the spirits of others, nor do we want a reminder of death in our presence. We send an unwritten message to the grief-stricken: Stay home until you can resume your normal, all-is-well facade.

Even friends tend to ignore and avoid a grieving person. Being with a grieving person is not pleasant, so we stay away. It is not pleasant in part because it reminds us of death when we prefer to retain our illusion of immortality. Sometimes a grieving person feels lonely and isolated even with others present because others do not understand what she is going through.

Sadness, Depression, and Despair. A move to another city will evoke sadness at the loss of friends and familiar surroundings. Much greater, of course, is the sorrow we feel at the loss of a child or spouse or dear friend. A person in grief has lost something important and yearns for restoration.

Sadness can become depression when our loss is particularly great. We may feel, as my father did, that our lives are over, that there is no longer any reason to live. Ann Kaiser Stearns writes that "for most people, depression is the main feature of grieving and it involves the longest struggle."⁷ That is why grieving people are easily fatigued and why it is hard for them to do very much. Depression is terribly tiring.

The lowered energy that results from depression and grief makes it difficult for one to resume a normal work schedule. Again our society is not helpful, for we expect people to resume work within a few days after a significant loss. If a

person has major surgery, we do not expect them to return to work the following week, but that is usually what we expect of people who are mourning. The grieving person should be allowed to take several weeks off and then to return to work gradually, part-time at first. It is often good to have work to do, for work gives us some purpose or usefulness and takes our minds off our loss for a while. Work is therapeutic, but only under limited conditions.

Sorrow flows into despair if a person comes to feel that life is futile, that there is no hope for the future, or that he or she can never experience joy or happiness again.

Fear and Anxiety. An early source of anxiety each of us experiences when we are children is the anxiety we feel at the possibility of abandonment. When in later life we lose someone we love and on whom we depend, we feel this anxiety again. It takes the form of concern over whether we can survive emotionally and physically without the other, the terror of helplessness like that we felt as a young child.

Separation from someone to whom we have been close and closely identified with for years can cause us to feel depleted as a person. This is often particularly true for a woman who has heavily invested her life in her husband and his career. If he dies or if they are divorced, she may feel she has lost her own self as well. She may feel deeply anxious about whether she can rebuild her life.

Anxiety is vague and diffuse. Fear is more specific. Divorced persons may specifically fear that they will not be sexually attractive to anyone else. They may fear to venture out alone to social events. The loss of a spouse by death or divorce can produce a feeling of sheer panic about whether you can handle all the tasks of living by yourself. A woman who has never worked outside the home may be frightened

about her prospects of getting a job, or scared at the thought of just trying. We may be fearful or anxious about any number of things when we are left alone to cope by ourselves after many years of living with another and depending on that other for support and encouragement. Being left alone can be very frightening, indeed.

Guilt and Self-blame. When we lose someone, we always think of things we might have said or done differently. We think of times when we were thoughtless or unkind or unfair to the one we have now lost. We think of things we wish we had done or said. "Why didn't we take that trip to Europe while she was still able to travel?" "Why didn't I encourage him to take early retirement?"

Survivors may feel guilt related to the manner of death. "Why didn't I insist that he see a doctor sooner?" Or, "It's all my fault; I should have insisted that she get a second opinion." We need to distinguish between realistic and unrealistic guilt. Guilt and self-blame are unrealistic when we are not really at fault for what happened, when we did not actually cause harm to another. And that is most of the time, for most often no one is to blame. Illness and death are chances of nature, the natural result of imperfect physical bodies.

We can always second-guess ourselves, though. We can always think of things we might have done which *might* have made a difference. But the assumption behind many of these thoughts is that we should be perfect, that our foresight should have been as good as our hindsight, that we are responsible for the loss. We need to remember that we probably did the things which at the time seemed best, and we need to remember that we can never control another's life. Moreover, had we done the things for which we in grief

blame ourselves for not doing, they probably would not have made the hoped-for difference. For all these reasons, such self-blaming thoughts have to be seen as the fruit of unrealistic guilt.

Unrealistic guilt is sometimes related to wishes. As children we believed that wishing could bring something to pass. As adults, if we sometimes wished that an elderly parent who has become a burden were dead, we may feel guilty when the parent does indeed die, as if the wish caused the death. The child whose mother spends so much time with a sick grandparent may wish that the grandparent would die so she can have her mother back. Then when the grandparent does die, the child may feel responsible for the death.

When death occurs in a family, there are many reasons why the children should be included in discussions about the death and the funeral arrangements and should attend the funeral itself. Participation guards against exaggerated guilt the child might feel in regard to the death. Participation also decreases the child's fear and anxiety which may be aroused by the unknowns surrounding death.

Grieving over a divorce, we always think of things we might have done differently. But the primary problem is often a haunting sense of inadequacy. "I made a mess of that relationship; therefore I am a failure. I cannot have a significant relationship with the opposite sex." Here, as so often, friends are important, friends who can help us see that this kind of self-punishment is not grounded in reality.

Realistic guilt issues from something we have done which actually resulted in harm to another. One June morning I was asked to officiate at the funeral of a sixteen-year-old boy accidentally shot by his best friend. They had been

playing with an "unloaded" handgun, and the friend held it to Robert's head and pulled the trigger.

The boy who pulled the trigger belonged to another church. I did not have the opportunity to help him deal with his guilt. All I could do was advise his father that he might need many sessions with an understanding priest and possibly a therapist. Fortunately the family of the dead boy were very sensitive to the situation. They did everything they could to show that they did not blame their son's friend. Nevertheless, it will not be easy for that young man to make peace with himself, and it will likely take him a long time to do it. He may turn self-destructive to punish himself for the loss he caused.

To be responsible for another's death or disability is a terrible burden. It helps to have loving, understanding, sensitive friends, but it is also important to have a religious faith that can enable us to feel forgiven by that which we hold ultimate. With such a faith as a foundation, we can work on forgiving ourselves.

Anger and Bitterness. When we have lost someone we love, we are understandably angry, and we look for someone or something to blame. We may feel angry at the doctors for what we regard as mistakes they made in diagnosis or treatment. We may be angry at ourselves for not having pushed our loved one hard enough to get a check-up. We may be angry at our lost loved one for leaving us. Though it is irrational, anger at the one we have lost is commonly a part of grief.

We may feel angry at God or fate or, depending on our theology, we may angrily protest the unfairness of the world. Even so devout a Christian as C.S. Lewis expressed rage at God at the loss of his wife.

If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine.⁸

We can expect to feel angry at whatever we believe to be ultimate when we lose someone dear. Again, we may be expressing our sense that we have lost an orderly universe, that our world has been shattered.

Anger is a normal, natural reaction to loss. We have cause to be angry; for we have lost someone or something significant. Anger and resentment are a normal part of the grief process. If we do not feel anger at some point, we may be repressing our anger and not dealing with our grief in the best way. For anger unresolved or unexpressed can lead to depression, fatigue, irritability, digestive disorders, insomnia, and other maladies. All of us need an outlet for our anger, yet it is also important that we not let anger dominate us.

We are increasingly aware that the self is a psychosomatic unity; so we should not be surprised that bereavement affects our physical well-being. A grieving person will often experience symptoms such as loss of appetite, insomnia, headaches, muscular pain and tightness, weight loss, fatigue, indigestion, shortness of breath, and tightness in the throat. In its most acute form grief can actually cause or at least precipitate death. Thanatologists tell us people may actually die of a broken heart, as my father did.

The suffering of grief is acute and intense, but it is the only path to recovery. As John Nichols writes,

Grieving is putting the world back together again. . . . [it] is not, as is commonly believed, the weak side of human nature. It is the process by which we strengthen ourselves for the task of living courageously in a universe in which there is very little

security even as there is a great deal of happiness and love.⁹

It is essential that we acknowledge and express our pain, and it is helpful to have good friends to whom we can express it and who will respond in a caring way. Mitchell and Anderson write:

Crying out one's pain may be largely done alone, but some of that crying needs to be heard and responded to by others who care. Withholding or denying one's feelings will almost inevitably block a person suffering from loss from finding the relief and growth that come with what Granger Westberg has called "good grief."¹⁰

The role of the liberal religious community is to be among those "others who care," and to that important and many-faceted role we now turn.

GOOD GRIEF

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart,
and you will see that in truth you are weeping for
that which has been your delight.

Kahlil Gibran

You cannot prevent birds of sorrow from flying
over your head, but you can prevent them from
nesting in your hair.

Chinese Proverb

The fall is brutal, but we set out again.

Albert Camus

Chekhov wrote a poignant story entitled "Grief" about an old taxi driver in the days when taxis were horse-drawn carriages. The driver's son had died a few days before, and the lonely old driver wants desperately to tell someone the story of his son's illness and death, of the funeral and the terrible loss he feels. He tries to tell his story to all who ride in his taxi, but they are not interested. They do not respond, or they cut him off to talk about something else. Chekhov writes:

With an anxious and hurried look, he searches among the crowds passing on either side of the street to find if there is just one person who will listen to him. But the crowds hurry by without noticing him or his grief. Should his heart break and the grief pour out, it would flow over the whole earth it seems, and yet no one sees it. It has managed to conceal itself in such an insignificant shell that no one can see it even by day and with a light.¹¹

He finally gives up trying to tell his story and ends his day early before he has as many fares as he needs. But he cannot help it. He desperately needs human companionship, and he needs to tell his story to someone. So he goes to the stable hoping to find other cab drivers who will listen. But they are all asleep by the stove. Then he goes out to feed his horse, and there he pours out his soul, telling his story to his horse.

That story movingly depicts one of the most important ways in which we recover from loss and the devastating emotions of grief. We need to let our grief out with others who will hear us. "Give sorrow words," wrote Shakespeare; "the grief that does not speak/Whispers the oe'r fraught heart, and bids it break."¹²

The road to recovery leads through the painful work of grieving, the long and difficult process of experiencing and expressing the emotions discussed in the last chapter. When the loss is a significant one, the suffering is likely to be very intense and very long. Moreover, though we speak of recovery, that is a relative term. The time comes when the worst of the suffering is over, when we are able to resume a more or less normal life, when we once again experience joy in living. But that does not mean we will not at times experience grief again. Many types of grief never wholly end. Something you see or read or something someone says can remind you of your loss, and suffering returns. If you have lost a spouse, each time you see a couple enjoying each other, you are reminded of that of which you have been deprived. If you have lost a child, each time you see a child laughing and playing, you are reminded of what you have lost. If you have lost your health or some part of your body,

you will at least occasionally regard healthy and whole people with envy and perhaps resentment.

And grief never wholly ends in the sense that without your lost child or spouse, your life will never return to what it once was. Life may be good again; you may even be happy again, but you will never be the same again. Something valued will always be missing.

Neither is grief healed in a straight line of progress. You can feel better one day and the next regress to an intense degree of suffering, and repeat that alternation many times. C.S. Lewis writes: "One keeps on emerging from a phase, but it always recurs. Round and round. Everything repeats. Am I going in circles. . . ? The same leg is cut off time after time. . ." ¹³

Where the loss is of a person — either by death or divorce — the goals of grief work are four: (1) to accept the reality of the loss and its finality; (2) to build a treasured memory; (3) to begin to make new attachments; and (4) to reconstruct a meaningful world.¹⁴ Recovery involves the successful attainment of these goals.

Mourning and Accepting

The values of liberal religion and the ministry of the liberal religious community can be very helpful to persons in reaching these goals. Through religious ceremonies, personal caring and support groups, the religious community is able to encourage and hear the expression of grief and to provide comfort and understanding.

Ceremonies are among the more significant ways in which religion helps grieving persons begin to admit the reality of their loss and to create a cherished memory. Some ministers have developed ceremonies of separation dissolving a marriage for couples or individuals requesting them. Such cere-

monies recognize the things which brought the couple together, some of their joys and accomplishments together, the importance of the children if children are involved, and the continued commitment of the parents to the children. They then move to the changes that made separation necessary and to an indication of the future direction their lives will take. A divorce ceremony can help to bring closure to a marriage, thus helping those involved to accept the reality of their changed situation.

Often anger and other emotions are too strong shortly after divorce for such a ceremony. Some have found helpful a ceremony of healing and closure some weeks or months after divorce is legally final. The ceremony marks passage from the status of wife or husband to single person and from one lifestyle to another. It may also include a celebration of the growth that has taken place. Close friends are sometimes invited to attend and even to participate actively.

Upon a death, the funeral or memorial service should be a significant part of the mourning process. Like most religious liberals, I prefer memorial services to funerals. A memorial service usually occurs a week or more after death, and the corpse is not present. In addition to the element of mourning, a memorial service expresses thanksgiving for the life lived, often including statements of appreciation by friends or family members. Different circumstances often mean a difference in tone if not in theme.

Whether one chooses a funeral or a memorial service, cremation or burial, I strongly urge those closest to the deceased to spend some time with the dead body. This can be very helpful in coming to grips with the reality of death. The practice of letting the mortician cremate the body almost immediately after death can hinder acceptance. I

know how important it was for my grief work to see the bodies of my parents after death.

Preparation for the service can make a significant contribution to the grieving process. As do most liberal ministers, I always involve family members in helping me plan the service, and this includes talking with me about the deceased. This helps me to prepare the service, but it also assists them in their grief work by helping to begin or continue the creation of a treasured memory of the deceased. What is said at the service by the minister and by others continues the building of a memory. Though the mourners may be still in a state of shock and numbness, they will remember some things said at the service, and these recollections help.

I emphasize two things in the memorial service. First, that we are gathered to mourn a significant loss, and for this I choose readings which evoke feelings of grief, sadness and loss. I strongly disagree with the view that people should not express their grief at services. Quite the contrary, I believe it is very helpful to do so. Certainly, in a religious community the level of trust and understanding ought to be high enough that we should not feel embarrassed by letting our feelings out. The early part of the service gives permission to mourn loss and at the same time helps enable the mourners to accept the reality of their loss.

Later, the memorial service moves from mourning to thanksgiving for the life of the one who has died. The latter half or more of the service is devoted to remembering and celebrating that life. Obviously this adds to what is remembered. Many times something a friend says in the service recalls something loved ones had forgotten or even teaches them something about the deceased they had not known.

Thus the movement of the service is from expression of grief and sorrow to thanksgiving for the life he or she has lived.

In addition to the memorial service, I have developed a participatory ceremony held annually for those who have suffered a recent loss. The ceremony typically takes place on a Sunday afternoon at the end of May near Memorial Day. Most participants have lost a family member within the last year, but some are still mourning losses of earlier years.

I begin the service with some comments about its healing purpose and several readings dealing with the transient nature of life. I then ask each person to light a candle in memory of the one he or she has lost, and say something about what that person meant to him or her. After each has done this, I read selections emphasizing the life of our lost loved ones in our memories and of their influence on us. I then ask each person to say goodbye to their loved one and to snuff out the candle. I conclude with a prayer requesting the grace of healing and the strength to let go. The service is to assist participants to internalize the lost loved one in memory and to let go of their emotional attachment to the person. Deep bonds are also established among some of the participants, who then continue to comfort and help one another in an ongoing way.

We have also celebrated a variation of this at the regular Sunday service on Memorial Day weekend. I invite all who wish to come forward and light a candle in memory of a friend or family member who has died and to say a sentence or two about him or her or simply to acknowledge how much they miss the person. The rest of the service is devoted to the theme of loss and remembrance.

Caring

Liberal religion offers ministries of caring. Here I am speaking not only of the professional ministry but more importantly of the ministry each of us can do for one another. Grief is a lonely work, and no one else can do it for you, but Chekhov was right. Grieving should not have to be done entirely alone. It is important to have others who will listen, empathize, or simply be present in a caring way. Being present to one who has suffered loss can help that person recognize and express feelings. Often there is not much we can say to the grieving. But we can listen to their hurt and confusion. In a time of loss many of us have found, like Chekhov's taxi driver, that no one wants to hear our story. As a community of caring people members of the liberal religious community can be with grieving friends and listen as they tell their story. That is as important when the loss has been by divorce as by death, and when the loss may be of something other than a person.

If a family member has died, it is often helpful especially during the first hours and days simply to free the mourner from routine tasks, such as food preparation, routine shopping, and the tasks of notifying others. Bernadine Kreis and Alice Pattie write:

As soon as you hear a friend is in grief, phone him. Get to him as quickly as you can. Do not ask him what you can do, ask a member of his family. Once there, be alert. Does he need someone to answer the phone; someone to make calls; send wires; brew coffee; or just sit beside him?¹⁵

When a person has sustained a great loss, she needs time and space to begin to come to grips with the meaning and reality of that loss. We often urge a mourner to keep busy,

but that is not good advice. "Keeping a grieving person busy is really keeping a busy person from grieving."¹⁶

In his study of *Liberal Religion's Response to Loss*, John Nichols suggests that too often instead of simply being with people and sharing their pain and loss, we tend to feel that we must offer a rational explanation for the loss or address the cause of the loss through social action.

Rather than help bear the pain and curse the senselessness of it all, the liberal will seek for some kind of intellectual precept in a vain attempt to make the unacceptable, more acceptable.¹⁷

One way we may do this is by offering premature comfort. Our intentions may be very good, but the result is not. For example, when a person has died after a long painful illness, we may try to comfort the bereaved by saying death was really a blessing. That may be true, but it is often heard to mean they should be glad the person died. When someone you loved deeply has gone forever, you are anything but glad. I know when my mother died after a long struggle with cancer, I certainly felt her death was a release from pain for her, but I was bereft. She was my mother, and I did not want well-meaning people in my hometown to tell me it was a blessing. Even so, that was not nearly so bad as hearing them say, again with good intentions but with very bad theology, that it was God's will or that God had called her home.

Saying that the pain will eventually go away is not helpful either, even though it may be true. Any effort to comfort by short-circuiting the grief process can be harmful because it denies the importance of grieving.

Another unhelpful attempt at premature comfort is to rush to justify the loss or find some meaning in it. "It was God's will," those of traditional religious faith may say.

Religious liberals may suggest that somehow, in ways we do not understand, all things work together for good. But it borders on cruelty to say that to one who has just lost someone very dear, who cannot possibly see any good in what happened.

Ann Kaiser Stearns writes about all attempts to make us feel better:

We live in a 'fix-it' society, where people think the way to help is to make us feel feelings other than the ones we are actually experiencing. Mistakenly many persons will attempt to offer positive or even cheery words during a time of suffering. What you need instead are friends who can stand alongside you, with patience, while your feelings of sorrow run their course.¹⁸

Being with one in grief cannot eliminate the sorrow, but it reduces the isolation and anxiety which make grief nearly unbearable. And our caring support should not end with the reception after the memorial service. After the service, when others have gone home, we are needed even more. Then the feeling of isolation and abandonment is greatest. Then the initial shock and numbness have given way to intense suffering. To be aware of this fact and to respond sensitively to it is one of the ways in which a religious community can be especially helpful.

Many churches offer support groups for persons who have known loss. Recently widowed or recently divorced persons can share their experiences and learn from one another how to cope and how to get on with their lives. People who are further along in the grief process can help those in earlier stages. People who have shared the same type of loss can minister to one another and support one another in ways more helpful than can be offered by others who have not had their experience. An example is the Widow-to-Widow

program in which a small group of those widowed a year or longer invite people more recently widowed to meet regularly with them to talk about their experience. This kind of support group is often very helpful.

Theological Principles

The theological principles involved in ministry to the grieving include the covenant of the community and what Luther called the priesthood of all believers. Covenant is a Biblical term. It refers to a committed relationship. In the Old Testament God established a covenant with the people of Israel. God and Israel were to be faithful to each other. Israel often broke her covenant with God, but God was always seen as faithful to Israel. Liberal religious communities are covenanted communities in the sense that the liberally religious are bound together in a commitment to shared values, principles and ideals, and to one another. A central principle is the sanctity of each person. This principle means we love and care about one another and are pledged to tend one another's growth and well-being. Our commitment to the principles we share may be represented as the vertical dimension or the God dimension of our covenant. The horizontal dimension involves our commitment to one another. In a covenanted community there are times when the individual subordinates his or her interests to the interests of others or the interest of the whole body of the church.

Religious liberals are for the most part highly individualistic. We think for ourselves and we tend to try to rely on ourselves and ask as little from others as possible. We are self-reliant. These characteristics are among our better virtues, but they sometimes isolate us from others and hinder us from entering into genuine community. Emphasis on our

being a covenanted community serves as an antidote to an exaggerated individualism, fear of interdependence, and isolation.

The term *priesthood of all believers* originally referred to Luther's insistence that each person could approach God directly without a priest as mediator. Liberal religion has carried this principle further than more conservative types of religion which still reserve sacerdotal functions for the ordained clergy, for example. But one of the primary functions of a priest is the ministry of healing, and it is this sense of the *ministry of all believers* that applies in the present discussion. Care-giving is not an exclusive preserve of the ordained; it is the responsibility and privilege of all who are in a position to minister.

In chapter one we spoke of the sense of oneness of all creation emerging among many religious liberals. From this awareness of connectedness with others, we experience the empathetic sense of feeling grief when another grieves and of hurting when another hurts. This feeling of connectedness leads to both a covenantal commitment to one another's well-being and a desire to minister to those who mourn. Established on this spiritual foundation of the essential unity of all things and all people, the liberal religious community ought to be a caring community in which we minister sensitively to persons experiencing loss.

Religious liberals also find strength and healing from the deep resources within themselves and within Life, resources which some of us call God. As John Nichols puts it, one strand of liberal religious thought

recognizes a powerful creative force working in the world, a force which sustains, upholds, comforts and often heals. This force is not immediately available upon the flick of a prayer, but we encounter it when

we know we have reached the limits of our ability to deal with crisis.

This experience of grace involves "a power of healing which flows into individuals whose prior defenses have been torn down by the immensity of their anxiety."¹⁹ But healing power is often mediated through the ministry of caring friends and the ministry of the caring religious community.

Remembering

The end of grieving is emotional release from our attachment to the person we have lost. We attain it by actively making what is lost into a treasured memory. When what is lost is internalized and well-remembered, the bereaved are better able to leave the past behind and take up new emotional involvements in the present once again. Then we can speak meaningfully of recovery.

Because remembering is at first painful, we often resist it. Sometimes caring friends need to encourage the bereaved to reminisce in the knowledge that although it is painful, it does encourage healing. We naturally tend to idealize the lost, but it is important to recollect the negative things too, painful as they may be. None of us is perfect; we shall all leave behind a legacy of failures and hurt as well as a legacy of kindness and generosity and helpfulness. Where divorce is involved, the tendency is to remember only the negative, but it is good to recall positive things about the former spouse as well.

Religious liberals share no consensus on the question of life after death. My own belief is that we live on only in that our words and deeds linger on as influence and as we are remembered by others. (See Part V.) So for me and for many, this matter of remembering the deceased takes on special significance. It is the way in which we give them

immortality. It is one last thing we can do for them, to ensure that they live on.

Remembering transfers our image of the person from life to death, from a living person with whom we interact in the present into a person with whom our relationship is now only in the past. Remembering is part of the process of accepting the loss and letting go, so painful but so essential to recovery. It is also a way of affirming that love is stronger than death. For though death can take our loved ones, it cannot take our beloved memory.

Rebuilding

Finally, a person whose life has been shattered by loss needs to come to the point where he or she is ready to resume normal living. This involves restoration and reintegration of a self depleted by loss. The religious community can help in this task in several ways.

If the loss has produced a "cosmic crisis," if it has shattered our sense of an ordered and meaningful world, liberal religion offers help in rebuilding the world. As we noted in the section on meaning, religion has traditionally provided a sense of meaning and purpose to living. Liberal religion's theological or philosophical framework can assist the bereaved in rebuilding a meaningful world.

But though a conceptual framework is essential, it is not enough. Our sense that life has meaning and purpose is mediated to us by others to whom we are of value and importance. By offering support, encouragement and friendship throughout the grieving process, a religious community can help a grieving member retain a sense of self-worth and the sense that life is worth living.

The grief process is not complete until the bereaved has discovered a new purpose for living. The bereaved must

choose to live again. A new reason for living may be found in grandchildren, a job, in travel, in volunteer work, or in a thousand places.

Eventually, if we have sufficiently expressed our grief, the time will come when we complete our mourning. The time comes to let go. We already know that from letting go our lesser losses, but we must learn to let go with respect to great losses as well. Life is a drive toward the future, and ultimately we must stop grieving and get on with our lives. It isn't easy, and indeed it is not possible if we have not come through the pain of grieving.

We come through grief a different person, sadder, perhaps wiser, and almost certainly stronger. Colin Parkes says:

Just as broken bones may end up stronger than unbroken ones, so the experience of grieving can strengthen and bring maturity to those who have previously been protected from misfortune.²⁰

Grief is often a door to growth. Sorrow can transform our lives and enable us to be spiritually and emotionally richer. I do not mean to gloss over the tragedy of loss; the tragedy remains. Nor do I mean to suggest that we must suffer loss in order to grow. As I wrote in the previous section, I do not believe everything that happens has a purpose, nor do I believe that what happens to us occurs in order to teach us some kind of lesson. Moreover, it may well be that some grief does not or cannot lead to growth. But this I know: Often grief is a door to growth.

In the aftermath of a very painful divorce, a woman I know examined her life and realized that she had been living a self-centered, shallow and hedonistic life. Dissatisfied with her values and lifestyle, she resolved to change. She joined a Unitarian Universalist Church and adopted personal and spiritual growth as her new goals. Loss and sorrow led to a

significant personal transformation that enriched and deepened her life.

Similarly, a woman who lost one of her teen-age sons through suicide began serving as a big sister to motherless children. The excruciating pain she felt as a result of her son's suicide caused her to want to try to heal the hurt of children who had lost their mothers.

It is not comforting to tell a grieving person she will grow from her sorrow. Early in the grief process we should resist making any suggestion that there might be a positive aspect to loss. But it is true that we will not remain the same; we will either be strengthened or weakened by grief.

Grief can even be good in the sense that it can be the road to a new life, not a life we would have chosen had the choice been ours, but a life which we can again love and enjoy.

PART V

THE CRISIS OF DEATH

SESSION FOUR

THE CRISIS OF LOSS AND GRIEF

PREPARATION FOR THE SESSION

Participants should have read Part IV (pages 89-118) before this session.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

- 1) a. The book notes many different kinds of losses. Briefly review some of these and then ask each member to think about some of their own losses. Allow two or three minutes of silence for this. Now ask them to think about their most serious loss. Ask them to recall how they felt at the time.

b. If the group is small (eight or fewer) ask those who will do so to share their most serious loss with the group. If the group is larger, divide into pairs and ask them to share their most serious loss with each other.

c. In pairs or in the group as a whole, ask them to discuss the following questions:
 - Do you remember the emotions you experienced at the time?
 - What were the things that helped most in coping with their loss?
 - What did other people do that helped you most?
 - What did the church or church members do that was most helpful? Did you fail to get any help from the church, and if so, do you know why?
 - If the above discussion was done in pairs, have the group re-assemble and ask for brief responses to the same questions (above). Discuss at greater length those questions or responses that seem to be of greatest interest.
- 2) Instead of the above exercise, you might prefer to review the contents of chapter 8, "The Hour of Lead." Note briefly some of the various forms of loss. Ask for sharing of relevant experiences of any of these.

Discuss the three stages of grief (numbness, etc.), then the emotions of grief (emptiness, loneliness, isolation, etc.). You might want to list the emotions of grief on newsprint as each is discussed. Ask for comments or personal sharing of relevant experiences with each point.
- 3) Reproduce from the appendix of this guide the sheet entitled "Experiences Common to People Who Suffer a Loss." Pass these out so that each person has a copy. Read this list aloud, asking people to comment on them as you read or to share any personal experiences they have had that illustrate these experiences. (The comments should be brief, for this exercise should not take more than 10-15 minutes.)

- 4) Chapter 9 deals with recovery and the completion of mourning and mentions several ways in which the liberal church or fellowship can assist the mourning process. Ask the members of the group to share their experience, if any, with funerals or memorial services in a traditional church and in a liberal religious context. Which type of service was more helpful in assisting the mourning process? Did the services include portions that evoked mourning and portions that celebrated the life of the deceased?
- 5) As noted earlier, one of the author's friends read the book before publication and commented that he disagreed with the idea that the liberal religious community is a caring community. In his experience, he said, ministers do most of the caring, while the lay people do very little. How does this square with your experience? Is your society a caring community with respect to members who suffer serious loss? How did members of the society respond to you when you suffered a major loss? What did they do that was especially helpful? What did they fail to do that would have been helpful?

If your society falls short in this respect, what might be done to address that problem? Discuss whether the concepts of the covenant community and the ministry of all (shared or mutual ministry) might be helpful in giving a theological foundation to the idea of a caring community.

- 6) Duplicate and distribute the sheet in the appendix with the heading "Observing and Healing," by Elaine Tiller. The center column lists four tasks of grieving and the columns on the right and left list normal behaviors (right column) and helper, supporter tasks (left column) that correspond to each of the tasks of grieving. This is a helpful way of seeing the relationship between the mourning process and both the mourner's feelings and the helpers' role.

Spend some time with this sheet, beginning with the first task for grieving and noting its corresponding behaviors and the corresponding helper tasks. Do the same with the other tasks of grieving. Allow time for questions or comments.

- 7) Simply listening to the grieving person can help a great deal, yet so many of us have trouble listening. Chekhov's taxi driver's difficulty in finding anyone who would listen to his expression of grief is all too common. Many of us want to jump in with answers and problem-solve. Good listening, someone has said, involves:

- listening without judging
- hearing without retreating
- evoking without forcing
- and understanding without condescending.

Listening training exercise: Divide into pairs.

- a. Have one person tell the other person something about her/his background (religious journey, family history or background, etc.). This should be limited to 4-5 minutes. During this time the listener must listen and say nothing. Then the listener must tell the story she/he just heard to the teller who listens without prompting or helping or correcting until the person has told all he/she can remember. The original teller can then evaluate how well the original listener listened. Have the couple reverse roles and repeat this process. This whole exercise will take about 15 minutes.
- b. Reassemble and ask the group how well they listened. How did it feel to have to listen without saying anything?

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT SESSION

Assign Part V, (pp. 121-142) for the next meeting.

CLOSING

The book suggests that grief can be a door to growth. Rabbi Harold Kushner was told when his son Aaron was three that the boy had a rare, incurable disease that produced rapid aging and that his child would be stunted in growth, look like a little old man and die in his teens. Reflecting on the question of loss and growth, Kushner writes:

"I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counselor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back. If I could choose, I would forego all the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way because of our experiences, and be what I was fifteen years ago, an average rabbi, an indifferent counselor, helping some people and unable to help others, and the father of a bright, happy boy. But I cannot choose."

Lynn Caine in her book *Widow* writes of her awful pain at the loss of her husband and concludes: "But today I am someone else. I am stronger, more independent. I have more understanding, more sympathy. A different perspective."

Ask the members of the group to meditate silently on ways in which they have grown as a result of loss and grief.