

Ministry in the Valley of the Shadow of Death

“If no one gets out of this world alive, why do we go in fear?” Maggie Callanan, in *Final Journeys*, recalls her father’s question and offers other possibilities for approaching death. Our Christian faith, in fact, promises that death is not an ending, but a “graduation” into a new dimension. Christian teaching exhorts us to live in such a way that when we die, we do so peacefully, “...sustained and soothed by an unfaltering trust.” (William Cullen Bryant, *Thanatopsis*). Indeed, as John Fanestil describes in *Mrs. Hunter’s Happy Death*, faith communities often celebrate death as a “glad reunion” to be anticipated with joy.

Even so, we may not find ourselves at peace when facing death or the loss of a loved one. Unexpected death, such as that of a child or young person, may shock and overwhelm us with grief. Infertility and miscarriage, accidents, suicide, and homicide traumatize us. Hiding the fact of death and avoiding conversations about it add to the sense of dread. How can the church help people face their own death and the inevitable loss of loved ones? Surely we do not want to make persons feel guilty if they experience fear and sorrow! Some congregations train designated persons or Stephen Ministers to provide care for those in the “Valley of the Shadow of Death.” Even more, through preaching and teaching, we can train all members of a congregation to minister more effectively in such situations.

Many persons avoid those who are dying or bereaved because they do not know what to say, leaving mourners feeling isolated and abandoned. Caring words need not be elaborate or astute. It is better to admit that “I don’t know what to say...” and follow up with words and gestures of compassion. “I cannot imagine how difficult (painful, sad, terrifying, etc.) this must be for you” conveys empathy, without pretending to actually *know* how a person feels, and invites the other to share, if he or she chooses. Sometimes compassionate words will open the floodgates of grief and trigger an outpouring of feelings and details. When that happens, we can give the greatest gift possible by just listening. We may need to stifle our need to try to fix things. When someone listens with acceptance and a desire to understand, sufferers usually feel a great relief, which can free them to move on through their pain.

Sometimes well-meaning people, because of their own discomfort, will try to placate mourners or those facing the final hours of a loved one’s life by making statements that cannot possibly be confirmed. I once heard a well-meaning aunt assure her young nephew, whose father had just died, that his dad was “right up there behind that star, looking down on you.” If she had prefaced that statement with the words “I believe...” she would at least have avoided setting herself up as a questionable authority in the eyes of her nephew, who will surely someday learn some astronomy and wonder how she could have been so sure. Statements of faith (“I know God will help you get through this” or “I believe that those we love are never very far away from us”) might best be cushioned by “I understand that may be hard for you to believe right now.”

Children need careful approaches to guide their understanding of and participation in the experience of death and dying. Trying to shield them from the reality of death and grief may end up isolating and traumatizing them even more. Staff at the General Board of Discipleship recently compiled a leaflet titled “**When a Loved one Dies – Helping Children & Youth Cope With Death**” summarizing wisdom about what to say and do – as well as how to avoid saying and doing things that might be harmful. (<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/when-a-loved-one-dies-helping-children-youth-cope-with-death>)

Mourners, young and old, and those anticipating the death of a loved one need to experience their grief and sadness at their own pace. Some will numb themselves with activity for a while, busying themselves with the minutia of everyday life and with the tasks that must be faced in the aftermath of death. Others will collapse in pain immediately. There is no “right way”

to mourn; however, loving companions can make the journey bearable by simply standing by, asking what is needed, and waiting patiently for direction.

“Grief is perhaps the hardest work humans have to do,” noted Rev. Linda Littlefield Grenfell, a United Methodist pastor in Maine, who led a local church workshop on the subject. “Mourners may lose control, fearful that they will never stop weeping and may never recover from the pain. However, the opposite is true. It is only when we name and process grief that we recover, gain control and learn to enjoy living again. Burying grief disconnects us from ourselves, from others, and from the Divine. Denying grief often results in physical illness, depleting the immune system and making us more susceptible to colds and flu or worse. Depression, cancer, accidents, asthma -- all can be triggered by denial of grief. Overeating and sleeplessness may lead to illness. Numbing behaviors like alcohol, drugs, excessive screen time, pornography, and even overworking can debilitate health and destroy quality of life.”

Grenfell goes on to describe how, immediately after a death, the family and the community may gather around the bereaved, bringing food, offering transportation, checking in – for a while. Then they may assume they are no longer needed, expecting the grieving person to get back to work or to some other routine. Grieving persons may hesitate to bother others with their needs - for company, for distraction, or for someone to talk or even cry with them. What helps is ongoing contact with family and friends who are willing to keep the memory of the loved one alive. “Knowing that grieving persons are likely thinking of their loved one all the time anyway, we should not hesitate to bring up the person’s name or share a memory. We might fear that saying ‘I remember when...’ will trigger tears or an outpouring of feelings, but your willingness to listen empathically to whatever mourners need to say can be very healing. There is no ‘getting over’ such a loss. Life has changed permanently. But when persons are allowed and encouraged to process grief in their own way, when they experience companionship along the journey, they will in their own time be able to move through it to a day when they can smile again, and even laugh.”

Grenfell then offers specific advice: “Encourage your congregation to persist in making contact, even if their invitations are declined. Writing notes or emails, bringing bread or other treats, and calling from time to time all serve as reminders to mourners that they are not alone. Remember birthdays and anniversaries, even just to say ‘I am thinking of you today.’ Offer information about a grief support group or consider getting one started. If you see danger signs, evidence that the bereaved may be isolating or drugging themselves with alcohol, medication, food, or screen time, ask for help and consult with family, other friends, a pastor or other professional. Ask yourself what would you want? What would help you? Probably you would not want to be left alone, but you would want to be respected, not patronized or criticized. Your quiet presence may be the most healing. You do not have to give answers, directions, or solutions - there aren’t any. Grief is hard work, for which we need the support of others. Working through grief may also liberate, strengthen, and renew us. Those who companion others on their grief journeys walk on sacred ground and manifest the healing power of love.”

In addition to the following resources, see “Caring for Widows and Widowers” and other articles addressing specific circumstances at www.marriagelovepower.net (under “Best Practices Articles and Recommended Resources/Ministering with Those in Crisis or Transition”) or search at www.umcdiscipleship.org/leadership-resources/intergenerational-family-ministries by topic or title.

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Resources for Ministry in the Valley of the Shadow of Death

Reading List

Carenotes, from AbbeyPress, www.onecaringplace.com, 800-325-2511 Attractive, thoughtful booklets on a wide variety of topics are available for individual or bulk purchase and in packages related to such topics as “End of Life/Hospice” and “Grief & Loss.” Individual titles include “Understanding a Child’s Grief,” “Grieving the Loss of Your Parent,” and many more.

Don’t Ask for the Dead Man’s Golf Clubs: What to Do and Say (And What Not to) When a Friend Loses a Loved One, by Lynn Kelly (Workman Publishing Company, Inc., NY, 2000) Drawing on her own experience of being widowed at a young age, and combining it with the words of survivors who have lost mothers and children, husbands, grandparents and siblings, Lynn Kelly offers a simple but profound little book of advice. There are four sections: What to Do Now, What to Do Over Time, What Not to Do, and the particularly difficult situations of Suicide, Stillbirth, and Miscarriage. The advice is practical, heartfelt, direct, insightful. Let your friend know how you feel. Express sympathy to all the family members. Talk about the dead person and don’t be afraid to say his or her name. Write a fond memory or send a picture. Bring food. Listen. Record a new phone message. Remember holidays. Keep giving hugs. And never criticize arrangements, assume that it's a blessing, compare to the loss of a pet, say “I know how you feel,” or do something without asking. And don't ever, ever ask for the dead man's golf clubs - as some people actually do. (Based on Amazon review)

Final Gifts: Understanding the Special Awareness, Needs, and Communications of the Dying, by Maggie Callanan and Patricia Kelley (New York: Bantam Books, 1992). The authors share stories and insights from their years of caring for terminally ill patients. They help the caregiver understand his or her own feelings and needs and communicate more effectively with the dying person so as to transform dying - and even death itself - into a peaceful and deeply meaningful experience.

Final Journeys: A Practical Guide for Bringing Care and Comfort at the End of Life, by Maggie Callanan (New York: Bantam Books, 2008). Sharing true stories from her experiences as a hospice nurse, the author provides a thorough guide to understanding the special needs of the dying, their loved ones, and their caretakers. With gentle wisdom she addresses such issues as dealing with denial, choosing treatment or palliative care, understanding the physical symptoms of terminal illness and dying, honoring individual coping styles, and addressing spiritual needs. This is an excellent resource for those who want to be present with the dying in the most helpful way possible.

Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations For Working Through Grief, by Martha Whitmore Hickman (Avon Books, 1994). The author offers short comforting and encouraging meditations, which have proved helpful to persons who have lost a child, parents, grandparents, and others. The daily selections offer quick, meaningful reads full of insight, hope, and understanding. Readers can work through the pages in order or skip around to find what they need at a given time.

Mrs. Hunter's Happy Death: Lessons on Living from People Preparing to Die, by John Fanestill (New York: Doubleday, 2006). The author, inspired by reading accounts of the “ritual of happy dying” and by witnessing persons approach death with grace and uplifted spirits, discusses the spiritual practices – prayer, reflection, caring for others, and more – that seem to help make such an experience possible.

I Wasn't Ready to Say Goodbye: Surviving, Coping and Healing After the Sudden Death of a Loved One, by Brook Noel and Pamela D. Blair, Ph.D. (Sourcebooks, 2008). The authors explore the experience of sudden death and offers wisdom for those grieving the sudden loss of a loved one, addressing such difficult topics as the first few weeks, suicide, death of a child, children and grief, funerals and rituals, physical effects, homicide, depression, male and female grieving styles, religion and faith, myths and misunderstandings. New material in this most recent edition covers the unique circumstances of loss, men and women's grieving styles, religion and faith, myths and misunderstandings.

Tear Soup, by Pat Schweibert and Chuck DeKlyen, illustrated by Taylor Bills (Portland, Oregon: Griefwatch, 2005). This beautifully illustrated children's book for age 8 and up portrays the grieving process, using the metaphor of “tear soup” as a way “...to sort through all the different types of feelings and memories you have when you lose someone or something special.” In the story, Grandy, who has suffered a great loss, knows that she must deal with her feelings, memories, and tears in order to heal. Some friends help her just by listening and caring, while others increase her suffering by telling her what she should feel and do. Near the end of the story, she explains to her grandson why making “tear soup” is so important, affirming that “...there is something down deep within all of us ready to help us survive the things we think we can't survive.” Following the story, several pages provide succinct advice on self-care while grieving and on caring for others mourning a loss. Finally, you will find a list of websites and organizations providing support and resources for various kinds of loss.

To Begin Again: The Journey Toward Comfort, Strength, and Faith in Difficult Times, by Naomi Levy (Ballentine Books, 1999). The senseless murder of her father when she was just fifteen shattered the author's faith. In time she fought her way through the darkness to conquer her pain. Weaving together her own experiences and stories of her congregants with the teachings of great sages, she offers simple lessons and prayers for those who struggle with pain and seek to live joyfully again. (Based on Amazon review)

“When a Loved one Dies – Helping Children & Youth Cope With Death,” (Leaflet contents compiled by MaryJane Pierce Norton, Associate General Secretary Leadership Ministries, GBOD & Chris Wilterdink, Director, Young People's Ministries Development, GBOD)

<http://www.umcdiscipleship.org/resources/when-a-loved-one-dies-helping-children-youth-cope-with-death>

www.thegrieftoolbox.com - This website offers articles, healing activities, and guidance for support groups, which can be registered – and found – on line. The accompanying Facebook page sends regular posts of encouragement and inspiration to your Facebook news feed. You can also sign up for email messages, e-newsletters, and Twitter; watch videos, participate in discussions, share poetry and artwork, and purchase books, mementos, and curriculum materials for group use.

Curriculum Resources for Ministry in the Valley of the Shadow of Death

Living Fully, Dying Well, by Rueben Job (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006) This eight-session study for small groups includes a book for the leader, a participant's book, and a DVD with eight approximately 10-minute video presentations and three additional stand-alone lessons - accessible by computer with a DVD-rom drive - for adults and teens. Each chapter of the leader's book contains, in addition to the content of the participant's book, scripture, prayers, discussion questions, and a summary of the video presentation. Chapter titles are as follows: "Living Fully," "Theology of Aging," "Our Culture's View of Aging," "Finding Purpose and Meaning in Life," "Getting it All Together," "Dying Well," "What Happens When We Die," and "How Then Shall We Live?" The three additional lessons on the DVD are "Dying Well" and "Living and Dying" for adults and a "Reel to Real" youth lesson based on the film "My Life." Although the booklets described in the back of the Leader's guide are now out-of-print, similar titles can be found through *Carenotes*, described below.

Stephen Ministry, <https://www.stephenministries.org> Stephen Ministry is a one-to-one lay caring ministry that takes place in congregations that use the Stephen Series system, which includes specific training and resources. Stephen Ministers provide high-quality, confidential, Christ-centered care to people going through tough times, usually meeting with one person at a time for an hour or so weekly and participating in sessions with a Stephen Leader for supervision and ongoing training. Visit the website to learn more or go to www.stephenministries.org/begin or call 314-428-2600 for information on how to get started.

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