

AN EXPERIENCE OF GRIEF AND LOSS IN AN ERA OF TRANSITION

By Ray Mattes, IHM, DMin.¹

The cover story of a community's most recent newsletter focused on the sale of its congregational center. The article states that some community members who had been residing on its campus had relocated to several licensed long-term care facilities while others moved to mission houses. Among the newsletter's remaining articles several reported on the community's transfer of sponsorship of its healthcare ministry as well as the withdrawal and closure of several educational institutions.

Each article contained a brief overview of the ministry's founding, fond recollections of community members who had served in mission over the years and sentiments of gratitude for the services the institutions provided. The last page of the newsletter contained brief statements about community members who had died within the past year. The newsletter, while giving testimony to the numerous years of dedicated service and the community's collective ministry endeavors, also spoke of transitions and losses the community was now experiencing.

Losses may be experienced in multiple ways that include the death of loved ones, life transitions, changes in health and relinquishment of roles. Each of these losses

is experienced differently among individuals or a group, depending upon their ability to adapt to the changes created, the existence of relational support networks and the importance placed on that which was lost. As such, not all losses are experienced with the same level of intensity nor are they viewed in equal amounts of importance by those who experience them.

As an individual moves through life's developmental stages, s/he continually experiences the rhythm of loss and gain. Each new phase of life presents opportunities for growth, but in order to access such growth, a process of letting go must also occur. It is these acts of loss and gain that provide one with the tools to address life's impending challenges. While this is a life-long process, as one enters later life the losses experienced may increase with each loss serving as a pre-cursor of those which will soon follow.

With loss comes the experience of grief. Pastoral theologian Scott Sullender defines grief as "the human emotion we feel when we lose someone or something to which we are psychologically attached."² As such, grief is a natural process that occurs whenever these psychological connections are severed. As a process, grief and the act

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² R.S. SULLENDER, *Losses in Later Life: A New Way of Walking with God*, 2nd ed., New York: Haworth Pastoral Press (1999) p. 1.

of grieving follow neither a specified set of criteria nor occur within the parameters of a specific timeframe. Rather, grief like loss is individualized, and its manifestations are as unique as the person who experiences it.

Attempts to understand the dynamics of grief resulted in the establishment of a series of developmental stages, steps and/or phases. Psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross, in her pioneering book *On Death and Dying* in 1969, proposed that individuals who have been diagnosed with a terminal illness undergo five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.³ Similarly, psychotherapist John Bowlby proposed that grief emerges within the person in stages that result in feelings of shock and initial disbelief that the loss has even occurred while searching to retrieve what has been lost, and disorientation over the loss event and recovery.⁴

Traditionally, the goal of grief work has been to return grieving persons to the previous emotional state they occupied prior to the experience of the loss. Grief was thought to be completed when connections around what was lost had been severed and new attachments developed to replace the old. However, ongoing research has challenged this perception of grief and its impact on individuals as such approaches, while beneficial, often fail to incorporate diverse cultural dynamics to and understandings of grieving. This research includes the work of Silverman and Klass on the notion of “continuous bonds,” where the established relationship is interrupted by the loss but not completely severed. Rather the

relationship or bond to that which is lost is sustained in the life of the individual.⁵

Educator and pastoral theologian Melissa M. Kelley contends that grief is nuanced and expressed in varied ways, depending upon numerous contextual factors as individuals search for meaning among the losses experienced.⁶ Therefore, narrative is an integral part of this search as it encompasses the totality of both an individual’s and the community’s lived experiences. In the face of loss, grief and/or trauma, the life narrative has been interrupted. The challenge becomes that of integrating the loss into her or his life narrative in a way to both restore it and discover meaning. Faith images related to God also impact the way a person and a group process the grief experienced, due in part to the impact that such faith images may have on the quest to understand the transcendent dimensions of being.

Finding a balance between the provision of pastoral support for individuals, as well as the community as a whole, can at times be a balancing act. The provision of support whether in the form of counseling and/or spiritual direction to address individual needs, may not always be sufficient to either recognize or address the communal losses experienced by each of them.

In addressing loss and grief within the context of community, it may be beneficial to first differentiate between two distinct types of grief. As communities continue to address issues related to diminishment, sponsored ministry withdrawal and care needs of elder members, awareness of the

³ E. KÜBLER-ROSS, *On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy and Their Own Families*, Scribner trade paperback ed. New York: Scribner, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc. (2014) (originally published in 1969).

⁴ J. BOWLBY, *Attachment and Loss*, New York: Basic Books (1969-1980).

⁵ D. KLASS, P.R. SILVERMAN, and S.L. NICKMAN, eds., *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief*, Series in Death Education, Aging, and Health Care, Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis (1996).

⁶ M.M. KELLEY, *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press (2010).

impact of such losses on all members is important. While reactions to communal losses are as individualized as the persons who experience them, their very nature also impacts the system to which individual members belong.

Two general types of grief exist. The first is referred to as uncomplicated or “normal” grief. It is a form of grief that results from the experience of loss that can be noted on psychological, physical, social/behavioral and spiritual levels. Movement through the experience of grief requires making adjustments in a person’s life as a result of transitions that the loss has introduced. In uncomplicated grief, both the intensity and frequency of an individual’s reaction to the losses experienced wane with the progression of time. While the experience of grief may never go away, the intensity of emotional suffering does decrease.

The second type of grief is referred to as complicated grief, whereby loss occurs as a result of situations and/or events that are unexpected, sudden, violent, ambiguous or traumatic. Specific conditions surrounding the way in which the loss occurred may also add to its being perceived as complicated. These conditions can include the various systemic aspects around the loss, role structures that are no longer in place and the lack of both human and financial resources to provide support.

Educator and researcher Pauline Boss identifies complicated grief as a state that may emerge from experiences of loss where the relationship between what is known and what is unknown is “blurred, unclear and/or confusing.”⁷ Referring to this as ambiguous loss, Boss contends that the boundaries that existed prior to the loss event may now be

altered or even eliminated. In an attempt to address the ambiguity that results from such a situation, Boss offers “guidelines” through which meaning is sought, uncertainties surrounding the loss are accepted, ambivalence is normalized, attachments are reestablished and hope ultimately is discovered.

For communities undergoing multiple losses, the guidelines offered by Boss may be helpful in addressing communal grief and loss. These guidelines as summarized below may offer guidance in addressing difficult situations where ambiguity around the meaning of the losses experienced may not be fully understood.

Ambiguous loss cannot be mastered in a normal sense due to the lack of clarity around specifics, possible denial of the reality of the loss that has occurred or the uncertainties around boundaries as the search for meaning unfolds. Mastering a situation often involves taking control over it in an attempt to lessen its impact. However, with ambiguous loss, such mastery is unattainable due to specific circumstances that are involved in the loss that has been experienced.

Addressing personal, familial/communal system identities in the face of the loss experienced is another guideline. The individual/community engages in a “reconstruction of the rules, roles and boundaries” within the familial/community unit. This process joins together two distinct identities that have been assumed. The first is who the person/community was prior to the loss experience. The second is who the individual is or what the community now has become, as a result of the loss experience. Reconciling these two identities

⁷ P. Boss, *Loss, Trauma, and Resilience: Therapeutic Work with Ambiguous Loss*, Norton Professional Book, New

York: W.W. Norton & Co. (2006).

becomes part of the shared journey towards healing. This incorporation of identities is possible only through a level of resiliency within both the individual and the familial/communal system. Such resiliency entails maintaining a healthy tension between what has been lost and what is still present within the individual and/or community.

In the midst of the ambiguities, feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, and disbelief regarding the current reality may emerge. This process can be further complicated through a perpetuation of a sense of helplessness in relation to the loss experienced. Such a sense may contribute to common grief reactions such as numbness, anger, denial, and a sense of inertia. To address this situation, it is helpful to name the uncertainties and/or ambiguities around the loss in order to identify these as the problem. Thus the emphasis shifts away from what has been lost to the uncertainties around the loss itself.

Naming the uncertainties around the loss allows for the creation of an environment in which individual community members are able to both voice and hear the differing perceptions, understandings and impacts surrounding the losses experienced by the group. While not all have the same experiences, the ability to voice and listen to each other without judgment creates a climate of togetherness amongst differing views.

This kind of environment allows for the sharing of facts and clarification of information around the losses that impact the whole. Through interchange among members, opportunities are provided for individuals to discover meaning within the loss events that were experienced personally and communally. In so doing, the group learns to cope with the uncertainty they have had and will continue to experience.

The discovery of hope in the midst of the loss event is the final guideline. Defined as a “belief in a future good,” hope exists when the individual and/or community sees the loss event as part of a larger narrative that involves both personal and communal aspects. As such, the loss experienced may be viewed through an expectation that in some way a future good will emerge. Therefore, that which is lost is not the ultimate ending of the narrative.