

WHEN YOU LOSE SOMEONE YOU LOVE

Chapter 1 THE WORLD IS NEVER THE SAME AGAIN...

The world is never the same again after someone you love has died. Never, ever. In one of Charles Dickens' short stories, there is the scene of an elderly woman standing with tears in her eyes at the grave of a man who had died at age twenty-five, fifty years before. The dates were still visible. A passerby came up to comfort her. Noticing the young age of the deceased and the five decades which had passed, the stranger said to her, "I am sorry dear. Was this your son?" "No," she replied a bit impatiently, "He was my husband"...! And a thousand years, the Bible reminds us, pass as a watch in the night.

Time is not what it is in other ventures when it comes to memories and grief. I have seen real live painful tears at five, ten, twenty, even thirty years after the death. Dickens apparently saw them at fifty. I have watched people grieve on endless anniversaries and birthdays, as if the parting had happened yesterday. "Our New Year's Eve has never been the same since 1942", she said, "when those two uniformed soldiers came to bring the awful news. They have all been special burdens since then."

From a personal point of view I can testify that twenty years is like a watch in the night. Back then our family had an awful year, to say the least...my brother Bobby died on April 15, 1985, at age forty-three. None of us could believe it. He had just made an offer on a house. His realtor called his home the next morning to tell him the good news. I was there, by then. Mother had called me to say that Bob had not arrived for work earlier that morning, and asked me to go over to make sure everything was O.K. I was providentially visiting Pittsburgh at the time. I went to his apartment. When the telephone call came from the realtor, I was already there and he thought I was Bobby. He said, "Congratulations, (I guess we sounded alike to Norm.) you are the proud owner of a new dwelling place!" I replied that I was not Bobby, but that he would never know how right he was. I had discovered a few minutes earlier that Bob had died sometime during the night. As they say in Scotland, he had "gone away" to the Lord, to a new dwelling place indeed! Income tax day never rolls around but that my first thought is not of Uncle Sam. It is of brother Bob.

By the way, it got worse. My father was so over burdened, trying to handle Bobby's death and other things, that on the following September the Fourth, he also died, without warning, in the wee hours of the morning. The next August the Fourteenth, my dear Mother decided that she had had enough loneliness for one lifetime. She passed away during the night a couple of days after they told her she had cancer. Oh dearie me: "The world is never the same again after someone you love has died..." Too much has gone away with the deceased.

*"With you a part of me hath passed away;
For now in the peopled forest of my mind
A tree made leafless by this wintry wind
Shall never don again its green array.
Chapel and fireside, country road and bay,
Have something of their friendliness resigned;
Another, if I would, I could not find,
And I am grown much older in a day.
But yet I treasure in my memory
Your gift of charity, and great heart's ease,
And the dear honor of your amity;
For these once mine, my life is rich with these.
And I scarce know which part may greater be,
What I keep of you, or what you rob from me."*

SANTAYANA

The mighty force called grief comes in strange and impromptu ways, often in surprising and unexpected places. We read in the Song of Solomon, "Lord, save us from the little foxes which come under the fence." We can usually protect ourselves from the beasts of the field by keeping watch and building shelters here and there, and by erecting huge fortresses to keep out the thundering herds of danger. But as every farmer knows, especially the one who has a fence around his little garden, tossed up in haste perhaps...the little foxes sneak in during the night. They dig right under the fence. When the farmer least expects it, they steal away his produce. The little foxes will steal away your happy moments, too. Tears come at the oddest time without warning. Life is never the same again after someone you love has died.

This strange power called grief works its weary way in around the edges of your soul and psyche. "What's wrong with you?" I once heard a Grandmother bark to her little grandson just seven years of age. (She was the impatient kind.) What was wrong with him?... I could have told her: the little boy was grieving, in his own rambunctious way. To her a lot of time had passed since his mother died. But his grief was as real as the first day, sure as sure can be.

"What's wrong with my teenaged son?" the father asked me boldly. "He is making a mess of his life. Talk some sense into him, Reverend." I said the lad was grieving, for his mother who had died three years before, grieving for what was lost and never found again, grieving for the loneliness one feels when a parent has been taken, grieving for...I tried to help his father understand.

A season of grief can alter and stifle the course of a whole lifetime, especially if the time of grieving is not accomplished when it should be. It is so intense, and by the accident of not knowing what to do, or in the confusion and clatter of the unknown, or in the unresolved fears, all of those will follow you forever, unless you solve them now.

For example, I know a man, now in his early middle years, who was involved in a horrible auto accident when he was eighteen. Two young people, including his best friend, died in the crash. He was seriously injured, but he survived. I knew him then and I have known him ever since. He has never fully recovered emotionally from that dreadful day.

"Why is she so mean?" the daughter asked. "I've never seen or heard my mother talk that way before." I said, "She is grieving." Every time the funeral hearse goes rolling by, every time we touch base with another round of death, every time we have a bad dream...it all comes back as if we were grieving for the first time, or at the last. Grief waits at the end of every day. It's there when you enter the empty house or apartment. "I still expect her to be in there," Forrest told me, "Every time I come home." It hangs around in the front row of your memories. It sits in the pupils of your eye to remind you: life has forever changed, and it will never be the same again.

I once had the privilege of being friend and pastor to a dear woman who lived to be one hundred and seven. I was invited to what turned out to be her last birthday party. After the songs and the candles, I asked her, "What is the most important thing for a one hundred and seven year old to remember?" She smiled and said, "I always try to live to be a credit to my father." He had died fifty-seven years before that day, but she never had forgotten what her father meant to her.

Grief crops up in strange and unpredictable ways. We are wise to know that and to try to remember it. If you act the fool, or if you find some meanness you did not know you had, or if your whole attitude changes toward life and death, whatever, pause and meet your grief. Make friends with it. Think about the good times. Lean on your faith. If your steady faith should falter, even fail you, try not to worry, it will all come back again when the proper time has passed. But, do not leave it unresolved. A young friend of Desert Ministries, Incorporated gave me this poem when her father died:

*Do not stand by my grave and weep.
I am not there. I do not sleep.*

*I am a thousand winds that blow.
I am a diamond glint of snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain.
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awake in the morning hush,
I am the swift, uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circling flight.
I am the soft starshine at night.
Do not stand by my grave and cry.
I am not there...I did not die.
AUTHOR UNKNOWN*

“Johnny died and went to heaven,” she once told me, “the rest of us have gone to hell”.... “He’s grieving for a father that he never had,” the psychiatrist alerted me. Another said, “He is grieving for a child that was not born at all, grieving for a friend he lost a long, long time ago.” When one young woman read this book, she said she was grieving for “the loved one” she never had.

Once in a while that grief is associated with a child lost to abortion. I do not wish to raise the politics of that procedure here. I will leave that to others. I include it now for those who, trying to do what they felt was right at the time, and then later were left with a sad and troublesome memory. A middle aged woman I know said to me “Oh Reverend, I wish I had gone ahead and had my child....He would be thirty-seven this holiday season. I often think about how he would have turned out.” You can’t go back again.

The first time a person comes in contact with death, the memory can imbed itself forever in the soul and psyche. It is a monumental thing. I often ask those who have lost someone they love, and who are not inclined to talk or share their feelings, to tell me about the first death they can remember. Almost always they can tell me when and who it was. Often it was a significant moment in their lives. We grow and learn to walk, but the first step, if not remembered, still has a lasting significance. Perhaps you can uncover your earliest experience of death and find some way to better handle your present situation.

Anyway, you have to learn to deal with it, not hide it, or avoid it or to try to run away from it. If you do, you might be running all your days. For example, I have noticed some similarities through the years of those who lost a parent when they were quite young, more especially with men who lost their mothers when they were still little boys. Life can be forever colored. It often affects one’s ability to trust and give again. If a mother can be taken from a little child who needs her, then anything can happen....Should this be true with you, I suggest you learn to express your feelings toward it, not bury them, not hide them in the cellar...or, like the barking dog we used to have at home, he did not go away or quiet down because we decided to close the cellar door. He barked on and on, scratched at the door, annoyed our sleep, awakened the neighbors, made us cranky, and made us wish we had never had a dog at all.

Chapter 2 PLEASE SAVE SOME TIME TO LEARN TO GRIEVE

St. Paul wrote, “I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, to be content.” That sounds nice. Normally, we use this verse to celebrate his inner peace, no matter what had happened. True, but that is not the message I want to borrow on just now. Concentrate here on the word “learned”. Paul did not come by the knowledge naturally, anymore than you or I can speak a foreign language that we have not struggled to learn, nor play the flute the first time we pick it up. It takes work, hard work, learning how to do a new instrument or language, or life.

When it comes to grieving, you and I must learn to do that properly too. It is not as easy as it looks. To learn you will need many different teachers. Others who have walked that road ahead of you will drop back, if you ask them, to tell you what they found along their way. While some find it too painful to do so, most will try to help you. Pastors, parents, teachers, friends will open up your vistas. The Bible can teach you the spiritual lessons for your journey. (At the end of this

book we have added a list of relevant Bible passages.) A support group of like-minded people can be of enormous help. A trained counselor can be invaluable. But, it all begins with you, and that is also where it ends.

St. Paul goes on in Philippians 4:13: "I have learned the secret, I can do all things in Christ who strengthens me." That is, it is Jesus Christ who gives me strength. He knew how to grieve himself. He wept. He overcame his fears. He wiped his tears away when he turned it all over to his Heavenly Father. Jesus was a teacher, most of all; after all they called him "Rabbi", which means teacher. You have to learn how to overcome your grief.

Dr. Kubler-Ross and others have conducted endless experiments in ending psychodrama, trying to teach people how to go back and reclaim their grief. They found that some will not let the process happen. They never let it go. The primary purpose of the exercise is to get on with life and leave the grieving to the dead.

Poem

*If I should die and leave you here awhile,
Be not like others, soon undone, who keep
Long vigil by the silent dust and weep.
For my sake, turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
Something to comfort weaker hearts than thine.
Complete these dear, unfinished tasks of mine,
And I perchance, may therein comfort you.*
ANONYMOUS

On the down side, some people cling to grief and use it as a crutch. Some will not surrender it. It gives meaning to their lives. As old men love their illnesses, and young men love their inexperience, some learn to love their grief. It brings them some attention and the concern of others. But that is the wrong lesson. If your life was defined and absorbed by the one who is gone, it will be difficult to find yourself again. If grief lingers on too long, you should seek some help, and then get on with life.

In the old days, dressed in black, the widow paraded through the streets. Armbands were the thing. I remember them. At the time when I was a boy in Pittsburgh, black-ribboned wreaths were still hung on the doors of the homes where the awful thing had struck. Well, thank God we have passed that time; or have we? Have you? Have you managed to get up and go on and out with something else to do and give and think about? Or, have you made your loss the measure of your days? "Slumber not in the tents of your fathers," the Spanish philosopher Unamuno once wrote, "the world is advancing. Advance with it!"

I guarantee you: life will never be the same again. It will all look bleak and dark, more so at the start. But time and the Lord can help you to clear out the clouds. In the end, since God works all things together for good, He will lead you through the Valley, if you allow Him to, and on out to the other side, to the mountain top of your new tomorrow.

Psalm 23 says, "Yea though I walk through the Valley of death, I will fear no evil." Through the valley. Sometimes you need to stir up the gift of God which is within you. The gift is there. Christ promises that. He will never fail you or forsake you. You will need to find it once again. Do not be afraid to say you need help in learning how to grieve. "I have learned to be content." Tough lesson indeed!