

# Love Is Stronger Than Death

## 1-The Great Mystery

As a humanist minister I have seen much sorrow and grief. I have been with children after their father was killed in an auto accident, a young couple when their month-old infant died, a wife in a hospital waiting room when all life-support systems for her husband had been shut down by the doctor. I have officiated at funerals for the very old and for children and I have counseled families during their bereavement.

Most often the grief seems overwhelming and unbearable. Few believe that their lives will ever return to anything resembling normality. But at some point most people do find a way through their sorrow and become, once again, part of the on-goingness of life.

Yet no two people are alike. Some recover quickly, some more slowly and some are changed forever. Over the years I have seen some of the problems that the bereaved encounter. Out of this experience I have learned a number of things that may be of use.

During the period of intense grief, people often think they are going crazy. Some people hear voices or see visions, others find themselves attached to odd objects.

I have seen long-term friendships disintegrate because of misunderstandings and I have known people who were once emotionally strong suddenly weep at unexpected times, in unexpected places. People feel embarrassed, ashamed, guilty, edgy, withdrawn, anti-social and angry. They sometimes act in ways totally uncharacteristic and this is why they feel they must be going mad. They are no longer themselves.

I have also learned that there is no such thing as a time-table for grieving nor is there such a thing as the proper way to grieve. The most that can be said is that there is a general pattern, a broad outline, but within these contours each person finds his or her own way. What is true is that for many the amount of time grief takes to work itself through is far longer than outsiders realize.

People tend to get impatient with the bereaved. But when there has been a profound loss, patience and understanding are often the most important things to be had.

I think there are two ultimate sources of comfort for the bereaved. The first is the recognition that the great mystery is not death but birth, not that someone loved is now gone but that the person was here at all. The great gift is life and loving and being loved in return. In this way love is stronger than death. The second source of comfort comes from other people, from those who can sit quietly and simply be with the bereaved. Their love, kindness, tenderness and caring is what gives us the strength to go on.

This book is meant to help those who are bereaved. I attempt to do this in two ways. The first part of the book contains thoughts about the bereavement process. It is meant to help a person better understand some of the emotions he or she may be feeling. It is based upon some of my own observations, as well as those of others who have also been involved in bereavement. The second part of the book contains poems and aphorisms. Some sections of the book will fit what some are feeling at a particular time, while other sections of the book may seem irrelevant.

Since grief is not something static but is a process, what may not be helpful today may be tomorrow. The book need not be read as a whole but in parts, little by little.

August Renoir, the French Impressionist painter, late in life suffered with rheumatism. His affliction was so intense that he painted while sitting in a chair and being moved about as he directed. Holding a brush was extremely painful. Yet he continued to paint, and despite the crippling illness, created several masterpieces.

To watch Renoir struggle was painful itself. One day a friend asked him, "Why do you torture yourself? You have already produced scores of wonderful paintings."

Renoir looked at one of his canvases and replied, "The pain passes, but the beauty remains."

The pain felt at a death seems too much to bear, yet people go on because the beauty of life remains despite the loss. But what do people do while the pain persists?

As a way of coping with the pain many people form attachments to particular objects. A widow may keep her husband's clothes. It is not uncommon for parents to keep a child's room intact for several years. It is as though by keeping things as they were the person is really still here with them.

While those who stand outside may think the behavior is abnormal, forming attachments to objects is often a healthy thing to do. Psychologists call this 'transitional relationships.' Children form them all the time as a way of coping with the fear of leaving the safety of the home and having to face the frightening world without mother or father. Being on one's own is a frightening prospect and one way a child deals with that anxiety is by playing with teddy bears or forming a fantasy world in which the child is totally in control.

Transitional objects give children a mean of mitigating the terrors of inner turmoil in a seemingly hostile and indifferent world. So too when some- one dies the universe becomes frightening and hostile. Holding on to those things which remind us of a time when the person we loved was with us gives comfort. There is nothing wrong with that. The possession of these objects can provide bereaved people with a bridge from the time loved ones were alive to the present.

## **2-Comfort**

I know a woman who for months after her husband's death kept his pajamas under her pillow. She took them from the drawer each night and returned them there in the morning. Before placing them under the pillow she lifted them to her nose and smelled them.

The pajamas and their aroma was a link to her deceased husband. The touch and the smell were her bridge from the past into the present. The ritual of holding, folding, sniffing and placing the pajamas under the pillow each night served her as a source of comfort.

In a primitive and powerful manner, the senses provide solace. Most often they are used unconsciously. Out of nowhere, it seems, there wafts an aroma that is associated with the deceased. It is a smell that reminds us of the person we loved. The smell may evoke a memory: a walk in the woods together, a smell like that of a car once owned, lilacs in spring. Many who are bereaved find themselves weeping for what appears to be no reason at all. In reality, it may be that there is something in the air that unknowingly reminds the bereaved of the person now missed.

In a similar way, food provokes strong feelings. Cooking aromas in the kitchen can remind us of the times we ate together, the communion around the table.

Food is also more than its aroma. Without it no one can exist. Each time we eat we are reminded that life continues, that there is a cycle in which we participate.

For this reason, mourning rituals throughout the world involve food. People come to visit the bereaved, often bringing food as a gift. It is both a real and symbolic gesture real because the mourners are in no condition to cook nor tend to ordinary necessities. Bringing food relieves the bereaved of that duty. Further, it is a declaration that the survivors must continue their own lives. Food is a reminder that life is more important than death.

All too often the bereaved think that they have lost hold of sanity because they break into tears without any apparent reason. In reality, they have not lost hold of life but are attempting to hold onto a life that had great meaning. They weep because something has entered unexpectedly and unconsciously. A touch, a smell are powerful cues to memory.

### **3-Talking to the Dead**

A month after her husband's death a woman met with me to talk about something she had experienced which she didn't understand and found frightening. All her life she had been a humanist, convinced that nothing exists outside the natural order of the universe. She was not at all superstitious and believed that death was final and complete. When a person died, no soul continued on.

One morning her husband suddenly died from a heart attack at the foot of the bed they had shared for nearly thirty years.

Several weeks after the funeral she was startled from her sleep. She sensed her husband was in the room with her. She felt it the way a person sometimes feels when they are being stared at by another.

When she first felt the presence she became scared and her husband's presence quickly disappeared. Several days later she was again awakened when she felt him in the room with her. This time she was less frightened and the presence stayed longer. On one other night the same thing happened and this time she felt no fear at all.

Now she came to talk to me because she thought that maybe she was losing her mind. She believed that her husband's presence was real but at the same time she didn't believe in angels or spirits.

What was it then?

I then told her a story about John Lovejoy Elliott, an Ethical Culture leader who had served the Ethical Movement for half a century. Elliott and Felix Adler were fast friends for fifty years. Some described Elliott's relationship to Adler as a nephew to an uncle. However it may be characterized, clearly it was close and long-lasting. Following Adler's death, Elliott moved into Adler's study at the New York Society for Ethical Culture. One day a visitor came to call on Elliott, only to find him talking out loud. No one else was there. The visitor was embarrassed to have discovered Elliott like this. But Elliott wasn't in the least bothered by it. He explained in all sincerity that he was talking to Adler.

Elliott didn't believe in ghosts. He never had and he didn't now. He explained to the visitor that Adler wasn't literally in the room with him but in a real sense he was present. After half a century of close association, after having worked and studied together, Elliott said that he still consulted with Adler when an important decision needed to be made. He knew Adler so well that he could have conversations with him even if he weren't there. It was an honest admission on his part that Adler's personality continued to live through his own. Elliott said that he often talked to Adler and his old friend still offered guidance. Sitting alone in the study, holding a conversation with a departed friend was a valuable source of comfort to him.

Sometimes the dialogues are held out loud. Other times they are inner discussions, interior conversations in the privacy of one's own being. The poet Abraham Sutskever holds such conversations with his parents through his writing. They talk to him and he to them. By writing about them and listening to what they have to say he finds continued guidance. In one of his poems he writes about his mother's death at the hands of the Nazis during the Vilna massacre. He imagines rushing into her room after her death and finding her torn nightshirt. Sutskever says that he threw off his clothes and climbed into her open shirt. "It's no longer a shirt but your bright skin/ it's your cold, surviving mortality."

But after he had taken on her skin, she speaks to him. She tells him not to do it. "It's a sin, a sin./ Accept our separation/ as just."

What is this sin? It is giving up his own life, to take on his mother's for her sake. She tells him, "If you remain/ I will still be alive/ as the pit of the plum/ contains in itself the tree,/ the nest and the bird/ and all else be- sides."

The sentiment of the poem is correct. For Sutskever to take up his mother's life would compound the tragedy. If he wants to honor her, it is enough for him to live. It is that which ensures her immortality. Life is complete and each life is unique. To give up life, to deny one's own specialness is to commit a sin.

She tells him that the seed contains the flower, the acorn the tree. She will remain alive because he exists. His very existence attests to hers. In this way her presence is real and eternal. And in this way her son continues to talk to her.

#### **4-The Wonder of Memory**

The night after a devastating tornado ripped through an Ohio town killing more than twenty people and destroying nearly all its buildings and homes, the evening news showed the destruction and interviewed the victims. One picture in particular seemed to sum up the tragedy and poignancy. There was a girl, perhaps ten, standing upon the rubble of what that morning had been her home. With a teddy bear in the crook of her arm, she picked her way through the pile of boards and plaster. Page by page she recovered pieces of the family photo album.

This girl was doing what others had said they would do in a fire. After saving people and pets, they would rescue the family album. The photographs reveal a lifetime of shared memories; they are a record of what has gone before. Separate but intertwined lives unfold across the pages.

Each time we look at the photographs of friends who have come to visit, relatives who have moved away or died, our memories grow larger. Every time new photographs are added another piece of our lives is given a place of permanence. We are reminded of what we once looked like, the kind of lives we led. Here are the vacations, the visitors, the holidays. Family photographs are a record in the way that family bibles once were the ledgers of families' histories.

Often parents will show their children relatives that they seldom see or may never have seen. This visualization helps children locate their places in the complex and unfolding narrative. The family photo album provides a sense of continuity between the past and the present. In a significant way it contains a key to understanding our life today. After a death, the album becomes even more important; the importance of photographs looms even larger. To be able to see a person again is one of the ways of remembering the deceased.

Some people fear that being reminded of the past prevents a person from living in the present. This does sometimes happen. I know a woman who keeps an urn with her husband's remains on the mantle above the fire- place. She said that for the first year she found his ashes in her living room a source of comfort. However, now she wanted to move on but was burdened by the urn. As long as the reminder was as immediate as an urn in her house, any attempt to reestablish her life without him felt like an act of disloyalty.

Yet, it is also true that without connections to others life can become meaningless. It has been said that each of us is like a letter in the alphabet - alone we are mere sound but with others we become words, and when the words are put together we have a story.

The wonder of memory is that, when properly used, it gives strength and vitality for living today.

Many small things, such as food, photographs and songs, can be vehicles for solace when they provide links to a loved past. In times of distress some people find the forgotten scent, a song heard together as a way of keeping the past in the present. Healing can be helped by drawing upon the past as a means of living fully in the present.

There is nothing contradictory about using the past to enhance the present. Memory can be an enrichment and is only harmful when it becomes more important than the present. When people recognize that the past and the present are of one piece, then they are ready to welcome tomorrow.

There is a man who scattered his wife's remains in the woods near the Ethical Society. Each Sunday morning before attending meetings he stops by the birch trees, holds a silent conversation, then goes to the meeting with his present wife. He can love her more because he still draws upon from strength of the love from his first marriage.

## **5-The Unexpected**

Grooms tend to be older than brides and men tend to die younger than women. Given these two facts, in the United States eleven out of every twelve women become widows. Most married women know that in all probability their husbands will die before them. But when death comes it comes with shock, pain and a sense of betrayal. Knowing about some- thing is not the same as experiencing It.

Equally, while the death of the old is inevitable and does not have about the same sadness as does the death of a younger person, no one is ever fully prepared to lose a parent. Even after a long and painful illness, even when death is a welcome relief from suffering, there often are feelings of remorse, a sense of things unfinished, a feeling that perhaps more could have been done, that things could have been different.

The death of a young person is most painful, most unbelievable of all. Once when I was in Kenya my friend Anna took me to meet Paul, her brother-in-law. Paul had been a student at the University of Nairobi and one day, suddenly and mysteriously, he fell ill. He lay in a coma when I met him, nearly a year after the onset of his disease. His eyes were open but he didn't move. Neither could he speak and the family didn't know if he could hear or understand what was said to him. Despite the numerous examinations by doctors throughout the country and the various treatments he received, nothing could rouse him.

Anna explained that doctors had given up hope for his recovery. The family exhausted all possibilities and had resigned itself to his continuous comatose state and they knew that in all likelihood he would die soon. They kept him at home and each morning took him from his bed and seated him in a chair in front of a window looking out upon the family garden.

The family didn't know what Paul thought or felt, or if he thought or felt anything at all. But in case there was some consciousness, they wanted him to enjoy the pleasure of seeing his family and looking at the trees and grass. No one knew what caused his illness and they received no encouragement from doctors regarding his recovery. Meanwhile, they tended to him and introduced him to each visitor.

For more than two years the family had fed him, cared for him and sat him by the window in his room. But just as mysteriously and as quickly as he had fallen into a coma, Paul died. Within minutes word spread about his death. Friends and relatives throughout the district gathered at the family home and together built a coffin, dug the grave, and, on the third day, buried him.

The family was overcome with grief. Although they had anticipated Paul's death daily, when he died it still came as a shock. Two years of waiting didn't lessen the pain.

People expect their parents will die; wives know that the chances are great that their husbands will die before they do. But a young person's death is nature betraying itself. It is a wrenching out of the normal order of birth, growth and decay. The death of a child turns the world upside

down. It is such a profound wrenching that nothing any longer seems real or worth- while. There is no way to prepare for the death of the young.

On some level of awareness we know that accidents don't choose their victims and fatal illnesses strike people of all ages. We also know that the older a person becomes the closer that person comes to death. Despite this, no matter how well prepared we think we are, even though death is inevitable and spares no household, it always takes us unawares.

Whatever the time or circumstances of death, survivors feel anger and guilt - anger that they have been abandoned and left alone, guilt that they might have done things differently, that things were left unsaid, that there was unfinished business. If only: he took care of himself, I made him take care of himself, I didn't let her go out that day, if we hadn't had that fight yesterday. If only we had loved each other more. Anger at what has been done, guilt over what was not. Only the bereaved can know the depths of these emotions and only they can transcend them in time.

## **6-No Correct Way**

Rituals and traditions notwithstanding, there is no "right" way to mourn. While there is a general pattern for mourning, generalizations often do not apply to individuals. Every person is unique and each meets the world in his or her own special manner. Imposing certain expectations regarding the expression of emotions can be harmful.

Anna faced such a problem. At Paul's funeral, just before his body was carried from his house to the grave outside the window of his room, Anna told us that she dreaded the next step. Custom required that she enter a nearby house full of women, rip her clothes, pull her hair and wail as the coffin was lowered into the grave. For the rest of the day she was to sob with her relatives as proof of her grief.

The difficulty for Anna was that she did not feel that way at the time. Perhaps Paul had been ill for so long she experienced his death as a relief or perhaps it didn't yet feel real. For whatever reason, Anna couldn't genuinely express grief publicly that day. She wasn't sure how she felt, yet she had to act as though she were overcome with sorrow. If she didn't behave this way, she would be ostracized by her family.

What was meant to be a ritual catharsis for Anna turned into a meaning- less, dishonest and therefore potentially harmful act. When the dirt began to fall on the casket, Anna, with all the other women, ran, wailed and sobbed. Custom had forced her to be dishonest. The prescribed timetable and manner of expressing grief could only add to her sense of guilt. What kind of sister-in-law could she be if she couldn't feel what everyone told her she was supposed to feel?

Custom required that women wail. At the same time, all the men at the funeral sat somberly and all had dry eyes. I didn't see one cry. Just as women were required to display their emotions, men were required to hide them. If this is true, it is much like American society. In both instances, custom interferes with true feelings. Both men and women are told what to feel, even if that telling is never said directly), when to feel it and how to express it.

Forcing these feelings and actions upon people can be impediments to healing. People feel different things at different times. Although death is universal and no one is spared its tragic appearance, it is also personal and unique. Nothing else forces us to contemplate the great and ultimate questions with such urgency. In the face of death we are thrown back upon our most basic fears and anxieties. Each person suffers alone and the manner in which that loss is felt and expressed differs from person to person.

Willard Gaylin writes, "The sustaining loss to the individual involved in death, even a nontraumatic one, is never fully appreciated by the one who has not been in that position. Time does not heal all wounds, and the amount of time needed to heal the majority of serious wounds is well beyond that which the unwounded could ever anticipate."

Feelings cannot be summoned upon command and rituals that demand specific displays of emotion can be harmful. Instead of healing, they may be sources of unnoted guilt, as the bereaved feels that somehow he or she is not normal because what is experienced and felt is not what custom deems proper. Often it is healthy to release strong feelings. But to demand that the emotions be expressed in a particular way at a particular time is a rejection of the uniqueness of each personality. In an understanding and supportive environment of friends and family, feelings will be worked through in their own time, in their own way.

## **7-Feeling Abnormal**

Suffering a death of a loved one is analogous to a physical injury. Some people shrug off injuries, some go into shock. One wound may take days to heal, a similar wound at another time may

take the same person months to heal. Healing has no timetable. Indeed some feelings may never go away.

Forty years after her 18 month-old child was kidnapped and murdered, Anne Morrow Lindberg still remembered the terror and nightmare of that spring in 1932. She vividly recalled the confusion, the police station that had been set up in her house, the detectives, the police and Secret Service agents. Everything felt unreal during that period.

Even more, she recalled the initial disbelief as numbing. She wrote that it was as though she had undergone an amputation. And nearly a half century later she wrote, "One still feels the lost limb down to the nerve endings. It is as if the intensity of grief fused the distance between myself and the dead."

Alice Ginott notes a similar experience. Remembering her reaction to her husband's death, she refers to the numbness and shock. Her pain settled in her stomach and refused to subside. "Sometimes I felt it less, sometimes more; but it seemed always to be there," she writes. "At night the suffering seemed unbearable, and the only thing I wanted was not to feel."

Despite her desire to anesthetize herself, the initial numbness gave way to pangs of longing. "I was going through a temporary emotional sickness that was pursuing its prescribed course," she writes. "No intervention on my part altered its relentless misery or flow of tears. It was an illness punctuated by severe mood changes from the depths of depression to the extremes of elation. Weeping while working, weeping while walking, weeping unexpectedly for all that could and should have been!"

Bereavement is a form of emotional sickness. A mourner, full of pain and loss, acts irrationally, at once needing companionship and comfort and also intensely needing to be left alone in the privacy of memory. Just as a burn victim wants to be held but cannot without causing more pain, someone who has experienced a death of someone close needs friends but will often rebuff all efforts to be helpful.

After his wife's death, a middle-aged man was invited to friends' homes for dinner. They offered to help however they could. But all their offers were rejected. He couldn't make appointments, he forgot to return calls. Anxiety, terror, anger and guilt made it difficult for him to accept others' desires to be helpful. Unfortunately his friends experienced his emotional turmoil with its contradictions and rebuffs as personal rejections. They wrongly concluded that he was no

longer interested in them as friends. By the end of the year the friendships had undergone such strain that they were irrevocably broken.

His friends could not appreciate the extent of his hurt and confusion. They could not accept his irrationality or the length of time it took him to regain his balance.

Just as a healthy body eventually is repaired, the suffering of bereavement is eventually transformed. A wound that does not heal however, indicates an underlying problem and bereavement that continues without end needs to be examined. A mourner must return to life. This is not a matter of letting go of the past or of forgetting; it is a matter of accepting and moving on.

## **8-Transitions**

Edourda de Moura Castro suffered from leukemia. He knew about the disease and had no illusions about its course. His illness had been diagnosed when he was five and now at age seven he needed an oxygen machine in his bedroom to help reduce his suffering.

Edourda knew he was going to die. He prepared for his death by helping to arrange for his funeral service and by taping a message to other children afflicted with terminal illnesses. He told them, "If you don't hang on to your body and let yourself ease away, it is not so painful."

But his pain became too great. He said, "I don't feel good and I am too sick to live on." He asked his mother to disconnect the oxygen. His mother said, "I turned it off. He held my hand and a big smile came to his face. Then he left."

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross conducts sessions for people who have a member of the family who is dying. In one workshop a mother and her 18 year-old son who had a brain tumor were present. Together, with others who faced the prospect of death, the son and mother shared their fears and sorrows, their anxieties and anger. The mother asked the group, "What comfort can there be when there is no hope?" By posing the question, part of the answer was forthcoming. Mother and son had confronted together life's great tragedy. When the son died, a transition had occurred. Although the mother said that she could barely speak, the act of sharing deep emotions between mother and son had created a foundation upon which the sorrow could be ultimately transformed into the ability to find joy in living.

All that is helpful need not be so profound. In a world filled with bugles and fanfare, we sometimes forget the power of silence. The simplicity of merely being with another is in itself a source of comfort. As May Sarton writes, "Sometimes silence is the greatest sign of understanding and respect. It is far more consoling than words of false comfort."

Children seem to know this better than adults. A story is told about a girl who went to visit the home of a neighbor where her little friend had died. When she returned, her father asked her why she went.

"To comfort her mother," she told him. The father was incredulous and asked her what she could have done to console a woman who had suffered such a terrible loss.

"I climbed onto her lap and cried with her," she said.

Rational appeals, sympathetic words or cliches could not have done as much as this innocent act. Whereas many adults think that they have to say the right word or try to distract the bereaved from thoughts of the departed, the girl knew that there was nothing that could be said. But that didn't mean that nothing could be done. Sitting on the mother's lap didn't lessen the pain; it may have added to it. But it was an expression of caring and concern, a reaching out from the heart, a gesture of hope. It symbolized the continuation of life but did not diminish the anguish. The girl was right: grief genuinely shared is an important means of healing.

Yet we cannot avoid the truth that each death is experienced alone. Gerald Larue writes about the death of his grandson who had not yet reached his second birthday. More than a year after the infant's death, he said, "We cope in our individual way, and our coping mechanisms fluctuate. I cry often. I am angry - at whom or what I am not sure - but I am angry, for death has robbed me of someone who means so much to me. I am despondent and distant. I need closeness and warmth. I ache, I feel resigned. Moods and changes flow. I think I am in control now, but there are moments when I watch children at play at a recreational center and I feel sad and angry, for I will never be able to take my grandson there. I am flooded with mental images and the images bring pain and tears.

"Now, somehow, life goes on. The world spins on its axis, days fade into weeks, and weeks into months. Time will heal the wounds of loss, but the scars of separation remain and the memories of a beloved and loving child do not fade.

“Time is precious, but time is only valuable when it enhances and nourishes living. My grandson touched me, and I can never be the same again.”

The death of a loved one changes us forever. Never again will we be the same. But how it changes us is, in part, a choice. We can either be shattered by the experience or find ourselves annealed, like iron smelted in a furnace to make it stronger when cooled. We can think of the world as a place where always an infant is being born. Someone once said that when she thinks of the world she is saddened because she knows that at that very moment snow is falling furiously. Her friend responded that when he thinks of the world he knows that somewhere at that very moment there is dawn break.

## **9-Being Exposed**

“To love one who loves you,” wrote Madame de Girardin, “to admire one who admires you, in a word, to be the idol of one’s idol, is exceeding the limit of human joy; it is stealing fire from heaven.”

Every life is a gift and every love the gift of joy. Death seems to take it all away. Yet not everything is lost. That love can continue to live through the act of remembrance. Judaism provides for the yizkor service, the word meaning ‘he shall remember’ in Hebrew. Catholics light candles in church to remember those who have died. Many Africans set aside small portions of food at meals and Shintos ring bells in temples.

It is in memory that the links to the past are forged. Out of the sadness of death and the ache of love can come a new strength and capacity to go on. The person we lose in death is not obliterated if we affirm life and deny despair. Memory is part of the healing process that brings together life and death as a mark of gratitude and an expression of love. Through the actions of the survivors the dead do live on.

Because we loved we feel the sorrow of death. And because love is not contained by the boundaries of our physical bodies it returns to us.

Until we are ready to embrace life again, as healing takes its erratic and eccentric course, all we can ask is for others to be near. As Alfred Lord Tennyson wrote, “Be near me when my light is low/ when the blood creeps, and the nerves prick/ and tingle, and the heart is sick,/ and all the

wheels of being slow.” So too Archibald MacLeish has written, “Then blow on the coal of the heart,/ It’s all the light now.”

What we ask of friends is warmth. We need friends when we think that all we have is ashes. Friends can help us to know that it is not ashes that remain but embers that can billow into flame once more.

Friends are essential for death makes us feel alone and exposed. “Feeling vulnerable without one’s lifelong companion,” writes Ies Spetter, “easily raises doubts as to whether one can ever again be intimate with another person.”

Ies Spetter relates the story of a widow who confessed to him that she felt morally tortured because she had dinner with a male companion at the same table at which she once ate with her husband. The feeling of un-faithfulness was overwhelming. As she and her friend deepened their emotional and sexual interest in one another, she became more anxious. “She became obsessive about keeping her home spotless,” Spetter writes, “and only by being helped to realize that she was in fact engaged in postponed mourning could she slowly overcome self-deprecation. Then slowly she could see herself reclaiming her life, by building new ways to sharing and, ultimately, daring to love again without self-reproach.”

Mourning is an emotional process. It cannot be hurried but it can be helped. Thomas Scheff tells the story of a woman whose young daughter died. Two years after the death the mother was contemplating suicide. She went to a therapist who helped her through the transition from refusing to admit the reality of her daughter’s death to a point at which the woman was ready to engage life once again. The therapist encouraged the woman to bring a photograph of her daughter to the sessions. There he asked her to talk to the girl’s picture. Finally she was able to say, “I’ve got to send you away. I don’t want to because I love you. I want you to be here with me. But I’ve got to let you go, even though I can’t. Good-bye, my love.”

## **10-A Wedding and a Funeral**

Doug and Barbara planned to get married but they wanted to wait a while. While I was out of the country on sabbatical I received a letter from them. They said that during a routine examination the doctor found a mark on Doug’s lung. They were waiting for further test results. A month later a second letter arrived. Doug had been operated on for the removal of a growth. They were

eager for me to return so I could officiate at their marriage. We planned the ceremony for mid-October.

When I returned home toward the end of September, a group of friends met me at the airport. Doug and Barbara were conspicuously absent. I was told that Doug was in the hospital again. He had been having difficulty with his eyes. The doctors thought that his cancer had spread to his brain.

Doug and Barbara had decided that they couldn't wait for my return to get married. They wanted to be wed before Doug went to the hospital again. So they had gone to a judge that Friday before my return to become legally husband and wife.

Doug received a series of radiation treatments but they failed to check the malignant growth. His eyes continued to bother him until he could no longer

keep them open. He lost his sense of balance and needed a cane, then a walker. In a few months he was confined to the house and finally to bed.

Several times Barbara expressed her disappointment at not having an Ethical Culture wedding ceremony. While it was important for them to be married, she felt that something was lacking. Doug too on various occasions said he wished that he could have had a humanist wedding ceremony. A quick ceremony in the judge's chambers did not satisfy either of them, although they could not say exactly what they felt was missing. No one any longer held out hope for his recovery. One night, while I sat with him and Barbara, he asked if I would perform a wedding service for them.

Less than a week later close friends and relatives came to their home. We arranged for the ceremony to take place in the sunroom - the place where Doug's hospital bed had been set up so he could overlook the garden. Doug lay in his bed, only partially conscious and coherent. The others stood around him and Barbara sat on the bedside, holding his hand. Each brought something to say, and we shared our thoughts and feelings with them.

When we finished, Doug, who had his eyes closed throughout the ceremony, said it was now his turn to speak. And he did.

"I am enfolded in an envelope filled with warmth and love," he said.

It was as though a veil had been lifted from him, as though for those brief moments the hand of death had been lifted from his body and he was transformed. He spoke to us about his love for Barbara and how much we all meant to him.

Surrounded by those most close to them, in the intimacy of their home, with the specter of death present and visible, they rededicated themselves to each other. Then Doug closed his eyes again to sleep.

Two weeks later he died at home. We arranged a memorial service for him at the Ethical Humanist meeting house. Whereas the wedding was private, in a home with but ten guests, the memorial service was communal, the meeting house filled with friends and relatives, acquaintances and colleagues. The memorial service emphasized the inevitability of death and loss and grief we all felt. But Doug had given something to each of us who knew him and that lives on through us. Others who were especially close to him spoke of his qualities of gentleness and humor. Members of the society who were musicians and knew that Doug had enjoyed jazz ended the service with the mellow, bittersweet “Mood Indigo.”

That was the closing of an exhausting, yet exhilarating month - from the intense warmth of the wedding at a sickbed to the pathos of a memorial service for a man whose life ended shortly after his love began.

“We mutually needed to reaffirm our commitment,” Barbara now reflects. “I felt the love of sharing with him, and the love and support of a group at the ceremony that was almost overwhelming. Without that I could probably not have had the strength to face what was inevitable. The peace and security and pleasure in Doug’s participation in our marriage ceremony which he requested so close to his death gives me a memory that has and will continue to dispel the grief and depression which overtakes me when I remember how short but wonderful our time was.

“The memorial service was like the closing of a transparent cover of our book. The service was really for me to hear expressed what I felt about Doug and the comfort of others who cared and spoke so sensitively. It marked the close of a living relationship. Instead of closing off a dying person, I will forever be grateful for the very special way in which he is enfolded into my life.

“I can’t express too strongly the importance of the inclusion of dying people, for them and the family, in life!”

## **11-Accepting and Forgiving**

Wendy was four years old. About a month after her mother died, Wendy complained that no one loved her. In order to reassure her, Wendy's father explained that there were many people who loved her and made a list of the people who did. Wendy still wasn't satisfied. "But when Mommy wasn't dead," she said, "I didn't need so many people. I just needed one."

No person can ever be replaced. Each individual is unique and at the various stages of our lives we find one person who assumes a central place in our hearts. When that person dies, the emptiness cannot be filled by other people. Activities and distractions don't help. Wendy's mother wasn't interchangeable with other relatives. Even if her father remarried, her new mother wouldn't be the same not that she might love her less but simply that no two people are alike and Wendy would always, in some way, remain loyal to her mother.

Wendy's father was right in one regard: having people love us helps us to recover from the wounds of separation. Understanding and support facilitate the mourning process so that life can be lived once again.

Ann Morrow Lindberg described the kind of understanding that acknowledges the pain of loss: "Courage is a first step, but simply to bear the blow bravely is not enough. Stoicism is courageous, but it is only a halfway house on the long road. It is a shield, permissible for a short time only. In the end one has to discard the shield and remain open and vulnerable. Otherwise, scar tissue will seal off the wound and no growth will follow. To grow, to be reborn, one must remain vulnerable open to love but also hideously open to the possibility of more suffering."

The ability to remain open includes seeing the deceased honestly rather than in an idealized manner. Eulogies that present the departed as saints and visitors who gloss over the flaws of friends do not help mourners. Instead, these attempts at kindness may inadvertently add to the guilt the survivor may already feel.

Soon after her father's death, a woman began seeing a therapist, not because of her grief but because she was literally tearing her hair out. She plucked hair from her head. She couldn't control or understand her behavior. During the course of therapy, she talked about her father. As therapy progressed, it became evident that he had been an exacting parent who held up high standards for his daughter, impossible standards which she could not meet. All her life she felt as though her father looked disapprovingly over her shoulder. Only when she was able to admit

that there were parts of her father that she hated did she realize that by pulling her hair she was symbolically continuing her relationship with him. Finally, acknowledging that her feelings towards him were mixed that there were both love and hate her neurotic behavior ceased.

To be able to admit both the good and troubled aspects of a relationship is vital to recovery. While honoring the dead means assuming some of their best qualities and enacting them, this can be done only if it is also acknowledged that the person was not perfect.

Idealization does not help; speculation will not speed recovery; avoidance only makes matters worse. What then will help, what are the sources of comfort?

Mainly, it is being with others who can share in the grief. It is a condolence letter received, a visit, a call. It is feeling cared for by others who understand, who accept and forgive. It is a sense of solidarity, silence and touch. These small but genuine gestures allow the mourner room and privacy to eventually face life transformed but whole.

## **12-A Sketch**

We do not know where we came from or where we will go when we die. Sometimes we think we live our lives like the firefly, illuminating some small part of the world, briefly flying, then returning to the earth so that something else may live.

Other times we think there may be more. But this will always remain a mystery. We know nothing about the beginning of time or its end, nothing about heaven or an afterlife. We can only draw upon our imagination and agree with Emily Dickinson:

My only sketch, profile, of Heaven is a large blue sky, and larger than the biggest I have seen in June - and in it are my friends - every one of them.

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