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The Role of the Clergyman in the Grief Process

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CONCORDIA THEOLOGICAL MONTHLY

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Theology

EDWARD H. SCHROEDER


Homiletics

Book Review

Vol. XLIII

March

Number 3



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The Role of the Clergyman in the Grief Process

VERNON R. WIEHE

The author is director of social services at Lutheran Family and Children's Services, St. Louis, Mo.

THE AUTHOR PRESENTS A PSYCHOLOGICAL AND PHYSIOLOGICAL DISCUSSION OF THE reactions of the bereaved to the loss experienced in death and offers some guidelines to clergymen for counseling and preaching in grief situations.

Life must go on
And the dead be forgotten
Life must go on,
Though good men die.

Anne, eat your breakfast;
Dan, take your medicine;
Life must go on,
I forget just why.¹

In this poem, *Lament*, by Edna St. Vincent Millay, the feelings of the bereaved at the time of a death are portrayed. Life must go on and the dead be forgotten, but how is often a perplexing question. How is grief to be handled? Particularly, how is the Christian to express grief in the light of faith in the resurrection? What is the role of the clergyman in the grief process?

Man's grieving is prescribed and conditioned by culture. At the time of the crisis of death, friends of the bereaved attempt to console and comfort and in essence may tend to deny for the bereaved the reality of their feelings. Social etiquette, supported by our culture's handling of the death event, would tend to reinforce the

¹ Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Lyrics of Edna St. Vincent Millay* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1917), p. 103.

denial of intense feelings of loss experienced by the bereaved. The funeral director's art is focused on helping those who mourn not to experience the sharpness of death. A scene of artificiality is created from the viewing of the deceased in a slumber room to the final parting in the ground amid sprays of flowers and carpets of artificial grass. The clergyman who relates closely to the grieving family is a key individual in both openly and covertly prescribing directions to the bereaved on how to grieve. He may be so busy offering consolation to survivors that he may fail to sense the true feelings experienced by the bereaved.

In this study the reactions of the bereaved to the loss experienced will be discussed both from a psychological and physiological perspective. Second, the grief process studied by Lindemann in his research on this phenomenon will be described. The study will conclude with the role of the clergyman in his ministry to the bereaved. It should be stated that although this study focuses largely on the concept of loss as it occurs through death, the sense of a loss and accompanying grief feelings occurs in situations other than death; for

example, a son or daughter leaving home to attend college or to enter military service, the loss of a job or the failure to secure a promotion, or the loss of a friend.

REACTIONS TO LOSS EXPERIENCED BY THE BEREAVED

The reactions of the bereaved to the loss they have experienced may be viewed as both psychological and physiological. The most obvious and conscious reaction to the loss is that of sadness. The relationship of the bereaved to the deceased is terminated. A loss is experienced by those who mourn. In addition to the obvious reaction of sadness, the bereaved may be reacting to the loss incurred with feelings of hostility and guilt. Hostility may be shown by the bereaved specifically toward God, toward the deceased, and toward those around who want to help the bereaved. The bereaved may also experience a generalized feeling of hostility. The feelings of hostility may be intensified by well-meaning sympathizers who attempt to comfort the bereaved by statements emphasizing how much better the deceased is through his departure, not realizing this statement omits the bereaved's wish to retain the relationship. This was aptly stated in a remark made by a widow at a wake to a young woman who was also "mourning" the temporary loss of her husband through induction into military service. The widow hostilely stated, "Your husband will return, but mine won't."

The anger experienced by the bereaved may be directly expressed toward the deceased. The bereaved, in the confusion of the sudden and unexpected death of a mate, may experience the loss in terms of an abrupt termination of goals and ambitions,

in addition to being forced to assume insurmountable responsibilities such as raising a family and providing financial support. A young widow with several children, when discussing with her pastor her feelings following her husband's death, exclaimed, "He pulled a dirty trick on me by dying." While the deceased had no choice in terms of a course of action, neither did the bereaved, and the feelings of hostility which were experienced were intense.

Although feelings of hostility may be experienced by the bereaved over the loss of the deceased, these feelings may not be expressed but rather denied. As stated earlier, many aspects of our culture's handling of the entire death event tends to aid in the denial or suppression of the feelings aroused, particularly feelings of hostility. These feelings of hostility may be introjected upon the self by the bereaved and experienced as depression. This may be particularly true if the bereaved questions the reality of such feelings and the propriety of expressing feelings of hostility at the time of a death of a loved one.

Feelings of guilt may be experienced by the bereaved as earlier experiences in relation to the deceased come to mind. Incidents involving hurt, anger, disappointment inflicted by the bereaved upon the departed may be remembered, as well as promises not kept or wishes of the deceased not fulfilled before the latter's death. The bereaved may formulate an idealized picture of the dead person on the basis of flashes of a highly selective nature which come to the bereaved's mind. In this idealized picture, the memories of the dead person may become highly falsified on the basis of what the bereaved would have

wished the deceased to be. The bereaved's own functioning in comparison to this fantasized or idealized picture may create further guilt that such an idealized state was not attained.² Erich Lindemann, in a study of the grief reactions of survivors of the Coconut Grove fire in Boston, found the bereaved searching the period of time before the death for evidence of having failed the deceased. The incidence on which the guilt was based was often out of proportion with reality.³

Bonnell, in discussing the guilt experienced by the bereaved in the form of re-primination, distinguishes between actual guilt and neurotic guilt. Genuine or actual guilt becomes neurotic guilt when the bereaved flagellates himself for imaginary wrongdoing or if he views the latter far out of perspective of the reality of what has occurred in the bereaved's relationship to the deceased. If neurotic guilt persists, professional counseling may be indicated.⁴

Physiological reactions may also occur in response to grief experienced over a loss. The first reactions to the loss may be physiological, accompanied, however, by a psychological reaction. The following physiological syndrome is suggested by Lindemann on the basis of the study referred to earlier:

1. sighing respiration.

² Willard Waller, *The Family: A Dynamic Interpretation* (New York: Dryden Press, 1951), p. 471.

³ Erich Lindemann, "Symptomatology and Management of Grief," *Crisis Intervention: Selected Readings*, ed. Howard J. Parad (New York: Family Service Association of America, 1965), p. 9.

⁴ George C. Bonnell, "The Pastor's Role in Counseling the Bereaved," *Pastoral Psychology*, XXII (February 1971), 30.

2. complaints concerning a lack of physical strength and general exhaustion.
3. digestive symptoms, such as food seems tasteless or a hollow feeling exists in the stomach.⁵

This syndrome or aspects of it may occur in periodical waves such as twenty minutes to an hour and be provoked by thoughts of the deceased, visits from friends, or reminders of the deceased from items left by the individual.⁶ In this physiological reaction an increase of physical activity may also occur. The bereaved cannot sit still, there may be a general feeling of uneasiness or restlessness, a quest for something to do while at the same time the inability to focus on one activity or to initiate any such activity, or insomnia may occur. A rush of speech may be noticed when the bereaved speaks about the deceased. There may be a loss of enthusiasm for activities which the bereaved formerly engaged in with the deceased.⁷

The intensity of the reaction experienced by the bereaved at the time of the loss can be better understood if the effect of the loss on the future life of the bereaved is considered. Viewing the life pattern of the bereaved from the framework of socio-cultural concepts, changes can be expected in the roles of the bereaved, even perhaps in the status and class positions or reference groups of the bereaved. New roles must be assumed by the bereaved and former roles disbanded, depending on the nature of the relationship to the deceased. Status, class, and reference groups of the bereaved might likewise be affected as financial security is disturbed, as new pat-

⁵ Lindemann, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 9—10.

terns of friends must be made, or as a geographical move is necessitated by the loss of the deceased.

The reactions of a physiological as well as a psychological nature may cause the bereaved to question what is being experienced. This questioning may take the form of concern over the reality or normalcy of the reaction to the loss experienced to the extent that some breakdown in ego functioning may occur. If the bereaved's grasp of reality around the feelings experienced over the loss becomes hazy or the bereaved does not have a relationship with someone who can represent reality in the sense of reflecting to the bereaved the normalcy of the reactions, a surmounting state of anxiety can occur, complicating the crisis already being experienced by the bereaved.

THE GRIEF PROCESS

Grief is a normal working-through process of a loss an individual has experienced and the process whereby the individual can reinvest energies into new tasks and relationships. The German word for mourning, *Trauerarbeit*, roughly translated "grief work," expresses what must occur in the period of mourning or grief. Lindemann describes the grief process occurring in three phases:

1. the process of freeing oneself from the ties associating one with the deceased.
2. the process of readjusting on the part of the bereaved to the environment without the deceased.
3. the process of forming new relationships.⁸

The above process is referred to as a normal grief reaction as compared to a morbid

⁸ Ibid., p. 11.

grief reaction. Characteristic of a morbid grief reaction is the delaying of grief because of the responsibilities of the bereaved or the feeling that it is necessary to maintain the morale of others. Significant individuals in the bereaved's environment, such as immediate members of the family or a well-intentioned clergyman, may further deter the normal working-through process of grief. The grief may be provoked later by another loss or even by the occurrence of the anniversary of the death of the loved one.

The intensity of the relationship of the bereaved with the deceased before death seems to be significant to the nature of the grief process. This relationship need not have been only positive in nature but could also have been one of a hostile interaction.⁹ An intensely negative relationship will require a working through of the grief experienced at the time of the loss just as close affectional ties would demand such a working-through process.

A therapist or counselor can be helpful in aiding a counselee in working through the grief experienced by a loss. Lindemann describes the therapy in four steps:

1. In the counseling relationship the counselee is enabled to review the relationship with the deceased.
2. As the counselee reviews this relationship and grieves, the counselee must become aware of his own modes of emotional reaction to the loss.
3. The counselor must represent reality in the grief process; for example, in representing the reality of feelings of hostility and guilt experienced by the counselee in reaction to the loss incurred.

⁹ Ibid., p. 18.

4. The counselor can enable the counselee to reinvest in new relationships.¹⁰

Lindemann found that generally with eight to ten interviews of the bereaved sharing in the grief process with a therapist, or in a period of four to six weeks, it was possible to settle an uncomplicated and undistorted grief reaction.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, when an individual suffers a loss, he is faced with the task of redirecting his emotional energy from the person or object he has lost to a new object. However, prior to reinvesting this energy in a new object or person, the individual may withdraw this energy into himself. Freud compares this flow of emotional energy or "libido" to the footlike structures of the amoeba which are originally concentrated within its own body substance but can be stretched out toward the outside world or withdrawn, such as at times of danger.¹¹ Thus, following the loss of someone or something in which considerable emotional energy was invested, the individual enduring the loss may show a great amount of self-concern with little interest in family, friends, and others who attempt to reach out to him. Those who attempt to reach out to such an individual may be hostilely treated by the person to whom they are reaching out. However, it is important that the bereaved, after being given some opportunity to withdraw into himself, be encouraged to make new contacts, new friends, and new investments of emotional energy which originally went to the departed one.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," *Collected Papers*, IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1925), 33.

Jackson summarizes the grief process in this way:

Theoretically, successful grief work includes movement from denial which follows the original shock to a fuller and fuller realization of the feelings of loss. This increasing recognition is accompanied by such affective and physical symptoms as despair, hopelessness, anger, anorexia, sleeplessness, withdrawal, apathy, restlessness, and others. There generally develops a general idealization of the lost object (or old self) with an intensification of memories. Through this means the hyper-cathexis of the wish for the lost object (the old self) is gradually reduced. Finally, feelings are liberated for a more realistic adaptation to the new situation. The basic function of grief is to test reality. Its utility lies in the fact . . . that the grief normally erases those detachments which otherwise menace the individual by leaving him fixed in an illusory life.¹²

THE ROLE OF THE CLERGYMAN IN THE GRIEF PROCESS

The clergyman often relates most closely of anyone to the bereaved in the crisis of death. Perhaps at no other time in a parishioner's life does this relationship exist with an individual's pastor. Having discussed the reaction of the bereaved to the loss incurred, it is well also to consider the reactions of the clergyman as he deals with the phenomenon of death. The intensity of the feelings experienced by the clergyman at a death will be determined by the nature of the relationship he had with the deceased; however, the presence of his own feelings and the manner in which he han-

¹² Claire L. Jackson, "The Grief Process in Physical Illness," *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, XXXII (October 1962), 133.

dles them is significant to the role he is asked to assume. Tournier, the French psychiatrist, says that grief makes us conscious of our own impotence in the light of death. We are helpless over the loss, and we do not like to experience the anxiety of this helplessness.¹³ The clergyman also experiences feelings of helplessness as he attempts to minister to the bereaved with the variety of feelings the latter may be experiencing. If the clergyman were to closely examine his role in his ministry to the bereaved in conversation, in prayer, in the funeral sermon, or in the selection of Scripture passages, he might find that his role often centers in the denial of the feelings being experienced by the bereaved over the loss incurred. The clergyman may covertly in his ministry at the time of a death be encouraging and aiding the denial of the feelings experienced by the bereaved, feelings of hostility, guilt, or hopelessness.

Cultural patterns would tend to reinforce this denial of feeling through the absence of traditional mourning customs of various ethnic groups prevalent as late as recent decades. It is interesting to note that traditional Judaism appeared to have devised procedures or prescriptions for the healthy expression of grief. The Old Testament records how open and unashamed was the expression of sorrow on the part of Abraham, Jacob, and David. The bereaved wept publicly, wore sackcloth, fasted, and tore their garments in the course of the expression of grief. Today traditional mourning attire and a period of abstinence from social activities has largely disappeared. While there are very

positive, helpful aspects to the trend of proclaiming a joyful and triumphant resurrection theme at funerals in churches today, yet the question must be raised whether this reinforces the denial of actual feelings experienced by the bereaved. Considering present-day burial and mourning customs, is the opportunity provided for the bereaved to grieve over the loss incurred through death?

A significant role the clergyman can assume in his ministry to the bereaved is the representation and reflection of reality in terms of the feelings being experienced around the event of a death. An open approach to the bereaved in which recognition can be given through empathy to a mixture and confusion of feelings which are being experienced can be a key factor in this relationship to the bereaved. While the clergyman's role need not assume the proportion of being the catalyst of the expression of the feelings of guilt, disappointment, despair or hostility experienced by the bereaved, yet if the clergyman can be aware of the reality of these feelings, the comfortable expression of these feelings can occur on the part of the bereaved as part of the grief process. A reference in conversation, prayer, or the funeral sermon may serve as an entree for the recognition of these feelings in the bereaved or for the expression and quest for further understanding of such feelings in a counseling relationship with the clergyman or other professionals.

If the clergyman in his ministry to the bereaved is aware of the normality of feelings of hostility following a loss, he will be able to better understand and handle such feelings, which may be directed toward him or to his representation as

¹³ Paul Tournier, *The Meaning of Persons* (New York: Harper & Row, 1957), p. 152.

a minister of God. With such an understanding the pastor need not react with rejection to similar feelings he may experience from the bereaved in his attempt to minister. An empathic, sincere understanding of the emotional crisis and the resultant confusion of feelings shown by the clergyman toward the bereaved will aid the latter in the grief process and a healthy resolution of this emotional crisis.

Perhaps the clergyman would do well to redirect some of his emphasis in the funeral address from a description of the joy and bliss of eternity to relating to the feelings experienced currently at the time of the loss of the deceased. C. S. Lewis has said it is as impossible to explain the joys of eternal life now as it is to explain the joys of marriage to a small boy who loses interest and grows distrustful as soon as he hears that the joys of marriage are totally unrelated to the consumption of chocolate. It is easy for the clergyman to become "other world" focused at the time of the crisis of death in his ministry to the

bereaved and to entirely lose the bereaved in their sorrow by failing to understand the reality of the feelings confronting them in the here and now. While the hope of the resurrection is a vital message at the time of the death, the reality of life of the bereaved should not be forgotten.

In the clergyman's ministry to the bereaved in the period following the immediate loss of the loved one, he can be helpful as former ties are broken and a reinvestment of energies in new relationships occurs. In the lives of many bereaved, the new relationships formed may occur with friends and acquaintances in the church, through activities in which an individual involves himself, or through new efforts and tasks that are available in the mission of the church. The recognition of an unhealthy resolution of grief in the form of a morbid grief reaction and the encouragement by the pastor to have the bereaved seek professional help can also be a vital aspect of the clergyman's ministry to the bereaved.

St. Louis, Mo.