

Good Grief? A New Model for Understanding Grief and Loss

by Derek Murray

Most of us are in some way bereaved and you may well be grieving now. After over twenty years at St Columba's Hospice I am still puzzled about the concept of bereavement care. I have attended courses, read some literature, and watched the videos. I have spoken with and listened to a lot of bereaved folk. I have been through the acute phase myself, indeed am still grieving, and on the basis of some experience I want to make three points.

1. Most people grieve in a way that is satisfactory to them. In our work we may develop a warped view, and we may see an abnormal number of difficult situations, but looking back to the years when I was a minister in a church I can recall relatively few instances of 'bad' grief a few, but not many. There are resources in most folk that enable them to deal well with, or sometimes disguise, their grief.

2. Watch out for the 'Grief Police.' Schemes of grief reaction, grief work, outcomes and aims are fine, they are useful to students and practitioners, but they are often not a lot of help to the griever. Stories help, and listening ears, and invitations to meals, and the discovery that you are not alone. Church people are good at giving practical help. When Calvin's friend Viret lost his wife, he was invited to Geneva for a time of peace, untroubled by unwanted ministrations (1). Each of us must be allowed to grieve in our own way, and if we upset the experts, so be it.

3 And after all that Luddite talk, can I recommend 'A New Model of Grief' outlined by Tony Walter in the interesting Periodical Mortality(2) He defines the dominant model of grieving as being a working through of emotions, a moving on, and a learning to live without the deceased, although he

concedes that there are subthemes within this model. He proposes what he terms a more sociological model. Survivors want to talk about the deceased and to construct a story. In the West the sense that the deceased is still alive is deemed by many experts a temporary but perhaps necessary illusion before attaining the ultimate goal of life without the deceased. Walter suggests that the purpose of grief is to live with the dead. Years ago I went to visit a Welsh Baptist historian, and his young wife and new baby, and he made a point of showing me a photograph, prominently displayed, of his first wife who had died some years previously. When my mother died, in 1941, she seemed to be hidden away, and only very recently has my father started talking to me about her- but to me she has always been important, and I have enjoyed listening to the increasingly elderly group of women who knew her as she grew up. Of course this can lead to idealisation, but it need not, if the storytellers are honest. Walter concludes that there are several kinds of grief process. The grand narrative has given way to the diversity of postmodern narratives. How do we talk about the dead? Must we see folk as 'stuck' in grief if we will not entirely let go? Can we integrate the dead with the living in some way? And he points out one important corollary those who knew the dead person are at an advantage over counsellors, or clergy, who did not.

Endnotes

1. Letters of John Calvin, Edinburgh 1980 p83
2. Mortality Vol.1 No.1 March 1996 pp 7-27, and Mortality Vol. 2 No. 3 November 1987 pp 255-267

Derek Murray is a chaplain at St. Columba's Hospice in Edinburgh.