



GriefConnections

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Making Spiritual Connections in Grief by William G. Hoy

One little-known fact of American history is that the Great Awakening that swept New England in the early 18th century, started with grief, according to Jonathan Edwards, the minister credited with beginning this religious revitalization. Reflecting on the deaths of a teenage boy and a young mother in Pascommuck, Massachusetts, the “Ground Zero” of the Awakening, Edwards (1995, first published 1737) wrote, “there began evidently to appear more of a religious concern on people’s minds.”

Readers of *GriefConnections* and all who counsel the dying and bereaved have noticed a similar truth: people facing death or dealing with a loved one’s death usually become quite interested in spiritual things (even if not overtly religious). And as death is faced head-on, the spiritual, the transcendent, becomes an inescapable reality. Like many whose father fought in World War II, my dad was fond of quoting the simple truth he learned in the trenches, “There are no atheists in foxholes.”

But what do we make of spirituality related to death and bereavement? Certainly some professionals would, at the first mention of any matter of faith or philosophy by a bereaved family member or a dying patient, instantly call for the chaplain or some other member of the trained religious establishment. And to be sure, referral to professional spiritual counseling is a wise step. Just as nursing, social work, and medicine often require specialized training and experience, so does spiritual care.

Every person has a spiritual core and most often, possesses deeply-held beliefs. Health-care chaplains, however can generally be expected to have received advanced training in how to help patients and families deal with the diversity of spiritual challenges arising in a death or serious health crisis. Congregation-based clergy are especially good resources for understanding the nuances of faith as expressed by their community and tradition, making them an exceedingly helpful resource to other professionals.

The spiritual issues faced by critically ill patients and bereaved families can actually be classified into six general themes. Whether devout adherent or seeker, most people grapple with questions addressed by these themes: transcendence, meaningfulness of life, faith heritage, meaning of this death, completion of unfinished tasks, and making sense of what lies beyond death.

First, the dying and bereaved seek to *make sense of the transcendent*, an infrequently used word that refers to the notion there is something bigger than me at work in the universe. In his bestselling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, southern California pastor Rick Warren made this startling announcement: “It’s not about you.” This is spiritual care at its heart; the spiritual challenge faced by the dying and bereaved is that we must get our hands around the notion there is something (or someone) bigger than ourselves.

I smile when I remember hearing the famous motivational speaker, Zig Ziglar remark years ago: “There are three things I know and that I know that I know. First, there is a God. Second, I’m not Him. Third, you aren’t either!” One Gallup poll after another has pointed out that people affirming a “belief in God” number in the 80-95% range. But at

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least some spiritual distress in death-related matters—perhaps much of the spiritual distress—has to do with the disappointment that God (as I had at least imagined him) has not “come through for me” in the ways I expected. This sense of abandonment or disappointment can be profound for the dying and bereaved.

Second, dying and bereaved people grapple with the *meaningfulness of life*. One of the important tasks of spiritual care is to be present with dying people as they take stock of their life and determine in what ways it has been meaningful. “How have I impacted the world?” is a question of the highest spiritual order.

Life review with dying people is particularly helpful; we must help the dying to “take stock” of some of the people whose paths have crossed with the person who is dying. Asking him or her how those people influenced the dying person can be a wonderful entry point to the conversation about how the dying person has impacted others. “Will anybody miss me when I’m gone?” is a question harbored in the hearts of many people.

Third, the dying and bereaved grapple with the notion of *faith heritage*. Most of us learned some things as children about the role of faith in life—it was to be treasured at all costs, it was to be avoided at all costs, or something in between. For those who perhaps gave up on the faith community in which they had grown up somewhere shortly after high school, taking stock of this heritage means taking a long view backward. Yet, no matter how far back this heritage goes, it probably continues to wield a powerful influence today. As theologian George Hunter puts it, some people don’t even know the name of the denomination they are against, but they still know they have some deep-seated disdain for it!

If a bereaved or dying individual is open to reconnection with the faith community with which he is best acquainted, caregivers can help make that connection. In my role as a hospice chaplain, there were many times a patient was unaffiliated with a local congregation but were interested in my calling a local clergy person from that denomination. And virtually all faith communities have formal or informal ceremonies where one can make reaffirmation of faith or be reconciled with beliefs and with God.

A fourth theme in bereavement focuses on the *meaning made of this death experience*. Especially after tragic or unexpected deaths, the human heart must grapple with what sense this death makes. In time, bereaved people often join (or begin) a cause that works to help other families avoid the pain they have experienced; suicide prevention groups and Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) are notable examples of this process of sense-making.

In my counseling with individuals, whether facing their own death or dealing with the unexpected death of another, I often ask a question like, “So what sense are you making of all this now?” Obviously the responses run the gamut from superficial to deeply introspective, but I believe it is vital that we let clients know we are present with them as they grapple with the sense—and often the seeming senselessness—of the loss. (See the *Research that Matters* section below for additional perspective on this topic.)

Fifth, spiritual care examines the tasks to be completed. All of us have things we want finished before we draw our last breath, and these tasks take on fresh urgency for those who are facing death shortly. Perhaps the tasks involve granting forgiveness or seeking it from others; perhaps they require reconciliation in a relationship. Quite possibly, these tasks involve some of the mundane, even simple—but ever so important tasks of getting ready for death like thinking about funeral music or making sure estate plans are in place. Frequently, I find dying people long to hear—and tell again—the old stories from a life spent in relationship with others.

Finally, a fair number of dying people express *wonderment about what lies beyond death*. Interestingly enough, I don’t find widespread fear about the life beyond but I do meet people—both devoutly faithful and those who are not adherents to any traditional faith beliefs—who express curiosity about this topic.

As a hospice chaplain, I occasionally had patients muse with me about what Heaven must be like; patients from a Christian heritage were frequently interested in some of the biblical images of Heaven. The picture in Revelation 21-22—including the oft-referenced river of life, streets of gold and pearly gates—has reminded many believers of their future hope.

Some of my bereaved clients have found great solace in talking with their own clergy about their concerns for the post-life destination of their recently deceased loved ones. If not fearful of the future, most people express some curiosity. I think those we serve are best helped when we assume they wonder about the future and help them discover answers that bring comfort and guidance for this element of the journey.

Regardless of our professional position, we must provide an emotionally warm manner of conversation and a non-judgmental ear. The old saying that one never discusses religion or politics is only half true when it comes to the dying and bereaved. The vast majority of people with whom I have worked don't care about the political party with which I line up, but they are quite interested in discussing the role of their faith and philosophy in coming to terms with this loss.

Reference.

Edwards, J. (1995). A faithful narrative of the surprising work of God (originally published, 1737). In J.R. Smith, H.S. Stout, & K.P. Minkema (Eds), *A Jonathan Edwards reader* (pp. 57-85). New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

The Author: William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. In addition to walking through significant losses of his own, Dr. Hoy has counseled grieving individuals and families for more than 25 years. He is the author of *Guiding People through Grief* and *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*. His newest book, *Called to Care: Navigating a Life of Care for Others* will be published this spring. He teaches in the graduate program in bereavement and leadership at Marian University and maintains an active counseling practice with Pathways Volunteer Hospice.

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Research that Matters

Currier, J. M., Holland, J. M., & Neimeyer, R. A. (2006). Sense-making, grief, and the experience of violent loss: Toward a mediational model. *Death Studies, 30*, 403-428.

Though not newly published, this research bears review again in light of this month's theme. One of the most important aspects of spiritual sense in bereavement, as articulated in the opening article, is the ability of the bereaved to make some sense of the loss. For many, this sense-making involves finding a "silver lining" that helps the death take on meaning. For others, the sense-making involves the 'cause' committed to by survivors like the family member of a young suicide victim who gets involved in a suicide prevention movement.

The current study examined how this ability to "make sense" plays out in the overall adjustment to bereavement. Among other findings, the one that proves what is commonly held among counselors is that the ability to make sense of a loss, especially when the death came by traumatic means, seems to lower the risk of the survivor developing complicated bereavement symptomatology.

We clearly serve the best interest of the client when we encourage him/her to discover richer meanings in the loss than perhaps seen on first glance. In the words of these researchers, "the current results support the notion that, although the objective circumstances of a loss carry weight, the survivor's subjective interpretation of the loss is more influential in explaining the ensuing grief response. . . .clinicians could do well to focus on structuring interventions toward meaning-making with the subset of bereaved persons struggling to find a greater degree of sense in their loss."

Memory Quilt 2010

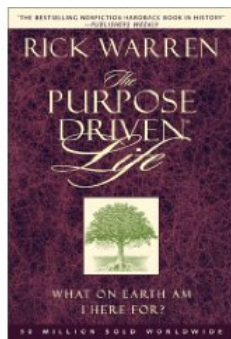
If you would like to design and sew a quilt block in memory of a loved one as a part of this year's Memory Quilt, please contact the Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077, Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or Carpenters Funeral Home at 607-936-9927. A Memory Quilt packet will be sent to you. All quilt squares must be completed and returned no later than September 13, 2010.

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Library Notes

The Purpose Driven Life *What On Earth am I Here For* by Rick Warren



From the book cover

...This book will help you understand why you are alive and God's amazing plan for you--both here and now, and for eternity. Rick Warren will guide you through a personal 40 day spiritual journey that will transform your answer to life's most important question: *What on earth am I here for?* Knowing God's purpose for creating you will reduce your stress, focus your energy, simplify your decisions, give meaning to your life, and, most important, prepare you for eternity.

To purchase a copy of *The Purpose Driven Life*, stop in or call the Special Memories Card & Gift Shop located at Phillips Funeral Home, 17 W. Pulteney St., Corning, 607-936-9212.

Upcoming Events

Southern Tier Hospice Annual Geranium Sales

Petal Pushers Geraniums will begin on April 13th and go through May 8th. Any person or company interested in volunteering to help publicize and sell these beautiful red, pink or white geraniums can call Southern Tier Hospice & Palliative Care and sign up to be a Petal Pusher. For more information on Petal Pushers or to volunteer, please contact Paul Rossi at (607) 962-3100 or by email at prossi@sthospice.org.

Loss of a Spouse Support Group

Wednesdays at 6:30 pm at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, 150 Victory Highway, Painted Post. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Loss of a Loved One to Suicide

First and third Thursdays of each month at 7 pm at the Hand in Hand Methodist Church on Wardell Street, Elmira. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Compassionate Friends Support Group

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at jmorgan55@stny.rr.com.

Infant Loss

Empty Arms, Healing Hearts is a support group centered around infant loss through miscarriage. For more information, contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

Abortion

Forgiven and Set Free—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

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