GriefConnections

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History and Bereavement

William G. Hoy

A front-page story appeared in our local paper recently about a man who volunteers maintaining historic graves at an old cemetery. Though he has to juggle his cemetery-caretaking responsibilities with family and job, Bobbie Moon is committed to maintaining the final resting place of some of central Texas' leading figures—governors, university presidents, and business leaders. In his words, he got interested in the project because he is a student of history and he believes that future generations have a lot to learn from our past.

History is incredibly important in bereavement care. We refer to the process of "taking a history" when we hear the story and the details of a client's life and past experiences. The narrative details of a client or patient's life story are vital—not only for the one telling the story but for those of us who are privileged to hear, as well. *History* describes *heritage*, the legacy of one's life. Here are a few of the ways I believe history and heritage become vital in the grief process.

History builds a sense of peace for dying people. Most everybody wonders, at least secretly, if we have made much of a mark on the world, whether or not our contribution to family, community and society will be remembered after we die. Early 20th century teacher, Forest Witcraft once said, "A hundred years from now it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove...but the world may be different because I was important in the life of a child." I expect most dying people want to know their life has mattered, so we may need to teach family members and others who know the dying individual to speak to him/her about the qualities lived out.

Caregiving professionals and volunteers can model this, especially after working with a patient over several days or weeks. In the presence of a family member, simply say to the patient, "John, you have blessed/touched my life in these last few days/weeks. I am always encouraged by your (gentle spirit, willingness to go the extra mile, sense of humor, bright smile, etc.)" A funny thing happens in that transaction: the person to whom gratitude is being expressed, the one showing gratitude, and the "witness" all benefit greatly!

History keeps us humble. I will never forget hearing motivational speaker, Zig Ziglar lecturing years ago. He said, "There are three things I know. 1) There is a God. 2) I'm not Him. 3) You aren't either!" Learning the stories of others—whether written down in a book or told orally from an aging man or woman—is a great gift. Hearing these

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stories remind us that we are not the center of the universe and that life is not completely about us, our desires and our issues. Few things for me hold memories as vivid as hearing aging hospice patients tell me of their experiences in the Great Depression or how they have gotten through the tough experiences of their lives. Whether the stories tell of job losses, homes built, deaths of children, business success, proud accomplishments, or some combination of them all, these narrative details demonstrate resilience and strength.

More than 40 years ago, Rabbi Maurice Lamm (1969) wrote about the power of the eulogy in the Jewish funeral and recalled the biblical example of Abraham as he eulogized his wife, Sarah. "Very wisely, the Jewish tradition requires the eulogizing of the deceased to be *kara'ui*, balanced and appropriate. It may not grossly exaggerate, or invent, qualities that the deceased did not in fact possess. Such praise is a mockery and an effrontery to the departed, rather than a tribute to his personal virtues" (p. 50).

History teaches us what to embrace, what to avoid. I don't know about you, but I'm glad I don't have to learn everything the hard way—through personal experience. Reading of the experiences of others in grief, hearing the stories of resilience and learning about how others have coped in the face of impossible odds all become a healing balm to the grieving soul. A well-told story helps me think, "Yeah. I can do that, too." In a quiet time away from work and other demands, take a few minutes to write down the ten biggest lessons you have learned so far in your life. You might be surprised at just how much you have faced and overcome, and that history becomes part of the resources that help you cope with difficulties in the future.

History provides a pathway over uncertain terrain. Financial service companies are fond of reminding prospective investors that "past results are no guarantee of future results." True enough—but past experience does provide a reminder that some things work and some things don't. Grief is a highly personal experience, but it helps to be gently reminded in the midst of my pain that I am not the first human to have ever experienced the death of a loved one. One gift of the highly-criticized ritualized funeral ceremony is that it lacks personalization. Maybe so, but remember that we didn't invent grief and we are not the first people to walk through it. A predictable ritual helps the bereaved take those measured first steps without having to think through every nuance of planning, organizing and carrying out the details. There can be great adaptive power in "just going through the motions."

We require students to study history. However, we sometimes forget its inestimable value in helping settle a "legacy" of the person who has died or is dying in terms of the lives touched. I believe this is one reason we flock to monuments to great events and great people. Recently, my colleague Laura Lewis and I have written, "Legacies not only are the purview of the individual but also are passed from one generation to the other, creating vital contributions to the identity of the next generation. The erection of war monuments and subsequent pilgrimages to them by former soldiers and families of the dead are an important way in which social legacy is established" (Lewis & Hoy, 2011, p. 319).

The words of George Santayana still ring true: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." History provides one important means for us take stock of where we have been so we can more clearly see where we are going.

The Author: As a counselor, author and educator, William G. (Bill) Hoy has been walking alongside the dying and bereaved for more than 25 years. He is the author of more than 100 educational pamphlets, books, book chapters and articles and delivers more than 75 invited presentations every year, mostly to groups of caregiving professionals. His professional experience spans hospice, hospital, church, bereavement center and university. In addition to GriefPerspectives, you can follow his blog at http://griefconnect.wordpress.com.

References.

Lamm, M. (1969). *The Jewish way in death and mourning*. New York: Jonathan David Publishers.

Lewis, L. & Hoy, W. G. (2011). Bereavement rituals and the creation of legacy. In Neimeyer, R.A., Harris, D.L., Winokuer, H.R., & Thornton, G.F. (Eds.), *Grief and bereavement in contemporary society: Bridging research and practice* (pp. 315-323). New York: Routledge.

Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention Walk

According to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, "In the United States, a person dies by suicide every 16 minutes, claiming more than 33,000 lives each year. It is estimated that an attempt is made every minute; with close to one million people attempting suicide annually."

To help raise community awareness about suicide prevention and to help save lives, Sandi Follette, Executive Director for the Grief Center of the Southern Tier is heading up the Out of the Darkness Community Walk sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention (AFSP) on Saturday, September 10, 2011 at Craig Park in Painted Post, NY. This year will be their 3rd annual event.

For more information about the walk, go to www.outofthedarkness.org. Then on the center of the page click on the link for "to find an event near you". Those looking for more information can also contact Sandi Follette at 607-936-9077.

In-service Programs for Your Organization

Did you know that we can provide an in-service speaker for your organization? Whether you are looking for a group presentation on some aspect of grief counseling or a program on today's funeral options, we have an excellent group of speakers ready to respond. To talk about options for a workshop in your organization, please call Phillips Funeral Home at 607-936-9212 or email info@phillipsfuneralhome.com.

Do you know someone who would benefit from receiving this newsletter?

Want to receive *GriefConnections* in your email box every month—absolutely free! Simply send an email to; griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com and write SUBSCRIBE TO GRIEF CONNECTIONS in the subject line.

Library Notes

- "Choosing to SEE" by Mary Beth Chapman
- "When Will I Stop Hurting? By June Cerza Kolf
- "Grieving the Loss of Someone You Love" by Raymond R. Mitsch & Lynn Brookside
- "Confessions of a Grieving Christian" by Zig Ziglar
- "When God Doesn't Make Sense" by Dr. James Dobson

Support Groups

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 Savious 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.

Abortion

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

Infant Loss

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Maryanne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

For more local support groups go to www.phillipsfuneralhome.com.

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