



# GriefConnections

Volume 6, Issue 7

July 2010

## **Stories, Legacy and Personal History in Bereavement** by William Hoy

If there is one element of the bereavement process more important than all the rest, that one element might be storytelling. In my compass model of bereavement (Hoy, 2007) I have suggested that the need to *remember* is fundamental—not only in early grief but for the entire duration of the process. Whether those stories of life's impact are told to small groups of family and friends, at holidays, in eulogies, in bereavement support groups, through monuments and contributions or in a thousand other places, clearly there is great power and value in marking the legacy of the person who died.

**History stories** engage the bereaved person with the facts of their loved one's life. Therapists use history to paint a picture of the client's life—how the biography has shaped who the person is. In the same way, when first meeting a bereaved person, it is always helpful to hear the biographical details of their loved one's life—how old he was, where she was born, what the early years of relationship were like, etc.

Sometimes, the details of the death get overlooked, at least in early bereavement. In my experience, before a bereaved person is ready to talk in depth about the life of the person who died, there is usually a need to share the details of the death—where he died, when he died, and how he died. Whether the story is told to the hospice nurse as she arrives at the home moments after death, to the funeral director in the arrangement conference, or to the counselor days or weeks later, the story of the death is, for most bereaved people, a vital part of this biography.

Listen for the details in these biographical sketches. Speaking of her recently deceased husband, a widowed woman in her 70's said, "He had a very rough childhood but he overcame that bad start." In follow up to that remark, I learned her husband had been abused in foster care during the Great Depression, having been given up at age 4 by his parents because they already had too many children to feed.

**Character stories** take the biographical details of the history stories a step farther. These details actually assign character qualities to the deceased, helping the hearer to understand the values by which the bereaved perceives the deceased lived her life. These details often form the basis for spoken eulogies with descriptions like just, honest, compassionate, fun-loving, faithful, charitable, kind, generous, and hard-working. When we hear in the funeral homily or sermon that Marie was a woman who walked with God, and then we are reminded of specific examples of how she lived out that faith, we are participating in the labeling of her character, a vital role in grief.

Counselors can be on the lookout for details about the "sort of person" she was and even help the bereaved person find labels to fit. I've said to bereaved people in session, "So it sounds like he was a very honest man; is that a good word to describe him?" Then, the bereaved can enhance the story or change the "label" to best fit their perception of their loved one's character. This powerful exercise helps to establish for once-and-for-all the kind of man or woman the deceased was.

*Phillips*

FUNERAL HOME & CREMATION SERVICE

*Celebrating Life*

*Honoring Memories*

[www.phillipsfuneralhome.com](http://www.phillipsfuneralhome.com)

Phone: 607-936-9212

## ***Stories, Legacy and Personal History in Bereavement con't***

**Life impact stories** move the storytelling to an even more intimate level as the bereaved person explains, "This is how her life impacted me." Biographical details and even character stories can be told almost with an objective, third-party tone. Life impact stories likely get closer to the heart of the loss; we don't grieve the deaths of people about whom we only know facts and dates. We might notice their death and feel some sense of loss, but grief, it seems, is a term that is reserved for those with whom we share some level of relationship. And it is in relationship where life rubs against life and where life's impact (and therefore, death's impact) is keenly felt.

These stories get to the heart of the matter. They are the stories that most reflect the depths of the loss and that declare, "This is what I most miss about her." The erecting of a monument over the grave, naming a hospital wing in memory of a loved one, making a contribution in a loved one's memory, and planting a tree in a park are all ways grieving people try to demonstrate the impact on the life of their loved one who died.

But the telling of these stories requires a "witness" to hear them. It doesn't seem enough for a grieving person to *say to himself*, "Wow, he was a swell guy because of this, and that, and something else." We need another person to bear witness to that story. Speaking a character quality aloud and sharing the story—the supporting evidence if you will—helps to consolidate the story's truth. When we invite the story to be told in our presence or when we attend a funeral where stories are told, we become part of a throng of people who hear the stories and attest to their truth. I suspect when a monument is built or a university building is named in a person's memory, family and friends hope that the story of the deceased is heard by a great throng of people over many generations.

I went alone to visit the World War II memorial in Washington DC when there on a business trip a couple of years ago. Because my dad, a veteran of that war died quite a few years before its completion, he never saw it. What I was unprepared for when visiting the site, however, was the need I had to "join with" some of the other several hundred people there. I even found myself "tagging along" with an "Honor Flight" group of veterans from Iowa who were visiting the memorial. I sense that my need, in part at least, was to experience that memorial with concerned others, rather than in isolation.

As counselors, we also want to be highly sensitized to those bereaved individuals whose stories do not grow out of positive recollections and experiences with the dead. These stories also need to be heard, but it might be very unpopular for the bereaved person to utter these details in the family or friendship circle. Abuse victims most often need the safety of a person to whom they can tell "the rest of the story" after the death of the abuser. And in more cases than not, he or she will not feel able to safely share these stories within the family where the abuse occurred.

Perhaps, like me, you like old cemeteries. The gravestones to which I am most drawn, however, are the ones that tell a story—either through words or symbols. In an old cemetery, it has been perhaps a hundred or more years since this person lived, and yet, I am "blessed" by reading elements of their stories; often, I wish there were more details shared! I remember one monument to a young man and woman who, as best I could tell from reading the story on their gravestone, had been killed in an accident on their honeymoon. I felt a bit of the anguish of the families and community, who in the space of less than a week, went from the celebration of their wedding to the utter sadness of their deaths. And as I read their story etched in bronze, I felt my life strangely enriched.

Embrace the story. Encourage the telling of stories with all the details the bereaved can find. In the hearing of those stories, you become an important tool in their experience with grief.

### **Reference.**

Hoy, W. G. (2007). *Guiding people through grief*. Dallas: Compass 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 summer. He teaches in the graduate program in bereavement and leadership at Marian University and oversees the counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice.

### ***If Tears Could Build a Stairway***

*If tears could build a stairway  
and memories were a lane,  
We would walk right up to heaven  
and bring you back again.  
No farewell words were spoken,  
no time to say good-bye,  
you were gone before we knew it,  
and only God knows why.  
Our hearts still ache in sadness,  
and secret tears still flow,  
what it meant to lose you,  
no one will ever know.  
But now we know you want us,  
to mourn for you no more,  
to remember all the happy times,  
life still has much in store.*



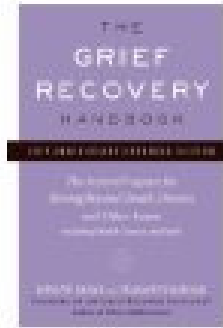
*Since you'll never be forgotten,  
we pledge to you today,  
a cherished place within our hearts  
is where you'll always stay.*

-Author Unknown

### ***Out of the Darkness Suicide Prevention Walk***

Sandi Follette of The Grief Center of the Southern Tier is organizing a Suicide Prevention Walk called "Out of the Darkness". The walk is sponsored by the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. The date of the walk is September 11th at 9 am at Craig Park in Painted Post. For more information or to volunteer to help with the walk contact Sandi at 607-936-9077 or email her at [griefcenter@gmail.com](mailto:griefcenter@gmail.com). To sign up for the walk go to [www.outofthedarkness.org](http://www.outofthedarkness.org).

### Library Notes



James, John W., Friedman, Russell. *The Grief Recovery Handbook. The action program for moving beyond death, divorce and other losses.*

From the publisher, "*Incomplete recovery from grief can have a lifelong negative effect on your capacity for happiness. Drawing from their own histories, as well as from others, the authors illustrate what grief is and how it is possible to recover and regain energy and spontaneity. Based on a proven program, now extensively revised, The Grief Recovery Handbook offers griever the specific actions needed to complete the grieving process and accept loss. For those ready to regain a sense of aliveness, the principles outlined here make this a life-changing handbook.*"

To purchase a copy of *The Grief Recovery Handbook*, stop in or call the Special Memories Card & Gift Shop located at Phillips Funeral Home, 17 West Pulteney Street, Corning, 607-936-9212.

---

### Upcoming Events

#### **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](mailto: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.

---

We will only send *GriefConnections* if you want to receive it! You may unsubscribe from our newsletter anytime. Please just send an email to [griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com](mailto:griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com) or click REPLY to this email and ask us to remove your name from our list.

*GriefConnections* is published monthly by Phillips Funeral Home & Cremation Service. Copyright ©2010. All rights reserved, including publication or distribution in any form, electronic or printed. For reprint permissions or suggestions for content, please email us at : [griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com](mailto:griefconnections@phillipsfuneralhome.com).

*Phillips*

FUNERAL HOME & CREMATION SERVICE

*Celebrating Life*

*Honoring Memories*

[www.phillipsfuneralhome.com](http://www.phillipsfuneralhome.com)

Phone: 607-936-9212