

# Offering Comfort in Grievous Times

Walter Wangerin Jr.

Our world has tilted. We slip and stumble...

Since September 11 we've begun to suffer an elemental instability. The security we once took for granted must now be preserved by fighting for it. This is the loss of peace. Safety is no longer assured. We can no longer move through the normal paths of our communities with an unconsidered trust. The common, unremarkable things of our previous life—the things by which we oriented ourselves, the conditions under which we did business and loved and acted and passed our days—are suddenly transformed into potential sources of danger.

A letter may have the bite of a poisonous serpent.

Travel is difficult, if not dangerous.

Hatreds are justified.

Death is dealt without remorse but with, indeed, a religious assurance.

Murderers are worshippers, and heaven rewards their murders.

Many people—plain, good people—have begun to suffer a debilitating malady: lack of focus, weariness, uncertainty, difficulty making decisions, emotions sudden and inexplicable. But the malady is undefined and wants a name.

I think its name is "Grief."

Because the cause of this present suffering may well be a "dying"—that which occurs to us when something important for our life breaks.

Below I offer an extended quotation from my book, *MOURNING INTO DANCING*, which might explain the source of our malady today, might explain what the malady is, and how a genuine healing occurs. And how one might effectively comfort the friend who requires this healing.

I hope there is hope in this for you.

Walt Wangerin, Jr.

(The excerpt below is from *Mourning Into Dancing* which was published in 1992 by Zondervan Publishing House.)

*The Pattern of Grief*

Grief begins as soon as some bereavement is perceived to be real; the perception is the reality, whether the break has actually happened or not. Even when a break is only imminent, but fiercely imagined because it is as fiercely feared, grief begins. Gloria, we shall see, has already begun to grieve. If Sonny Boy doesn't die, the process will stop. If he does, why, the beginning of grief was at the moment the doors swung shut upon the operating room, cutting her from her daddy. Likewise, a diagnosis of "terminally ill" triggers grief. Even a lie (as gossip carries lies, suggesting to one friend that another friend betrayed her) causes immediate grief.

Grief is a personal, distressed reaction to bereavement.

Grief is pain.

The pain is caused by the sundering of one relationship, but it is registered in many (if not all) of the remaining relationships, which are strained or abused, troubled or stunned thereby. Internally, our emotions suffer the stress; our bodily functions are affected; our mental agility, our perceptions of reality, our spiritual balance all can become confused. Externally the pain affects our behavior with other people, so that those closest to us not only sense our grief but feel the pain as well. Surely, they may sympathize with us, but more than that, we hurt them. We may ignore them, nag them, abuse them, exhaust them; but then, because we feel our grief-pain within the relationship that we have with them, we may blame our friends for causing our hurt. Thus, we often misdirect our angers.

But the pain of grief is not merely a reactive sensation. It is also the pain of strenuous activity. Spontaneously, we strive to adjust to the straightened circumstance.

Any death must change us. Grief is, first, the raw awareness of that change, but then it becomes a terrific struggle: a violent disputing of the facts, a striving for life again, a revising of the terms by which we know ourselves, a sometime surrender to despair, and finally a conscious acceptance of the change-in which we change. This is a labor, burdensome, aching, and painful. But it can accomplish a blessed rebirth in the griever.

Grief, therefore-though it cripple us so completely that it seems endless while we suffer it-grief has an end: both a goal and an ending.

It is a natural, spontaneous *process* of healing. Even as a broken bone, by no thought of our own but by the nature of bones, commences to mend, so the soul broken by death starts step by step to heal. As a process, grieving has an identifiable pattern. It's not a mystery. All grieving (no matter the dying that

caused it) can be understood according to certain broadly defined stages. And even the purpose of each stage can in general be explained.

Of course, each griever's experience will be unique. And she can feel, in the event itself, frightfully lonely and bewildered. And pain may persuade her that this grief is the evil. In fact, death is the evil, not grief. And we, who are her friends, will know this; we, who choose to become her comforters, will learn the general pattern of the process, the purposes of each stage of grief, so that we might name her wounds and companion her sorrows till grief has brought her back to life and wholly to us again.

Human grieving is a personal development, the private drama in which one moves through specific "acts," actions, intense activities. An act, by its finishing, causes the next. There is reason to the sequence, though the griever may feel bewilderment only; and there is motion, though she feels caught in a single emotion. And since this is healing, always and always, there is hope.

*The first act of grief—*

-is, seemingly, not to act.

If the relationship broken is not an absolutely essential one, the pain of the break may be immediate and equal to the relationship's perceived significance. When a piece of the person dies, the rest of her hurts, calling sudden attention to the cut: *Can I fix it?* And, panicking, *Can I fix it fast?*

But if the relationship was indeed essential and the break, therefore, traumatic, the sensation of pain may stall a while, numbing the cut and protecting the bereaved: mercifully, she may neither feel nor know the full nature of the injury. She is in shock. She seems, in regard to this pain, inactive.

Actually something inside her may be very busy preparing the griever (even now this is grief) consciously to confront her death. She's marshaling emotional forces, as it were. When they are ready, the pain that had waited will come with all its strength, even long after the event.

Curiously, she may swing back and forth between knowledge and ignorance, between feeling and numbness, sometimes knowing, sometimes not, sometimes anguished, sometimes performing exactly the right responses to her situation, but feeling nothing at all.

But finally she must know. Finally she suffers in fact. And then, by degrees, the passive grieving issues into intense activity.

*The second act of grief—*

What she learns in this dying is more than one dying. What she learns may seem monstrous to her: that all relationships are as vulnerable as this one was; that things she had depended upon are suddenly not dependable; that the world, unstable, is also unloving, unreasonable, arbitrary, dangerous.

That she has little, if any, authority over the world, little and less power within herself.

That she is not in control.

Death is the evidence, and pain the persuader: she is not (we are not) god.

She who can die is finite. We are all, in every respect, finite.

So the sensation of a particular pain has inaugurated a pain more metaphysical. The destruction of the "self" that one had imaged and believed in is an ache deep, deep in the bone. Gloria Ferguson, waiting for news of her uncle, may see in his trouble the possible collapse of a world and therein the loss of her own effective identity. This is too much to take without a fight.

So the second act of grieving is active indeed. The griever defies the facts— fights against what *Is*.

To what degree do grievers fight? To what degree, therefore, do they anguish? Well, here are differences. Some kick hard against the goads. Some surrender quietly and easily. Each shall fight to the degree that he had truly desired to be, and truly believed he was, his own sufficiency. Each shall anguish to the degree that he clings to the lie, *Ye shall not surely die*. For the fight is to preserve these things still, to snatch them from the hands of what *Is*.

(This is an important word of comfort: if we have denied ourselves to follow Jesus, if we have already died that death, the dying of grief shall be infinitely easier for us!)

But we who choose to fight what *Is*—to fight convictions of our ultimate limitation—are limited. That is what *Is*. Therefore, fighting with all our mights, we will fail. Each battle is marked by its failure.

Nonetheless, we may engage in battle, attacking with each of three parts of our human selves....

*With all our strength*: Simply, we oppose our will to this present Secondary Dying and all it represents. Against reason and evidence, like children, we deny the death. Lo, we are not broken—just because we say we're not.

There's no divorce here. I refuse to consider such a thing.

I have not lost my job.

My son is not in prison; he'll be home any day now.

The strategy of the fight at first is mere denial. But what is *Is*, and in time our strength to say it is *Not* is exhausted. Willfulness fails.

There is an element of the heroic in grief's struggle; we are persistent, and having failed in one attack, we try another....

*With all our heart:* We oppose next the pure potency of personal emotion to the death and all it must force us to accept. As if it changed what Is, we rage against the dying. Anger feels like an empowerment (it's a feeling that swallows the feeling of impotence a while). Fury (so strong in the widow it astonishes her) seems almost equal to death.

I hate the futility of all my labor.

I hate you, -who betrayed me-who beat me, divorced me, or merely lied to me.

I hate the system that treated me treacherously and remorselessly.

The strategy is the anger itself. But what is Is, and we shall spend ourselves against it until we are spent indeed.

But up again, up with a difference, up and attack with our last personal resource....

*With all our mind:* Finally we oppose that which in us is peculiarly human, our rational faculty, our restless effort to solve problems, our reason.

Again, we attack the evidence. We apply conditional arguments to an unconditional situation, actually trying to reconstruct the world: If, we say "I do such and such a thing, my beloved will not die." Or, after the fact, we seriously declare: "If only she'd stayed home that night--"and in our minds do truly imagine the possibility, living it even as we speak it "-she would be here today."

Intellectually we conceive of a thousand "If-only's" and do dwell a while in their alternatives.

Or like Job we approach the Creator himself to dispute things, mind to Mind. There's a momentary sense of control: "I may be broken, but will find that higher plane at which this world shall seem a dream to me." By elevating the mind we try to leave hard fact behind. We ascend to the consolations of philosophy: "There's another existence, more rational than this."

At its crudest, the strategy has been called bargaining.

At its noblest, human reason seems infinite-but it only seems so because it deals in distractions and musings, things without corners. Against one fact even the mind must fail.

Finally we shall have fought what Is with our whole beings, and so it is our being itself that is proven a failure. Finite. That which cannot be explained to us in words alone has enforced itself upon us by experience: has revealed itself *within* us. This is us, terminal, dying.

The lie was a lie after all. We have "come to ourselves."

Grief now shows a dismal vista. This defeat may seem to us the end of everything.

*The third act of grief—*

There is nothing left for the griever but to gaze upon what *Is*, both the immediate sundering and the doom it has revealed in existence itself. Simply, she is sad.

This is the stage of a solemn inertia.

And here is a new level of pain: the confessed conclusion of human effort, her concession to failure. This pain is called despair.

Others label it "depression," but I ask the harder word because the quality that characterizes grieving now is *hopelessness*. There is no hope; and since hope is our touch to the future, there seems no future either. This third act, though it lasts but a while, seems to be the way the world will be-forever.

In this act the griever again appears willfully passive, doing nothing. She gives up: surrender. She gives up: *sheol*, the pit. Now grief has confronted the unvarnished, unpalliated truth, and no illusion. Lo, death attends absolutely every party.

And the griever expects nothing to follow.

But this void is itself a preparation. For when something follows after all, the griever can do nothing but receive it purely as gift- unexpected, you see, unpurchased, undeserved. Grace!

No sermon could have accomplished this thing. Experience only: it is the personal conviction that we've come to an end that makes any new thing astounding to us. It is the deep conviction of our helplessness that makes any new life hereafter a genuine mercy of God.

We needed truly to sorrow, in order truly to rejoice.

*The fourth act of grief—*

-may have two parts, the first one secular, the second divine.

*Acceptance:* Slowly (weeks, months, years) the realization dawns that we are still living. And we are viewing life after all-after all our complete convictions of gloom. There was a tomorrow; it is today; and we *are*. We truly had not expected yet to be. This is news!

We've been purged of illusions, to be sure. We recognize the limitations of all our relationships, and so of ourselves. But we do exist today; and our new wisdom is to celebrate what *Is*, even knowing the proper proportion of things. This day (not the "forever" we had hungered) is beautiful simply because this day *Is*, though it didn't *have* to be. This present moment is a gift.

And look: though will and emotion and reason are clearly limited faculties, they are faculties still, working and healthy. They can no longer be rulers, indeed:

but they may be effective servants, used with moderation and sanity. They are our self. We live.

We won't be the same after grief. A certain innocence (whether silly or sinful) is gone. And pain has left a scar that must qualify us forever. But perhaps we won't allow the Tempter to lie to us any more either: only the gullible can think he is godlike.

No longer believing the lie, we can return with truer sight to life again. Even so far may every human come, whether one believes in God or not.

But for those who believe, who know of the Primal Dying, there may be one more episode in the fourth act of grieving....

*Resurrection:* Grief has purged us of the very premise of our pride; and it was pride (remember?) that had severed us first from God.

Grief, the experience of failures (not the hearing of the ear, but the seeing of the eye and the rough discipline of death) has persuaded us that we are creatures after all and that everything will finally defraud us-except God. Only God is God.

That confession gives us the right perspective: we look up to God, creatures up to their Creator. In the third act of grieving, God may have seemed indifferent to us. Terrifying, even. His righteousness during that act struck us with our guilt.

For those who believe, then, the despair of the third act holds horrors the secular world might consider excessive. But pity the secular world! For we are being prepared not just for this life again but for forgiveness and grace at its most glorious.

The highest joy of the fourth act is beyond a secular comprehension.

It is this, that God does not impose the sentence we know we deserve. The seemingly indifferent God is a Father after all, who hugs us, who slips rings on our fingers and shoes on our feet and food in our mouths, who kills the calf and throws a party-the dance to which Death never shall come.

In the days of our personal majesty, we would not have seen a Father. We could see nothing but an enemy and cosmic hostility.

But in the days of our humility, any gesture from God is dear. Any gesture. How stunning is love, then. And how unspeakably glorious is life everlasting, relationship with the Source of Life even beyond our Corporeal Dyings and into eternity.

This drama of grieving, able so to transform us and lay us like children upon the bosom of God again-this grief rightly we call good.

### *Notes to Those Who Would Comfort the Griever*

*Comforters: Know the script but read the griever*

Clearly, grievors do not all suffer the same. Some souls stick in the process for years, never coming to any sort of final acceptance. Some souls are healed by the external trappings of mourning more than by the internal transfigurations of failure and ache and renewal. Some glide with a wonderful trust straight past the battles of the second act of grief, arriving quickly at a simple sorrow, the sorrow alone: - they bow their heads and are sad. None of these variations, of course, is "wrong."

The script outlined in the previous chapter as the Four Acts of Grieving is not a rule to be followed. Rather, it's a tool for interpretation, so that no one need be baffled by the sometimes

outrageous or illogical behaviors of grief,  
neither friends nor kin nor the griever herself.

But in this chapter I speak especially to those who choose to become caregivers for one on a difficult journey: the griever's comforters. (No matter how close you may be to this person apart

from her bereavement, it must be a *choice* to take upon yourself the delicate job of comforting her, a choice made willingly, consciously, with foresight and commitment. Comforting shall require much of the comforter.)

No gesture of grief is isolated. *She* may not know why she does what she does. She may fear that her broken emotions and wild compulsions are evidence of a sort of insanity, sudden, inexplicable, estranged, and isolated. Coming from nowhere. In fact, every gesture and every mood is experienced in the stream of all her grieving, which soon reveals a continuum, a necessary form. The comforter can recognize the form according to general human patterns of behavior.

Even if the griever "spirals" through the pattern, repeating certain acts again and again with greater or lesser intensity, yet because the comforter can name the behavior he is himself neither frightened nor useless, but remains a stable element in the midst of chaos.

Comforter, know where she's at in her journey *according to the script*. Though you need teach her nothing right now, you are her knowledge: you yourself have become the "knowing" that assures her of sanity and hope and healing, though she *recognizes* none of these things.

On the other hand, do not impose the script upon her, nor presume to know which act she's in without first reading her behavior. Always take your cues from her. By instinct she is leading;

in patience you are serving.

And expect anger. Since you will be one most available to her, you'll likely become the target of her moods. (1) Don't demean the mood by disbelieving. *It* is real, even if *you* are not its real cause. But (2) don't take it personally. It is love

that offers yourself as the "other" in all her dramas; it is wisdom that knows you are not the "other" at all, but her blessed opportunity, her comforter.

When I met Gloria in the hospital, she wouldn't talk to me. Her eyes had a smoky glaze of rage. I don't think that what I said made any difference. There was no right nor wrong so far as her fury went, because she was angry at Authority Itself, Whoever or Whatever was the cause of this hateful circumstance-and I was the closest thing she had for Authority in the moment. It was my service as her comforter that I should receive the rage without returning it or being wounded by it. (What good is the incapacitated comforter?) It was also my trust that, having exploded, she would change and love me again-especially if the explosion had not offended me and sent me away. My steadfast love must finally prove to her that Love is steadfast, and life continues, and forgiveness heals.

Gloria was struggling in the second act, opposing emotion to an unacceptable possibility, the death of her uncle.

Three hours later she switched the strategy. Now suddenly she set her will against the foe, a dramatic denial of the nearness and imminence of death, because it had just invaded the lounge in the person of the doctor, his surgical "greens," and that spray of Sonny Boy's blood on his shirt.

When Gloria's legs seized up, one might have demanded that she stop acting like a child: "You know there's nothing wrong with your legs." Or one might have panicked at the urgency and weirdness of the crisis. In either case one would have mistaken a good opportunity.

Read the griever: she was, in fact, doing a reasonable thing and at the same time giving her comforters chances to comfort. She was exchanging an impossible pain for a possible one (the mortality of Sony Boy is overwhelmed, for the moment, by spasms in her legs). She was avoiding the greater horror by finding a lesser, stranger one: "My legs! They hurt!" The comforter does best to accept her perspective (the grimmer facts will reveal themselves soon enough), to be grateful that he now can do something at all (can touch her who so needs touching, but for whom touching can be dangerously ambiguous), to play his role without embarrassment or hesitation (even if it is, in a sense, "role-playing"), and so to love her. To prove himself an ally.

It is in precisely such a moment, when the griever makes the outrageous demand, that the comforter wordlessly declares: I am here. I will be here. I will companion you, however far we must go together. And so, the covenant is established and life engaged in death's despite, by a comforter.

### *Comforters: Prepare yourselves*

Here is ministry so ancient, so common among us, so eminently human that no one needs post-graduate degrees in counseling or psychology to perform it.

Nevertheless, two preparations are necessary, both for your sake and for the sake of the bereaved. The first is general and ought to be accomplished sometime in your adulthood, whether or not you are ever required to comfort a griever. The second is specific and ought to be accomplished with direct regard to the particular griever you choose to help. Both are your spiritual preparation.

First, make peace with your own death and with Death Itself. Second, purge yourself of any false or selfish motive for consoling this person.

*Make peace with death*, or the death you confront in comforting may threaten you as much as the griever and trigger in you your own process of grief. You shall be no comforter then, but one in need of comfort-and the blind shall be leading the blind.

I have met the physician who refuses to meet his own death. He's a cold sort. With terminal patients or with families of the deceased, he speaks of professional issues. All is mechanical: it works or it doesn't. It can be fixed or it can't. But between the can and the can't are percentages only and no human soul. So here is a persistent denial. Seeming so strong as to be unapproachable, this physician in fact is unapproachable because he is weak: fearful he might catch the grin of his own Dying in the face of the bereaved, his limitations, his finitude. Death.

This chilly manner is not, of course, restricted to physicians. There are as well chilly pastors, chilly counselors, parents, spouses, friends.

On the other hand, I've met doctors so overwhelmed by the tragedy of death that they themselves show signs of grief whenever the dying comes near to them. They seem (they are!) most generously human. When the patient weeps, so do they. When the patient hurts, so do they. They offer an ocean of compassion; but it can conceal trouble-like the rage that in a griever is necessary but that in a doctor comes like the shark. These (counselors, pastors, friends, any who would comfort) do not lead. They mimic. They befriend, indeed, but they can't inspire confidence, because they are not confident. They seem to a griever the most sensitive of all who surround her; they feel what she feels; but they know no hope nor serenity nor assurance for the future-and therefore what they do not do is comfort.

The comforter is called to walk a middle ground: to be familiar enough with death (and clear enough regarding his own death) that he can gaze with sincerely compassionate eyes at the grief of the bereaved (they are one on this journey together); and yet, at the same time, to be objective enough about any particular death (to be free *from death*) that he can maintain a leader's distance for the sake of the griever (no, he is not taking the same journey with her; he isn't grieving). In other words, the comforter must (1) already have engaged his own personal war with dying and (2) even now be assured of the victory to come. He knows suffering, but he, in Paul's words, does "not grieve as those who have no hope." The very character of his comfort derives from the experience of these contraries: both death and hope.

And we have a faith that does not shrink from death. The fundamental concern of our faith is *both* to reveal with fearsome accuracy the nature of death, *and* to draw the sting from it by the victory of the resurrected Christ. We, of all people, need to deny nothing true, the bad and the good. Of all people, we are most able to confess the grand proportions of death: so terrible as to defeat us all!-but defeated, rather, in Jesus.

Therefore, let comforting arise from your faith. No: comforting is not the *preaching* of this faith; it is the genuine *living* of it by those not frozen in denial nor lost in perpetual grief. You who once were a standing dust are now the walking Gospel. You are able.

And *purge your motives*, since anything less than the willingness to make personal sacrifice will not endure this journey through.

The comforter is the servant.

Expect nothing in return for your ministrations. This is both spiritual and realistic. The griever has suffered the rupture of some significant relationship; she will be unable then to give reasonable and mutual attention, to other relationship including the one she has with you. Of course: she is dying, and death puts stress on all her relationships. For a while (as grace will always have it) it becomes your commitment to uphold not only your side of a covenant but hers as well-in order that life continue for her. For the time being, and specifically for this business of comforting the griever, expect nothing. There's nothing to give and nothing to gain. She is leading, indeed; but she ain't payin' for it; you are grace to her now.

You will grow tired. Often there will seem no end to the griever's morbidities, her unaccountable demands, her maudlin pawings, her silences and sadnesses. Perpetual watchfulness will drain you because you are her life just now. It is a godly work, to be life for another. But it's exhausting. And if you had expected something in return, you will be deeply disappointed; and disappointment may justify withdrawal; but if you withdraw-if you take life away from her-she dies all over again.

I must be as clear here as possible. Expect *nothing*.

-Not her gratitude nor the praise of the people. For she will often be angry at you, and the praise of people who do not also help will sound like a mule's bray in your ear, aggravating.

-No, nor meek obedience either. She shall not see you as her savior, her hope; she shall sometimes not see you at all; she shall at other times (if you had expected anything) seem most arrogant.

-Nor rational behavior -or communication. ("She doesn't even try!" may be your desperate complaint.)

-Nor even, in your private midnight soul, should you seek the rewards of self-satisfaction, the pious sense that you're doing good and are a good person, therefore. Such comforting, though overtly sacrificial, is spiritually self-centered: it judges success or failure by the comforter's feelings rather than by the griever's

progress. I promise: a selfish contentment must turn into discontent, and by a terrible irony, the comforter will blame the griever for it. You'll hold her responsible for the unrewarded disruption of your own life. You'll wonder whether she's troubling you on purpose. "She *likes* to be sad! She just wants the attention!"

Thus, "expect nothing" means, more sharply, "seek nothing for yourself."

If you had sought or expected anything, then it is at this point- battered, tired, feeling no accomplishment, no honor nor inner reward-that you may be inclined to quit. "I've got my own life to live. She's just using me. She's not even trying. It's ruining my family-" and so forth.

The comforter must choose to be a servant, to serve God by serving the least of his children.

The comforter is not a teacher, a moralizer, a quoter of helpful Bible verses, a preacher of timely sermons!-just a servant, serving.

The comforter is not a prophet, pointing out the errors of the bereaved, interpreting sorrow as a visitation of an angry God, but a servant, serving; and grief is the mistress of this house. Grief commands; the comforter obeys.

The comforter is not a professional mourner, matching sad stories with sadder ones in a very sad universe; the comforter cannot be that merchant of misery who takes a dangerous pleasure in having found one soul sadder than himself and who, while seeming so deeply sympathetic, is in fact feeding on others' sorrows. That's a parasite. That one loves the grief, not the griever nor the healing.

It's necessary to know and to name such apparently "Christian" comforters (the platitudinous "preacher," the accusing "prophet," and that most humble of servants, the "Parasite") and then to protect the griever from them. They serve themselves; they enjoy a false superiority over one who is vulnerable; their friendship is treacherous.

The comforter is not a professional martyr, making a show of his self-denials, helping those on social ash-heaps whom everyone else neglects.

The comforter is, simply, a servant of God, so healthy in the holy relationship that though he is no lover of grief he will live beside it for love of the griever; so happy in the divine relationship that grief shall not impair him; so empowered by his relationship with Jesus that he expects absolutely nothing from his relationship with the griever: he is Jesus come near unto her, and his presence in every sense is Grace.

Comforters, analyze your motives to purge all that is fraudulent or self-serving. This is your second preparation and will permit "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

*Some principles for comforting*

Though the causes of dying can be explained, death itself has no solutions. Comforter, you're not required to fix the mortal break, but rather to companion the broken.

Certain questions have no answer. Any answer, then, feels cheap or absurd, cheapening the questioner. What the griever most needs is to ask the questions passionately and honestly, and to be heeded when she does. So honor the questions. But though all your being yearns to solve things, do not belittle deep mysteries with piddling answers. That's what Job's comforters did to him.

In other words, the first principle of comforting is that your presence is of more importance to the griever than any solutions you might propose. This is comfort for the comforters: you don't have to say the right thing, to see to the depths of the universe, to know doctrine as wisely as do grave clerics. If you don't know what to say to a griever, say nothing. Simply, in an unembarrassed candor, be.

The griever, who suffered the sundering of relationship, needs relationship. You are her life. It requires only your proximate bodies, eyes unafraid to gaze at her, arms willing to hug her when she thinks she's about to fly apart, hands to touch her, kindness. Kindness.

Note, please: it doesn't matter which Secondary Dying she has died. The world gathers to comfort a widow. You, however, perceive death in divorce-and so you come to comfort. You see death when a dear dream has finally been destroyed, or where one was fired from a job, or in the radical ripping of a hysterectomy, or in the imprisonment of one's beloved son. You see the death; you know the onset of grief; you come; you comfort. God is with you.

God is with you, and when the griever tests your durability she discovers eternity: you won't leave. God, with you, is with her too. For her, you simply *are*. That is the first and the most important principle of comforting.

And once she trusts your graceful presence, then seven other principles may be engaged:

1. *Name*, when she is able to hear it, and *explain* as simply as possible her particular stage in the drama of grief. She will need assurance that her behavior is not unnatural. She may forget your explanation; be ready to repeat it as often as she asks. The words themselves may be her stay against an utter confusion.

2. By your uncritical responses, *grant her permission* (and the time and the space) to perform what her present act of grieving demands of her. Don't force things, but *listen* to any mood in her, even her rages. These may be hidden in shame or else overt and powerful. Let them occur even if the anger is against God. On the one hand, be not aghast; on the other, do not echo what she says. If you are startled, she loses an ally now. If you agree with her furies, she loses the ally in the future when she will need to believe that God is good.

Rather, *listen* with honest attention. Restate her sentiments, asking if that is what she meant; and so she'll know that listening (so much a salve to the torn spirit) is happening. If she needs to be sad for seven months, allow for sadness. Affirm it. Trust that (in almost every case) the griever's instinct is accurate, and she does need the time. If she wants to repeat certain memories over and over, let each repetition be new to you. The point is not to learn something you hadn't known before. The point is relationship, manifest in plain listening.

3. *Attend*, especially during periods of distractedness, *to her basic needs*. Grief can neglect the body, its food and dress and cleanliness. Grief forgets the requirements of society, bills, lawns, kids, gas, taxes, voting. But if these things are not accomplished, chaos comes indeed.

With the help of the whole community, maintain these other relationships until she's ready to take them up again. In order to learn what duties need to be done, pretend you are she; but when you do her duties, let it seem a matter of course and no big deal. Don't let your kindness cause her guiltiness. And surely do not patronize her, as though you reached down to her from a lofty health.

Always watch for signs of revival-so that the instant she's able to shoulder her load, you slip away and vanish from that particular juncture.

(So critical is it that you "expect nothing"-especially here. Your hope for some gratitude might communicate itself and double her burden: guilt for her failure, obligations to thank you equal to your work.)

4. Always, *express confidence in her*. Find ways to gesture your undiminished appreciation. She should know that you never cease to believe that her worth, her abilities, her goodness-her particular virtues-will rise at the right time, and resume her life again. In you she will have a sort of savings account; in you she will find evidence of her faith and strength and good purpose, especially when she can't find them in herself. You'll create certain phrases that characterize the best of her, and you'll repeat them till she trusts them: "I know you don't feel it now, but you're the finest architect I know." "The wisest parent." "A singer that gives me joy."

And this: "I love you, Gloria. Nothing will change that. I love you."

5. *Stay with her*, stay with her, stay with her: abide.

The whole world gives a griever only so much time as the world itself can stand to be sad. Short time. Abbreviated grief. And then it demands that she get on with it. The world will attend a funeral; but two weeks later, when she sits in her kitchen staring at her empty hands, it doesn't know. It's back at work, wondering where she is. Stay with her: holy stability and the human touch. Stay.

6. And though you learn from her the amount of time she needs to complete any single act of grief, the genuine love in you (not a snifty pride in you) will notice when it's gone too long. So you will *encourage her* to move to the next act simply by presenting its next actions as reasonable possibilities.

"Are you angry these days?" you say. "When you sit all alone, what do you feel?"

"Are you sad?" you say. The question does not trouble you, and so it doesn't trouble her.

And always you indicate that you're willing to hear whatever the furnace in her soul casts up: whatever.

7. But throughout the process, comforter, *take care of yourself*. You will need an emotional support of your own. Earnestly I suggest that you surround yourself with a group of people not involved in this matter. Let the group covenant:

-to pray with each other for each other;

-to praise one another in knowing detail, and to offer a continual encouragement;

-to do something else than your various ministries together, like playing bridge or tennis, laughing loudly, gathering regularly when there is no crisis at all, on holidays, for feasts, with all the children, looking forward, perhaps, to a unifying worship-gathering simply to prove the commitment of this group, the unity and love.

If you are to be life to one bereaved, then you must find nourishment from others unbereaved. And so this support group must be yours, not the griever's. It can't be a body of people as large as a congregation but one well able to name you in love. It needn't know the confidential details of your ministry; but it will affirm you nonetheless, and hold you up to God.

This is common sense. It will establish your own life and health so that you maintain a realistic perspective from which to comfort them who have lost exactly that perspective.

Oh, comforter! The peace of the Lord be with you, that it might be with them whom you serve and console. Amen.

Walt Wangerin  
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