Class Notes: Terminal Illness and Funerals

***The difference between dying and grieving***

“Dying and grieving are related but different processes with distinct purposes.

*The one who is dying* has a single purpose: letting go of valued objects and loved relationships to get ready to die.

*The friends and family of the dying* have a double task: (1) helping someone they love live as fully as possible until death, while (2) grieving their common losses…

Dying is enhanced when the dying person has someone to hear his or her story. The process of grieving is easier when the survivors participated in the dying person’s final narrative chapter” (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 98).

**Part 1 Pastoral care during a terminal illness**

**Last Wishes:** *Five wishes* is a form for writing a living will that is used in 36 states. It can be found at this website: http://www.agingwithdignity.org/

**Preparing for Death**: Congregations/ communities of faith can prepare and make available for families helpful resources, in order to plan their funeral service.

**Stories told by those who are dying**

* “Stories told by the dying are privileged acts of self-interpretation” (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 98).
* “If a dying individual’s view of life is honest, complete, and accessible, it is …easier to construct an authentic memory that facilitates grieving (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 99).
* “Memories are the place of consolation. It is also where we get stuck in our grief when we resist recalling the whole story” (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 100)

**Litany of Lasts:**

* “Once it has been acknowledged that a person is irreversibly dying, the dying individual and families or friends begin to make a special moment of the last time something happens. The last dinner out, the last love-making….While it may seem a morbid focus, each “last” provides a time of recollection and an invitation to mourn. Marking the litany of “lasts” is also another way of continuing to be an agent in giving up one’s life (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 110).”
* “In the process of bringing closure to a life, the dying person needs to say many goodbyes. What we thought was the final good bye is seldom the last because the moment of death remains a mystery (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 111).”

**Maintaining vigil:** Spiritual care and presence can be especially comforting during this time. Help everyone talk as openly as they can about death. This can be an intense time for pastoral care and experiencing a sense of God’s presence, and the goodness (and sometimes painfulness) of the family system. Be clear about how the family can reach you, and what you can offer them in terms of being able to spend time with them.

**Part II Funerals**

Grief rituals need to be big enough to hold differing realities simultaneously and express conflicting thoughts and emotions in response to the death of a lived person….The presence of a faith community absorbs grief and transforms it into hope within a framework of ongoing trust in the promises of God. (Anderson & Foley, 1998, 115-116)

**I. The acute stage of separation:**

* Letting go of the body, *some of this work can be done in having private time with the body, especially for children, who need to be prepared; also issues to do with letting go of the body can be acutely experienced at the committal service or crematorium.*
* Letting go of all the familiar routines of being with the person who died; *pastoral visits in the weeks following the death can help people talk through how they can use religious rituals/resources to help them during the moments in the day when they re-experience the loss. Re-experiencing can happen in moments when those in grief momentarily experience the dead person as being with them in some way or another. There is such intense yearning for the deceased that it is as if the five senses of those in mourning are searching for signs of the deceased presence. This “looking for signs of the deceased” can lead to visual, auditory and olfactory “hallucinations”. These experiences can be interpreted as signs of spiritual connection with the person who is deceased.*
* Letting go of a role one might have had (i.e. the role of nephew); *anticipating important anniversary events in the first year of mourning can be very helpful (birthdays, family holidays, etc.)*
* Letting go of one’s anger, need, etc. for the person; especially letting go of guilt or shame. Sometimes shame comes from the meanings given to the death by one’s culture; sometimes shame comes from private family meanings. *Sometimes prayers of confession and also the sermon in the funeral service can address these issues generally. It’s very helpful if these issues are raised in pre-funeral visits.*
* Letting go of the ways the family system that may have been strongly shaped by the deceased person; *Again, attention to anniversary events are helpful; for example, how the family copes with the loss of a mother who prepared familiar dishes on holidays.*
* Tolerating the experience of being psychologically “in between” : for example, a woman who is no longer a wife, now a widow. In dreams she may return to being a wife. She may have moments when she forgets that she is now alone, like when she wakes up and thinks for a moment that her husband is beside her in bed. *These issues are important to address in pastoral visits in the acute phase of loss, especially when people in grief experience a lot of disorganization.*
* Holding on to spiritual ways of connecting with the person who has died *(many people need help with this; it’s important to explore what is meaningful for those in grief).*
* holding on to a sense of God’s presence, and the presence of the community *(votive candles, pictures, holy pictures are helpful in many traditions; also saying the rosary)*

***II. The long-term process of grieving includes*:**

* Acknowledging ongoing sadness, and the eruptions of grief that may continue, especially around anniversaries
* Living within a committed relationship/marriage and family where everyone grieves in his or her own way
* Working through the more difficult aspects of letting go and holding on; going through a process of reconstructing our stories of who the dead person was to us, who we are as people who have lived through this death; who God is to us. Van Katwyk[[1]](#footnote-1) (1993, 146) describes this as “transforming the spiritual and vocational identity of the family” as the death is incorporated into who this family is and who God is to this family. This process can be described as relocation:

Relocation, rather than replacement, finds a place for the dead person without disrupting ongoing life. This approach emphasizes the life of the dead person. It is found in the search to locate the meaning of the person and to incorporate within one’s own life and family circle the essence of the other… The story of relocation continues as the dead actively participate in the future without becoming an obstacle in the ongoing journey of the living. (van Katwyk, 1993, 146, 147)

* Similar to relocating, finding new ways to connect spiritually with the person who has died.
* Remembering together as a family, within the community. *(in some churches, for example remembering can be done in open prayer time, or sharing of concerns; also the opportunity to place flowers in the church for Sunday worship, and have this noted in the bulletin can be a way of remembering together)*

*For children:*

Grace Christ’s book, Healing *children in grief*, compiles research findings from a study of 157 children whose parent were cancer patients at the Sloan-Kettering Cancer center in NY, from 1988 – 1994. Children experienced and expressed their grief differently at different developmental stages.

Ages 3-5: Children cannot anticipate death of a parent; cannot believe that parent will to return. When they do accept death as final, they want to have their dead parent replaced quickly.

Ages 6-8: Children use magical thinking to create what can be erroneous causes to death of parent, often making the death their own fault.

Ages 9-11: Children want to know as much as they can about the death, since they are now using facts to gain a sense of mastery. Knowing the facts helps them better express their feelings without becoming overwhelmed.

Ages 12-14: Teenagers are starting to become more separated from parents, and can become angry, and may withdraw into an exaggerated sense of self that seems to exclude others.

Ages 15-17: Teenagers may be more like adults: able to describe intense feelings of loss and grief.

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***III. Getting ready for a funeral service***

1. Set the date and time for the service, ascertain what arrangements have been made with the funeral home, and whether the family would like you to be present in these discussions.
2. Arrange a time to meet with the family, to talk about how the person died and who was there/what it was like when they heard the news. Do some processing of feelings (getting a sense of the family system and how individuals are grieving).
3. Talk about the funeral service, and whether there had been conversations ahead of time about the funeral service.
4. Try to get a sense of the religious/spiritual beliefs and practices of family members? Have they had any sense of spiritual closeness or connection with people who have died? How do they understand the suffering which the person who died may have experienced, as well as their own suffering? You can use Susan Nelson’s five paradigms to think about their religious understanding of suffering: What would they like to lift up and celebrate of this person’s life? What may be hard to celebrate/ are they aware of losses, regrets to do with the person who has died?
5. Go over some scripture verses (psalms esp.) and music; or leave copies of biblical passages with them.
6. Ask if people would like to take part of readings, or offering words celebrating the person’s life.
7. Make it clear that you would like to give a sermon (short), and then have time to offer thanks and for people to speak.
8. Arrange a check-in time or a time to confer before or after visiting hours/vigil on their needs/arrangement for the service.
9. Arrange to spend some time at the visiting hours/ vigil; see if they would like prayers said.

Many traditions/congregations/families have their own traditions concerning death; you’ll find out what these are, and learn how to use these traditions to express religious faith and traditions and to work through issues of grief (acute and long-term).

**Religious and theological sources:**

1. Biblical texts relating to grief, death, hope and resurrection
2. Your denominational worship book has the following:
3. theological statements on death, resurrections and rituals
4. various orders of worship, and suggestions of prayers, readings etc.
5. instructions about various actions and movements

The Methodist, Presbyterian and Congregational have funeral services that include the following components: gathering of the community, confession, hearing and proclaiming the word, giving thanks and committing the body to be buried.

Congregational Presbyterian Methodist

Placing the Pall

Procession Procession

Opening Sentences Opening Sentences Greeting

Hymn of Praise Psalm or Hymn Hymn

Greeting

Prayer Prayer [confession] Prayer [confession]

Scripture Scripture Scripture

Sermon Sermon Sermon

Words of Remembrance [expressions of gratitude Naming/Witness

for the life of the deceased] Hymn

Affirmation of Faith Affirmation of Faith Affirmation of Faith

Hymn Hymn

Prayers of Thanksgiving Prayers of Thanksgiving Commendation

and Intercession and Intercession Prayers

Commendation Commendation

Blessing Blessing Dismissal

1. Your denominational hymn book is a resource for hymns
2. Some congregation develop their own resources, such as statements/policies of the church community (see the booklet on “Preparing for Death”).
3. Your theological perspectives on death and resurrection, grief and mourning are a resource to you. Every funeral sermon you write will be an opportunity to try to understand the religious worlds of those who mourn, your own religious world, and what kind of bridge you can build between these worlds.
4. Your own life experience of death, and what this particular death may mean to you.
5. The community of faith: their support and participation
6. The funeral director (if you’re blessed s/he will fall into this category of being a theological resource--- someone with whom you can consult about pastoral issues).
7. Colleagues who may help you sort out dilemmas, and offer support when you haven’t had much experience and/or it’s a particularly difficult death.

References:

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Callahan, Maggie & Patricia Kelly. 1997. *Final gifts.*

Cherry, Kittredge & Zalmon Sherwood, Ed. 1995. *Equal rites: Lesbian and Gay worship, ceremonies and celebrations*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.

Karaban, Roslyn. 2000. Complicated *losses, difficult deaths: A practical guide for ministering to grievers.* San Jose, CA: Resource publications.

Mansell, John S. 1998. *The funeral: A pastor’s guide*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.

Sanker, Andrea. 2000. *Dying at home: A family guide for caregiver.* John Hopkins University Press.

Searl, Edward. 2000. *In memoriam: A guide to modern funerals and memorial services.* 2nd Ed. Boston: Skinner House Books.

For a variety of books on helping people deal with particular kinds of losses, look at Compassion Books (www.compassionbooks.com)

1. Van Katwyk, Peter. (1993). “A family observed: Theological and family systems perspectives on the grief experience.” *The Journal of Pastoral Care*. *47*:141-147. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)