

Stepping Stones

TM
NEWSLETTER

SPIRITUAL REACTIONS TO LOSS

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Regardless of one's identification or affiliation with an organized religion, spiritual doubts and questions may arise when a loved one dies. Suffering a major loss usually causes us to confront and re-think our basic beliefs about God, religion, death and the afterlife. Some may turn to God as a source of strength and consolation

at the time of a loved one's death and find their faith has deepened. Others may question the religious teachings they've practiced all their lives and find the very foundations of their beliefs shaken to the core. Even those who had no religious upbringing at all may still feel abandoned by God or angry with God for letting their loved one get sick and die. Not all people respond to loss in the same way, and not everyone shares the same cultural, religious or spiritual beliefs about death and the afterlife.

Death forces us to confront the spiritual questions we may have been avoiding or haven't taken time to address, the questions that get at the very heart and meaning of life: Who am I? Why am I here? Where am I going?

Whether a strong religious faith will be a help or a hindrance in your recovery from grief depends on what you believe and how your beliefs are practiced. Like any other tool, religion can be used in healthy,



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appropriate ways, or it can be abused in unhealthy, inappropriate ways.

Religion can influence your fundamental view of life: you can see life as temporary and death as permanent, or you can see it the other way around — death is temporary and life is permanent. Death may interrupt a life that was very special, but it cannot cancel it. Religion can provide the motivation required for grief recovery: it says you're not alone — somebody has done it before. Grief's path isn't a dead-end street; it's a well-marked trail. Religion can be a great antidote for the loneliness that accompanies every major loss, and it can be a source of strength and group support.

What religion cannot do is give us immunity from loss or give us back our lost loved ones — nor can it provide us with a shortcut through grief. In his wonderful book *Life After Loss*, pastoral counselor Bob Deits identifies some religious beliefs that can be *harmful*:

- Death is God's will and should not be questioned.
- The person was so special that God called him or her to be with Him.
- There must be a grand plan or purpose (a *why*) for every death.

These religious beliefs are *helpful*:

- This is a mortal, frail, imperfect world, and tragedies occur.
- There is no satisfactory explanation when loss occurs.
- The question is not *why me*, but rather *if me*, what can I learn from this?

Deits encourages moving from *why* questions to *how* questions:

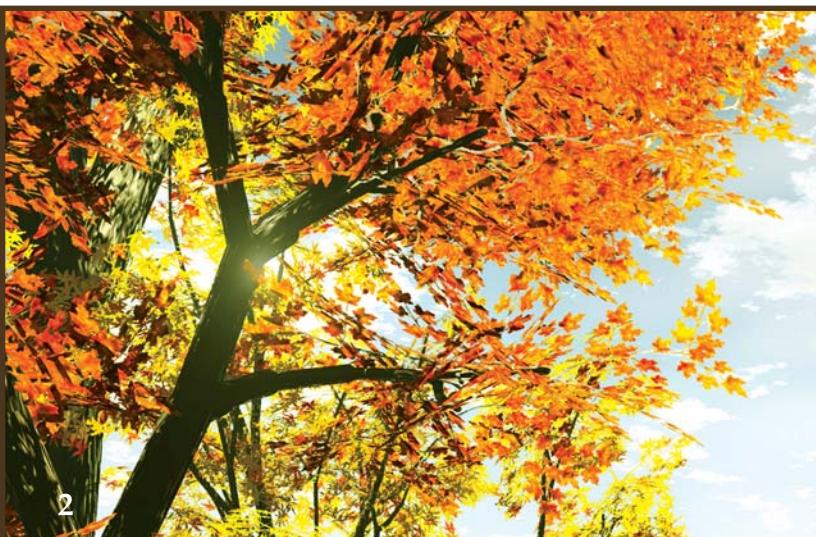
- How can you work through this loss and achieve as full a life as possible?
- How can you use this experience to help someone else?
- How do you find meaning in life without this person?
- How do you start anew?

SUGGESTIONS FOR COPING WITH SPIRITUAL REACTIONS

Recognize that a new faith can grow from grief, into a deeper, more mature understanding of the divine dimension of life. Sometimes meaning must be lost before it can be found. Consider talking to a minister, priest or rabbi. Pastoral counseling can comfort you and help you find a pathway to renewed faith.

- Make space in your schedule for daily meditation or prayer, which can be a source of great strength and consolation.
- Explore and question the values and beliefs you've accepted in the past, and formulate new ones when you need to.
- Consider grief as an encounter with life's greatest mysteries: the meaning of life; the promise of rebirth; the depth of love we share with one another.

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“Advanced funeral planning gives you the peace of mind that comes with knowing your funeral arrangements are taken care of while lessening the burden on your survivors.”



FORK

Keep your Fork

BY DR. ROGER WILLIAM THOMAS

The sound of Martha's voice on the other end of the telephone always brought a smile to Brother Jim's face. She was not only one of the oldest members of the congregation, but one of the most faithful. Aunt Martie, as all the children called her, just seemed to ooze faith, hope and love wherever she went.

This time, however, there seemed to be an unusual tone to her words.

"Preacher, could you stop by this afternoon? I need to talk with you."

"Of course. I'll be there around three. Is that okay?"

As they sat facing each other in the quiet of her small living room, Jim learned the reason for what he sensed in her voice. Martha told him that her doctor had just discovered a previously undetected tumor.

"He says I probably have six months to live." Martha's words were certainly serious, yet there was a definite calm about her.

"I'm so sorry to..." but before Jim could finish, Martha interrupted.

"Don't be. The Lord has been good. I have lived a long life. I'm ready to go. You know that."

"I know," Jim whispered with a reassuring nod.

"But I do want to talk with you about my funeral. I have been thinking about it, and there are things that I want."

The two talked quietly for a long time. They talked about Martha's favorite hymns, the passages of Scripture that had meant so much to her through the years, and the many memories they shared from the five years Jim had been with Central Church.

When it seemed that they had covered just about everything, Aunt Martie paused, looked up at Jim with a twinkle in her eye, and then added, "One more thing, Preacher. When they bury me, I want my old Bible in one hand and a fork in the other."

"A fork?" Jim was sure he had heard everything, but this caught him by surprise. "Why do you want to be buried with a fork?"

"I have been thinking about all of the church dinners and banquets that I attended through the years," she explained. "I couldn't begin to count them all. But one thing sticks

in my mind.

"At those really nice get-togethers, when the meal was almost finished, a server or maybe the hostess would come by to collect the dirty dishes. I can hear the words now. Sometimes, at the best ones, somebody would lean over my shoulder and whisper, 'You can keep your fork.'

"And do you know what that meant? Dessert was coming!

"It didn't mean a cup of Jell-O or pudding or even a dish of ice cream. You don't need a fork for that. It meant the good stuff, like chocolate cake or cherry pie! When they told me I could keep my fork, I knew the best was yet to come!"

"That's exactly what I want people to talk about at my funeral. Oh, they can talk about all the good times we had together. That would be nice.

"But when they walk by my casket and look at my pretty blue dress, I want them to turn to one another and say, 'Why the fork?'

"That's what I want to say. I want you to tell them that I kept my fork because the best is yet to come."

Time

Time is too slow for those who wait,
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for those who grieve,
Too short for those who rejoice,
But for those who love, time is
Eternity.

~ Henry van Dyke



We are pleased to continue our tradition of caring through these complimentary issues of *Stepping Stones Newsletter* and our professional staff.

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If you have enjoyed this reading, please let us know! We'd love to provide you with additional grief materials and resources to help you cope during this difficult time. If you would like more information, or if you would like to speak to someone who can assist you with filing for veterans' benefits, Social Security and insurance benefits, or who can help you prepare your own or a loved one's funeral plans in advance, please reply to this email, and a funeral home representative will contact you shortly. We sincerely hope that we have been able to brighten your day with this edition of *Stepping Stones*.

Please don't hesitate to let us know if there is anything we can do to assist you.