Grief and Bereavement Revisited: Introduction to Special Issue

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Recently I was reviewing the course syllabus for the first class on death and dying I ever took. The place was Princeton Theological Seminary. The time was the fall of 1971. The instructor was Herbert Anderson. In this class we learned how inevitable and universal loss and grief is. We learned about the stages of the grief process. We read Kubler-Ross, who was refreshingly innovative in those days. Granger Westburg's *Good Grief* was very popular as well. It was a profound class—first on an existential level and secondly as a focus of my career for the next 38 years.

As I was reviewing the old course syllabus, I was reflecting on how much my understanding of grief has changed in the last nearly 40 years. The world of loss, grief and dying has changed. There are new perspectives, new theoretical understandings and new interconnections. And it is a different world, where the kinds of “deaths” and “griefs” seem more complex, intense and global than they did in 1971.

When approached about editing a special issue of Pastoral Psychology, my goal was to pull together a series of articles that would update clergypersons on the latest thinking, understandings and perspectives on loss and grief. I call this issue, “Grief and Bereavement Revised.” My hope is that this issue might be a convenient and readable collection of essays that will in a single volume update the modern minister on the current issues in the pastoral care of grieving persons.

This issue begins with an article from Herbert Anderson, my instructor and long time friend and colleague, who taught that course some 38 years ago. Herb has written widely on a variety of topics, but loss, grief and death has remained a central theme of his distinguished career as a pastoral theologian. His volume with Kenneth R. Mitchell, *All Our Loss, All Our Grievs: Resources for Pastoral Care*, has become a classic in this field. I asked Herb to begin our issue by reflecting personally and professionally on how grief studies have changed in the recent decades.

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Pauline Boss, who taught for many years at the University of Minnesota, has pioneered the concept of “ambiguous loss.” She applies her thinking about ambiguous loss to the growing incidence of caring for loved ones with dementia, and offers care givers and clergy some helpful principles. Her observations clearly remind us that losses and grief can be complicated, and that the previous “stage theory” of grief work was much too simple.

Ted Rynearson, a nationally and internationally known psychiatrist who specializes in the treatment of survivors of violent death, raises the question of how is grief different when the deceased died a violent and sometimes horrific death. He argues for a narrative approach to treatment, that is, an approach that focuses on the process of telling and retelling one’s story.

Ting-Yin Lee who teaches pastoral care and counseling at Yu-Shan Theological Seminary in Taiwan discusses the growing phenomenon of immigration as a type of loss. He suggests that immigration includes a series of obvious and hidden losses that are widely underappreciated in their importance, in part because so many voluntary immigrants arrive in their new nation filled with dreams, hopes and expectations. He suggests that many of the difficulties that ethnic congregations experience can be understood as a reflection of the dynamics of grief.

Kent Drescher works as a psychologist with the National Center for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) at the VA Heath Care System in Palo Alto, CA. He is experienced in treating returning war veterans and training military chaplains in the signs and symptoms of PTSD. Kent, along with his coauthor, David W. Foy, provide readers with a wealth of useful information about PTSD, its dynamics, diagnostic features, its etiology, the role of spirituality in the treatment and its relationship to grief.

Elaine Ramshaw, who has written, lectured and taught widely on the subject of ritual, explores the changing face of rituals in the postmodern world. In particular, she discusses the trend, at least in the United States, toward increased personalization of rituals. She explores what might be the dynamics behind this trend, and offers pastors some suggestions and observations for how to cope with the increasing expectation that the average pastor become a creative ritual expert.

Finally, I offer my own entry for this special issue, focusing on the role and influence of the media upon how we grieve. Few other changes are more unique to the last 40 years of life in America than the growth and diversification of the media. I explore the subject of vicarious grief, both its benefits and its dangers in a media-driven age.

I deeply appreciate each of these authors for taking the time to share their observations, insights and thoughtful analysis. Each of these articles has enriched my understanding of grief and bereavement. I trust they will as well for each of you, the readers. As in the past, may all of your losses be growth experiences.