

Chapter 7

What to do when Someone Dies

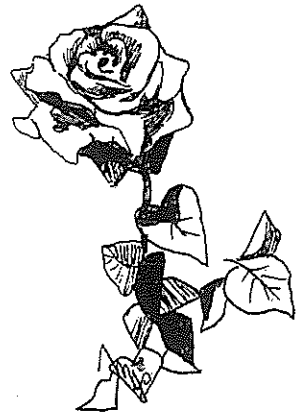
Lament for Glen

(Killed in a motor-bike accident, aged nineteen)

*The splendid youth is dead and is no more,
And who shall comfort those who are left?
Who shall comfort the mother who has lost her son?
Who shall comfort the sisters who have lost a brother?
Who shall comfort the friends who have lost a friend?
And who shall comfort the father?
There is no comfort for those who are grieving
For faith is not enough
To assuage the tearing wound of sudden death.
O let me not drown in the flood of grief
For all young men who died before their time
And for this one so newly dead.
O let me catch the raft of life again
And not be swept away
Into the darkest depths of grief and loss.*

Marjorie Pizer

Published in *Good Grief* by Barbara Ward and Jamie Houghton White
Crescent Press Ltd, UK, 1988 Permission of Jessica Kingsley Publishers.



The death of someone in a family is usually a very sad occasion. When the person is young and the death is sudden, the experience is all the more traumatic for the family and friends.

The Church community is called to support those who grieve. Long-time absence from Church activities need not deter any person from the prayer and support of the Christian community at the time of a death.

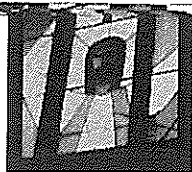
When a death occurs in a Catholic family, it is important that the family contact the priest and inform the faith community. The community can then pray for the dead and give prayerful support to the bereaved family and friends.

The following article highlights some questions which people have regarding burial procedures, and mentions some ways to help families through the grieving process.

Good Grief

When a death occurs, even an expected death, a surprising number of people don't know what to do. Nor do they know the wishes of the dead person about funeral arrangements. And yet those decisions made in the days between the death and burial (or cremation) are important ones which can help in the grieving process.

Some Australians have little involvement with funerals until an immediate family member dies. They don't like to talk about death, especially their own. They feel they are 'tempting fate'. On the other hand, Aboriginal, Maori and Polynesian peoples, and some of European descent, are familiar with the customs and traditions surrounding death because they have been involved as members of an extended family, even as children.



"I won't be here, so it doesn't matter what they do with me," some people say.

Others insist that "no fuss" be made — no ceremony in a church or anywhere, just a private cremation or burial, and no notice in the newspapers until it is over.

"These people forget that others have a right to grieve and must be allowed to grieve," says funeral director, Cedric Little. He thinks it is no kindness to family or friends to follow the "no fuss" requests. It denies people an opportunity to bid farewell and express grief.

Grief counsellor Brad Kunin of Barnardos Family Counselling Service, agrees:

"The grieving rituals are important for the survivors. If we don't resolve our grief at the appropriate time, it eats away at us. The two fruits of unresolved grief are anger and guilt."

"People need time to adjust to the idea that the person has died. If the funeral follows too soon, the death doesn't really sink in," says Cedric Little.

He thinks three days is a good average time between death and burial, allowing the family time to talk, grieve and make decisions about the funeral.

He praised the Maori tradition of having the body on the marae, and suggests to his clients that they may like to take the body home for a time.

"Some families have never thought of having the body at home and are pleased with the idea when I mention it."

This time with the body at home is for saying goodbyes, expressing feelings and coming to acceptance of the death.

"The Maori tradition of speaking to the dead person, saying what you want to say, is a very cleansing process," says counsellor Jill Worrall.

When he comes to the house to arrange the funeral, Cedric Little says he tries to talk to those closest to the deceased, but finds that where a parent has died, sometimes adult children will leave the surviving parent out of the room while they arrange details.

"No matter how well-meaning, this has a negative result," he says.

In an effort to present the person "the way he or she was," many funeral directors

suggest the family provide the deceased's own clothes to be buried in. And not always the best, but the ones the family saw them in the most and which they enjoyed wearing.

Some families are pleased when asked if they wish to help dress the body.

Cedric Little sees his job, as helping families through this difficult, grieving time.

"There are a lot of negative reactions from people, especially in the case of sudden deaths. A lot of 'if only' and 'why didn't I do this or that', or 'why didn't the doctor...'"

No one imagines that a beautiful funeral Mass or service will soften the grief immediately or that grief ends with the burial or cremation. But the involvement of family in planning the funeral ceremony makes it different from every other one a funeral director may have attended.

"I want my funeral to be a celebratory experience," says Jill Worrall.

"As a Christian, I believe at funerals we celebrate the life of the person who has died, and we celebrate what he, or she is going on to."

Because people are in a state of shock, especially in the case of sudden or accidental death, even the rituals don't always make sense until later. The first anniversary of the death is a time when people experience a great flood of emotion.

"It is good to give this time some structure," says Brad Kunin.

Some do this by erecting a headstone over the grave or a plaque where the ashes are interred, on the first anniversary.

When she visited New Zealand early in 1992, neuropsychologist, Dr Frances Clegg from London, pointed out that memorials are part of a long tradition, to acknowledge the former life of a person, to mark the spot where the earthly remains were placed, and to show love and respect for them.

She said a memorial provides a focus for anniversary months or years, for grief. It is a place where mourners can go to re-experience and express the pain of loss. In time it can become like a photograph of the dead person, something that is a source of comfort, rather than pain.

by Dorothy Coup New Zealandia October 1992