

## CHAPTER 1

# Introduction



I struggled up the slope of Mount Evmandu to meet the famous guru of Nepsim, an ancient sage whose name I was forbidden to place in print. I was much younger then, but the long and arduous hike exhausted me, and, despite the cold, I was perspiring heavily when I reached the plateau where he made his home. He viewed me with a patient, almost amused, look, and I smiled wanly at him between attempts to gulp the thin air into my lungs. I made my way across the remaining hundred meters and slowly sat down on the ground—propping myself up against a large rock just outside his abode.

We were both silent for several minutes, and I felt the tension in me rise, then subside until I was calm. Perspiration prickled my skin, but the slight breeze was pleasantly cool, and soon I was relaxed. Finally I turned my head to look directly into the clear brown eyes, which were bright within his lined face. I realized that I would need to speak.

“Father,” I said, “I need to understand something about what it means to die, before I can continue my studies.” He continued to gaze at me with his open, bemused expression. “Father,” I went on, “I want to know what a dying person feels when no one will speak with him, nor be open enough to permit him to speak, about his dying.”

He was silent for three, perhaps four, minutes. I felt at peace because I knew he would answer. Finally, as though in the middle of a sentence, he said, “It is the horse on the dining-room table.” We continued to gaze at each other for several minutes. I began to feel sleepy after my long journey, and I must have dozed off. When I woke up, he was gone, and the only activity was my own breathing.

I retraced my steps down the mountain—still feeling calm, knowing that his answer made me feel good, but not knowing why. I returned to my studies and gave no further thought to the event, not wishing to dwell upon it, yet secure that someday I should understand.

Many years later I was invited to the home of a casual friend for dinner. It was a modest house in a typical California development. The eight or ten other guests, people I did not know well, and I sat in the living room—drinking Safeway Scotch and bourbon and dipping celery sticks and raw cauliflower into a watery cheese dip. The conversation, initially halting, became more animated as we got to know each other and developed points of contact. The drinks undoubtedly also affected us.

Eventually the hostess appeared and invited us into the dining room for a buffet dinner. As I entered the room, I noticed with astonishment that a brown horse was sitting quietly on the dining-room table. Although it was small for a horse, it filled much of the large table. I caught my breath, but didn't say anything. I was the first one to enter, so I was able to turn, to watch the other guests. They responded much as I did—they entered and saw the horse, gasped or stared, but said nothing.

The host was the last to enter. He let out a silent shriek—looking rapidly from the horse to each of his guests with a wild stare. His mouth formed soundless words. Then in a voice choked with confusion he invited us to fill our plates from the buffet. His wife, equally disconcerted by what was clearly an unexpected horse, pointed to the name cards, which indicated where each of us was to sit.

The hostess led me to the buffet and handed me a plate. Others lined up behind me—each of us quiet. I filled my plate with rice and chicken and sat in my place. The others followed suit.

It was cramped, sitting there, trying to avoid getting too close to the horse, while pretending that no horse was there. My dish overlapped the edge of the table. Others found other ways to avoid physical contact with the horse. The host and hostess seemed as ill-at-ease as the rest of us. The conversation lagged. Every once in a while, someone would say something in an attempt to revive the earlier pleasant and innocuous discussion, but the overwhelming presence of the horse so filled our thoughts that talk of taxes or politics or the lack of rain seemed inconsequential.

Dinner ended, and the hostess brought coffee. I can recall everything on my plate and yet have no memory of having eaten. We drank in silence—all of us trying not to look at the horse, yet unable to keep our eyes or thoughts anywhere else.

I thought several times of saying, "Hey, there's a horse on the dining-room table." But I hardly knew the host, and I didn't wish to embarrass him by mentioning something that obviously discomfited him at least as much as it disconcerted me. After all, it was his house. And what do you say to a man with a horse on his dining-room table? I could have said that I did not mind, but that

was not true—its presence upset me so much that I enjoyed neither the dinner nor the company. I could have said that I knew how difficult it was to have a horse on one's dining-room table, but that wasn't true either; I had no idea. I could have said something like, "How do you feel about having a horse on your dining-room table?", but I didn't want to sound like a psychologist. Perhaps, I thought, if I ignore it, it will go away. Of course I knew that it wouldn't. It didn't.

I later learned that the host and hostess were hoping the dinner would be a success in spite of the horse. They felt that to mention it would make us so uncomfortable that we wouldn't enjoy our visit—of course we didn't enjoy the evening anyway. They were fearful that we would try to offer them sympathy, which they didn't want, or understanding, which they needed but could not accept. They wanted the party to be a success, so they decided to try to make the evening as enjoyable as possible. But it was apparent that they—like their guests—could think of little else than the horse.

I excused myself shortly after dinner and went home. The evening had been terrible. I never wanted to see the host and hostess again, although I was eager to seek out the other guests and learn what they felt about the occasion. I felt confused about what had happened and extremely tense. The evening had been grotesque. I was careful to avoid the host and hostess after that, and I did my best to stay away altogether from the neighborhood.

Recently I visited Nepsim again. I decided to seek out the guru once more. He was still alive, although nearing death, and he would speak only to a few. I repeated my journey and eventually found myself sitting across from him.

Once again I asked, "Father, I want to know what a dying person feels when no one will speak with him, nor be open enough to permit him to speak, about his dying."

The old man was quiet, and we sat without speaking for nearly an hour. Since he did not bid me leave, I remained. Although I was content, I feared he would not share his wisdom, but he finally spoke. The words came slowly.

"My son, it is the horse on the dining-room table. It is a horse that visits every house and sits on every dining-room table—the tables of the rich and of the poor, of the simple and of the wise. This horse just sits there, but its presence makes you wish to leave without speaking of it. If you leave, you will always fear the presence of the horse. When it sits on your table, you will wish to speak of it, but you may not be able to.

"However, if you speak about the horse, then you will find that others can also speak about the horse—most others, at least, if you are gentle and kind as you speak. The horse will remain on the dining-room table, but you will not be so distraught. You will enjoy your repast, and you will enjoy the company of the

*host and hostess. Or, if it is your table, you will enjoy the presence of your guests. You cannot make magic to have the horse disappear, but you can speak of the horse and thereby render it less powerful."*

*The old man then rose and, motioning me to follow, walked slowly to his hut. "Now we shall eat," he said quietly. I entered the hut and had difficulty adjusting to the dark. The guru walked to a cupboard in the corner and took out some bread and some cheese, which he placed on a mat. He motioned to me to sit and share his food. I saw a small horse sitting quietly in the center of the mat. He noticed this and said, "That horse need not disturb us." I thoroughly enjoyed the meal. Our discussion lasted far into the night, while the horse sat there quietly throughout our time together.*

—RICHARD KALISH (1985)

#### UNDERSTANDING DEATH, DYING, AND BEREAVEMENT

To understand fully what it means to be in the presence of grief we must speak of death. And to speak of death is to enter the realm of the supreme mystery, that of the unanswerable question. For although it certainly is the most inevitable fact of life, death also represents the quintessential paradox: "From the very beginning we sense the oxymoronic quality of death. Death is destroyer and redeemer; the ultimate cruelty and the essence of release; universally feared but sometimes actively sought; undeniably ubiquitous, yet incomprehensibly unique; of all phenomena, the most obvious and the least reportable, feared yet fascinating" (Shneidman, 1980a, p. 10).

Death may indeed be fascinating. However, more commonly it is feared. Thus, as we begin the pursuit of greater awareness for ourselves and an enhanced ability to work with others in the realm of death, dying, bereavement, and related end-of-life issues, the first task generally involves becoming acquainted and comfortable with "the horse on the dining-room table," the fact that each of us ultimately must die. The degree to which this may or may not be a challenge will be influenced significantly both by the stories and experiences each of us brings with us from our families of origin and by the rules and norms, or "culture tales" (Howard, 1991), of the society in which we live.

We all received from our families a variety of messages, both implicit and explicit, about whether death was to be considered an uninvited stranger or a welcome guest. There is a good chance, however, that previ-

ously we may not have focused on bringing these messages into conscious awareness. Therefore, it is a good idea to take a few moments to consider our first encounter with death and dying. Was it through the loss of a grandparent, parent, sibling, other family member, friend, stranger, public figure, pet? What was the reaction and how did those around us respond? Other questions we may wish to ask ourselves include the following: How was the subject of death in general talked about or handled by the people with whom we grew up? What was the story about death and what happens after we die that we told ourselves as children and how has this story evolved and changed over the years? What events and people have been involved in the creation of our story about death and dying? How have we been influenced by our reading, the media, religious beliefs, our own health, the death of someone close? Have you thought about your own death or when and how you might die or might prefer to die? What are the feelings we experience when we consider and confront our own mortality?

Responding to these questions may enable us to get in touch more fully with our personal beliefs about death and dying as well as with the process of their creation. As we respond, we must be aware that our answers may be revealing and may have consequences that go far beyond the desire to gain intellectual knowledge. Although many would consider a focus on concerns such as these to be rather morbid, others would urge us to recognize the extent to which life may be enhanced by a full consideration of death-related issues (Sogyal, 1992).

In this regard it may be important as well to remember that for any concept to have meaning, a second concept which is a logical complement to the first also is required. Thus, for example, we are able to understand the concept of happy as we distinguish it from the concept of sad. Similarly, sweet would be difficult to comprehend without being able to contrast it with sour. This is the challenge experienced by those born without sight as they struggle to make sense of colors without the visual ability to compare, for example, red and blue. As Bateson (1972) noted many years ago, it is through the relationships of difference that meaningful information is communicated. And so it is with life and death; each requires the other and without both, neither would be a meaningful concept.

However, as we exist in a particular social context, we tend to imbue the sides of each set of complementarities, or opposite concepts, with negative and positive connotations. Despite the fact that happy is not necessarily better than sad, nor sweet better than sour, any more than blue is

better than red, we make value judgments consistent with our preferences and forget that it is we who have created the story that sad and sour are negative experiences. Although this is by no means a universal response, certainly in our culture the attribution of negativity is the typical reaction to death.

Indeed, despite some shifts in recent years in our attitude toward death and dying, we live in a society in which denial (Becker, 1973) and fear (Foos-Graber, 1989) continue to be the norm. We attempt to push thoughts of death out of our awareness at every opportunity and when we are unsuccessful we often find ourselves feeling frightened and lost. So negative is our perception that death often is construed as a social disease (Shneidman, 1980a), thus making it a less acceptable topic of conversation than is sexual activity (Gorer, 1980). And even when we allow ourselves to engage in discourse about death, we tend to do so in a solemn and subdued manner (Hainer, 1997, p. 1D), thereby enhancing its fearfulness and heightening our anxiety.

Perhaps it would be appropriate to become aware of and to consider critically the statement, however unintended, we may be making as our stance toward death is basically one of trepidation. As Plato writes in his *Apology*: "For the fear of death is indeed the pretense of wisdom, and not real wisdom, being a pretense of knowing the unknown; and no one knows whether death, which men in their fear apprehend to be the greatest evil, may not be the greatest good" (in Packard, 1981, p. 9).

In fact, we do not know that death is something evil. Nevertheless, as we engage in a search today for definitions we find that, according to the dictionary, death refers not only to the loss or destroyer of life, and to extinction, but also to anything so dreadful as to seem like death. Further, death often is symbolized by a skeleton with a scythe, the grim reaper. We therefore may find it difficult even to say the word and thus we hear that someone has "passed," or gone to his or her "great reward." More colloquially some common terms to describe the fact that someone has died include "kicked the bucket" or "bought the farm."

The reality is that most of our public associations with death appear to be anything but positive. It therefore follows that we are fearful and not only avoid the topic but also engage, sometimes fanatically, in activities aimed at prolonging life and denying death. For example, we value a youthful rather than a mature appearance. Unless or until pressed by necessity we put off discussions about the kind of funeral we might like, where and how we would prefer to die, and what our wishes are in terms of burial. We delay the making of a will, or thinking about a living will.

And once death has arrived, we support the practice of embalming in an attempt to create a life-like appearance for the one who has died. According to Aries (1980), however, embalming is virtually unheard of in Europe. Further, it is his belief that in the United States it is the ultimate attempt to maintain the facade of life, and thereby to deny the reality of death.

Consistent with such an attitude, both as individuals and as a society, we also devote enormous amounts of time, money, and energy to efforts aimed at sustaining life. We permit the use of extreme measures of life support for the dying, even after all hope of recovery has ceased. And we often refuse to let our loved ones go, emotionally, even when their time seems to have come. However, the main emphasis of these efforts generally tends to be on quantity rather than on quality. The irony here is that the goal of a rich and full life, despite its length, may perhaps best be achieved in the context of full awareness and acceptance of death. As Norman Cousins (1989) writes,

Hope, faith, love, and a strong will to live offer no promise of immortality, only proof of our uniqueness as human beings and the opportunity to experience full growth even under the grimmest circumstances. The clock provides only a technical measurement of how long we live. Far more real than the ticking of time is the way we open up the minutes and invest them with meaning. Death is not the ultimate tragedy in life. The ultimate tragedy is to die without discovering the possibilities of full growth. The approach of death need not be denial of that growth. (p. 25)

As we seek to avert the tragedy of which Cousins speaks and to engage in the process of living more fully, or of “befriending our death” (Nouwen, 1994), we may actually enhance our relationships with ourselves, with those around us, and with our world. As we live in the awareness that we begin to die as soon as we are born, each moment becomes a gift to be cherished. Life, with all its opportunities for growth and learning, becomes a treasure to be handled with care. And the people with whom we share our lives become special in entirely new ways. We recognize the importance of not squandering our riches, of spending our time wisely. Along the way, we also may become better equipped to be with and help others as we model for them what is possible through acknowledgment that we are indeed finite creatures.

This process of acknowledgment, of *learning to accept and to live with*, is the essence of what is meant by the term “resolve,” the understanding

of which is the goal of this book: helping family members to successfully *resolve* death, dying, bereavement, and related end-of-life issues. However, that which we must resolve, or learn to accept and live with, changes as death moves from being an abstract concept to a concrete reality. To explain, as we seek on the one hand to come to terms with our own mortality, our greatest challenges may emerge from feelings such as fear of the unknown, concerns about those whom we would be leaving, disappointment about what we have not accomplished, or despair that this may be all there is. On the other hand, the death of a loved one catapults us into an entirely different realm, one characterized by equally significant but different kinds of issues and challenges.

Indeed, one of the foremost realities, and perhaps the greatest paradox, that often emerges when we lose someone we love is the fact that we also may lose our fear of death. We even may lose our will to live. In this instance, therefore, resolving, or coming to terms with death, may involve not only learning to accept and live with pain but also finding ways to answer some of life's biggest questions: "Who am I?" "Why am I here?" "What is life all about?" "Is it worth the effort?" We may be challenged to create meaning where none seems to exist. We may find ourselves at sea without the anchor of previously cherished and long-held beliefs. All the basic tenets which have been the ground of our being, the foundation on which we have built our lives, may have been washed away as we discovered that they were insufficient to sustain us in our time of greatest need. And even when this is not the case, we often are faced with the task of figuring out how to continue to live in a much altered context.

Clearly, however, not all encounters with death and dying will have consequences with the magnitude of those just described. Some of the most crucial factors influencing the impact of the loss, as well as the ability of those who survive to cope, include the dimension of time, the family position and life stages of the people involved, the intensity or closeness of relationships, and the manner in which both dying and death have occurred. Thus, even within one family the experience of a death will be unique for each different family member. Those who desire to assist family members, therefore, must be sensitive to the particular configuration of circumstances that characterize the context of each individual's grief experience.

The dimension of time is significant in many ways and has important ramifications for both the dying and for those who survive. As will become apparent, neither unanticipated nor anticipated death is necessarily more to be desired and both kinds of experience have their share of benefits and losses. Similarly, the age of the person at the time of death is wor-



thy of attention but no one age inevitably means that the survivors will have an easier time handling the loss. Rather, the effect of time must be considered relative to the variety of other factors which also may influence the grieving process for each person involved and affected. In the following sections we introduce some of the particular ways in which the dimension of time may have an impact.

### WHEN DEATH COMES UNANNOUNCED

When death is unanticipated, or comes without warning, there is no time for anyone to prepare for what has happened. In this case, the person who has died may have made no arrangements or may have had no opportunity to express his or her wishes regarding issues such as organ donation, funeral arrangements, and burial preferences. There may be many loose ends around financial and legal issues. What may be even more critical, however, is the sense of dislocation and incongruity experienced by the survivors. One moment the person was alive and healthy; the next moment the person is gone forever. Also important in this regard is the lack of closure the survivor may be experiencing. There has been no time for farewells and guilt may emerge regarding unresolved conflicts or dissatisfaction about things left undone or unsaid.

Accordingly, acute feelings of unreality, disbelief, and shock are common in the aftermath of a sudden and unexpected death. Dissonance in terms of basic assumptions and meaning systems is highly likely, particularly if the death occurred under tragic circumstances or involved the loss of a child. In the latter instance, the feeling of a death out of time is extremely significant (Gilbert, 1997). In the event of a violent or wrongful death, anger and frustration at the injustice may be added to grief over the loss.

At the same time, when death comes unannounced, and particularly if it is instantaneous, there may be some sense of gratitude that the person did not suffer, or died doing something she or he loved, or in the midst of a full and active life. Thus, for example, the parents of soldiers killed in battle often have found solace in the thought that their child gave up her or his life in the service of a country all hold dear. Although this may be of small comfort in the moment, it may ease the pain of the loss as time enables the survivors to view the event from a less anguished perspective. In retrospect there even may be relief that the person who died did not have to experience subsequent hardships which may have been inevitable

had she or he lived. All these factors contrast sharply with events surrounding a death that is more or less expected.

#### WHEN DEATH IS ANTICIPATED

In the case of an anticipated death, the dying person often is provided with an opportunity to put his or her affairs in order, to tie up loose ends, so to speak. There is time to create a will, if necessary or desired, and to indicate personal preferences about issues such as dying at home or in a hospital as well as about measures that are or are not to be taken to sustain life. There is time to consider the possibility of organ donation and to participate in funeral arrangements and burial decisions. There is time as well to achieve closure in significant relationships, a process which may be facilitated by the imminence of death. There also is an opportunity for everyone involved to assimilate what is happening, to realign beliefs if appropriate or necessary, and to make plans for a future without the person who is dying.

At the same time, having foreknowledge also tends to initiate a period of anticipatory mourning in which everyone involved is faced with the inevitability of the loss. In this case, the grieving process may begin even though the death has not yet occurred (Rolland, 1991). In the event of an extended dying process, significant stress also may be placed on caretakers, who may feel angry and/or overwhelmed by the situation. In addition, a sense of remorse about being a burden may emerge on the part of the person who is dying. Attempts to resolve conflicts also may prove futile, leading to feelings of frustration for those involved. When the death ultimately occurs, survivors may experience a complex set of emotions including sadness about the loss, gratitude that suffering has ended for the dying person, relief that there will now be a respite for the caregivers, and guilt about what are perfectly normal, if mixed, reactions. What is more, the desire to alleviate emotional and physical pain during a period of extended dying may have opened the door to another set of end-of-life issues with long-lasting ramifications.

#### WHEN THE QUESTION OF EUTHANASIA EMERGES

An additional factor that may emerge in the context of anticipated death involves questions about the rights of people to consider and choose the

manner and timing of their own death. Since the late 1990s, much heated controversy has been captured by the media as we have debated publicly such questions as when it is appropriate for life-support systems to be removed, how much suffering, both physical and emotional, a person should have to endure, the ramifications of the use of narcotics which may relieve physical pain but dull consciousness, and the appropriateness of allowing a person to die by refusing food and liquids (Peay, 1997). As we attempt to assist family members who may be seeking, in a very personal manner, answers to questions such as these, we must be cognizant of both legal and professional responsibilities (Becvar, 2000a). We also must be sensitive to the ways in which families may be torn apart as they endeavor to cope with this dimension of the dying process. Indeed, many controversies may surface regarding whose right it is to make what decision and how differences of opinion are to be handled in the midst of efforts to cope with the fact that a loved one not only is dying but that it promises to be a long, slow, and painful process. And all these debates are further influenced by the roles and ages of those involved at the time of death.

#### WHEN A CHILD DIES

Whether death has been unanticipated or has occurred in some configuration of the circumstances associated with anticipated death, the family position and life stages of the people participating, and particularly of the person who is dying or has died, also have a tremendous influence on the way in which the event is experienced. Nowhere is this more evident than when a child dies. Regardless of other variables, the death of one's own child almost always seems a travesty. There is an extreme sense of dissonance and a feeling of something being extraordinarily wrong when parents bury a son or daughter. This is especially true in the current era in which a continually increasing life expectancy seems to promise a full and active existence well into our 70s and 80s. Thus, the death of a child may seem even more unlikely than in an earlier era when disease regularly claimed the lives of many at a young age. And even if the child is not our own, there appears to be something inordinately wrong or unfair about having life cut short. What is more, regardless of the fact that the person who died was an adult, the loss for parents generally continues to be excruciating as they simply don't expect to outlive their children. Indeed, there is probably no way that one can be prepared adequately for or can be expected to accept easily the death of a child.

## WHEN A SIBLING DIES

Similarly, siblings may be totally unprepared to handle the death of a brother or sister, even after a prolonged illness. With no past experience, young children may not have a way of understanding either what has happened or the impact of this event on their parents. If they are older, the intensity of their experience often is overlooked (Becvar, 2000b) even though they may be feeling an enormous amount of grief. Further, if they are adults, they even may be called on to take over for their parents (Nolen-Hoeksema & Larson, 1999). Thus, they may be asked to handle the details of funeral arrangements or the logistics involved with housing and feeding relatives from out of town. However, the death of a sibling represents the severing of an extremely important connection. It may mean the loss of a beloved companion, mentor, or protector. It also makes real the awareness of one's own vulnerability and mortality. As a function of such a loss, siblings may be moved to change their attitudes about career choices, family relationships, and the importance of creating a healthy lifestyle. At the same time, they may find themselves feeling like an "endangered species" as their parents become extremely overprotective out of fear that they may lose another child, and/or they may feel bereft of parents, as the latter are now totally absorbed in their own grief. And while this is occurring, the child has fewer or no siblings to whom to turn for support in significantly changed circumstances.

## WHEN A PARENT DIES

A more expected occurrence for siblings is the death of a parent. In the natural order of things we presume that we will outlive our mothers and fathers. Nevertheless, when a parent dies, it signifies the end of a primary attachment bond and therefore the loss of one of the most important relationships in our lives. No matter what the age at which one loses a parent, and while different developmental issues thus may emerge (Shapiro, 1994), life thereafter is forever altered. What is more, the degree of closeness or distance characterizing the relationship with the deceased parent apparently has little influence on the intensity of the grief experienced by surviving children (Umberson & Chen, 1994). More crucial, perhaps, is the time of life at which death occurs. That is, we certainly don't anticipate that our parents will die before they have reached a ripe old age or

while we are still young. Indeed, the younger the child, the greater may be the long-term consequences of the death of a parent. The reality is that with each milestone passed following the death of a parent, her or his absence once again is brought into sharper focus. Not being able to share graduations, weddings, the birth of a baby, and other significant events with the parent who has died lends a bittersweet taste to otherwise happy occasions. Thus, once again we also must be sensitive to the dimensions of role and life stage and to issues related to the disruption occasioned by a death “out of time.”

### WHEN A SPOUSE DIES

When a spouse or partner in a committed relationship dies, similar issues emerge as a function of the age at the time of death, thereby changing the complexion of the loss. For example, the experience of widowhood varies considerably for young adults and/or those with young children, as compared with those in midlife or old age. The expectation is that the members of the couple will grow old together and thus a death in youth or in the middle of life is likely to be more of a shock. In all situations, however, when a wife, husband, or partner dies one loses one's companion and counterpart and the feelings of aloneness may be overwhelming. Even in the case of a relationship characterized by conflict, the absence of someone with whom to discuss and perhaps commiserate about daily events, the loss of a sexual partner, the lack of someone to share responsibilities for home and family, the burdens associated with being a single parent, as well as concerns about financial security, all may be keenly felt. And the sense of aloneness may be exacerbated as couple friends drift away, failing to include the now single person in formerly shared activities. Over time, as the widow or widower begins to consider establishing a new committed relationship, she or he also may be assailed by feelings of guilt or betrayal of the spouse or partner who has died. What is more, depending on gender, age, and the presence or absence of children, opportunities to create such a new relationship may be limited. The idea of starting over with another person, let alone confusion about how to proceed, also may seem overwhelming. Although spouses or partners are not related by blood, the closeness and intertwining of lives which characterize the marital or committed relationship may make the death of a spouse or partner an extraordinary challenge.

WHEN AN EXTENDED FAMILY MEMBER  
OR FRIEND DIES

Different kinds of challenges may arise with the death of an extended family member or friend. In this case the grief experienced may go unacknowledged as attention is focused primarily on immediate family members. For example, there certainly is little provision for absence from work in such situations. Therefore, although a person may be grieving, she or he may fail to give adequate consideration to her or his own needs and may not take time to facilitate the process of healing. What is more, the effort to provide support for those who seemingly are most closely affected also may be difficult as this person attempts both to be of assistance and to avoid intruding. Indeed, the fact that one is not part of the inner circle may make it hard to know what would be considered helpful. And despite one's sadness, there also may be relief or gratitude that it was not one's own family member, or even oneself, who has been struck down.

At the same time, the kinds of reactions just described often are followed by a sense of guilt for having had the feelings. Or, conversely, one may wonder why the particular person was the one to die rather than oneself or one's own family member. And certainly issues regarding one's own mortality may rise to the surface through the contemplation of death from a somewhat removed perspective.

Clearly, with the death of an extended family member or friend, as with the deaths of people in each of the various roles and life stages previously mentioned, an extremely important variable is the intensity or closeness of relationships. We cannot assume more or less grief based on the degree of kinship. For example, one may have had a much deeper and more meaningful relationship with a devoted uncle than one had with a parent. Similarly, in this era of extreme mobility and loosening of family ties, the loss of a friend may have much greater significance than does the death of someone to whom we are related by blood.

As we also have touched on briefly, the manner in which both the dying and the death have occurred plays an important part in the bereavement process. Death following an extended illness, sudden or accidental death, violent or wrongful death, death by suicide, and ambiguous death and loss lend different meanings and have different impacts on the grief experience. The manner of death also may greatly influence how funerals and other ceremonies are handled. In the case of a suicide, for example, the family may wish to keep the funeral small and private. What is more, there may be limited awareness of the variety of options available

relative to the creation of funerals and other rituals, both formal and informal. Thus, one of the ways in which we may be of assistance is through the process of helping family members to understand the importance of honoring the person who has died in ways that are not only respectful of that person's wishes but also helpful and healing for those who survive.

### CREATING FUNERALS, CEREMONIES, AND OTHER HEALING RITUALS

Given a general reluctance to broach the subject of death and dying, particularly our own, it is not surprising that most people have not delved too deeply into the business of funeral arrangements much before it becomes an absolute necessity. And even when preplanning is engaged in, typically we tend to assume that the process will be consistent with the norms of our society. Thus, we may choose either burial or cremation, we might designate our preference for type of service or ritual, we may select the music if there is to be any. We might even decide to become an organ donor or to donate our body to science. We also may purchase a cemetery lot and design and/or order a tombstone. But rarely do we stop to consider significant deviations from the norm. When death arrives, a fairly standard script typically is followed.

Accordingly, we as survivors tend to have little or nothing to do with the final preparation of the body and very little actual contact with the person once she or he has died. When next we see the deceased, often in the context of a viewing, visitation, or wake, she or he has been embalmed, dressed, and made up with cosmetics in an attempt to have him or her look as life-like as possible. Although we may have interacted with morticians and clergypersons in order to handle formal details, there is no sense of having experienced in a more informal, personal manner the transition of the loved one following death. And this lack of closure may add to our grief and confusion.

Next, we most likely find ourselves attending a funeral service—in a religious context, at the funeral home, or by the grave site. Although we may have indicated preferences and had a hand in the planning, once again the ritual usually is presided over by an “outsider”—the official representative of our particular religious or spiritual community. However, active participation on the part of the bereaved most often is constrained by tradition. What is more, the entire funeral process generally is completed in 1 to 3 days.

Although many certainly will continue to prefer to adhere to the common tradition, and in fact might be horrified by the thought of any deviation from it, others may find the opportunity to engage in a hands-on manner in the after-death preparations of the body as well as in the funeral and burial a balm for the wound of grief and an important catalyst for the healing process. Involvement in preparation of the body can range from being included in what is taking place at the mortuary to handling and preparing the body entirely on one's own. In terms of the funeral service, family members may choose to take on some of the primary roles in the prescribed ritual, or they may take total responsibility for the creation of a ceremony.

It is important for those who desire greater participation to be aware of actual legal limitations and regulations for the area in which the death has occurred or the funeral is to take place. Inasmuch as we as a society have turned over most of the responsibility for those who have died to the profession of funeral directors, we as individuals may be surprised to learn how much leeway actually exists. And whereas the violation of tradition may at first seem overwhelming, it is important to be sensitive to the degree to which the bereavement process may be facilitated as survivors are able to do something meaningful—to express their caring, feel a sense of control, and engage in a personally fulfilling farewell ceremony for the one who has died.

Regardless of the type of funeral or ceremony, however, part of the distress experienced by the bereaved in the days, weeks, and months that follow arises from the interruption of the repetitive patterns of interaction which have provided a sense of security in one's life and world. From the most mundane rituals, such as preparing meals or sharing conversations, to the family traditions surrounding major holidays and celebrations, one is faced with a lack of consistency and predictability. Inevitably, attention must be given to finding new routines, new ways to manage daily as well as seasonal or major milestone-marking events.

The task may seem difficult or even overwhelming at first, but revising old traditions may become an important part of the healing journey. Creating ways to acknowledge the one who has died may facilitate more open communication among family members. Rituals also may help with the task of managing a new event occasioned by the loss, that of the anniversary of the death. Indeed, even many years later, when one is not particularly conscious of the date, it can have an impact on how one feels or behaves. It therefore may be useful to plan to honor and acknowledge the day in a deliberate manner. Taking time off from work, making a trip to a



favorite place, visiting the cemetery, or preparing and eating the food that was most enjoyed by the loved one are but a few ideas that may prove beneficial in this regard. As I have emphasized, life in the presence of grief is new and different and honoring that difference through ritual may make its painful aspects more bearable as one attempts to recreate a meaningful existence.

## BEREAVEMENT AND THE SEARCH FOR MEANING

After the funeral or other ceremony, and particularly if there has not been a significant sense of completion, the survivors may find themselves plunged much more intensely into the experience of grief. In the immediate aftermath of the death they may have been caught up in the details of making various arrangements. They may have been flooded with phone calls, cards, visits, and the presence of relatives and close friends. Most likely, they have not had to deal with day-to-day cares and concerns (e.g., meal preparations or laundry). Although there may have been great pain, there often has been little time or energy for deep thought or soul-searching reflection.

Once the last guest goes home, however, the bereaved person is faced with the awareness that while life around him or her continues to go on in normal ways, normal no longer has much meaning. It is perhaps jarring to see people laughing and having a good time, seemingly without a care in the world. It feels ridiculous to be worried about paying bills or fixing a leaky faucet. If staying home from work is not an option, doing the job may become a process of going through the motions with little care about what is being done. The bereaved person may go to a store to purchase something but once inside wonder why she or he came. Feelings of numbness alternating with the constant need to cry may characterize this initial phase of mourning.

For many the ability to cope effectively and move beyond this phase may hinge on the degree to which they are able to make sense out of or find meaning in what has transpired; that is, we humans are a theory-building, meaning-making species. We need stories or explanations to help us understand the events in our world. Most often, we search for the answer to the question, "Why?" We tend to believe that problems can be solved through exploration into and insight about their cause. However, although knowledge of the cause of death may be available to us, the reason for the person's death often is not. And even when we can see that it

makes sense, for example, that the heart of an elderly person simply has given out, that it was his or her time to die, we may be surprised to find ourselves unable to be consoled by ideas or concepts in which we thought we believed.

Further, if the death is an example of a bad thing happening to a good person (Kushner, 1981), we may find the search for meaning even more challenging. That is, we may have a much harder time coming up with explanations that provide solace in the midst of great grief for a “death out of time,” for accidental or violent death, for suicide. And despite the best intentions on the part of well-meaning family members or friends, phrases such as “God doesn’t give us any burden we can’t bear,” or “only the good die young” may not soothe the bereaved spirit. Indeed, this may be so even though the recipient of the message previously may have believed in or spoken such phrases to others. Further, concepts which are foreign or strange may add to the confusion rather than provide assistance. For example, the ideas that one day the person might “thank God for what has happened,” or that “each of us chooses the time and manner of our death,” although meaningful in the context of some belief systems, are merely noise in the context of others.

Finding or making meaning is a personal process, one that can be supported and facilitated but ultimately must be accomplished in the way that is most appropriate for each person. Those who seek to help may be most effective when they are able to provide time, space, and encouragement for exploration. Offering to be a sounding board or to share one’s own journey also may be useful as long as there is no insistence on one right way or path to follow. Although it may seem like a daunting challenge, at least initially, the goal ultimately is to facilitate for the bereaved the creation of a reality that includes not only sadness but also joy.

## RECLAIMING JOY

Just as a death inevitably marks the end of one of life’s chapters, it also signifies the beginning of a new one. This new chapter may be unwelcome and strange but it also has the capacity to open doors to greater awareness, enhanced sensitivity, and increased compassion. It may even lead us to greater wisdom:

Wisdom is often born in the shadows, frequently more visible in the darkness than the light. The stadium lights of knowledge that seek to eliminate

natural cycles of night and day, death and rebirth, sorrow and joy do not cast shadows—they provide only the steady glare of illumination. We must move into darker places if we are to find the wisdom we so desperately need. We rarely go there willingly, though every life contains its own cycles of grief and celebration. To meet wisdom in these dark places we must be willing and able to hold all of what life gives us, to exclude nothing of ourselves or the world, to tell ourselves the truth. Wisdom will stretch us far beyond where we thought we could or wanted to go. She will show us what we cannot change or control, reveal what is hard to know about ourselves and the world, and tear at the illusions of what we think we know, until we are surrounded by the vastness of the mystery. (Dreamer, 1999, p. 41)

Although those of us who choose to be with and support bereaved family members or clients may not be able to share this perception at the outset, we can keep it in mind and allow it to permeate and color our responses. We, too, can learn to live in two realities: As we encourage in others the ability to understand that the reality of grief does not preclude the possibility of also being happy, we can acknowledge explicitly the pain that others may be feeling while simultaneously having knowledge about the potential to reclaim joy that is also part of the experience. Ideally the creation of such a stance will be facilitated by exploring more deeply in the following chapters each of the topics touched on briefly in this introductory overview.

#### THERAPEUTIC CONVERSATIONS AND REFLECTIONS



Many years ago my assistance was requested by a family in which the youngest of seven adult children, a young woman in her mid-20s, had been diagnosed with a terminal illness and was nearing death. We spent our first evening together gathered in the living room of the family home. Both parents as well as all their offspring were present. And all those who were married also had brought their spouses, so we were somewhat crowded, which I am sure was not at all unusual for such a large family.

After the introductions had been made, I asked someone to talk about why I had been invited and what the family wanted to ac-  
(cont.)

comply. The oldest son answered, saying that he was expressing the hope, shared by all his siblings and their spouses, that the family members would be able to talk about what was happening, let their sister know how much she was loved and supported, and provide a forum to speak about death and dying now and in the future.

The young woman who was dying then spoke quite eloquently about how thankful she was to have such a loving, caring support system. She expressed her gratitude for the willingness of her family members to come together as they were and for all the help and support she already had been receiving. And she also spoke about her deeply religious convictions and about the fact that she felt at peace with the reality that she was dying. She was not angry at God or fate, nor was she looking for a miracle. She was ready to leave when the time came.

Many of the young woman's siblings expressed both frustration with and, at the same time, understanding for their sister. They wished she would fight harder, try more experimental drugs. But they also knew she was tired and they respected her refusal of further treatment. Indeed, what eventually emerged was the fact that the underlying motive that had precipitated the meeting really had much more to do with what they feared would happen after she died than it did with their acceptance of her death.

As recounted by one of the younger siblings, they had also had another sister. She had been the second oldest child and had died many years previously—killed in an automobile accident during her senior year in high school. The feelings shared by the siblings were that their parents had never recovered fully from this event and that the family had never been the same since that time.

Although the children acknowledged that their parents had done all the necessary things for them, they felt that something basic had been lost. Their perception was that their parents had left them emotionally. What is more, they had not been permitted to speak about the changes, to talk about their sister, or even to discuss death and dying in a general way. Most felt a great deal of anger about what had happened and they wanted to prevent further damage from occurring when their youngest sister died. It was clear that they valued the family relationships and they also wanted to use the present tragedy to facilitate the healing of some of the old wounds.

The willingness of everyone to participate spoke to me immedi-

ately about the strengths and capacity for rebuilding relationships within this family. What is more, rather than becoming defensive, the parents were able to acknowledge and finally speak about the devastation they had experienced when their older daughter died. They seemed to welcome the opportunity to be able to express verbally their sadness relative to both their daughters. And they apologized to all their children for their previous inability to meet all of their needs, particularly at an emotional level. They knew that they had been both distant and fearful and yet could not seem to change.

The children, in turn, appreciated their parents' response and recognized that they had done the best they could. Rather than spending a lot of time with blame and anger, they were more interested now in avoiding the repetition of past mistakes and in doing a better job of dealing with the death of their younger sister. And that is the direction in which therapy ultimately proceeded with very beneficial outcomes.

What struck me then, as it does now, is the potential for either greater devastation or great healing that may occur when a loved one dies. With every crisis comes both challenge and opportunity, and when the crisis is precipitated by a death, the capacity for destruction as well as creation is increased geometrically. If there is meaningful support, if there is permission to speak, if there is a context of sensitivity and understanding, everyone stands to gain in spite of the loss. When these elements are missing, the damage done may be severe.

However, as the family in this instance illustrates, even after many years much healing remains possible. Although the past certainly was not able to be erased, a restorying which allowed each person to give voice to her or his respective feelings, both then and now, changed significantly the meaning associated with previous events. It also enabled a sense of greater solidarity as parents and siblings together participated with and supported their daughter/sister throughout her dying in the present and began the process of learning to live without her in the future.