

# Toxic Theology as a Contributing Factor in Complicated Mourning

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## Abstract

As an educator and spiritual caregiver to the bereaved, I offer supportive companionship and spiritual healing tools for the grief journey. In this capacity, I have encountered certain theological mindsets that can disrupt psychological well-being, and in some cases lead to complicated mourning, depression and even illness. This paper explores these “toxic theologies” and their relationship to complicated mourning, while offering alternative perspectives and cosmologies that may be helpful in supporting grievers who face spiritual challenges.

## Keywords

Toxic theology, bereavement, complicated mourning, grief

## Introduction

In reviewing the literature on the relationship between religious belief and bereavement, we find a substantial amount of material on toxic theology and also on complicated mourning, but very little that links the two together. Leading researchers in the study of complicated grief, most notably Rando (1993, p. 611) and Burke & Neimeyer (2013, p. 149) identify a list of complicating factors that include traumatic death, mental illness, death of a child, socially unacceptable death, and lack of social support, but specific religious beliefs are not mentioned as a risk factor. Burke & Neimeyer (2013, p. 154) acknowledge that the few studies that do exist on this topic yield inconsistent results.

In the growing body of research on the impact of religious belief *in general* when coping with loss, the consensus is that religious coping can be both helpful and harmful. The vagaries of this conclusion, as Brewster (2014, p. 3) points out, are due to the fact that it is so difficult to define religious belief. In their research *How Religious and Spiritual Beliefs Explain Prolonged Grief Disorder Symptoms*, Christian, Aoun and Breen (2018, p. 6) recognized that they did not provide definitions of religious vs. spiritual beliefs, and therefore could not know how these constructions were interpreted by their interview subjects. Ten years earlier, Wortmann and Park (2008) observed, “Although in the past, religion was assessed very simplistically (e.g., as attendance at religious services), it has become increasingly

clear to researchers that simple global conceptualizations of religion do not adequately capture the complex nature of religion in people’s lives” (p. 705).

This paper examines the relationship between a bereaved person’s religious beliefs (or the beliefs of others in the griever’s sphere of influence), and the impact of those beliefs on the grief healing trajectory. The primary focus of this investigation is on how toxic theology may contribute to the maladaptive response to loss known by several terms, including *complicated grief*, *complicated mourning* or *prolonged grief disorder*. I approach this topic from my perspective as an interfaith chaplain and educator unaffiliated with a specific religious tradition.

## Defining Complicated Grief

Clinical psychologist and thanatologist Therese Rando defines complicated mourning as “A generic term indicating that, given the amount of time since the death, there is some compromise, distortion or failure of one or more of the processes of mourning” (1993, p. 12). Similarly, Harvard psychology professor William Worden (2001) defines complicated grief as “the intensification of grief to the level where the person is overwhelmed, resorts to

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maladaptive behavior, or remains interminably in the state of grief without progression of the mourning process to completion” (p. 89).

Worden (2001, p. 27) identifies four specific tasks in the process of “normal” grieving:

1. Accepting the reality of the loss
2. Work through the pain of grief
3. Adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing
4. Emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life

When these tasks cannot be navigated successfully, grief can become complicated, expressed in the following responses (Worden 2001, p. 101):

- Prolonged grief – The client is aware that grief is not resolving after many months or years since the loss event.
- Delayed grief – The client’s emotions are thwarted, even though they might have had an emotional response at the time of the loss.
- Exaggerated grief – Characterized by excessive anxiety, depression or anger that may impair the person’s normal functioning.
- Somatic or behavioral symptoms - The client is experiencing physical symptoms or behavioral problems without being aware that unresolved grief may be at the core of the issue.

Rando (1993, pp. 393–448) identifies six critical tasks in the mourning process that she refers to as the “Six Rs of Mourning” to illustrate a normal trajectory of healing. In Table 1, I have listed these six tasks and added examples of how certain religious beliefs can complicate each of the tasks:

Rando (1993, pp. 453-501) also identifies the following high-risk factors for complicated grief (Table 2). It is interesting to note that she does not include religious belief as a risk factor:

### *Examples of Complicated Grief*

There are countless case examples that illustrate complicated grief, but in view of the space limitations here, I will cite one that is particularly significant. I recently gave a presentation at a meeting of a national support group for bereaved parents. After my talk, one of the group members – a man I will call Richard – told me this story:

My son was murdered six years ago. I think it’s important for people to know that such things happen, and that life is unfair, so wherever I go, I tell people about my son. When a clerk at the grocery store or the bank says, “Have a nice

day,” I tell them I never have a nice day because my son was murdered. When they reply with, “I’m so sorry,” I say, “Thank you, but you’ll never understand until it happens to your own child.” That’s how I cope with my grief. I’m angry, and I intend to stay that way (conversation with “Richard”, 20 December 2017).

It was hard to decide what was most disturbing about his comments: his determination to remain angry, or his need to project his pain onto strangers by inviting them to envision their children being killed. I acknowledged that his anger was understandable, but the decision to *remain* angry to that degree was a choice he was making, and there are other options that could be explored. His answer was, “I’m not interested in other options. This is how I *want* to feel. Anger *is* my choice.”

### *Normal vs. Complicated Mourning*

Horowitz et al. (2003, p. 904) defined normal grieving as the ability to tolerate distressing moods and turbulent thoughts with an eventual return to equilibrium. I would add that turning grief into a positive force for personal or community healing is also a characteristic of healthy grieving, as evidenced by the social activism of the teenagers who survived the 2018 school shooting in Parkland, Florida. By contrast, complicated grief contains extremes that can impair functioning to the point where equilibrium and post-traumatic growth seem out of reach, and the grief response becomes psychopathological. These two ends of the spectrum speak to an individual’s capacity to be resilient.

The American Psychological Association (2018) defines resilience as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats or significant sources of stress.” These responses are not considered unusual or extraordinary, and should not necessarily be interpreted as a denial or suppression of pain. It is also important to recognize that these responses can be influenced by the griever’s cultural norms or religious beliefs. For example, Bonanno (2010, p. 98) observes that a griever’s guilt feelings can be exacerbated by a belief in divine punishment, which contributes to complicated grief and increased pain. Bonanno also notes that resilience is not well supported in the modern Western way of grieving (2010, p. 101), and that when bereaved people show “only minor and transient disruptions in their ability to function,” psychologists sometimes find it to be an unusual or even pathological response (2004, p. 20).

### *When Theology Enters the Picture*

In October 2015 a television news crew covered the story of a 10-year-old boy named Kyler Bradley who was diagnosed with inoperable brain cancer. The crew filmed Kyler

**Table 1.** The Six Rs of mourning and religious issues that can complicate the processes.

| Rando's Six Rs of Mourning  | Religious Beliefs That Can Complicate these Tasks <sup>a</sup>  |
|---|---|
| 1. Recognize the loss: When the mourner is unwilling or unable to accept that the loss has occurred, this important primary task can be thwarted  | An African mother brought her dead baby to the village church and asked the priest to revive the child. She said, "Jesus could raise the dead, and as his representative, so can you."  |
| 2. React to the separation: Mourners who are unwilling or unable to fully experience the pain of the loss will have difficulty with this task.  | The parents of a murdered child will not allow themselves to acknowledge their anger because they believe that anger is a sin.  |
| 3. Recollect and re-experience the deceased and the relationship: If the circumstances of the death or the deceased's lifestyle is viewed as sinful, or if the person had been shunned by the family, this task may often be avoided.   | Mourners of a death related to perceived "sinful" actions (suicide, drugs, AIDS) may lack family and community support for talking about the deceased with fondness, or talking about the deceased at all (Rando, 1993, p. 648)   |
| 4. Relinquish old attachments to the deceased and to the old world: The nature of God may come into question in the face of a traumatic loss, and the "old world" might include relinquishing a previously-held God image. This transition may or may not be met with family and community support. | Lora wondered if her adult son, who'd died from AIDS, would go to hell for being gay. Recognizing that this doctrine may not be viable, she questioned the idea of eternal damnation in her weekly bible study group, where she found no support for challenging the group's interpretation of scripture. |
| 5. Readjust to the new world without forgetting the old: In the past, God may have been seen as protector/punisher, but the new world may introduce new beliefs. One may resist these changes, or experience pressure from church and community to remain in the old world.                         | When Rae's child became ill and died, despite the fervent prayers of her family, church congregation and home school group, her belief in the power of God to answer prayers was shattered, and she began to explore other theologies, which was met with disapproval from her community.                 |
| 6. Reinvest energy: Shifting focus away from the past and/or the lost loved one may feel as if one is no longer being loyal to the person or to the old world. In a religious framework, a shift in spiritual attitudes may suggest worshipping false gods or violating religious creeds.           | Steve's daughter and son were killed together in a car crash. Steve said, "I only asked God for one thing in my life... to keep my children safe." He is now angry at God for not honoring this request. Instead of allowing a new image of God to emerge, he focuses his energy on anger at the old god. |

<sup>a</sup>Selected examples from my clinical chaplaincy work

**Table 2.** Rando's high-risk factors for complicated grief with examples of potentially complicating religious issues.

| Rando's High-Risk Factors   | Selected Examples   |
|---|---|
| Sudden or unexpected death (especially when traumatic, violent or mutilating).  | Murder, suicide, natural disaster, war.   |
| Death from a lengthy illness.   | A caregiver may feel guilty for experiencing a sense of relief after the death occurs.  |
| The mourner's perception of the death as preventable.   | School shootings, drug overdose, suicide, or belief that the caregiver for a seriously ill person could have done more to prevent the death.      |
| A pre-morbid relationship with the deceased that was markedly angry, ambivalent or dependent.   | Death of an abusive spouse or a loved one from whom the mourner was estranged.  |
| Prior or current mourner liabilities, including (a) unaccommodated losses and/or stresses and (b) mental health problems of the bereaved. | Unresolved grief from prior losses, loss of self/identity, unfinished business with the deceased, diminished capacity for understanding the loss. |
| Loss of a child.  | All of the above.   |
| The mourner's lack of social support when the deceased's lifestyle choices are perceived as socially unacceptable.                        | Grieving an abortion, death by drug overdose or suicide, or the death of someone killed while perpetrating a criminal act.                        |

in his classroom surrounded by his friends, who were instructed by the teacher to "pray for a miracle."

The exact words of the reporter in the news segment were: "Kyler believes in miracles. So do his classmates.

Their teacher planted that idea when she told 30 10-year-olds about Kyler's cancer" (Dixon, 2016)

The reporter then went on to interview the children, one of whom said, "If everybody prays for him, God will listen."

Kyler died six months later, and when I shared this story with the educators and counselors in my professional network, there was an impassioned discussion about the teacher's inappropriate choice to use prayer as a coping strategy for her students. We wondered how the parents of those children dealt with the inevitable question, "Why didn't God listen?"

Events like this lay the groundwork for conflict between religious belief and reality. Not only did those children have to grieve the loss of their friend, they were also forced (by the teacher's insistence on prayer) to grapple with complex theological questions and a crisis of faith.

Schipani (2017) points out that many of the toxic religious beliefs we recognize today are rooted in the Abrahamic faith traditions, and identifies some of their key features:

- They include forms of emotional, spiritual, moral and sometimes physical or sexual violence and power abuse.
- They compromise emotional/mental health and are connected to mental/emotional dysfunction.
- They exist on a spectrum of intensity ranging from unhealthy to harmful to lethal.

Although the children in Kyler's classroom were not being emotionally abused, and their experience with unanswered prayer would not necessarily lead to mental dysfunction, the teacher's approach could certainly characterize the "unhealthy" end of Schipani's spectrum. They were encouraged to see God as an all-powerful wish-granter who could be influenced by their prayers. How they coped with the shattering of their belief in such a god would depend on how their questions were answered by their families. If, for example, one of the children was told that Kyler's illness was a punishment for sin, or that Kyler didn't go to heaven because he wasn't baptized, the seeds of toxic theology would be firmly planted in the fertile soil of a childhood grief experience. As evangelical Christian scholars Maxwell and Perrine described in their analysis of *The Problem of God in the Presence of Grief*, "The danger of addressing grief with theology is that it can inevitably reduce a complex and often bewildering phenomenon to a constraining ideology that may even result in the imposition of harm rather than relief. The helpfulness of God for grief is therefore not uniformly felt." (2016, p. 179).

### *Positive and Negative Religious Coping*

Much of contemporary research on religious coping for dealing with loss and trauma is anchored in the work of Pargament, Koenig, and Perez (2000) in developing the RCOPE scale as a measuring tool to assess a wide range of religious coping mechanisms used by people facing extreme stress, difficulty or loss (p. 519). The scale

addresses both helpful and harmful religious coping mechanisms that range from *positive* (finding meaning in the traumatic event or working with God as a collaborative partner), to *negative* (seeing the event as a punishment from God or defining the stressor as an act of Satan). These designations can provide deeper insight into religious coping behaviors beyond those of "traditional, generic measures of religiousness" that are usually limited to frequency of prayer or attendance at religious services (Pargament, Smith, Koenig, and Perez, 1998, p.711).

Pargament's work with the RCOPE scale showed that belief in divine punishment or demonic intervention as the cause of tragedy is a form of "negative religious coping" that can be associated with decreased mental health outcomes. While many of the research subjects used these negative mechanisms, the majority found comfort and hope (rather than punishment and shame) in their relationship to God when facing trauma or loss (Pargament et al., 1998, p. 720). For the most part, Pargament observed that people's religious outlooks showed "a secure relationship with God, a sense of spirituality, and a trustworthy worldview." But he also noted that although negative coping strategies were used less often, they expressed a "different religious orientation; one involving a tenuous relationship with God, spiritual struggle, and a threatening view of the world" (1998, p.721).

While comfort and hope may be the more common response, in my experience supporting the bereaved, I have encountered countless cases where specific religious beliefs have exacerbated stress and anxiety, keeping the griever in a state of chronic sadness, guilt and worry. Pargament's team came to a similar conclusion:

Generally, the positive religious coping pattern was tied to benevolent outcomes, including fewer symptoms of psychological distress, reports of psychological and spiritual growth as a result of the stressor, and interviewer ratings of greater cooperativeness. In contrast, the negative religious coping pattern was associated with signs of emotional distress, such as depression, poorer quality of life, psychological symptoms, and callousness towards others. Religion, these findings suggest, can be a source of distress as well as a source of solutions in coping (1998, p.721).

It is important to note that in addition to the individual's embedded theology, poor pastoring and careless spiritual guidance could also contribute to these negative religious coping responses.

### *Identifying Toxic Theology*

William Morrow, in *Toxic Religion and the Daughters of Job* (1998, p. 266), defines toxic religion as any system in which legitimate human experiences and responses are shamed

by religious institutions and systems. Psychological disruption can emerge when a person's perception of the beliefs and behaviors required by their religion are in conflict with the person's actual lived experience.

Morrow goes on to say, "To feel shame is to be seen in a diminished sense," and notes that the monotheistic faith in ancient Israel contains "shaming potential" (1998, p. 264). In a shaming relationship, one party has power over another, and when that power is over-used or abused, as in the case of over-controlling religious systems, it can cause psychological injury (1998, p. 266). He identifies "perfectionist-retributionist doctrines" – in which natural human experience does not match up with the moral requirements of demanding religious rules – as an expression of toxic religion (1998, p. 268). Similarly, traditional religious theories of justice and judgment can create cognitive dissonance when a death seems senseless or a tragedy unfair.

Benner (2012, para. 4) says that theology is toxic when it limits spiritual experience to merely accepting beliefs and doctrines, and Tarico and Winell (2014) find that the key characteristics of toxic theology include:

- An authoritarian power hierarchy that demands obedience.
- Policies of separatism.
- Restricted access to outside sources of information.
- A threat-based reality (hell, divine punishment, catastrophic end times).
- Psychological mind-control techniques that encourage isolation.

My own definition of a toxic theology system includes these features:

- Followers are held to a rigid, static system of beliefs.
- Questioning and exploration is discouraged.
- Outsiders are viewed with suspicion or disdain.
- Religious pluralism is unacceptable.
- Biblical texts are interpreted literally.
- God is seen as an authoritarian parental figure.
- A belief that God rewards piety and faithfulness.
- Behaviors/beliefs not in line with strict doctrines are punished by God.
- Natural disasters, epidemics and community tragedies are curses from God.

### *Toxic Theology on the Public Stage*

In November 2018 the state of California experienced the worst wildfire in its recorded history, which destroyed an entire town, burning 16,000 structures and killing 86 people (Moleski, 2018). In his article, *Is California Under a Curse?*, Gerald Flurry, pastor of the biblically-orthodox Philadelphia Church of God, had this to say about those fires:

God does punish us with natural disasters. "Thou shalt be visited of the Lord of hosts with thunder, and with earthquake, and great noise, with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire" (Isaiah 29:6). God says He visits, or punishes, us with the flame of devouring fire . . . The sooner we repent, the sooner the curses will end (Flurry, 2018).

Former child actor and outspoken evangelical Kirk Cameron, after Hurricanes Irma and Harvey in 2017, went on Facebook to proclaim that these events were sent by God so human beings could repent (Schmalz, 2017, para. 2). And in response to Hurricane Sandy in 2012, conservative Christian pastor John McTernan told his followers that God is destroying America in response to "the homosexual agenda" (Ford, 2012).

Returning to our focus on the impact of toxic theology on grief, one of the last places one might expect to find a theology of divine punishment would be in a grief support group. Yet the website for the Christian grief support group GriefShare offers this distressing explanation for the pain that grievers experience (GriefShare, n.d.):

#### **God's plan to end your suffering**

Not only does God want to ease your suffering, He actually relates to it. How can God understand a human problem like grief? He can relate because He grieved the unjust execution of His Son, Jesus.

As painful as it was, God allowed Jesus to die as part of His plan to end suffering and death. He wanted to bring comfort, hope, and healing to you. But to appreciate this plan, you have to understand the reason suffering and death exist.

#### **The reason we suffer**

All of us have disobeyed God. This is not a new problem. It stretches all the way back to Adam and Eve. The Bible calls this disobedience "sin" and describes its ultimate consequence:

"All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Romans 3:23)

"The wages of sin is death." (Romans 6:23a)

This creates a seemingly hopeless future for us:

- Because God is pure and holy, He cannot tolerate sin.
- He punishes sin. It is the only possible response consistent with His righteous character.
- The penalty for our sin is suffering in this life and physical death followed by eternal punishment.

After delivering this alarming message, the site offers "hope for healing" by assuring its site visitors (and thousands of group members worldwide) that "God's love and mercy are so deep that He wants to rescue each of us

from the consequences of our disobedience (sin)” (GriefShare, n.d.).

In Pattison’s (2000) study of individual and family shame, he observes that Christianity “has failed to recognize the way in which its own ideology and practices may have contributed to the products and exploitation of dysfunctional shame” (p. 187). He also states that doctrines of salvation and atonement, while capable of offering healing and hope, are equally capable of producing guilt and shame (2000, p. 190). For a grieving mother who just lost a teenage son to suicide, or a husband who feels he didn’t provide adequate care for his ailing wife before she died, messages like GriefShare’s can be soul-crushing.

### Rejecting Toxic Theologies

Noted secularist Dr Daniel Dennett (2007, p. 348) recommends that we put religion under the microscope and subject it to multidisciplinary research. Because religion affects almost every aspect our lives, and perhaps most importantly, our search for meaning, religious research is too important to ignore, and ignorance has no benefit (2007, Kindle location 362). Dennett recognizes however, that this sort of scrutiny will meet with tremendous resistance, because if religion is examined closely, the spell will be broken, and so would the hearts of countless people (2007, Kindle location 403).

If this scrutiny is to be multidisciplinary, then perhaps the best place to start is with the theologians themselves.

Theologian and scholar Father Matthew Fox spent 34 years in the Catholic Dominican order before being expelled for questioning the doctrine of original sin. Today he is a leading voice in a movement for making Christianity more progressive, more inclusive and more relevant to contemporary life. Now an Episcopal priest, Fox suggests that we replace the idea of original sin with a more life-affirming, less threatening concept called *original blessing*. He asks, “How is religion to be an agent of transformation if religion itself is not transformed?” (Fox, 2000, p. 19).

Fox describes our current understanding of Christianity as “a religious tradition that begins with sin and centers almost exclusively around redemption from sin.” He proposes that we redefine the word “sin” to refer to any action that “injures creation and disrupts harmoniousness” (2000, p. 119). He also offers an alternative to the idea of salvation: “instead of striving for an unattainable perfection and dividing the world into saved vs. unsaved, we can rise to the understanding that *all* experience is holy, and we can see God’s presence as much in suffering as we see it in joy. We accomplish this by learning to view ourselves as part of an original *blessing* rather than an original *sin* (2000, p. 90)”.

This blessing is the very self-awareness that Adam and Eve were forbidden to have.

Instead of grappling endlessly with doctrines and beliefs that are difficult to understand and even more difficult to

apply to daily living, why not simply reject those ideas entirely? Bishop Spong put it more bluntly when he declared, “The idea of Jesus dying for your sins has to go,” explaining that seeing Jesus as a rescuer is “a form of magical thinking that allows the church to use guilt as an imperative for conversion” (1999, p. 83), and moving theism aside would free us to explore spirituality in new ways (1999, p. 56). Matthew Fox (2000, p. 90) echoes Spong’s sentiments by stating that we must move from theism to pantheism so that we can find God in everything, and everything in God.

### Spirituality vs. Religion

As more and more people abandon traditional religious structures and opt to identify as “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR), notions of suffering, sin and redemption are changing. Mercadante’s (2014) study of people who identify as SBNR found that most of her interviewees did not see death as a “hostile force” or an enemy (p. 206), and that belief in an afterlife is more than just a choice between heaven and hell (p. 193). Drescher’s (2016) findings also show that the same population is not concerned with “future-oriented expectations traditionally associated with salvation or various other afterlife schemas” (p. 119), and in order to be a good person, it is not necessary to believe in a god that rewards and punishes (p. 189).

Current data from the Pew Research Center studies on America’s religious demographics reveal that traditional religious beliefs have given way to the growth of a population that identifies as religiously unaffiliated, a group that now makes up 23% of the adult population in the USA (Wormald, 2015, para. 5). As Putnam and Campbell’s (2010) study of religiosity in America noted, most of us now *choose* our religious preferences rather than *inheriting* them, and “roughly half of white Americans have departed from their parents’ religious stance, either through switching to a different religious tradition or through lapsing into religious indifference” (2010, p. 159).

Cox (2009) identified what may be the primary and pivotal point of departure for most people when he said, “People are drawn more to the experiential than to the doctrinal elements of religion” (p. 13). With experiential resonance, one senses a personal, numinous, mystical interaction with the spiritual realm, as opposed to simply parroting doctrines and narratives that have been promoted by church, community and culture.

The SBNR population does not set out to *challenge* traditional faith, but instead, invites the faithful to find deeper meaning through teachings and practices that have more relevant, more personal application in today’s world. But just like those who found Jesus’ message to be threatening to the status quo, not everybody sees the SBNR movement as a positive one. Rev. Lillian Daniel is one of today’s most prominent voices speaking out against

those who identify as spiritual but not religious. Her scornful analysis of the SBNR population goes so far as to suggest that the unaffiliated or un-churched are socially and politically apathetic, and rather than getting involved in humanitarian causes, they simply sit around “feeling lucky for their good fortune” rather than trying to help others (Daniel, 2013, p. 9). She refers to the SBNR view of the divine as a “cheap god of self-satisfaction and isolation” (p. 10), and her disdain for SBNRs reaches new heights when she sarcastically refers to the children of SBNR parents as “junior theologians” and “theological geniuses” for thinking that God is a rainbow (p. 6). She also objects to the idea of personal revelatory experience, and believes that humans “shouldn’t be allowed to come up with their own human-invented God” (p. 13).

But aren’t *all* gods human-invented? And shouldn’t the spiritual quest, as described in Unitarian Universalist Principle #4, be all about “a free and responsible search for truth and meaning” ?” (4th Principle).

For many Americans, a free and responsible search for truth and meaning led directly to the birth of the SBNR movement. Mercadante (2014) observed that SBNR thinking “relocates authority from external to internal” (p. 192). Among her study subjects, the term “spirituality” was commonly referred to as an interior life of faith, while “religion” contained a communal or organizational component (p. 5).

Relative to working with the bereaved and the professionals who serve them, Mercadante found that SBNRs generally bring less dogma-based fears to the experience of illness, trauma, death and grief (2014, p. 206), and for this reason, it is important to offer bereaved individuals and bereavement professionals a selection of spiritual tools from outside the boundaries of traditional religious structures.

## Restoring Spiritual Health

For many grieverers, a minister or priest may be a primary source for counseling and comfort, but oftentimes, members of the clergy lack specific training in grief counseling and are not familiar with current research in bereavement care. For example, Elizabeth Kubler-Ross’ (1969) “five stages of grief” are still referenced by many mental health care providers, even though the stage theory has long since been abandoned in favor of newer ideas focused on tasks rather than stages. Ministers and secular therapists who are not familiar with these contemporary trends may not be able to provide adequate support.

But even if a griever seeks solace exclusively from a religious source without regard to psychology or grief theory, many of our familiar religious practices fail to engage the soul at a deeper level. For example, rituals such as funeral services, holiday customs, conventional liturgies and routine prayers are often generic and

performed by rote, which some mourners may find lacking in meaning and personal relevance.

In Bonanno’s (2004) exploration of grief practices around the world, he concluded that the way we grieve in the West underestimates our capacity to heal ourselves after an extremely difficult or traumatic event (p. 101). Modern Western thinking, steeped in a value system that places independence and self-reliance above collective experience, tends to see grieving as a private, individual process rather than a communal one (Parkes et al., 2015, p. 43), so not only do we grieve alone, but by denying the reality of death (Parkes et al., 2015, p. 223), we have become estranged from ancient practices that were designed to help us have a more personal relationship with the natural cycles of change and impermanence. As Parkes points out, “We live in a world in which religion and the fundamental idea with which it deals – birth, death and the meaning of life – have been taken over by professionals, and quietly downgraded in personal significance” (2015, p. 144).

How did this happen?

Matthew Fox explains that we have lost our connection to the cosmos. Instead of invoking the energies of the sun and moon, the power of nature and the unseen forces of the universe that are part of the birth/death experience, traditional Christian rituals focus primarily on scriptural narratives and religious doctrine. This is because, as Fox states, “The fall/redemption tradition does not trust the cosmos, and does not celebrate it” (2000, p. 75). Scripture substantiates Fox’s point when it states in Deuteronomy 17: 2-5 that worshipping the sun, moon and stars is an abomination punishable by death.

In order to restore the sacred practices and the cosmic connection that has been lost, we can begin by exploring cultures and religions that may be unfamiliar to us, but can offer fresh inspiration and new spiritual direction. We can borrow from indigenous customs that have maintained a close relationship with the earth and the elements, and use those elements in our own rituals.

In the curriculum I teach for bereavement professionals, I incorporate a variety of processes drawn from world religions and cultures. Parts of the workshop involve sacred song, which includes a Hindu chant, a Hebrew chant, and grief laments from the Celtic Pagan tradition. We also create altars called “stations of the heart” (based on the tradition of stations of the cross), and we perform a Peruvian shamanic prayer ceremony called a *Kintu*. These deeply-felt processes invite us into a meditative state where we find our spiritual center and infuse the ceremonial actions with personal meaning. Activities such as these can help release rigid adherence to traditions and doctrines that have proven unhelpful, and replace them with a more practical, more personal means for allowing loss and trauma to lead to strength and wisdom rather than hopelessness and despair. The

workshop processes also incorporate a variety of tools to address the following:

- How to identify religious beliefs that may be complicating the grief process.
- Introduction to unique therapeutic tools not ordinarily found in traditional counseling or grief group settings, including working with sacred symbolism, creative ritual, family dynamic mapping, community grieving, guided meditation and art and movement therapy.
- Processes for shifting the griever's focus toward inner transformation and away from external events.
- Multi-cultural, inter-religious content and alternatives to doctrinal limitations that can contribute to complicated mourning.
- Personal rituals to replace traditional rituals that may have become meaningless.
- Exploration of new spiritual resources beyond those of an inherited religion.
- Techniques for healing in community rather than in isolation.
- New forms of prayer that do not include disempowering imagery.
- Adding new language and imagery to old practices such as prayer and ceremony.

## Conclusion: God Needs a New Image

Some people see God as a man-in-the-sky who disburses joy or sorrow, reward or punishment, either randomly or according to what we earn through our behavior. If it is the former –if our experiences are random and cannot be controlled – then prayer and religiosity are pointless. If it is the latter, and God is a doting parent whose blessings can be earned, then God is essentially running a protection racket. Because even if blessings *could* be earned, the rewards are inconsistent and the conditions we must meet to earn them are unclear, which is a very bad form of parenting. When our good behavior isn't rewarded, we feel abandoned, betrayed, terrified and completely alone. With this expectation, despite our efforts to earn the love of this fickle parent, there is no assurance of safety or protection.

Seeing God as a protective/authoritative parent is an infantile view that separates and disempowers us. If we think God's love is supposed to provide us with a conflict-free existence, we will always be disappointed. Because when that expectation is not met (and it can never be met), we end up focused more on our feelings of anger and abandonment than on the valuable lessons these experiences can teach us.

Images of God are meant to change as humanity evolves, and changing our image of God could be as simple as

changing the language we use. A Christian's definition of *salvation* might be similar to a Buddhist's definition of *transcendence*. The need for salvation implies that something's wrong; that we are broken and not what we *should* be, so we need to be rescued by an outside entity. Transcendence suggests that we can view our condition from a higher perspective and heal *ourselves*.

Consider that perhaps there is nothing wrong. Perhaps we are exactly what we should be . . . an evolving species experiencing all the drama, beauty and intensity of incarnation, which includes both love *and* loss. A spiritual crisis gives us the opportunity to form a new image of God, so why not choose an image based on oneness instead of twoness; an image we can experience as unity rather than separateness? That version of God does not live in a galaxy far, far away. It is not a *being*, and it is not a father, mother, protector or judge. It does not favor one group of people, one nation, or one set of beliefs over another. It is not angry, jealous or violent, nor is it loving, benevolent or forgiving. It is *neutral*. Or in the words of the brilliant Rabbi David Cooper (2006), "God is a verb."

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