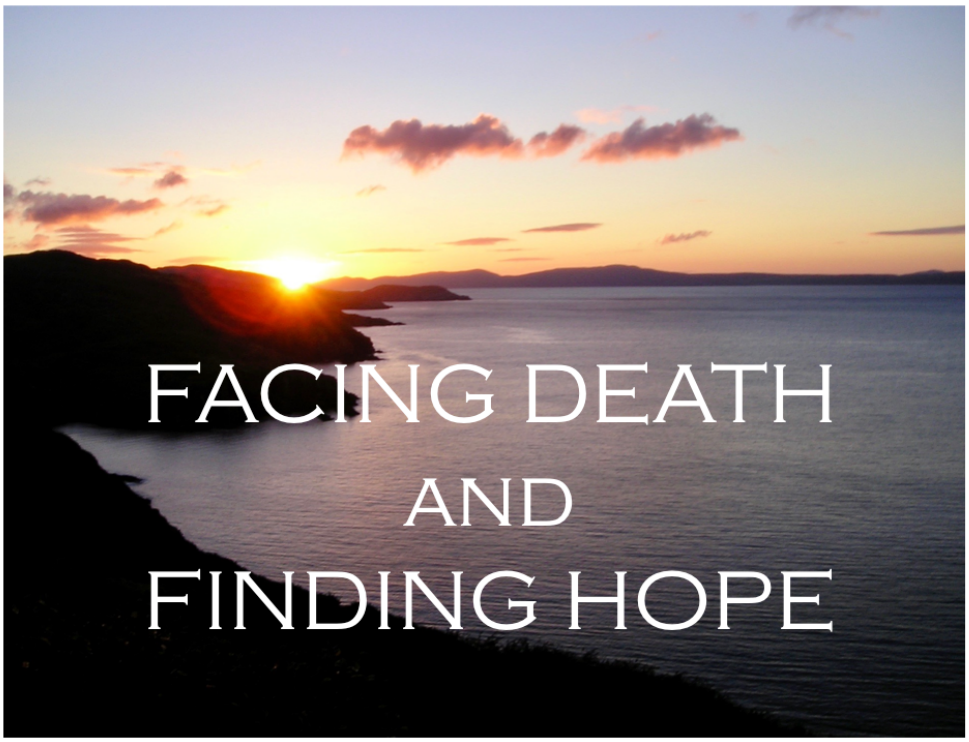
CHRISTINE LONGAKER



FACING DEATH AND FINDING HOPE

A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying

"Longaker's views span all religious traditions. This is a fine, gentle, and deeply compassionate work. Highly recommended."
–Dr. Larry Dossey, author of *Prayer is Good Medicine*

Chapter 3
The Needs of the Dying

Excerpt from *Facing Death and Finding Hope: A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying*, by Christine Longaker

AFTER YEARS OF LISTENING TO MANY PEOPLE WHO are dying, hearing them try to articulate what they need during this most difficult passage of their lives, I will try to speak for them to you, their loved ones and caregivers. I will speak with one voice representing all their many voices, communicating the emotional, practical and spiritual needs of a human being facing imminent death.

I need to talk about my thoughts and fears. I am going through so many changes; I feel so uncertain about my future. Sometimes all I can see in front of me are those future things I am afraid of. And each day, my fear ignites a different emotion. Some days I can't take it in and I need to believe it isn't happening. So there might be days or even weeks that I will feel sad, or act irritated. If you can listen and accept me, without trying to change or fix my mood, I will eventually get over it and be able to relax, and perhaps even laugh with you again.

Until now, you may have always expected me to be emotionally strong and in control. Now I'm afraid that if I honestly reveal myself, you will think less of me. Because of the extreme stresses I am going through, it might happen that the very worst sides of my personality, the real dregs, will get stirred up. If that happens I need permission to be "lost in the woods" for a while. Don't worry, I will come back.

Do you know that I'm afraid to express my true thoughts and feelings? What if everyone I care about runs away and leaves me all alone? After all, you might not believe how hard this really is. That's why I need you to reassure me that you understand my suffering, and that you are willing to stay with me through the process of my dying. I need to know that you will listen to me, respect me, and accept me, no matter what sort of mood I am in on any particular day.

Here's the most important thing: I want you to see me as a whole person*, not as a disease, or a tragedy, or a fragile piece of glass. Do not look at me with pity but rather with*

all of your love and compassion. Even though I am facing death, I am still living. I want people to treat me normally and to include me in their lives. Don't think that you cannot be completely open with me. It is okay to tell me if I am making your life harder, or that you are feeling afraid or sad.

More than anything, I need you to be honest now. There is no more time for us to play games, or to hide from each other. I would love to know I am not the only one feeling vulnerable and afraid. When you come in acting cheerful and strong, I sometimes feel I must hide my real self from you. When we only talk of superficial things, I feel even lonelier. Please, come in and allow me to be myself, and try to tune in to what is going on for me that day. How healing it would be for me to have someone to share my tears with! Don't forget: we're going to have to say good-bye to each other one day soon.

And if we have a rocky history between us, don't you think it would be easier if we could start by acknowledging it? This doesn't mean I want you to rekindle the same old disagreements. I would like it if we could simply acknowledge our past difficulties, forgive each other, and let go. If we don't communicate like this, and instead stay in hiding from each other, then whenever you visit we will feel the strain of that which remains unspoken. Believe me, I already feel much more aware of my past mistakes, and I feel bad about the ways I might have hurt you. Please allow me to acknowledge them and say I am sorry. Then we can see each other afresh, and enjoy the time we have left together.

Now more than ever I need you to be reliable. When we make plans and you are late, or do not come at all, you don't realize how much you've really let me down. Thinking that I will have one visitor on a given day can make all the difference in how much I am able to bear my pain or emotional distress. Each moment spent with a friend who really loves and accepts me is like a warm light shining in a very difficult, lonely, and frightening existence.

When you come into the room, can you meet my gaze? I wish you would take the time to really look into my eyes and see what I am truly feeling. I long for friends to embrace me, or at least touch my shoulder, hold my hand, or gently stroke my face. Please don't hold back your affection and your love. In the hospital, I sometimes feel more like an object or a disease rather than a human being. Please, bring in your humanity and kindness to ease my suffering. Because no matter how I might seem on the outside—gruff, withdrawn, cheerful, bitter, or mentally impaired—inside, I am suffering and I am very lonely and afraid.

Even though this is a difficult time in my own life, often my main worry is about how my condition is affecting my loved ones. They seem so lost, so burdened, so alone with all of the changes they are experiencing, and all the responsibilities they shoulder. And what about their *future? How are they going to cope after I am gone? I'm afraid I am leaving them*

stranded and alone. Some days, when everyone comes in with different emotions and needs, I am too weak to handle it all. I can't possibly listen to everyone and all of their burdens. I would be so relieved if someone could help my closest family members contact a counselor, or an organization like hospice, who could support them, listen to their needs and their sadness, and maybe even help out in practical ways.

Saying good-bye is so very hard for both of us. But if we don't, and if you are resisting my death when I have begun the process of dying, it will be even harder for me to let go. I would like to live longer, yet I cannot struggle anymore. Please do not hold this against me, or urge me to fight when all my strength is gone. I need your blessing now, your acceptance of me and of what is happening to me. Tell me it is all right for me to die, even if I appear unconscious or in great pain, and tell me you are letting me go, with your warmest wishes and all the courage you can muster in this moment.

One of my deepest, most powerful fears is that I will be reduced to the situation of an infant, helpless and incoherent. I fear that you will forget who I am and treat me with disrespect. Even thinking about others taking care of my most intimate needs makes me feel ashamed. And every step closer to death makes me realize I will soon be totally dependent on others. Please try to understand when I resist giving in to one more change, one more loss. Help me to take care of myself, even in little ways, so that it will be easier to tolerate the bigger changes that are coming. Speak directly to me, *rather than over my head, or as though I am not in the room. Find out what my wishes are for my medical care during the time of dying while I can still articulate them. And please honor and respect my wishes, ensuring they get written down and communicated.*

When everyone treats me as though they know what is best for me, I get so angry. Aren't I the person who is ill? *Isn't this my life, and my body? Don't I have a right to know what is going on, to know if I am living or dying? I need to know what my condition is. I need to know, in the doctor's best estimate, how much time I have left. If you find the courage to tell me what is going on, then I can decide which type of care is right for me; then I can make decisions about my life. If we stop hiding from the truth about my imminent death, I will be able to wrap up the details of my life, and prepare my family to survive after I'm gone.*

You know, the pain can be unbearable sometimes. On other days, the pain is just there, like a bad toothache, and I get tense and irritable. Please forgive me when I am in a bad mood; you may not know what it is like to live with constant pain and discomfort. What is hardest is when no one believes the amount of pain I am having; that makes me feel crazy. I

need to be believed and I need to have my pain relieved. But please don't knock me unconscious to do it. I would rather experience a little pain, and still be conscious—to enjoy my life and my family, and to do my spiritual practice—while I am in the last few weeks of life.

One of the most important ways you could offer practical help would be to act as an advocate for my needs. When I am ill and weak, I may lose my ability to communicate what I want and need. Perhaps some hospital rules can be relaxed to accommodate my lifestyle, my family, and my personal needs. My loved ones might need reassurance, or encouragement to take a break from caregiving duties when they become too emotional or stressed. And legally, help me to plan ahead of time whatever practical arrangements are necessary so that I can prepare for a peaceful atmosphere at the time of my death.

And what happens if my mind starts to disintegrate? How long will you visit me then? I hope you will not give up communicating with me when my words come out garbled, or when I can't speak at all. Do not forget that underneath the seeming confusion —or unconsciousness—I am still there, I can still hear you, I can even feel the quality of our relationship. I might be feeling lonely and afraid, though. I always need your love and your reassurance. In order to help me, I hope you can learn to be deeply peaceful inside and receptive, so that you can sense what I am feeling and needing and know how to respond appropriately.

As my body and mind disintegrate, remember that inside I am still the person I was when my life was at its peak—and thus I am always worthy of kindness and respect. No matter how far gone I appear to be, trust that your love and your heartfelt prayers really do get through and deeply reassure my entire being. Please don't give up on me when the going gets rough. This is our last chance to heal our relationship, and to give to each other our last gifts of love, forgiveness, and wisdom.

Being in the hospital makes me feel so restricted. It's hard to give up the patterns of my normal lifestyle: my ability to enjoy the company of my friends, my favorite activities, and even my usual waking and sleeping patterns. It's hard to lose my privacy; in the hospital I feel so exposed and vulnerable. I miss the home-cooked meals, the family celebrations, and my favorite music. It's hard, in this controlled and public environment, to find a space to share our intimacy and our grief without fear of being interrupted. When I'm hospitalized, I yearn to have a connection to the outside world, to nature, to the beautiful changes of weather and seasons and wind. Do I have to be cut off from all that I love and cherish even while I am living?

I might prefer to die at home. If you called a hospice program, they could show you how to arrange for me to be cared for at home as long as you can manage it. Being at home would make the process of dying more bearable. I understand that if you have the responsibilities of work and raising your family, you might have to put me in a hospital. But please, do not abandon me there! Help make the hospital environment more like home; try and spend the night when you can. And, even if I have to be hospitalized for most of the period of my dying, I would be grateful if you could arrange with the hospice nurses to bring me home for at least the last few days of my life. What a relief that would be, to be cared for in my familiar surroundings, with family and friends keeping vigil—meditating, praying, or simply talking with me, to help relieve my fears and my loneliness.

I need help reflecting on my life, so I can make sense of it. What meaning did my life have? What have I accomplished? How have I changed and grown? I need to know you will not judge me, so that I can honestly face and reveal my life to you. Encourage me to acknowledge my regrets, so that I can make up with anyone I've neglected or harmed and ask for their forgiveness. Sometimes when I look back on it, my life seems to be one continuous string of mistakes, or a legacy of selfishness and disregard for others. Remind me of what I have accomplished, of any good I have done, so I can know that in some way I have contributed to your life.

Please don't feel you must have all the answers or wise words to assuage my fears. You might come to my side feeling anxious, not knowing what to say. You don't have to pretend or keep up a strong facade. To really offer me spiritual support, I need you to be a human being first. Have the courage to share with me your uncertainty, your fear, and your genuine sadness for the immense loss we are facing. Going through these difficult feelings together, establishing a deep bond and trust, I will feel safe enough to begin letting go, and I'll be able to face my death with more equanimity and an open heart.

After you have listened to my painful stories or complaints, remind me that I am more than my fear or my sadness, my pain or my anger. Help me understand that whatever suffering I am going through is natural; it's part of the human condition. Remind me that my painful emotional or physical condition, no matter how seemingly solid and real, will pass.

If I seem to be lost in my own suffering, help me to remember that there is still one positive thing I can do: extend my love and compassion toward others. Tell me the ways my life has touched yours. In whatever way you can reach me, help me connect to the inner goodness that is the most essential part of my being.

How can my process of dying have meaning? When I am lying here, weak and helpless, I am tempted to feel that the remainder of my life is useless. Everyone has to do everything for me, and it's so hard to feel that I have nothing left to contribute. If you ask, you might find there is something I do have to offer you: the insights about life and about death that I've recently gained. Would you allow me to give you whatever final gifts I have?

Sometimes the thought of death terrifies me. At the same time, I also feel strangely peaceful and even curious about the adventure that is ahead. Yet it is a journey for which I may not have prepared. It won't help if you try and give me your own beliefs and answers about death; I need you to discover my own philosophy, my own inner resources and confidence. But if you are grounded in a spiritual tradition which gives you strength, which helps you work through your own suffering, perhaps you can find ways to open windows and doors of hope for me. Perhaps all you need to do is tell me your own story, without any expectations attached. With time, if you give me your love and your trust, I will work something out deep inside me.

What will happen to me after I've died? What will count then? Help me find images of death that inspire rather than frighten me, so I can trust that what I am going toward is good. What I don't like is to feel I must simply "give up" and die. Perhaps you can help me find a way to meet death in a more positive way, calling on the best qualities of wisdom and authentic compassion within me. Maybe, like the prodigal son, I have been wandering far away from my home and my truth. Dying might be the process to help me find my own way home, so I can make my peace with God or my inner truth.

Perhaps you could learn which spiritual practices—prayers or meditations, sacred readings or music—are inspiring for me, and sit by my side and practice with me, whenever you visit. Finding a spiritual practice that fills my heart with confidence, devotion and compassion will help me to feel more prepared for death. I would be grateful if you could arrange whatever is necessary with the hospital staff and my family, so that the atmosphere when I am dying is loving and peaceful, and will be conducive to spiritual practice.

And please do not worry or feel bad if I die when you are not by my side. Sometimes your presence is soothing, but sometimes your being there makes it harder for me to leave. Please say and do whatever you need to early on, and then you won't have regrets if I should die unexpectedly soon. And when you learn I have died, please let go of any guilt! Remember that I am grateful for all you have done—and what I need most is your kindness, your sincere and heartfelt prayers, wishing me well and letting me go.

Chapter 11
Healing Bereavement

Excerpt from *Facing Death and Finding Hope: A Guide to the Emotional and Spiritual Care of the Dying*, by Christine Longaker

DURING THE YEAR MY HUSBAND WAS ILL WITH LEUKEMIA, I assumed that his illness and dying would be the hardest period of my life. I was wrong. Nothing compared to the extreme pain and bewilderment of my bereavement *after* Lyttle's death, which was compounded by the struggle of going through it alone.

Many of us suffer needlessly when we do not understand the normal process of bereavement, and when we do not know how to heal and finish our grief. If we have a deep aversion to entering this vulnerable state, we may suppress our grief for years and leave it unresolved. Any subsequent losses are added to our burden of unfinished grief, and our hearts grow heavier—or worse, become numb.

Due to medical advances, a large proportion of the population in developed countries now lives seventy years or more. Many of us have reached middle age without ever experiencing the death of someone close. No wonder death and bereavement seem so unnatural! Having little personal exposure to bereavement, we may have some mistaken assumptions about the natural process of mourning.

For instance, if we have experienced the death of someone to whom we were not especially close, our mourning was probably not very intense and finished within a few weeks or months. After this experience, we will very likely consider that every process of mourning should be this easy to finish. Then, if our friend's partner should die suddenly, we might encourage him to "get over it" quickly, only realizing our error years later when we ourselves are faced with a more personal and profound loss.

If we fear experiencing the deep pain of our own grief, we will fear witnessing such pain in others. When we meet a friend or co-worker who has lost someone close, we may hesitate to bring up the subject for fear of triggering the other person's grief. In doing so, we are actually discouraging his or her grieving and healing. The bereaved need to talk about their loss and have it acknowledged by those around them; otherwise they may feel desperately isolated in their grief.

Bereavement describes the emotional state of being *bereft*, a word whose root means "to be shorn" or "torn open." At no time do we feel more torn open than when we experience what is known as a "high grief" death: a sudden or violent death, a suicide, or the loss of a child. A "low grief" death is one which has been expected for a long time, such as that of an extremely elderly person; or a loss for which we have already grieved, such as our former relationship with a person suffering organic brain disease; or the death of someone to whom we are not especially attached. The depth of pain we experience in grief is connected to our degree of attachment to the person, and how much he or she was integral to our sense of well-being.

For example, the death of an elderly aunt to whom you were close many years ago may cause you to feel sad, yet your grief is not exceptionally painful. But you may be confused at the depth of your response when, a month later, your aged family dog dies. Your grief is deep and sharp and constant, yet everyone encourages you to get over it, saying, "It's only a dog." And you find yourself wondering why this loss feels so profound.

Whether our bereavement if for the loss of a partner or a significant friend through divorce or death, for a miscarried baby, for the loss of an integral part of our health or even a favorite pet, *any grief we feel is valid.* When the person or situation we have lost is intimately connected to our day-to-day experience of well-being and feeling loved, then our sadness will be more painful and prolonged. And it will take time to heal.

When we seem to overreact to a loss which we know is actually not significant, it's probably because this fresh loss has uncovered an older, unresolved grief. However painful it is, we must give ourselves permission to mourn and heal our emotional unfinished business. *We will only be able to mourn and finish our grief when we feel safe to do so.* If we feel safe now—even if our sadness seems disproportionate to our current loss—we need to extend compassion to ourselves by expressing and healing our grief, whatever its source.

The Normal Process of Mourning

Mourning is experienced over time in a repeating cycle composed of three phases: shock and disbelief, full awareness of the loss, and recovery or re-balance. Immediately following the loss, the experience of shock and disbelief may be quite prolonged, lasting anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.

Two weeks after my husband Lyttle died, I began the fall quarter at UCLA. I felt vibrantly alive and aware, attuned to nature and very connected with people; I felt grateful to be alive. Once in a while, a recognition would seep through: *my husband has died*. This thought did not arouse intense pain, but rather a "poetic sadness," as if I were watching someone else's story. Quietly I congratulated myself: "This is much easier than I had imagined. It must be because I truly let go of Lyttle when he died."

This relatively painless disbelief cracked open unexpectedly four months after Lyttle's death. I will never forget the mid-January evening when "full awareness" of my loss finally dawned. It felt as though someone had knocked on my door and announced, "I'm sorry, your husband has just died."

My pain was deep and wrenching, and I felt as though my heart was being torn in two. For the next week, all I could feel was deep agony, and I wept continuously, an unwilling subject to utter despair and aloneness. I felt as though my whole world was shattering and disintegrating.

Then, like the end of a violent storm, the pain and despair of my grief seemed to abate. I could breathe again! I felt as if I was recovering from a disaster and getting back on my feet, back in the world of the living. After a while, this feeling of recovery and rebalance drifted unnoticeably back into shock and disbelief—a sense that Lyttle's death was illusory, a bad dream from which I would yet awaken.

Within a few weeks, the "full awareness" of my loss cycled round again, and the heart-wrenching pain and despair were just as intense as they had been the previous month. I was shocked. Why had the pain returned, as fresh and deep as before?

"All right," I bargained, "maybe I didn't fully experience and express all my grief, so this time I will, *and then it will be finished*." Once again, the disruptive storm of excruciating sadness, loneliness and yearning took over my life, and I allowed myself to cry, moan, sob and express every feeling that arose. After a week or so, feeling like a shipwrecked survivor regaining consciousness on a beach, I was able to pick myself up and re-enter the world of the living again. Yet unobtrusively this feeling of recovery once more drifted back into a subtle state of disbelief.

A month later, the intense life-disrupting pain returned, along with my "full awareness" of the death. The following month, again. And the next month, again, with the same depth of intensity as the very first time. Now a distinct fear crept into my thoughts—What is going on? Why do I feel so out of control? What if I am going crazy? Why doesn't this horrible pain ever go away?

Finally, I remembered a warning I'd been given two months after my husband's death. A family friend who had experienced the unexpected death of her husband two years previously was babysitting my son. During those first months of prolonged shock, I hadn't understood her warning: "Christine, don't expect the intensity to go away for some time." When I heard her words, I wondered, *"What intensity?"* Now, seven months later, I understood.

People often wonder if grief can be finished, or exactly what it means to "finish" our grief. In finding a way through my own grief, I eventually learned that the process of mourning does finish. Under normal conditions, mourning a death takes about two years to complete; after a high grief death, it will take longer, yet we *can* recover fully and finish our grief. As Judy Tatelbaum, author of *The Courage to Grieve* writes,

> *"To recover fully from a loss means to finish or completely let go. Finishing with a dead loved one does not erase the love or the memories, but it does mean that we have accepted the death, that the pain and sorrow have lessened, and that we feel free to reinvest in our lives."*

The bereaved person needs to hear this strong reassurance more than once: *You will survive; grief can be finished.*

Grief's Side-Effects

Another normal but unsettling aspect of bereavement is the eruption of intense physical and cognitive symptoms. Although transitory, these symptoms can be frightening and may seem to presage a permanent loss of control. Some of the temporary physical changes that may be associated with grief include: shortness of breath, dizziness, irregular heartbeat, hot or cold flashes, disruption of normal sleep patterns, difficulty eating, manic energy, or sensations of heaviness or aching muscles. (Severe or chronic physical symptoms should be checked by one's physician.)

Possible cognitive and perceptual changes include disorientation, short-term memory loss, difficulty concentrating, or a sense that the normal world is now "unreal." When she sees people in the market carefully choosing melons, the survivor may wonder: "What is the point? My loved one has died. Why is everyone behaving as though nothing has changed?"

The bereaved person may also feel as though she sometimes hears or sees the deceased or has contact with him in dreams. These are all normal phenomena, based on our old mental patterning which continues for some time after a major change.

However, they do eventually diminish. At times, very disturbing violent or irrational thoughts or images—such as driving one's car over a cliff—may surface. Unless such thoughts become obsessive or chronic, they should be considered normal side-effects of bereavement.

Barriers to Finishing Grief

There are many obstacles that might prevent us from accepting the death and completing our mourning. Understanding the attitudes that stand in our way enables us to successfully change them, so that we can heal our hearts and reinvest in life once again. The most common barrier is what I have just described: either we ourselves or our family and friends fail to understand what is normal in the process of bereavement and judge our grieving process or encourage its suppression.

FEAR OF FACING THE PAIN ALONE

In the experience of mourning we lose some of our normal sense of "control," thus the intensity of grief can dramatically heighten our fears and vulnerability. Whether we are facing an exceptionally painful loss in the present or the accumulated unfinished grief of a lifetime, we may fear that opening ourselves to our pain will cause us to "explode" or go crazy.

For those who experience a high-grief death, those feelings and symptoms that are considered part of the normal process of mourning will be magnified greatly. No words are adequate to describe the total disruption and pain such a loss may precipitate in one's life. (Special issues related to sudden death and suicide are described in Chapter 12.)

When bereaved, we are thrust into a bardo similar to the bardo of dying. In this transition, we are suspended between the past and the future. We may feel extreme anxiety and loss of control as we experience the ground of our "known world" dissolving beneath our feet. The new shape of our life has not yet manifested, so we find no reassurance in the future. No wonder we find bereavement so difficult! Grieving challenges us to eventually die to our old way of life, letting go of our former expectations, identity, and all the associations we had with the deceased person.

If our family and friends encourage us to stifle our tears, telling us to pull herself together and be strong, then we may withdraw from them and become isolated, not trusting that we can face the depth of our pain alone. Yet I believe that, as human beings, we are not designed to go through crises alone. And bereavement is certainly

one of the most powerful life crises we can ever face—an experience that can be as emotionally powerful as dying itself.

More than anything, we need friends who can extend to us a life raft of understanding, love, and support, if we are going to survive this death-within-life and complete our journey through mourning.

UNRESOLVED FEELINGS OF GUILT

After the death of a loved one, we often feel guilty. It's normal to feel this way. Our minds go back to the past and find lost opportunities for connecting, showing patience, or resolving misunderstandings. We may even search our memory for a "cause" of our loved one's illness or death, often imagining ourselves culpable. We start with one thing we feel guilty about—not getting him to the right doctor, loaning her the car, that last fight—and soon we've accumulated a long list that makes us feel unreasonably guilty and unforgivable. While feeling some guilt is natural, the danger is that we'll get stuck in it, becoming trapped in the past. Unresolved guilt prevents us from mourning and letting go of our loved one and moving on in our life.

It's important to redefine our guilt feelings as "regret." While guilt traps us in the past, regret is a way of bringing us to the present, in order to take responsibility for our mistakes and begin to *do something* about them. It is up to us to heal and conclude the relationship. To do so, we can use the Method for Completing Unfinished Business (described in Chapter 7), combined with spiritual practice to help us purify ourselves and our deceased loved one from any painful memories or regrets. Once we take responsibility and clear up the past, we can resolve to live in a more caring and loving way from now on. We must develop a sense of perspective: no one is perfect. Life is a continuous process of making mistakes, taking responsibility for them, and then learning to be more aware and compassionate so that we don't accumulate new regrets.

CHRONIC FRUSTRATION AND ANGER

Like guilt, anger and frustration are normal feelings after a death, as we are forced to accept that we have no control over what has happened. Against death we feel powerless; this is especially true for parents who believed they could shield their child from suffering and death. After a loved one's death, there are many possible sources of frustration, from our assessment of lapses in the person's medical care to our being left unprepared to cope with financial and practical matters.

Especially in the case of sudden death, we may project our anger and blame onto whomever we believe caused the death and our painful grief. Our feelings of frustration and anger are normal; it is getting stuck in anger which creates problems. If our angry thoughts are acknowledged and then let go of, we will have the emotional space to begin accepting our loss and feeling our sadness. If, however, we continually feed our angry thoughts and feelings over months or years, we will have bound ourselves to the past and created a wall around our heart. We need to find a responsible way to release our frustration and anger if we want to finish our grief and be free to love once again.

INCREASED GRASPING AND ATTACHMENT

Instead of letting go of our attachment as we grieve, we can make the mistake of grasping onto the deceased person even more strongly. Halfway through the second year after my husband's death, the cycles of intense pain and sadness were continuing, and I felt a fresh fear that my grief would never finish. Part of me wanted to ignore this intense pain returning month after month, to push it down and avoid it altogether. Yet I suspected that repressing my pain would not help in the long run, either, so I decided to bring more awareness to my situation. I asked myself if I was doing anything that might be prolonging the mourning process.

Then I uncovered the secret thoughts I was generating each time I felt deep sadness and pain: "I can't live without you. I hate being alone. I want you back." There was so much grasping in my mind, so many wishes that could never be satisfied! If I continued to think and feel this way, I realized there would be no end to my grief and despair. It was clear that I needed to replace my grasping with a new way of thinking:

"I am letting you go and wishing you well. I am going to survive and be strong. I am going to make a new life for myself."

When I felt the deep sadness and pain rising again, I began practicing letting go in this way. After a few months of taking this approach, my process of mourning finished.

SELF-JUDGMENT ABOUT SADNESS AND GRIEF

Some people may suppress their grief with the thought:

"It's a sign of weakness to cry, and I must be strong."

Or, "*I'm just feeling sorry for myself."*

When we grieve, we are mourning our loss of the person and our relationship to him or her. Rather than judging ourselves, we can translate our emotional experience into: *"I am simply feeling sorrow*." Sorrow, like the joy we had felt previously, is an inescapable part of our experience of loving another person.

Most of us have been conditioned from childhood to be strong and not to cry, although women generally find it easier than men to weep. Men often need permission and encouragement to grieve and cry, as they may be judging themselves or fear the loss of people's respect. Our fear and suppression of grief prevents us from living fully. It's vitally important to find a healthy outlet for our painful feelings, so they don't back up like a river blocked by debris and deadwood. Rather than weakness, it is actually a sign of strength to grieve and let go of people who have left our life; it is a sign of our vitality and desire for wholeness. As Judy Tatelbaum writes:

> *Grief is a wound that needs attention in order to heal. To work through and complete grief means to face our feelings openly and honestly, to express or release our feelings fully, and to tolerate and accept our feelings for however long it takes for the wound to heal. For most of us, that is a big order.*
>
> *Therefore, it takes courage to grieve. It takes courage to feel our pain and to face the unfamiliar. It also takes courage to grieve in a society that mistakenly values restraint, where we risk the rejection of others by being open or different.*

RETREATING INTO A SHELL OF ISOLATION

When we are in pain, we often retreat into a shell of isolation—hiding from our feelings and also from the world. In this state, our loneliness is sealed, leading to feelings of utter hopelessness and despair. At a certain point in my own grieving process, I considered ending my life to escape from this deep pain. I felt as though I were at the bottom of a very deep and dark well, and that no one could possibly help me out. Even though I was an atheist at the time and I didn't know if anyone was listening, I began to pray for help.

After a few days of praying, in the midst of my despair, an image suddenly appeared in my mind, a photograph that was taken during the Vietnam war. The image was of a young mother holding her dead child in her arms and looking up to the sky in anguish. This vivid image broke my shell of isolation, as I understood that *we all grieve.* We all lose the people we love, and all of us experience the pain of grief. So, I was not alone. This experience must be as hard for everyone else as it is for me, I

realized, and others might not know how to heal their grief either. I resolved to find a way to go through and finish my grief, so I could help others do the same.

This was an important turning-point for me. Part of the task of mourning is to let go of our former relationship and then consciously decide to create a new life, with meaning and purpose. This decision helps us summon the courage to finish our grief. Failing this, mourners can end up living halfheartedly in a shadow world, neither finished with the past nor connected to the present. Everyone who grieves needs to find their own personal answer to the question: *For what purpose will I continue to live?*

Finishing Grief: The Four Tasks of Bereavement

The survivor's experience of bereavement parallels the process of dying, and the tasks of bereavement similarly reflect the Four Tasks of Living and Dying:

- Accepting the reality of the death
- Healing and concluding the relationship
- Releasing our emotional pain and letting go
- Finding a meaning in our new life

ACCEPTING THE REALITY OF THE DEATH

Mourning will never finish if it has never commenced. We must first come to accept the fact that the death has happened. When we do not have a physical, tangible experience of the reality of death, we may suppress our grief by denying the death for years. If we do not actually witness a death, then viewing the body afterward at home, in the hospital, or at the mortuary will help us begin to accept and get used to the reality of our loss.

When viewing the body of the deceased, we can arrange to have private time alone, enabling us to communicate what is unfinished, say our good-byes, and begin offering spiritual practice for him or her. All too often people who die in hospitals are whisked away before survivors arrive. If our loved one dies in a distant city, we may get the news through a phone call. In the case of sudden death, the inability to see or connect with the physical fact of death may lead to an even stronger denial or sense of unreality.

Early one morning I was called to help at the hospital with a young couple whose baby had died during the night. The officials needed to do an autopsy, but the parents were adamantly refusing permission. I sat down with them and asked a few questions, giving them time to tell me what had happened and how they felt about the

death. Finally, I reminded the parents that they would need to think about releasing the baby's body for an autopsy to be done. The mother responded sharply, "They're not going to cut my baby!"

I searched inside for what this young mother might be feeling and realized that part of her still felt her baby was alive. I proposed then to the mother and father that they could go into the next room and hold their baby's body once again, in order to say good-bye. At first the mother looked at me in horror. With trepidation, I offered to go into the room with them.

Once the parents saw and touched their baby again, once they began to say good-bye in their hearts and allow the tears to come, they were then able to release the body for the autopsy. For this young couple, making a tangible connection to the fact of their baby's death initiated their process of mourning.

We need to be free to speak about the person who died, and not conceal the dynamic change already taking place within the family. Speaking about our memories is a way of "purifying" the past and helping us to let it go. Families who openly talk about the death have a much easier time supporting each other in their bereavement. We must learn not to be afraid of feeling our natural sadness, as this is what will eventually lead to our healing.

Shortly after a death, it's not uncommon for a large circle of friends and family to gather together, offering their practical and emotional support for a few days surrounding the funeral. During this time, though, we are likely in shock and can easily feel overwhelmed by dealing with so many visitors. Months later, when the painful cycles of grief begin, we will find ourselves alone. When our family gathers for the next holiday or birthday, they often avoid speaking about the recent death in a misguided attempt to spare us pain.

Many survivors have found great solace in arranging a memorial or celebration of the person's life a few months after the death, or when the family comes together again for the next holiday. Instead of steeling themselves to avoid speaking about the death and their sad feelings, we could ask each family member to bring a memento, photograph, letter or story to share about the person who died. They can also bring ideas for creating a simple and personal ritual—prayer, meditation, candle lighting, readings, or singing—in memory of the deceased. Perhaps there will be some sad moments during this memorial, yet afterward, everyone will be able to laugh and celebrate because they have openly mourned together. (Spiritual practices for the deceased are described in Chapter 12.)

It's not easy to pack up and distribute the deceased person's belongings, and it may take a few months before the survivors feel strong enough to do it. Yet doing so is another sign we have accepted the fact of the death, and that we have begun the process of letting go.

Going to visit the grave can also help us begin to accept the reality of death. (Conversely, when the dying person has given instructions to have his ashes scattered by plane over the ocean, we may feel even more disconnected from the physical reality of the death.) Many survivors describe their wish to have a significant place to go, a place which marks their loved one's death in a physical way, and where they can continue their process of letting go.

HEALING AND CONCLUDING THE RELATIONSHIP

Getting stuck in any kind of emotional unfinished business prevents us from completing our mourning. We may sustain an unbalanced image of the deceased, seeing him either as her lifelong nemesis or as a saint who could do no wrong. To generate a more balanced view of the deceased, we should reflect on what we will miss about the deceased person and also on what we will *not* miss.

After a death, whether expected or sudden, we are challenged to communicate all of our conflicting emotions, frustrations and unexpressed regrets. If we didn't do so previously, we will also need to conclude our relationship and say our good-byes. Some people start a journal or write letters to the deceased. Although helpful, these methods can remain somewhat open-ended, because we may only partially vent our old problems and feelings, and never actually let them go. The Method for Completing Unfinished Business is exceptionally effective in helping us express and release our emotional pain and bring closure to the relationship. In the case of high grief death, it is vital we seek out the support of a trained grief counselor to assist us in releasing our powerfully charged emotions or unfinished business.

Jenny, an old friend of mine, showed me her "Deathography," an account of her personal encounters with death, which she'd written for a college class. In two pages, she described in great detail her father's illness and death, which had occurred three years earlier. I was startled to see one sentence standing alone at the end of the story: "Six weeks after my father's death, my mother died."

When I asked Jenny about this, she said she felt so guilty about her mother's death, she couldn't even think about it. Jenny had remained in the family home to support her mother for a few weeks after her father's death, but they had always had a

difficult relationship and this recent death strained it even further. Finally, Jenny had flown back to her own home and returned to work. Her mother died alone a few weeks later, after suffering a bad fall.

Because of our long friendship, and Jenny's willingness to heal the past, she agreed to work with me on resolving her unfinished business with her mother. I asked Jenny to imagine that her mother was in front of her once more. "See her as very open and receptive, willing to hear what you have to say. What do you want to tell your mother?"

Jenny finally said out loud all the things about which she felt guilty. I invited her to express as well any other old angers, regrets or hurts from their long relationship. Finally, Jenny was able to express her love to her mother.

"Jenny, if you were speaking to the 'best part' of your mother, and if she were able to really hear your pain and remorse, would she forgive you now?"

"Yes."

"Allow yourself to receive and feel your mother's forgiveness coming toward you," I suggested. "And Jenny, if your mother felt a similar remorse for any times she hurt you, would you forgive her?"

"Yes, I would."

"Tell your mother you forgive her, and really let go of these past memories now."

Throughout our work together, Jenny's unexpressed pain and tears flowed freely, enabling her to forgive, to accept forgiveness, to grieve and let go of her mother.

RELEASING OUR EMOTIONAL PAIN AND LETTING GO

To feel safe to grieve, we need the support of others who can validate the many layers of our suffering and emotional pain, who can extend to us their love and unconditional acceptance. Following a death, each spouse—or the teenagers within the same family—often expect support from each other and are disappointed and angry when they don't receive it. Within a nuclear family, it is not possible to get the support we need, since each family member is in the midst of his or her own crisis. We need to look outside our immediate family and *find the right kind of support*—from friends, counselors or members of a grief support group—who are not afraid of hearing our memories and thoughts, or of sharing our pain.

We may be tempted to judge those friends who do not know how to extend the kind of emotional support we need. If they have never lived through such a powerful grief, our friends will feel extremely uncertain about how to offer personal support, or

they may fear witnessing our pain. Sometimes our friends just don't have the skill or awareness to be there for us in extreme circumstances. Still, we can ask for their company at times, to enjoy a meal or a concert together, or to help with the gardening or other simple tasks. Even if they are not great comforters, our friends may be grateful if we suggest simple, practical things they can do to help and support us.

We must keep our eyes open for support from unexpected places—perhaps a neighbor down the street, a co-worker or a member of our church or synagogue who has gone through a process of mourning and has recovered well. Those who are familiar with bereavement are often happy to offer support, for they remember how much the support of others helped them.

We might receive support from our hospice team after a death or turn to self-help support groups composed of people who have experienced a similar loss, such as a Compassionate Friends group for parents who have lost a child. 3. Men and women alike have described the vital solace such groups provide: here are people who know how bad it is; they have lived through the yearly markers of birthdays and anniversaries; they aren't shocked by expressions of anger or guilt; and to newly-bereaved parents the group members are "beacons of hope" that it is possible to survive a painful loss and find a way back to life itself.

We need to find ways to release sadness and tears. Men have told me that when tears don't come easily, it helps them to find an activity to express their grief: planting a tree, dedicating one's daily run to the memory of their loved one, creating something with their hands, or going into nature for solace. Listening to music, painting or writing have been viable emotional expressions of grief for others. Whatever form helps us express and release our pain, we will need to return to it again and again while on the journey toward fully letting go.

We need to give ourselves permission to grieve, and we need to take time out for healing. Part of our life has been dramatically altered, and we can't just bounce back as though nothing has changed. Even if we have to return to work soon after a death, we can create a private space and time in each day to allow our natural feelings to surface. Perhaps at work we have to stop the flow of emotions, but we can define a period of time to be alone after we come home—even a half-hour—for sorting out our feelings and giving ourselves permission to grieve freely. Then, when we take the rest of the evening to relax or join our family, we can be fully present within ourselves and with our loved ones.

One technique I found to be effective for releasing emotionally charged memories from the last year of Lyttle's life was to deliberately review each potent memory again. As I relived the moment in my memory, I mentally "finished" that experience in the way I would like to have done at the time. Summoning a different memory each day, gradually I managed to untangle the emotional knots that kept me from accepting Lyttle's death and from accepting and forgiving myself. Besides healing our memory of the past, this process of imagining what we wish we had done or said also allows us to rehearse a different way of being in response to present and future life challenges.

While the process of mourning includes facing our dragons and moving through our pain, we must also find ways to comfort and take care of ourselves. It is not a testament to our loved one if we neglect our own well-being or become self-destructive, if we neglect other family members, or if we avoid laughter or activities that connect us to the pleasure of being alive. One useful technique is to imagine what our deceased loved one might wish for us now.

A man in his mid-seventies spoke quite glowingly of how he made his peace with the death of his wife two years before:

"At first, I felt like I wanted to die too, and I started neglecting myself, just staying at home and letting the four walls close in on me. I secretly wondered how long it would take me to become terminally ill so I could join her. Then I reflected on what had made my wife happy, and I asked myself: Is there anything I can do even now that would please her?

"I realized that my wife was most happy when I was happy. She would want me to still take care of myself, go out into the world and do things I enjoyed, or even learn new things. Now, by enjoying my life, I feel every day I am telling my wife that I love her."

FINDING MEANING IN OUR NEW LIFE

Judy Tatelbaum writes,

> *Just as we know that loss is inevitable, we know that recovering from our sorrow can also be inevitable. We can even use our loss in loving testimonial to the deceased as a step in our own growth, as a positive turning point in our lives.*
>
> *As we journey through these painful experiences of living, we must never forget that we have an amazing resilience and capacity to survive. Just as whole forests burn to the ground and eventually grow anew, just as spring follows winter, so it is nature's*

way that through it all, whatever we suffer, we can keep on growing. It takes courage to believe we can survive, that we will grow. It takes courage, too, to live now and not postpone living until some vague tomorrow.

In letting go of someone we dearly love, each of us faces the same conscious commitment—to mourn and let go of the past so that we can give shape to our new life. We remain aware of the uncompromising reality of impermanence and death, but we must resist the temptation to close our heart, to decide never to love or trust another person again. If we succumb to that temptation, we will freeze our life in the past, and end up bringing untold suffering to those who still love us, especially our intimate partner and children. Trying to defend ourselves from pain, we lose contact with the source of love in our hearts and inadvertently bring further pain to ourselves.

Poignantly aware that we will eventually lose everyone we love, we can decide instead to learn to appreciate the people in our lives even more. Awareness of impermanence can become a catalyst for helping us realize that in the light of death, many of our troubles are not so big after all. Then it becomes easier to forgive and let go, easier to tell another person how grateful we are for what he or she brings to our life. We can allow the truth of impermanence to remind us to be more patient, more attentive, and more willing to be present for others.

The process of recovering from our grief can help us to live more fully and appreciate each day, and each person, as an irreplaceable gift. In grieving, *we must eventually let go of our attachment to the person who is gone, yet we can keep their love with us.* We are not abandoned in bereavement; we can nurture our memories of love and allow love to keep flowing towards us.

Even if the person we've lost was the central person in our life, we can broaden our expression of love after he or she has died. One widow told me, "The hardest part isn't losing my husband's love, because wherever he is now, I can still feel his love for me. The hard part is feeling cut off from any ways of expressing my love. This is why I'd like to become a hospice volunteer."

While our grief is finishing, we need to find a way to contribute to the world, a means of dedicating our life to something greater than our personal desires and needs. We can even dedicate our work to the memory of the deceased. A word of caution, though, as it is important to maintain a balance. Some people take refuge in their new,

meaningful activity and allow this to consume all their energy and time, thereby avoiding their journey through grief and neglecting those loved ones who are still alive.

The realization of the reality of impermanence and death can also help us recognize that we will be at the mercy of our ego-centered attachments and fears until we commit to a spiritual path.

Krisha Gotami was a young mother who lived at the time of the Buddha. After her only child died, she desperately searched for someone who could bring him back to life. Finally, she turned to the Buddha for help, and he instructed her to bring him a mustard seed from a household that had never experienced a death. After going from door to door throughout the local village, Krisha Gotami finally realized the truth: everyone experiences the death of a loved one, and thus no one is truly alone in grief. She realized that everything in life was subject to impermanence and death, and that she could find no lasting happiness in imperfect, changing circumstances or people.

She then asked the Buddha for the teachings which could bring her out of this endless cycle of suffering, and help her realize her inherent, deathless nature. The Buddha accepted her as his disciple, and she followed the spiritual path he taught with diligence. And before she died, Krisha Gotami attained enlightenment.

Supporting a Bereaved Person

What helps someone going through bereavement is our friendship and presence, simply *being with them in their pain*, even when there is nothing we can say or do to ease it. In the section "Responding to Suffering" in Chapter 5, I described how we can be most effectively present for someone who is suffering. The following list includes additional points especially relevant to supporting the bereaved.

1. Offer your continued presence and friendship.

2. Validate the person's mourning and give her permission to grieve. Reassure her that her intense feelings and sense of losing control are normal in bereavement.

3. Accept the person unconditionally, regardless of any thoughts or emotions she might express.

4. Inform the bereaved, and her closest family members about the normal process and duration of mourning. Reassure them that grief can be finished.

5. Invite her to speak about her memories of the deceased person, even repeatedly.

6. Encourage her to complete any unfinished business.

7. Consider what practical support she might need and offer your help in specific ways: shopping or cooking, spending time with children, maintaining the apartment or garden, working through bills or the paperwork related to the death.

8. Assist her in identifying friends, professionals or other resources in the community she could turn to for support.

9. Encourage her to take care of herself, and to take the time she needs to nurture herself and allow this deep wound to heal.

10. Identify activities she had formerly enjoyed and invite her to join you in doing some of them, especially outdoor activities which entail some physical movement or contact with the beauty of nature.

11. Share comforting hugs and affection. Relate stories from life and cultivate a sense of humor where appropriate, knowing that uncomfortable moments will be inevitable.

12. Let the survivor know all the ways she has contributed to your life. Allow her to lend emotional or practical support to you sometimes.

Friends often make the mistake of leaving the bereaved alone, thinking they would prefer to have solitude. While all of us wish for some solitude when we experience pain, most bereaved people have too much of it. Single people need to have their long solitude interrupted by those friends who can sometimes nurture, sometimes listen in silence, and sometimes just play. Alternatively, parents with children need encouragement and perhaps an offer of weekly childcare so they can enjoy some solitude for mourning and taking care of their own needs.

The bereaved person can easily make the mistake of not letting anyone in, particularly by responding dishonestly when friends call to ask how she is or to offer their love. After some time, she may find herself totally alone. Most friends are well-intentioned and would be happy to learn how to help and support a bereaved friend. Yet they may not know what they can do. If we are to survive our grief, we must swallow our fear and pride and learn to ask others for their presence and help, even verbalizing what it is we most need from them.

During the first year of bereavement, one's rational thinking process often seems to be crystal clear and very convincing. Dramatic plans can be quickly formulated and acted on: selling the house and moving to a different part of the country, entering into a commitment in a new relationship, or making some other sudden lifestyle or career change. As a result, the survivor can unwittingly stop the natural process of grief and

effectively cut off dependable sources of love and support. What appears to be rational mental clarity spurring these impulsive decisions is called the "first-year crazies." We can encourage the bereaved to put off any major, life-changing decisions at least the first anniversary of the death has passed.

If we are able to intervene, we can refer the survivor to professional help when we see signs of an abnormal grief response—behaviors that may threaten her own or her family's well-being. These signs include prolonged dejection and depression, hints dropped regarding suicide, new or increased phobias, neglect of her own health or of her children's health, excessive withdrawal, or continued denial of the death. Not all counselors or psychologists have training in grief therapy, but a local hospice or community counseling center can make an appropriate referral.

Above all, remind the grieving person that she is more than her suffering. We must keep our heart open with love and support her in her pain, yet never lose sight of the big picture. We are all living in a world of suffering; loss, illness, death and grief are not unusual. They are very powerful transitions however, opportunities for us to wake up from our self-centered, materialistic approach to life.

Bereavement can be a time of despair and disintegration, as well as a time for a potent renewal of faith, as C.S. Lewis discovered and wrote about in *A Grief Observed*. For much of his life Lewis had been an inspiring author and sought-after lecturer on Christian faith. After his wife died of cancer, he chronicled his anger and sadness over the ensuing months and experienced a despair and aloneness so profound that everything he had formerly believed now seemed to be empty, hollow words. He felt abandoned by God and lost his faith. Yet as Lewis continued to question and search and slowly heal his painful grief, he gradually rebuilt, from the ashes of his suffering and despair, a potent and living faith.

As Lewis observed, when we lose that which we hold most dear, we have no choice but to mourn and let go. In the end, we must land on the ground again—what better ground to land on than the truth? We can encourage the grieving person to combine her mourning with her spiritual life. Finding an ultimate refuge in the midst of our deepest pain can be like throwing open the shutters on the windows of a long-abandoned house.

Most of all, don't give up on the bereaved. With kindness and patience, continue to offer your love and support over the many months it will take for her to complete the most painful part of her mourning. And we mustn't wait for the bereaved person to call us and ask for help. As a rule, she will find it very, very hard to admit, even when we

contact her, that she is intensely lonely and afraid. She is afraid to admit she feels like hell; afraid she is going crazy. She is afraid we wouldn't want to be with her in her pain. And she is afraid to make those first steps back into life.

Thus, it is left to us to be dynamic, caring and honest so that she feels safe to let down her guard and allow herself to receive love and support.

The following story is one both Sogyal Rinpoche and I like to tell because of its special message for those supporting the bereaved. One widow was asked, a year after her husband's death, "Is there anything special which helped you during this year of your bereavement?"

"Yes," she said, "It was the people who kept calling and coming by *even though I had said 'No.'*"

The widow's answer is significant for two reasons. First, when we call the bereaved person during the week she is experiencing the "disbelief" or "recovery" part of her grieving cycle, she may genuinely not need our presence or help. Yet if we keep calling or stopping by to see her, we will eventually make contact—and be able to lend meaningful support—during the most painful and despairing periods, when she will be unable to pick up the phone and ask anyone for help.

Second, we usually have a slight aversion to witnessing another person's pain. Although we might be willing to spend time with the bereaved person in spite of our fear, when she says, "No, don't come," we are tempted to hang up the phone with relief, and not try again! What helps the most, then, is to continue calling and offering to vigil with the bereaved person through her "dark night of the soul." With the love and continued presence offered by dedicated friends, the bereaved feel their life has new meaning and the future offers hope.