

All Our Losses, All Our Griefs

by Kenneth R. Mitchell and Herbert Anderson

Grief and loss are a normal part of the human experience because of the necessity of attachment and the inevitability of loss, theologically and psychologically. However, many important forms of loss go unnoticed. It is an important ministry to help others recognize how loss is operating in their lives, listen as they tell their stories and bring it to the surface, and help others process through their feelings, so that they may begin to heal. From years of research, the authors have observed six major types of loss (chapter 3). Often more than one are operating at a time. The authors note how each form is often denied for various reasons, including cultural norms, misconstrued "Christian" perception, as well as isolation. Often celebrations of milestones and rites of passage involve significant unrecognized loss, for example. The authors also explore the theology of loss from a Christian perspective.

1. Material Loss – loss of a physical object or a familiar surroundings to which one has an important attachment. There may be intrinsic or extrinsic value to the object(s), a gift from a deceased relative or a handprint from childhood, etc. Often shame is involved in not recognizing the significance of the loss, as no one wants to be perceived as materialistic.
2. Relationship Loss – the ending of opportunities to relate oneself to, talk with, share experiences with, touch, settle issues with, fight with, and otherwise be in the emotional and/or physical presence of a particular other human being. Moving, job change, divorce, changes in friendship; this is often another type of loss experienced early in life.
3. Intrapyschic Loss – the experience of losing an emotionally important image of oneself, losing the possibilities of "what might have been," abandonment of plans for a particular future, the dying of a dream.... Usually this is an internal process. Often what is lost is a secret not widely known by others, and therefore often it goes unrecognized and not shared.
4. Functional Loss – loss of some of the muscular or neurological functions of the body. As this is an accepted part of the aging process, individuals experience it as horrifying and just as difficult to deal with regardless of age.
5. Role Loss – loss of a specific social role or of one's accustomed place in a social network. The extent of loss to the individual is directly related to the extent to which one's sense of identity is linked to the lost role.
6. Systemic Loss – loss of patterns of behavior or functions as a part of interactional systems. Loss or change within a system can cause systemic loss for all in that system. A child departing to college, leaving home, or getting married all represent system changes that involve some sense of loss. Sometimes these losses are celebrated as milestones or new beginnings without recognizing the loss involved.

Other valuable quotes to help us understand grief and loss:

“Grief is the normal but bewildering cluster of ordinary human emotions arising in response to a significant loss, intensified and complicated by the relationship to the person or the object loss. Guilt, shame, loneliness, anxiety, anger, terror, bewilderment, emptiness, profound sadness, despair, helplessness: all are part of grief and all are common to being human. Grief is the clustering of some or all of these emotions in response to loss.” (electronic location 609)

“The abnormality of grief is frequently a consequence of the refusal to grieve or the inability of the grieving person to find those who are willing to care.” (electronic location 140)

“It is generally clear when we are ordering our lives by efforts to deny loss and hide pain. That is when grief is abnormal. Families may develop fixed patterns of interacting in an effort to minimize change and to avoid recognizing loss. They are then unable to cope with losses, which usually leads to the “storing up” of grief and its reappearance in unexpected and counterproductive forms.” (electronic location 653)

This book is written as “resources for pastoral care.” Another point the authors make is the importance for leaders to be aware of the loss operating in their own lives, as an important first step to walking in solidarity with others in order to bring healing.

No two experiences are alike, but there is a lot we can learn from a “sitting shiva.” The authors recommend: ministry of presence with no expectation for sharing; encouraging and active listening to stories as the person who has experienced loss is able and takes initiative; legitimizing feelings and releasing shame; and eventually recognizing the “normal-ness” of the experience within the human experience while not moving to it too quickly.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

1. How have you experienced each of the forms of loss? How are you experiencing them still? As each experience is different, share not only what happened but:
 - a. how it made you feel,
 - b. how you responded,
 - c. what God has taught you through it,
 - d. and how you are changed because of it.
2. How have you seen loss operating in yourself, or in those around you, perhaps in ways you/they are unaware?
3. How have you seen loss and grief operating at a systemic level within congregational life? What are the congregational losses that are not being recognized and might be festering?
 - a. Pondering: How might those losses be recognized as a part of congregational life? What are ways that we can help people both recognize and be okay with acknowledging loss, even in the midst of what is culturally perceived as joyous?