



# Journey

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to the Bereaved

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## DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF IN A BROKEN WORLD

by Mary Ann Wachtel

In October 2006 Pam Akers quietly walked out of the emergency training class at the local Lion Club after just five minutes.

People inside were laughing, excitedly asking one another whether they had heard that baby Abbey had just been found. The newborn was snatched from her house in nearby Lonedell, Missouri, five days earlier. Pam was not about to dampen the mood.

She walked around the building to a small memorial — a flower garden and a wooden bench with a laminated missing-child poster as the back. She knelt to face the picture of the brown-haired, smiling boy.

First, she prayed, “Thank you, Lord for giving this mom the miracle she needed.” Then she talked directly to Shawn Hornbeck, her son: “We will find you one day.” And like so many times before, she wept.

Shawn has been missing for four years from his home here, 65 miles southwest of St. Louis and his parents, Pam and Chris Akers, have devoted themselves to bringing the missing home. But it’s hard to keep waiting and watch others get their happy ending. When 11-year-old Shawn disappeared without a trace, his parents searched relentlessly. They trekked through caves and mineshafts. They combed acres of woods and trod through rural areas infested with meth labs. They set up a website and listened to anyone who claimed to know anything.

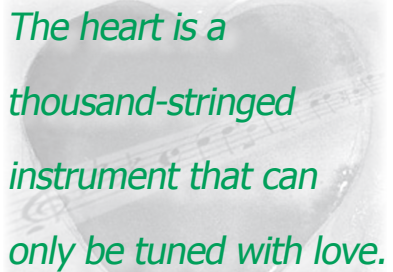
This experience has traumatized the Akres’ family and the whole community and the experience cannot be described in words.

Then on Monday, January 7, 2007, 13-year-old William “Ben” Ownby of Beaufort, Missouri, was abducted on the way to his home after disembarking from a school bus. An observant 16-year-old gave a description of a white, Nissan truck that sped away from the area where William Ownby disappeared.

That vehicle led to the abductor who was picked up by FBI agents on Friday morning, January 12, 2007, from the Kirkwood, Missouri, Imo’s Pizzeria. Investigators then went to Michael Devlin’s apartment where they found not only William Ownby, but 15-year-old Shawn Hornbeck. Shawn had been missing from his Richwoods, Missouri, home for more than four years.

Both boys were returned to their parents. For Pam and Chris Akre, four and one-half years devoted to the cause of missing children, and weeping each time a child was found, their grief was now turned to weeping for joy

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*The heart is a  
thousand-stringed  
instrument that can  
only be tuned with love.*

*Hafiz, Sufi Mystic*

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that their son was found. In the meantime, countless other parents were experiencing disenfranchised grief like she did on that October day in 2006.

Pam Akers experienced disenfranchised grief on that day in October. Countless parents whose abducted or missing children have not been found experienced this on the January 2007 day that Ben Ownby and Shawn Hornbeck were found.

What is disenfranchised grief? It is a grief that persons experience when they sustain a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned or socially supported. Societies have grieving rules which specify who, when, where, how long, and for whom people should grieve. We find these rules in personnel policies. A worker may be allowed a week off for the death of a spouse or child, three days for the death of a parent or sibling. These policies reflect who has a right to grieve; this right belongs primarily to the family. These grieving rights may not take into account the nature of the relationship, the sense of loss or the feelings of survivors. Therefore the grief of these survivors is disenfranchised. Ken Doka (1989) suggests there may be three reasons for this.

### THE RELATIONSHIP IS NOT RECOGNIZED

Grief may be disenfranchised in situations in which the relationship between the bereaved and deceased is not based on recognizable familial relationships. Examples are the death of close and special friends as lovers, friends, neighbors, foster parents, colleagues, in-laws, stepparents and stepchildren, caregivers, counselors, co-workers, roommates. Even though these relationships are recognized, mourners may not have the opportunity to publicly grieve a loss; often they are expected to support and assist family members.

There are relationships that may not be publicly recognized or socially approved. Nontraditional relationships such as cohabitation, marital affairs and homosexual relationships fall into this category. Persons involved in such relationships are touched by grief when the relationship is terminated by the death of the partner; others may experience a grief that cannot be acknowledged or socially supported.

Those whose relationships existed primarily in the past may experience grief: ex-spouses, past lovers or

former friends. The death of the significant other can still cause a grief reaction because it brings finality to the earlier loss. Society as a whole may not perceive that the loss of a past relationship could or should cause any reaction.

### THE LOSS IS NOT RECOGNIZED

In some cases, the loss itself is not socially defined as significant. Examples include perinatal death, abortions, giving children up for adoption or foster care, surrogate motherhood.

Another loss that may not be perceived as significant is the loss of a pet. Yet research shows the strong ties between pets and humans and profound reactions to loss. The closing of parishes without proper consultation with parishioners or appropriate ritualization has in many cases not been perceived as a loss.

There are cases in which the reality of the loss itself is not socially validated. There are situations of "social death" in which the person is alive but is treated as if dead, such as persons who are institutionalized or comatose. "Psychological death" is a condition in which the person lacks a consciousness of existence as someone who is "brain dead." There is "psychosocial death" in which the *persona* of someone has changed so significantly through mental illness or personal transformations through addiction, or conversion, that significant others perceive the person as he or she previously existed as dead. In all of these cases, spouses and others may experience a deep sense of loss, but the loss cannot be publicly acknowledged because the person is still biologically alive. This loss is often expressed in language as "I have lost the mother I once knew!" from a daughter whose mother is an Alzheimer patient.

### THE GRIEVER IS NOT RECOGNIZED

Sometimes the bereaved disenfranchise their grief. The person may be perceived as not capable of grief, consequently there is little or no social recognition of his or her sense of loss or need to mourn. Often the very old and the very young are perceived by others as having little understanding of or reaction to the death of a significant other. As a result, both young children and aging adults are excluded from both discussions and rituals. Examples are roommates in nursing homes.

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Mentally disabled persons may also be disenfranchised in grief. The mentally retarded understand the concept of death and experience grief. Often these reactions are not perceived by others; often other family members ignore his or her need to grieve.

### SPECIAL PROBLEMS OF DISENFRANCHISED GRIEF

The very nature of disenfranchised grief creates additional problems for grief since it removes or minimizes sources of support.

Many emotions are associated with normal grief; anger, guilt, sadness, depression, loneliness, hopelessness and numbness. These normal emotional reactions can be complicated when grief is disenfranchised.

It is to be noted that disenfranchised grief is associated not only with death but with any kind of loss: the many stories surrounding Katrina, the treatment of those with disabilities, the children of incarcerated parents, immigrants and persons like Pam Akers.

Here is a story of a child shared by a friend: "he was about grade 3 when we met and grade 6 when we quit meeting and his dad was in jail quite a bit of that time before the dad died (probably of drug overdose). The young man never wanted me to know what really killed his dad and that shame and secrecy is one of the experiences I had with him often."



*Written by Mary Ann Wachtel, SFCC, Executive Director for NCMB.*

### NCMB MEMBERSHIP MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved will hold its annual Membership Meeting on Friday, February 23, 2007 at 10:30 am. As a member of NCMB you are invited and encouraged to attend. The meeting will be held at the Sisters of Saint Joseph of Carondelet located at 6400 Minnesota Avenue in St. Louis, MO. We will be reviewing the past year's work and ministry and also proceed with business matters related to any by-law changes for NCMB. This meeting will also include election of new members to serve on the NCMB Board of Trustees. As the membership of NCMB we will review and discuss the work, needs, and business of the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved. Please plan to attend.

## “DECIDETE A VOLAR”

*by Deacon Ray Ortega*

Es sólo abandonando nuestra comodidad y enfrentando nuestros miedos e inseguridades, que podremos comenzar a volar.

Si sentimos que la vida no tiene sentido, que los problemas nos están acabando, memoriza siempre esta corta historieta: “Un pajarito que vivía resignado en un árbol podrido en medio del pantano, se había acostumbrado a estar ahí, comía gusanos del fango y se hallaba siempre sucio por el pestilente lodo. Sus alas, estaban inutilizadas por el peso de la mugre, hasta que cierto día un gran ventarrón destruyó su guarida; el árbol podrido fue tragado por el cieno y él se dio cuenta de que iba a morir. En su deseo repentino de salvarse, comenzó a aletear con fuerza para emprender el vuelo, le costó mucho trabajo porque había olvidado cómo volar, pero enfrentó el dolor del entumecimiento hasta que logró levantarse y cruzar el ancho cielo, llegando finalmente a un bosque fértil y hermoso”.

“Los problemas de la vida son como el ventarrón que ha destruido tu guarida y te están obligando

a elevar el vuelo o a morir”. Nunca es tarde. No importa lo que hayamos vivido, no importa por la situación por la que estemos pasando, no importa las oportunidades que hayamos dejado pasar, no importa la edad, siempre estamos a tiempo para decir BASTA, para oír la llamada de Dios a buscar la perfección, para sacudirnos el cieno, y así volar ALTO y muy lejos del pantano.

Abandonemos la vía segura y cómoda. Lancémonos a la ruta incierta, abandonémonos en los brazos de Dios, y Él nos acompañará siempre y nos enseñará que camino tomar.



**Deacon Ray Ortega** was ordained in 1979 for the Archdiocese of Miami. He is a certified Pastoral Bereavement Specialist from the World Pastoral Care Center and a member of the South Florida Chapter of ADEC. He is Master of Ceremonies for the Auxiliary Bishop, the Most Rev. Felipe de Jesus Estevez. Ray currently serves on the NCMB Board.