



Journey

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National Catholic Ministry
to the Bereaved

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FINDING GOD IN TIMES OF GRIEF

by Father Tony Stanganelli

I write these reflections with you today not because I am some kind of an expert on grief counseling, nor even as someone who can claim to have experienced the intensity of the losses that you have experienced. While I lost my own mother some fifteen years ago, I don't make the claim that I know exactly what you are going through. Grief is a very individualized process, and maybe there is no one who will ever quite understand fully what you have gone through or what you are going through in the present moment. Not as an expert do I write these reflections, but as someone who wants to allow the power of God to bring healing and wholeness to your life. I hope to explore with you in these pages some ways in which we can allow the Lord to bring us that wholeness that we so long for.

I begin these reflections with a passage of scripture that may be familiar to you—the story of the raising of Lazarus:

When Mary came to the place where Jesus was, seeing him she fell at his feet and said to him, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would never have died." When Jesus saw her weeping, and the Jewish folk who had accompanied her also weeping, he was troubled in spirit, moved by the deepest emotions.

"Where have you laid him?" Jesus asked.

"Lord, come and see," they said.

Jesus began to weep which caused the Jews to remark, "See how much He loved him!" But some said, "He opened the eyes of that blind man. Why could he have not done something to stop this man from dying?"

Once again, troubled in spirit, Jesus approached the tomb. It was a cave with a stone laid across it. "Take away the stone," Jesus directed.

Martha, the dead man's sister, said to him, "Lord, it has been four days now. Surely there will be a stench!"

Jesus replied, "Did I not assure you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?"

They then took away the stone, and Jesus looked upward and said, "Father, I thank you for having heard me. I know that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd that they may believe that you sent me."

Having said this, Jesus called loudly, "Lazarus, come out!"



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The dead man came out, bound hand and foot with linen strips, his face wrapped in a cloth. “Untie him,” Jesus told them, “and let him go free.”

This caused many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, to put their faith in him.

—John 11:32 - 44

When someone you love dies, actually three people die, when you think of it—your beloved, you yourself and God. The fact that we ourselves die, or perhaps a substantial part of us dies with a loved one is painfully obvious. In those first stages of grief, we go through life like a zombie, taking care of tasks and duties and responsibilities none the less, but with no life and no energy. Sometimes we even find ourselves engaging in some self-destructive activities in those early stages of grief—we drive the car a little faster, we busy ourselves to exhaustion, or we even try to anesthetize the pain with alcohol or drugs.

Everyone tells you that time heals all wounds. I have not found that to be true—as if you could only turn enough calendar pages to make the wounds go away. We put that unrealistic expectation on ourselves: “if I can just get through the holiday, or my loved one’s birthday, or whatever the upcoming event is that we are so dreading, if I can just turn the calendar pages, the pain will be less.” It is my firm belief that time doesn’t heal all wounds...only God heals wounds.

But how can God heal wounds if God is dead? As I said in the beginning of this reflection, there are three people who die when a loved one passes on: your beloved, you yourself, and God. What do I mean when I say that God is dead? Well, what has died in the process of our loved one’s dying is our image of God—an image of God that was there, unchallenged, since the days when we first learned about him from our parents and teachers. But, here is the good news—that image of God had to die.

Do you remember the story of the disciples on the road to Emmaus? The two people, Cleopas and perhaps his wife, were walking from the city of Jerusalem to their hometown of Emmaus shortly after Easter Sunday. They were in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, a powerful time for Jewish people. At each Passover, the Jews believed that this might be the time when the Messiah would reveal himself—that God would finally vanquish all of

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Israel’s enemies and that Israel would be set free from all its foreign oppressors and overlords. Jesus, a man powerful in word and deed, seemed to be a likely candidate for the job. And when he appears in Jerusalem for the Passover, he is hailed as Messiah on Palm Sunday. Independence from Rome—freedom from taxes—Hosanna! But of course, it didn’t work out that way—and we can even hear the pain of disappointment from Cleopas as he says to the stranger who walks with him, “We were hoping that he was going to be the one to redeem Israel.” Then Jesus begins to open their eyes to a deeper reality, a deeper presence. But first, he says to Cleopas, “Was it not necessary that the Messiah should suffer these things?” In other words, God, or at least our image of God, had to die.

So what was your image of God that died on the day that your loved one died? Let’s look at some of the images of God that we grew up with. The fact is that our understanding of the world, of human nature, of relationships — all this changes as we get older. But, for the most part, our understanding of God remains pretty much the same all through life until something traumatic happens. I don’t think it would be too blasphemous to say that most of us thought about God in the same way as we thought about Santa Claus. For most of us, Santa Claus is a mirror image of God. Think of the popular song, *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*:

*You better watch out, you better not cry.
You better not pout I’m telling you why,
Santa Claus is coming to town.
He’s making a list, checking it twice,
Gonna find out who’s naughty or nice,
Santa Claus is coming to town.
He sees you when you’re sleeping,
he knows when you awake.
He knows if you’ve been bad or good
so be good for goodness sake.*

Just as an aside: When you think of it, Santa is a pretty good invention if you want your kids to behave.

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You always have something to hang over their heads around the holiday times if you want to motivate them. Who wants a stocking of coal? God has been often times used in the same way by Church leaders to maintain control over the flock—do this or you're going to hell!

Anyway, the whole point of the song *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* says this: If you're a good boy or girl, Santa is going to give you good things. Of course, you have to tell him what you want. So, you make your Santa-list, and then you wait on the department store line for your chance to tell Santa everything that was on your list. If you didn't get what you wanted, if you didn't get what was on the list, then you were told, "Santa knew better; he knew that you shouldn't have that." Of course, there was always the fear that Santa saw all the bad stuff that you did and Santa wasn't going to give you what you wanted. He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake. The eyes of Santa, perhaps like the eyes of God, are searching eyes, seeing into all the dark and secretive recesses of our lives. He, God or Santa, are just waiting to trip you up. And remember, neither Santa nor God count percentages or averages: you can be good right up until Christmas Eve—you could have worked tirelessly to keep your slate nice and clean. But, one false step even before the stroke of midnight—and you blew it! I hope that you can begin to see the connections between our image of God and our image of Santa Claus.

The whole mythology around Santa Claus really is a projection of a very sad image of God that we possess and that we really don't challenge—until we are forced to challenge it when that image of God has died. The saddest part of the song *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* is that you are not allowed to have your own emotions. "You better not cry, you better not pout." That's pretty violent to a kid, when you think about it. Think back to the days when you were a kid and you fell and hurt yourself when you were playing. Where I grew up, there were no play grounds—we played on the street. If I fell in the street and skinned my knee, I wouldn't cry or wail right away. I guess that wasn't too cool to do when you were with all your friends. Instead, I would go running inside the house and desperately search for those people who loved

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me. Then, as soon as I saw Mom, I knew it was O.K. to unleash all the pain. It was as if she gave me permission to feel the pain and to express the pain. The pain was there all along—but the pain is held inward until someone comes along and gives me the permission to cry. And isn't that beautiful? Of course, it didn't always work that way. There were moments when you weren't given permission to cry. "Oh come on, what are you crying about. Don't be such a baby. You're not really hurt." Sometimes a crying child can be treated like a barking dog. I'll really give you something to cry about! All we're

looking for is someone who will give us permission to unleash the pain!

All too often, during the time of grieving, we desperately look for someone who will give us the permission to unleash the pain. Sadly, after about a month or two, it's so hard to find those people. This is where you get the list of the ten stupidest things that people say to people who are in grief:

The one who has lost a loved one through a long-term illness often hears: At least they're not suffering any more.

The one who has lost a loved one through a sudden accident often hears: At least they didn't suffer.

The one who has lost a spouse after many years of marriage we say: At least you have some good memories.

The one who has lost a baby or a child often hears: You don't know: maybe if they didn't die something worse would have happened later on (I don't know too many things worse than death.)

The one who has lost a baby through a miscarriage is often told: You can always have more children.

To this list, add other great phrases like:

- Your loved one wouldn't want you to cry.
- Try to do something to take your mind off of things.
- Think positive thoughts!
- You've got to put it behind you and move on.
- God knew what was best—he has his reasons.

Ten dopey phrases—you could probably add to the list. Each of the phrases are ways that people can tell us that they really don't want us to wail and cry—they don't give us permission to express the pain. It's not some kind of malice that motivates people to say these things—I suppose they want to fix the pain but they can't.

The last of these phrases, however, speaks about not questioning God—God has his reasons and he knows what is best, so you better not tell him how you are feeling. You better watch out, you better not cry, you better not pout. Our image of God, like that of Santa Claus, is someone who doesn't want to hear us pouting and crying. He doesn't want to hear our rage and anger. God doesn't even want to hear our questions: God has his reasons, so you better not even ask him Why?

Ultimately, our image of the Santa Claus God dies. The ways in which we have related to God in the past dies. We're good people—we've kept our nose clean, obeyed all the rules—we did what we were supposed to do. But we didn't get what we want. And so, our understanding of God dies. But this is more than just the death of a child's concept of reality. This is more than just discovering that the moon is not made of green cheese. This is more than just feeling the disappointment that there is no Santa Claus. This is the death of someone upon whom we've placed all our trust and hope. We don't know what to believe any more, we don't know what to think any more—we don't even know how to pray any more.

But, the good news is that this concept of God has to die if we are really going to discover who God really is. Israel only really discovered who God was when they were forty years in the desert. And, if you feel like you're in a desert right now, that's good news—now God can reveal himself. And the better news is that not only does God come alive but you come alive and your loved one comes alive. This is the reality I want to address in the rest of this reflection.

So, how does the new reborn God reveal himself to me? For the Christian, we believe that we find God in a unique and singular way in the person of Jesus Christ. Perhaps the best image of Jesus Christ that I know is the Sacred Heart. Now, I have to confess that until a few months ago, devotion to the Sacred

Heart was not a part of my spirituality. The image itself seemed so pietistic—almost an embarrassment in our relationship with non-catholics. I threw out the Sacred Heart in exchange for more sophisticated understandings of Jesus. But, the Sacred Heart tells me that God has a human heart. Right now, even in heaven, God desires and feels and is broken because he has taken on a human heart. And so, through the Sacred Heart, let me tell you what my new understanding of God is.

When I was a child, I studied the Baltimore catechism just like anyone else. But, I have to admit that I was a very strange kid who became overly concerned about discrepancies that I would find in the catechism. For example, there was the question in the old Baltimore catechism: How many natures does Jesus Christ have? And the answer: Jesus

Christ has two natures: the nature of God and the nature of man (forgive the sexist language). But, I found another edition of the catechism that said, Jesus Christ had two natures, the nature of God and the nature of man. This troubled me. Which is it? Jesus has two natures? Jesus had two natures? So, I brought this question up in confession and the priest told me, "Jesus has two natures—even today. After Jesus died, he didn't go back to being God. He still has a human nature."

But, what does that mean? For me it means that God has so taken on our human state that even right now in Christ he has a human heart: a heart that yearns, a heart that hopes, a heart that breaks. First of all, a heart that yearns. We speak of the human heart as the seat of desire; we say, "I have my heart set on that." Traditionally, it would be very hard to conceive of God as wanting anything—after all, he lives in perfect beatitude in heaven. He doesn't want for anything. Yet, if God has a human heart, he does have desires. In the gospel of John, we hear one of these human desires, "Father, I pray not only for my disciples but for all who will come to believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you. That they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me. Father, they are your gift to me. I wish that where I am they also may be with me."

In Jesus, we hear what God desires in his heart—that we can all be one: that where Jesus is, we also

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may be. At first, this desire of Jesus, this desire of the Sacred Heart seems to say only that someday we may all find ourselves in heaven, with Jesus, with Mary, with the saints and our loved ones. But Jesus desires more—he desires that the Kingdom of God be in our midst even today—right now. The great desire of God is that we discover one another in the Sacred Heart of Jesus even now. Later, I'm going to suggest a way that we can pray in that Sacred Heart of Jesus and find our loved one.

The human heart is also a heart that can break. That means that right now, God's heart is breaking with you. Just as Jesus wept at the tomb of Lazarus as we heard in the reading with which I began this reflection, so too God in Jesus wept on the day that your loved one died; God wept with you every time you shed a tear, cried a sob, felt your heart ripped in two. Do you remember in the gospel story when Jesus breathed his last on the cross? In Matthew's gospel we hear about the veil in the temple being torn in half. The veil was the Jewish version of the altar rail—it separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the Temple—it kept God on one side and us on the other side. Now, that barrier is torn down. In Jesus, God has taken up all of human reality, even human suffering, pain and longing.

In short, the Sacred Heart of Jesus means that because God and Jesus are truly one, God has a human heart that longs for you, a human heart that breaks for you. And even more importantly, all those people who are right now in the heart of Jesus, all those people who have passed onto the other side, they too long for you and their heart breaks for you.

Think, for a moment then of what that means about heaven. When I was a child, my mother and I had this discussion about heaven. I can remember my mother saying to me, "When I get to heaven, I can't wait to be with my parents and my little brother Anthony who died at the age of two." In my own intellectual arrogance I disagreed with her because I heard about this thing called the Beatific Vision. "Oh mother," I said. "When you get to heaven, you are going to be so caught up in the vision of God you won't desire anything else. You're going to be perfectly happy just beholding the beatific vision. You'll be so happy you won't want to look for your parents or your

brother or anyone for that matter." My mother looked at me with horror and said, "Anthony, what are you talking about, the Beatific Vision. Heaven isn't going to be heaven without the people you love."

I've thought about that in recent years. Mother was right. Heaven isn't perfectly heaven without the people you love. Sure, when we die we're going to be embraced by God. Sure, when we die we'll be freed from this life of pain, this vale of tears. But heaven isn't going to be heaven without the people you love.

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Now, on the one hand we can picture all these people up in heaven having a grand old time and not giving half a thought to us here on earth, we who are still in the vale of tears. But these people are caught up into the mystery of the Sacred Heart—they live in the heart of Jesus, and that heart still yearns and desires for us to be with them fully. "Father, that they may all be one, as you Father are in me and I am in you."

Concretely, I have come to believe that the people who have passed to the other side really do miss us, and they desire to be one with us. Well, obviously there will come a time when we will all be one in Christ, all sharing his company in the communion of saints. But even right now they want to be one with us. And the way they can be one with us is in prayer.

Well, what exactly is prayer? Before our loved one died, maybe we thought about prayer as a way of trying to tell God how to do his business. Like we have all these miseries here on earth, and God has to be reminded about all the things he should be taking care of. So we get on our prayer telephone to God, saying, "Oh God, help this person find some employment. They have three kids to care for and they are really desperate." And God says, "Hey, thanks for calling my attention to that. Yes, you're right—I didn't realize that those people had all those mouths to feed. Maybe I better do something about that. Yes, thanks for telling me about that sick person—you're right, they don't deserve that illness. Maybe I better do something to help them." Prayer is too often seen like we're rubbing the bottle of the genie to get our three wishes. Like the old Groucho Marx show, *You Bet Your Life*—say the magic word and the duck comes out of the sky and you win \$1,000. Say the right prayer, make the right novena to St. Jude, copy this novena nine times and leave it

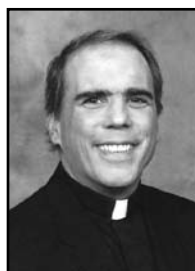
in nine Churches on nine consecutive days and you'll get what you are praying for.

Well, if that's our concept of prayer, no wonder we might find it hard to pray in the midst of the grieving process—fundamentally, what has come down to us is that prayer doesn't work—at least that genie-in-the-bottle kind of prayer doesn't work. Our judgment that this kind of praying doesn't work may have developed in those situations where we were praying for the recovery of our loved one if they were suffering from a long and terminal illness. God, make them better—get rid of the cancer. We hear about miracles all the time and we pray for that miraculous healing in a loved one and it doesn't happen. And we judge, "Maybe I didn't say the right prayers—maybe I didn't pray hard enough, or with enough faith." Maybe I didn't say the right word, like on the Groucho Marx show. Obviously, my prayers didn't work.

But what is prayer? Prayer, ultimately, is loving communion—it is communion with the heart of Christ and communion with all those who are in the heart of Christ. Prayer is the way we find ourselves in lov-

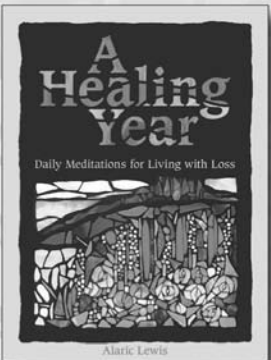
ing communion with one another. I think that is why the tradition of our Church has wisely set forth the Eucharist as a beautiful prayer both for the living and the dead. On All Souls' Day, we celebrate this long-standing tradition of our Church that, through the Eucharist, we are still in loving communion with those who have passed to the other side....

This article will be continued in the next issue of Journey where Fr. Stanganelli will discuss concrete ways we might pray in the midst of the grieving process.



Father Tony Stanganelli is a priest from the New York area. Father Tony has a Masters in Sacred Theology in New York and a pontifical licentiate degree in Sacred Theology from the Gregorian University in Rome. <http://www.holyspiritchurch.com/>.

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A Healing Year

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A BOOK FOR FAMILIES TO TALK ABOUT LOSS

The Land Beyond Forever

This story by Tracy Flynn Bowe is about a little girl named Anne and her mommy who travel through the heart on stars of light to meet with Grandma. It teaches that we never lose our connection to those we love, while the post-story narrative for adult readers provides insight and understanding that will be helpful to families coping with the serious illness or death of a loved one. It is a children's story as well as a tool for families to talk and share about the legacy of those who have gone before. A CD with a narrative and musical version of the story is included.

For copies, contact Three Sisters Publishing House at threesisterspublishing.com or call 320-654-0001.



UNOS POCOS HECHOS.

Solo unos pocos hechos en la vida del ser humano tienen la virtud de generar en el profundos cambios. Estos acontecimientos son oportunidades las cuales no siempre aprovechamos y que nos pueden ayudar a crecer. Entre ellos los más notables son el nacimiento de un hijo y la muerte de un ser allegado y muy querido. El primero por la alegría y la felicidad que nos produce y el segundo por el pesar y el dolor de la separación. Ambos por amor.

He experimentado en mi vida estas dos emociones, la segunda una emoción no deseada. Si tuviese que retroceder el tiempo y repetir estos dos acontecimientos en mi vida con el mismo amargo final, yo lo haria de nuevo, por que es preferible ser feliz y desdichado en la vida, a no ser ninguna de las dos cosas. Cuando mi padre y más tarde mi madre partieron de este mundo el dolor y la impotencia ante la muerte se apoderaron de mi. De nada me valio en ese momento el tener otros seres queridos y amigos que me daban consuelo y apoyo. Quedo en mi un vacío, me senti sin fuerzas, pero pronto comense a darme cuenta que la vida seguia su agetreado rumbo, me di cuenta que el mundo no se habia detenido, me di cuenta que yo a pesar del dolor que sentia seguia vivo.

Necesitaba hacer un nuevo replanteamiento de mi vida, ya mi papá y mi mamá no estaban más aqui en la tierra. Pense que era ciertamente muy doloroso, pero comprendi que no podia yo incomodar a los demas que me rodeaban con mi sufrimiento, recuerdos y relatos de mis desventuras.

Me di cuenta que tenia que continuar, que esta experiencia de la partida de mi papá y mi mamá a la Casa del Padre tenian que servirme para crecer, para tomar determinaciones sabiendo que la vida es hoy, y que hoy es el único día del cual soy dueño, por que el mañana es incierto y el ayer ya paso.

Ya mi futuro no es más mi verdugo, es en todo caso una dulce promesa del reencuentro con mi Padre Dios y con mis padres que ya viven en Su presencia.



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.

NCMB MEMBERSHIP MEETING ANNOUNCEMENT

The Membership Meeting and Board of Trustees Meeting that was scheduled for February was cancelled due to the snow storm that hit the St. Louis area and the entire Mid-west. As a result the Annual Membership Meeting has been re-scheduled for Thursday, October 9, 2008 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.

LEAVE A LEGACY

You can make a difference in the lives of others. Please remember the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved, Inc., in your will.