



# 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

### PART II

*The first part of this article appeared in the May 2008 issue of Journey.*

What I would like to do at this point in this reflection is to suggest some very concrete ways we might pray in the midst of the grieving process. First, let me offer some reasons why we ought to pray for those who have died. Fundamentally, why we pray for the dead is so that their lives and our lives can move on. Now, when you first hear that, it sounds like I'm saying that prayer is a way that we can separately move on with our lives. The image you might get is one of two people walking down a path together, and then they come to a fork in the road—one goes one way, and the other goes another way, and you won't see each other again, or at least for a while, so you utter this prayer, "God be with you," or, as we say in colloquial English shorthand, "Good-bye." But the image strikes us with horror because we don't want to have to say good-bye to the people we love, and if that is what prayer is all about, then I don't want anything to do with it. I have found that people are even afraid to stop the grieving process because they feel that once they have stopped grieving, they will stop remembering their loved one. It's almost as if the grief were the only way they can relate to their deceased loved one, and to suggest that we stop grieving and move on with life is like saying, "Cut off all ties with your loved one."

However, you can't bury love—love didn't go into the grave on the day that your loved one died. So, what do I mean when I say that prayer for the dead is necessary so that we can move on with our lives? Our moving on is a moving together. Together, we move more deeply into the heart of Christ so that together, both we the living as well as the deceased, can experience love, serenity and peace.

First let me speak about the moving on that our deceased loved ones are doing. Our tradition has spoken about Purgatory, a sort of half-way house between heaven and hell. Our tradition also spoke about our prayers helping the poor souls in purgatory moving from this place of unrest into the perfect rest of heaven. Well, what exactly is purgatory? Our tradition says that purgatory is the place where the deceased undergo a kind of temporal punishment due to sins already forgiven. Now, that might not have sat too well with you, particularly if you start thinking about your loved ones. I mean, if a sin is forgiven, why do we have to suffer any kind of punishment for it? The tradition said that, even though the sin is forgiven, sin still has consequences and creates a situation that needs to be "paid for." Fine, but what about that good thief on the cross? Remember the scene at Calvary when the good thief says to Jesus, "Remember me when you come into your kingdom." And Jesus says, "This day, you will be with me in

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paradise.” This day you will be with me. Jesus doesn’t say, “After your 312 years in purgatory for stealing will you be with me.”

I believe that those who die in the Lord are brought into the mystery of his love, into his Sacred Heart. However, perhaps they aren’t able to experience that love fully just yet. Why not? I go back to the wise words of my mother, “Heaven isn’t going to be heaven without the people you love.” Heaven will not be fully heaven if there is an obstacle between us and our deceased loved one. You see, we’re all members of the Body of Christ, and Jesus wants us to be all one in Him. But our human situation is such that we have differences between us, the petty little differences that arise between us even here on earth and may even be carried into the grave. In some way, those barriers, those obstacles have to be overcome. Of course, we might all feel, “Well it’s too late to make up with the deceased—after all, they left us and we can’t say we’re sorry and we can’t forgive them for the hurts which they have caused.” But that is exactly where prayer comes in.

There is a great deal of resistance, emotionally, to say that part of our prayer for our deceased loved one has to involve some form of mutual forgiving and asking for forgiveness. One of the dynamics that takes place after the death of a loved one is that we begin to make our relationship so incredibly larger than life. We want to forget the fact that we ever had arguments, that there were times when we found our loved ones to be troublesome or even obnoxious. We instantly want to canonize them. Sometimes at a wake you see the dynamic of all the people clamoring to be considered to belong to the inner circle of the deceased. I want to believe that I was so important in the life of this loved one, that this was my most cherished dearest friend. I want to ignore the fact that I didn’t get to the hospital regularly, or I don’t even want to deal with the guilt that I might have become short-tempered with them as they entered into the critical stages of their illness.

So, we all have this baggage that we want to ignore—the baggage of the day-to-day human dealings with someone we loved. We want to ignore the fact that our relationship was human with its ups and downs, its bumps and bruises. But, I’m telling you that this baggage has to be dealt with, especially if we are going to find peace and if our loved one is going to move on into the mystery of the Sacred Heart—if we are to move closer together into the heart of Jesus. After Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead, he says, “Untie him and let him go free.” Forgiving our beloved departed and allowing them to forgive us is an important prayer event that can help us move on. So, one of the prayers I’m

*“Heaven isn’t going to be heaven  
without the people you love.”*

going to suggest is a prayer of forgiveness for those who have passed on.

I realize that what binds us together is the common experience of loss—and yet each loss is unique. This kind of prayer of asking for forgiveness from a loved one and receiving forgiveness from that loved one may be more critical for some than for others. For those who experienced particular tragedies in their life: the loss of a loved one through suicide or through abortion, this kind of prayer is indispensable. But even in less intense experiences of loss, I’m thinking of the loss of a spouse or a parent in particular, this prayer of asking for and receiving forgiveness is important. We live in a day and an age where there is so much work that is being done in the field of recovery—recovery from addictions, reclaiming our lost, inner child, the work of people like Melanie Beatty and John Bradshaw. As we begin to uncover some of the woundedness of our own past, we start to see the roles that were played by our parents or by some significant person in our life. If that parent who might have hurt us is now deceased, part of the work of recovery and healing is the work of forgiveness. As Jesus says to Martha and Mary in the gospel, “Unbind him and let him go free.” In a moment, we can discover together some ways in which we can pray for that unbinding.

Another kind of prayer that I’m going to suggest is that we try to allow Jesus to unbind us and let us go free. Here, I think it is so critical that our prayer be as honest and as unedited as we possibly can make it. If we grew up feeling that we should never answer back our parents, then all the more we felt that we could never really bare our feelings of frustration, disappointment or anger before God. The older we get, the more sophisticated our prayer becomes—but sadly, our prayer isn’t a prayer from the heart but a prayer from the head. In this prayer I’m going to suggest, I will ask you to imagine yourself like a little child again. After all, it was Jesus himself who said that unless you become like a little child, you shall not enter the Kingdom of God. In this prayer, I will talk about becoming a child again with all the freedom that a child has to express emotions of hurt and disappointment. In this prayer, we will ask Jesus not to explain death away (after all, we’re

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children and we aren't interested in those philosophical answers) but to give us all the things that we miss from our loved ones.

And so, the first prayer experience I wish to express is to try to get ourselves to speak to Jesus like a child. In the gospels we hear how Jesus said "Let the children come to me and do not hinder them." He also said, "Unless you become like a little child, you shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven." Children don't edit anything—they are honest with their feelings (if we let them) and honest with their needs.

These meditations work best if someone is leading us or guiding us through the imagery. Perhaps you might ask a friend to slowly read these meditation exercises to you—or perhaps even read them slowly yourself into a tape recorder and then play it back for yourself.

And so, uncross your legs, sit as upright as you can, and breathe deeply. Inhale. One...two...three...four...and exhale slowly one...two...three...four. (Repeat this several times). Picture your house when you were about five years old. Remember what the living room looked like? What kind of furniture did you have? Do you remember the front door? Stand by the front door as a five-year-old child. If you are a girl, try to remember the favorite dress you would wear. If you're a little boy, try to remember your favorite shoes. Look at your dress...shoes...Now, open the front door and through the screen door, look outside. Remember what the street in front of your house looked like. Remember what the front stoop looked like. Now you leave the house...and you walk down to the street. Across the street, you see the neighbor's house—the walkway and the stoop. There are a lot of little children sitting on the stoop, and they are all sitting around a man. You recognize the man as Jesus. You want to run across the street, but you're a little shy...but then Jesus catches your eye and he waves you over. You go across the street, and as you walk up the sidewalk to your neighbor's stoop, all the other children leave. You then walk over to Jesus and he stretches out his arms and you climb up in his lap. What does sitting on his lap feel like? As you sit there, Jesus asks you your name. You tell him. He repeats your name over and over and says, "That's a beautiful name." Then he looks into your eyes and Jesus' brow begins to furrow. He sees you're upset and he asks, "What's the matter? Something is wrong...Do you want to tell me what's wrong?" And then you begin to pour out your heart. You tell him all your

*"Unless you become  
like a little child, you  
shall not enter the  
Kingdom of heaven."*

disappointment and hurt and frustration and anger. Jesus pulls his arms around you as you begin to cry...and sob. Let yourself cry like a little child. Jesus holds you close to his chest—so close that you can feel his garment against your cheek. Jesus doesn't say anything. He just holds you. While he holds you there, feel all the love in his arms, in his embrace, in his heart just envelope you. He gives you all you need right now—all the ways you need to be loved. All the ways you were loved by your loved one but now cannot receive. Stay there for a while...Let Jesus take his fingers and wipe away the tears from each of your eyes...

Jesus now stands up and takes you by the hand. You feel his large hands take your tiny hand as you cross the street. He walks you up the walkway to your own house. As you open the door, you stand there and give Jesus a big hug. He tells you, "I'll be here whenever you want me."

The second meditation: This is a meditation that can be adapted in many ways. The main focus of the meditation is to be able to address some of the unfinished business with your loved one. Before you begin the meditation, ask Jesus to reveal to your heart that person whom you wish to pray for right now.

So, once again, uncross your legs, sit as upright as you can, and breathe deeply. Inhale: one...two...three...four...and exhale slowly one...two...three...four. (Repeat this several times).

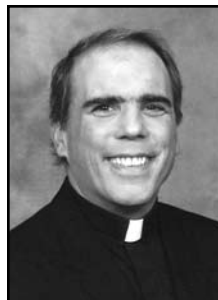
You are walking through the woods. There is a path you are following. It is a bright and sunny day. You look up and you see the sun filtering through the trees. You are aware of all the greenery of the woods...the ferns, the bushes, the trees...You come to a clearing in the woods and you decide to sit down. How does the moist ground feel underneath you? Feel a gentle breeze blowing against your cheek. Listen to the birds crowing overhead.

From the other side of the clearing, you see a path that leads back into the woods. As you sit there, you see two people emerge from the woods. The first person is Jesus, and he leads by the hand the person you love. They make their way toward you...How do you feel when you see Jesus and your loved one together? They walk toward you in the clearing and sit right on the ground facing you. You have so much you want to say to your loved one, but you don't know where to start. You begin to share with your loved one some of your regrets—some of the things that you wanted to say to

your loved one but never got the chance, some of the things you wish you had never done. As you speak, you are afraid to look into the face of your loved one, afraid of what kind of a look that might be there. Finally, you stop speaking and you look up. Your loved one looks at Jesus and together they smile—your loved one then turns to you and is still smiling. Hear your loved one say to you, “It’s all right, it’s O.K. I know what you are feeling. I forgive you. I love you.” Allow Jesus to take the hand of your loved one and place it on your heart. Allow your loved one to speak to you words that ask for your forgiveness. Maybe there is a particular incident that your loved one wants to address—a situation for which they never had the chance to say, “I’m sorry.” Listen to those words, “I’m sorry.” Feel that person’s hand on your shoulder.

Allow Jesus to place his arms around both of you. Stay quiet in this presence for a while. All three of you stand up together. When you feel that you are ready, take your loved one’s hand and place it in the hand

of Jesus. Watch Jesus and your loved one walk back across the clearing into the woods from where they emerged. Your loved one turns around and says one last parting word to you. What does your loved one say to you?



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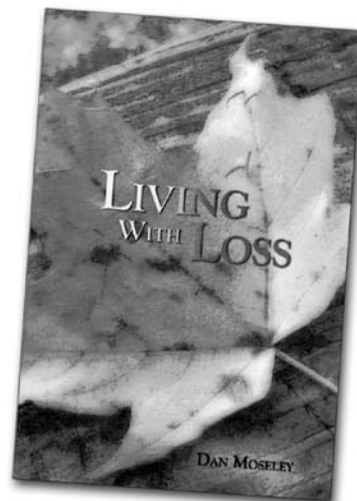
## BOOK REVIEW

### LIVING WITH LOSS

BY REV. DR. DAN MOSELEY

ISBN 9781601480057

This book is a practical, consoling, and encouraging source of support for anyone encountering loss and grief. Dan is able to captivate us and engage us in such a distinct way in his own grief, which on so many levels is our own grief. The author shares his personal experience with several losses and the healing process that follows uniquely outlined through his ten “dimensions of growth and grief.” He is able to reveal the universe of grief and loss that exist in all our lives. Moseley’s first book is impressive in its insight and its tenderness; it is a true expression of his palpable, profound and painful connection to his losses and to himself. There are no simple directions or quick fixes for grief; instead, *Living with Loss* is an immensely helpful and comforting resource for any-



one one struggling with the pain and sorrow of loss in their life. This book is about living. This book is about loss. This book is about living with loss.

For more information, please contact [www.xyzzypress.com](http://www.xyzzypress.com)

## EL PASADO Y EL FUTURO.

**Rev. Diácono Ray Ortega**

Cuando volvemos al pasado, volvemos a recordar. Pero muchas veces el recordar nos trae el sabor amargo de lo que ha pasado, de alguna frustración acontecida.

Recordar las acciones pasadas muchas veces nos sirven de lección y reflexión para nuestro futuro.

Recordemos que la recompensa no es algo que nos viene de afuera y se suma o se une a nuestros méritos; es algo que crece muy dentro de nosotros, como la planta de la semilla.

La semilla que es buena y cae en terreno bien cuidado produce buenos frutos, y ese es el premio. La semilla que es mala y cae en un terreno arido y pedregoso produce arboles secos y sin frutos, ese es el castigo.

Entonces que te espera en el futuro?. Si con certeza no lo sabes, piensa siempre en que estas sembrando. Si siembras matas de orquidias, recogeras orquidias. Si siembras matas de rosas, rec-

ogeras rosas. Pero recuerda que todas las rosas por bellas y hermosas que sean también tienen espinas que son punzantes y hieren produciendole a uno dolor y haciendolo sangrar. Pero porque las rosas tengan espinas no las vamos a plantar? Tendriamos que estar locos para no hacerlo.

Recuerda siempre que tu futuro será según tu lo decidas. Si quieres tener amor y felicidad, siembra siempre amor y felicidad, siembra siempre la buena semilla. Sacrificate para servir y ama para dar, y dandote sin reservas las semillas que plantes, produzcan frutos buenos y frutos en abundancia.



**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.

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