

## Chapter Six: Should Mourning Have an End?

This chapter is in many ways a mirror image of the previous five chapters. Mourning is to the survivor what stages of dying are to the terminally ill. One difference is that we know more, or at least we can know more, about mourning than about dying. The dead are not available to tell us about their experience of dying. But everyone past a fairly young age knows the experience of mourning for someone they loved. A second big difference is that the end of dying is clear and inevitable. Mourning, however, may go on indefinitely with seemingly no direction.

If, as it is often said, death is hidden in our culture, then one should not be surprised that mourning is, too. The dying cannot help what is happening to them. They stir up sympathy for their plight. The mourner is more likely to generate impatience and resentment. *Get on with your life* is the frequent advice given to the mourner. When mourning is hidden or suppressed, it does not go away; it operates quietly but endlessly. As patients can be put on life-support systems that maintain a semblance of life, if not human functioning, so millions of people go on mourning with no end in sight.

A few distinctions in the use of terms would help in setting out the problem and getting some bearings in the use of resources. Grief, mourning and bereavement are the terms most often used in referring to death and its response in the lives of survivors. *Grief* is a feeling of sorrow at a loss; most commonly it is used as a noun. It connotes a burden that a person carries when someone who had shared the burdens of life is gone. Grief is the territory for psychologists and *grief counselors* who try to unlock the feelings of grieving individuals.

*Mourning* might be helpfully distinguished from grief as its outward expression. Most commonly, mourning is used as a verb; to mourn is the activity of expressing grief. An individual mourns as a community member, that is, the main actor is a community or a group, while the individual both gives and receives as part of the process. This community of mourning can be a whole nation, at a time when the nation has lost a leader and occasionally when a nation has lost its soul.<sup>1</sup> Psychologists know much about mourning but they are not the final experts. Every community has wise adults who have learned both to comfort and to mourn.

*Bereavement* is a state or condition in which mourners exist. The adjective *bereft* is not used much in English but it still carries the powerful

image of feeling deprived and desolate. The noun *Bereavement* is also not very common because a set period for mourning is no longer in vogue. People are supposed to be freer to express their grief as they wish and for as long as they need to do so. But a bereavement having form and length survives among some religious groups and might be more supportive of personal freedom. Bereavement possesses the double sense of end: a fixed purpose and a termination point. The good thing about bereavement is that it actually ends.

Freud has a helpful essay on the difference between mourning and melancholy.<sup>ii</sup> Both are feelings of loss but melancholy is without end. The sad person who is afflicted with melancholy, says Freud, loses his or her own life and becomes impoverished emotionally. In contrast, the mourner *bit by bit*, under great expense of time and ...energy returns to reality.<sup>@</sup> The existence of the lost *Object* remains in mind. In the grip of mourning, the world becomes poor and empty; in melancholy it is the ego itself that is emptied. The absence of joy in one's life may paradoxically be due to an inability to mourn.

### Public Mourning

The main contention of this chapter is that mourning is a personal and communal act that can only be understood as a relational response. If there is no community with rituals for mourning, then feelings of grief cannot be accepted and dealt with in a healthy way. What we increasingly have is a dichotomy: on the one hand, intense private mourning that feeds on bodily and spiritual health, and on the other hand, an ostentatious public mourning that promises what it cannot deliver. Public displays of mourning, such as the new practice of victims confronting criminals at court sentencings, supposedly bring *closure*,<sup>@</sup> but more often they interfere with people coming to terms with their grief. Feelings of grief are repeated every time we relive one of the nation's calamities.

I have several times drawn the comparison between sex and death, sex education and death education. Geoffrey Gorer in his 1960's study compared mourning in the twentieth century to sex in the nineteenth century.<sup>iii</sup> Everyone is known to do it in private but one should not speak about it in public. Things have changed in the decades since Gorer's study but perhaps not as much as the surface would suggest. The place of sex was changed by adding public displays to the main activities that remain intensely private. Mourning, too, has acquired splashy public displays but feelings of grief are likely to remain bottled up in a private sphere.

Public mourning is not lacking so much as a form of *public* that is not cut off

from the private. The bridge between private and public spheres is rituals of community life that sustain interpersonal relations. Rituals of their nature are conservative, reminiscent of the past. They are always vulnerable to being attacked as outdated and irrelevant. But at the most intense moments of life humans need to be buoyed by routine gestures that hold the world together until new and reasonable actions can function again. Rituals have to grow organically; they cannot simply be invented. The best rituals are hundreds or thousands of years old. The funeral, with all its cultural variations, seems to have emerged at the very beginning of humanity.

The rituals for the disposal of the dead have changed over time. Rituals can change without losing their effectiveness provided the change emerges out of past experience, usually very slowly. What can be especially corruptive of rituals surrounding death is the exploitation of tender feelings for the sake of profit. The Commodification of grief - books, workshops, chat rooms - has been booming.

The beginnings of this grief industry were in the 1840s when the profession of undertaker or funeral director was born. The casket, a word taken from the jewel industry, replaced the plain, wooden coffin. Embalming became a standard practice to keep the corpse natural when clearly it is not. The funeral parlor gradually replaced the home as the setting for the mourners to gather.

Reformers have periodically attacked the funeral industry for its callousness, pretentiousness and greed. Jessica Mitford's book, *The American Way of Death*, is perhaps the best known book.<sup>iv</sup> But practices around death change very slowly. Until recently, most people trusted their local undertaker whose family had been in the business for generations.

A significant change occurred in the 1990s. For a long while, the big corporations had not seemed to notice how profitable the funeral business was. When bad economic times come, many businesses suffer. Funerals provide steady and predictable income.

In the late twentieth century, several corporations began buying up all the little, family-owned funeral parlors. The biggest entrepreneurs, Service Corporation International (SCI) and the Loewen Group, bought up one-fifth of the market. They expected to make millions of dollars. Surprisingly, a combination of greed and ignorance led instead to financial disaster. Between 1998 and 1999 both of these empires collapsed. SCI stock lost ninety-four percent of its value; Loewen filed for bankruptcy.

What is now emerging is a new funeral industry which one can hope has learned from mistakes made by the big corporations. What should have been learned is that there is a limit to how far business can go in making grief just one more impersonal object that can be subjected to economies of scale for maximum profit. The profession to be successful has to reacquire some of the better characteristics it had in the past as a family-owned business. The mourner was dealing with a neighbor who had deep roots in the community and had other interests besides making money.

The students in today's fifty-two mortuary schools are generally interested in providing a service to a community rather than being a sales manager in a big company. About half the students in these schools are women (as opposed to five percent in 1971); almost a third are African-American. George Connick, executive director of the American Board of Funeral Services Education, has said: "The business has opened up. It's brought people into the field who have stronger academic backgrounds and stronger backgrounds in working with people. I think the quality of service will improve over time."

The Jessica Mitfords of the country will remain suspicious of such lofty rhetoric but there does seem to be an opportunity for improvement. Nevertheless, one cannot expect a funeral industry to reflect better attitudes toward death than does the culture as a whole.

Death education is not primarily a matter for mortuary schools, or even for schools. It starts with the way parents provide an example of mourning to their children and the education continues by way of the many groups and organizations in which people participate. This education can include civic rituals that sometimes connect with genuine personal grief.

Television, now joined with the Internet, is one of the great variables in the modern expression of grief. Television is now old enough to have its own rituals. It can be an unsurpassable bond at moments of great sorrow. It can also be an instrument for the manipulation of mostly manufactured emotions.

When John Kennedy was killed in 1963, rituals on television and the ritual of television itself were relatively new. The assassination of a president, who had projected youth and vigorous action, came as a genuine shock to the nation and the world. Television provided a calming effect. The funeral was elegantly designed with admirable restraint in its form. For about four days the nation stopped its business and felt the reality of death.

The event of Kennedy's death and funeral quickly became part of the national memory (Where were you when...?). The Kennedy image became inflated into a legend. A brief and not so successful presidency was turned into a glorious achievement. Airports, highways and schools were named for the fallen leader, a way to keep the memory alive. The grave site of Kennedy became a chief attraction for Washington tourists. Less helpfully, Dealey Plaza in Dallas became a kind of shrine where one can relive the horror of Nov. 22, 1963. Still, when one looks back at the event, John Kennedy's funeral provides a standard for how national tragedies might be handled.

It was probably impossible that television could ever repeat this simple and restrained approach to the need for national mourning. Just five years later the deaths of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. evoked some of the same feelings as the assassination of John Kennedy. But the country's mood was much different and television could not heal the divisions that these deaths embodied. The artificiality of television's grief was evident. Since then, the deaths of famous people - rock stars, movie actresses, athletes - sets the grief machine in motion.

The death of Princess Diana in 1997 offers comparison to both the Kennedy proceedings and to the treatment of the glamorous celebrities in recent decades. Diana's funeral did create a bond of feeling in England, where she was not quite a national leader. The reaction was so intense and so widespread that many people predicted that the event would change the English character. England would now wear its emotions - especially grief - on its sleeve.

By the first anniversary of Diana's death, when the crowds failed to show up at the burial site, the predictions appeared exaggerated if not embarrassing. National character does not change drastically with one outpouring of emotion. In this case, as in many others in the 1990s, international television and twenty-four hour news channels created mass outpourings of feelings.

In the United States, the event that bears closest comparison to John Kennedy's death is the bombings on Sept. 11, 2001. The date itself became an immediate marker of anger, grief, self-pity and insecurity. The spontaneous shrines that appeared in Union Square Park and Washington Square Park in Manhattan represented genuine grief and the need to mourn in an appropriately public way. Television's part was a mixture of the best and the worst. For the first few days, a cadre of television reporters who were close to the scene delivered graphic and calming reports. But television's voracious appetite for news has no built-in restraints.

Some of the memorials at political, athletic and educational gatherings during subsequent weeks were appropriate. The well-attended funerals of fire fighters and police officers gave mourning a visible and solemn form. However, the attempt to make Sept. 11, 2002 the greatest memorial ceremony in history reflected the nation's tendency to overdo its self-absorption. After listening to a thousand renditions of *God Bless America*, many nations that had shared in the immediate grief reached the limit of their sympathy. It was time for the United States to put its grief in world perspective, which is not to forget the event but to situate it in a way that is helpful for itself and for other nations.

Washington D.C., which Philippe Aries described as a city of monuments to the dead, has one memorial that is different.<sup>vi</sup> The Vietnam memorial, a plain dark wall with 58,235 names on it, has done as much as any one thing to heal the division caused by that disastrous war in Southeast Asia.<sup>vii</sup> The young designer, Maya Lin, accomplished a near miracle in getting the monument built. *I had an impulse to cut open the earth*, wrote Lin, then a twenty-one year old student at Yale. *The grass would grow back, but the cut would remain.*<sup>ix</sup>

Any doubts about its effectiveness were quickly erased not just by the size of the crowds but by the genuine emotion that the memorial elicited. A *Veteran's Day* editorial aptly describes the usual scene: *They walk as if on hallowed ground. They touch the stone and speak with the dead. They come to mourn and to remember - an old ritual made new, creating in this time another timeless moment....As the long polished panels reflect those that move before them, the names of the past become etched on the faces of the present and, for a moment, the living and the dead are one.*<sup>x</sup>

National monuments seldom carry such power because mourning (in contrast to grief) requires interaction. People rather than stones are the ordinary basis for interacting. The genius of Maya Lin's design is that, unlike so many recent memorials that merely relive the past horror, the Vietnam memorial has a narrative, a powerful story that begins with the grim facts but then moves the visitor beyond the grave. One walks down until one is literally overwhelmed by the dead but then one walks up and out.<sup>x</sup> Perhaps the only comparable memorial in Washington is the Holocaust museum, filled as it is with the ordinary stuff of life and the extraordinary means of death. The museum is most powerful for Jewish people but, as the crowds of visitors indicate, its stark simplicity crosses both ethnic and generational lines.

## Personal/Communal Mourning

For most people most of the time, mourning is possible because there are one to a dozen people who are physically present to share the grief. The correlative of the verb *to mourn* is *to comfort*, a word that means to bring strength. The comforter brings strength mainly by being there. To comfort and to mourn, as reciprocal actions, can move back and forth in exchanges between mourner and comforter. Often the mourner ends up comforting the one who has come to offer support. No matter; the comforter and the mourner share the burden of grief and also share the healing that comes from genuine human encounter in dark times.

Words are important in such moments, although exactly what words are spoken is not so important. Religious rituals contain formulas that everyone in the community knows well. Such fixed formulas can be criticized as clichés or empty formalism. But in the midst of profound grief, few people are able to come up with fresh and brilliant insights that fit the situation. It is the strength of ritual sayings that they carry people through their sorrow. The standard Roman Catholic practice at wakes was to say the rosary (a decade of the beads), the repetition of a prayer formula without much thought to the words. Jewish religion probably has the most precisely specified gestures and words from the moment of death to the departure from the cemetery and for the week that follows.<sup>xi</sup>

For people attending a funeral service, the uppermost question is often: What do I say? However, once they have suffered the loss of someone close to them they usually realize that one need not worry about what to say. In the United States the funeral service still has enough ritual about it to provide help in what to say and do.

The same is seldom true of the mourning period that follows. Widows complain that their friends and associates shun them for months and then pretend that nothing has happened. Writing a letter of condolence is something of a lost art but cards and letters are still an important form of comforting during the weeks and months after a death. Whether the card comes three days or six months later it is always welcome. Today's e-mail lacks some of the desired formality but it does have the advantage of providing easy access to world-wide communication.

Harold Kushner's fine book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*, emerged from the author's own experience of mourning and the book offered helpful advice to comforters. When comforting is intended it is difficult to know what to say. It is easier to list what not to say, namely, anything critical of the mourner, anything that tries to minimize the mourner's pain, anything that asks the mourner to disguise his or her feelings.<sup>xii</sup> Particularly to children it is important

not to say: ADon't feel bad. God took your mother because he needed her more than you did.@

Commenting on the Book of Job, Kushner says that Job's comforters did two things right: they came and they listened - for several days. After Job was finished, they should have said: AYes, it's really awful.@ Their mistake was in thinking that when Job said AWhy is God doing this to me,@ Job was asking a question and that they should try to explain God's ways.<sup>xiii</sup>

The words at funerals and in periods of mourning come close to what Bronislaw Malinowski called Apathetic speech.@ This is a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words.<sup>xiv</sup> We need this form of Asocial cement@ when the community is bereft with sorrow and when whatever can be said is hopelessly inadequate to the sufferer's agony.

Poetry and art are to be cherished if they are available. Most of us are stuck with saying A'm sorry@ or some other inane-sounding phrases. But the mourner who has tried to comfort in other situations readily understands the words that come with the presence.

### The Process of Bereavement

Contemporary culture finds it difficult to accept that there is no substitute for time when it comes to mourning. The saying that Atime heals all wounds@ is demonstrably false but time is an indispensable factor in healing wounds. AEvery cell of the body has to be informed of what has been lost.@ (Proust). The closer the person, the more intense is the body's reaction. This closeness includes someone who was not necessarily loved but who nonetheless had an intimate bond with the survivor. A son or daughter, who has been estranged from a parent or who constantly fought with a parent, will often be surprised at how intensely they feel the loss.

Confucius said Aif a man ever reveals his true self, it is when he is mourning his parents.@<sup>xv</sup> What is unusual about the death of parents today is that we are among the first generations who are likely to have one or both parents alive when we are middle-aged. That is certainly better than losing one's parents when one is a child - a situation that has returned in much of southern Africa.

Having one's parents alive until one's forties or fifties should make it easier to let go, but it does not work that way. Middle-aged people whose parents die are inevitably surprised that the word which comes forcefully to mind is Aorphan.@ It is

embarrassing to admit feeling like an orphan at the age of fifty-five. Always there had been a generation in front. The death of the parents means moving to the front pew at funerals.

The novelist Saul Bellow wrote to his biographer: "When my father died I was for a long time sunk."<sup>xvi</sup> One tries to come up for air and then coast along with the current. Many people insist after a few days that they have their feet back on the ground. The truth may be that they have postponed the reaction which is sure to be more severe a month, six months or a year later. Most of the policies that allow leave from work provide three days to mourn one's parents. Then one is expected to "get on with your life."<sup>xvii</sup>

In some work settings, co-workers can be very helpful in providing a stable environment, but returning to work immediately can be an evasion of the time to mourn. The arrival of insurance agents, real estate brokers and tax accountants the day after the funeral is not the kind of interaction one needs.

The death of one's child is almost a different species of grief.<sup>xviii</sup> The sense of loss at a parent's death is balanced by the recognition that life has its natural cycles; after fullness of life there is inevitable decline and death. The death of a child is a screaming denial of what we assume are the ways of God or nature. Unless the parents can find a way to mourn together, the child's death will put a terrible strain upon the marriage. The parents need to talk and to talk to each other, activities that the situation makes difficult if not impossible. The sudden death of a child raises the mortality rate of the bereaved parents five times the average.<sup>xix</sup>

Can one draw up any fixed rules about the process of bereavement? Does everyone go through "predictable stages of development"? There is strong resistance to the idea that the nature and length of a process of mourning can be universally charted. Certainly, anthropology has made us aware of the cultural variations surrounding death, disposal of the body and mourning. More important, however, is anthropology's finding that every culture does have rituals for the funeral and a period of mourning. We are the odd ones in dissolving almost all the trappings of a bereavement process. Perhaps that represents progress but the medical and psychiatric toll suggests otherwise.

The claim in contemporary culture is that each of us is "unique" and must therefore deal with mourning in our own unique way. As I pointed out in chapter three, *human* uniqueness is not about having nothing in common with others. On the contrary, it refers to an openness to learn from all sources, human and

nonhuman. Human beings mourn their dead; some other animals also appear to mourn. What is uniquely my own bears resemblance and comparison to the other mourners on earth. It would be rash to reject help from any source, even though predictable stages contain a nearly limitless range of particular details.

It is surprising that stages of mourning have not been studied more extensively. People often refer to Kubler-Ross's stages as stages of mourning. But her study was entirely focused on stages of dying. The assumption that the two processes can be equated makes some sense, although there are some obvious differences. Mourning starts where dying leaves off (or possibly a little earlier). The end of the two processes also differ. Acceptance might apply to mourning as well as to dying but the connotations of the word in the two situations are not the same.

Mourning has been studied as one example of what are called Rites of passage. Arnold van Gennep coined the phrase in the early twentieth century to describe puberty rites and experiences that have a similar structure.<sup>xx</sup> Birth, marriage ceremonies and funeral rituals are characterized by a journey of withdrawal, seclusion and re-entry. The boy dies to being a child and, after a period of testing and transition, re-emerges as an adult. The engaged man and woman enter the ritual of the marriage ceremony and after a honeymoon transition take up life as a married couple.

The funeral ceremony should be integral to the mourning process but it can be examined as a rite of passage on its own. There can be confusion here as to whether the funeral is designed for the dead person or for the survivors. The confusion is often handled by assuming that some parallel exists between the transitions undergone by the living and by the dead.<sup>xxi</sup> Someone who has died is thought to need time before coming to a final rest. No one can be certain of that transition, but the relatives and friends of the deceased clearly need time before returning to ordinary life.

In many cultures there are two funerals or a funeral in two parts.<sup>xxii</sup> The first funeral signifies the dying of the individual and the disintegration of the community. After some weeks or months, a second funeral moves the remains to a final resting place. Order has thereby been reestablished both for the community and for the dead person who has been reintegrated into life.

In the second funeral, men and women have distinctly different roles and the ceremony includes sexual imagery. There is nothing shocking in the close association of sex and death. The struggle of life to overcome death is

represented by the mixing of young men and young women. From ancient Greece down to the modern Irish wake and African burial rites, funerals have always been a choice time for finding a sexual partner.

Modern cultures do not have two funerals. Sometimes, however, the body is quickly disposed of and a memorial service is held later. Friends and relatives, for whom travel to the funeral was impossible, can plan ahead for the memorial service. The mood of the second gathering is still somber but the life of the dead person is now celebrated along with his or her death being mourned. Favorite stories about the dead person are recalled by each of the living. That is the meaning of the term eulogy.

For many people, of course, this second part of the funeral follows immediately on the first. The sadness at the cemetery gives way to a robust meal - and sometimes overly robust drinking. The juxtaposition can seem incongruous, but, like sex, eating and drinking are the human challenge to death's finality. The drawback in the modern practice is the impatient attempt to settle everything in a few hours rather than letting time have its place.

Many communities are attentive to the widow having a prepared meal after the funeral. The test is whether there is concern for the eating patterns of the widow (and even more so, the widower) six months after the funeral. Failure to eat properly is a major problem during the time of mourning. Why bother to cook for one is a standard line among widows.

The funeral should be the beginning of the bereavement process. A dinner party after the burial can falsely imply that the mourning period is over. That is one reason why celebration and upbeat speeches would better be placed some time later. The funeral is mainly a time for absorbing a body blow. All the euphemisms for dying - passed away, expired, deceased - do not hide the absence. The person is gone; a gaping hole exists where there has always been a loved person.

In reinterpreting Kubler-Ross's stages of dying, I suggested that she had found a three part sequence: a no to death which is a yes to life, a yes to death which is a no to life, and then a yes to life which includes dying. The third is not really a stage so much as the synthesis of the two stages that have preceded. The two stages can be repeated any number of times. Kubler-Ross documented four stages plus acceptance, but she implies that there could be six, eight or any even number. The final synthesis, which is acceptance, can be reached only after the dialectic of yes and no has moved the elements toward each other.

The stages of mourning have this same structure. If anything, the stages are more obvious in the case of mourning than in that of dying. One criticism of Kubler-Ross's stages of dying was that not everyone has a lengthy period in which to think about their fatal disease. Kubler-Ross acknowledged the point in granting that people reach acceptance only if they have sufficient time.<sup>xxiii</sup> For the experience of mourning, a lack of time is not the problem. Indeed, the problem here is finding a place to stop. Some people are still mourning the death of a child fifty years later.

For many people today the period of grieving begins before death. When a patient is on a life-support system for years, the family is likely to mourn the loss long before the system is discontinued. The experience of the survivors is that the organism is still living but the person has departed. A similar and sometimes more agonizing experience occurs with dementia, such as Alzheimer's disease.<sup>xxiv</sup> The person is still there but living in a different world. African tribal religions have a time between life and death where the person is Aiving-dead@ modern medicine seems to have created this state in the nursing home or the intensive care unit of the hospital.<sup>xxv</sup>

Kubler-Ross called the immediate preparation for death Anticipatory depression.@ So also, survivors who begin mourning before a death can experience Anticipatory grief.@ By anticipating grief, the blow is softened and a protective attitude is called forth. Occasionally, people start this process when they fear the death of a loved one. If the person does not die, a great strain is placed upon the reunion.

Erich Lindemann, who did one of the first systematic studies of grief, coined the phrase Anticipatory grief.@ Part of his study included soldiers who returned from war and found their wives no longer loved them and wanted a divorce.. AThe grief work had been done so effectively that the patient has emancipated herself and the readjustment must now be directed towards new interaction.@<sup>xxvi</sup>

Stages of dying are most evident in long, drawn-out instances of dying. It is difficult to imagine anything called phases or stages occurring in automobile crashes or shootings. Stages of mourning, in contrast, are most evident in sudden and unexpected deaths. The survivor is plunged into one emotion and sometime later reacts in an opposite direction. In such cases, when someone is informed that his or her spouse or child or close friend has died, the person reacts in the same way that a person does when informed that he or she has a terminal illness: AThis cannot be true; there must be some mistake; I don't believe

it.@"

Such denial is likely to persist until the dead body is seen. It is amazing what extraordinary efforts are made to recover dead bodies. It may seem pointless to search at length for the bodies of people killed by drowning, in plane crashes or in collapsed buildings. Recovery of the body is followed by disposal of the body; the drowning victim may be buried at sea or the victim of a building collapse may be buried in the earth.

Part of the reason for the search is the respect and reverence that humans usually have toward the human remains. Part of the reason is that the survivor can begin the slow process of acceptance. One horrible aspect of the World Trade Center bombing was that survivors were deprived of both the life and the death of the loved one. The ash that covered southern Manhattan was composed in part of human bodies; the buildings had become crematoria.

Funerals are peculiar mixtures of denial and acceptance. The viewing of the body is customary among some groups. At the same time the dead body is made up to look as close to alive as possible. The whole production may seem ridiculous or worse to outsiders.<sup>xxvii</sup>

The funeral industry has undoubtedly exploited people's grief, selling the mourner unnecessary products. But one should hesitate to judge how people cope with death. If mourners really wish to spend their money in elaborate funeral practices, who can say it is not a good investment in their sanity. Everyone begins by denying what has happened. The concern should be for people who seem to act reasonably and appear to go on as if nothing has happened.

As in stages of dying, denial is a healthy first reaction at the beginning of mourning. Mark Twain's daughter, Sally, was killed at the age of twenty-four. Twain described his reaction: "The intellect is stunned by the shock and but gropingly gathers the meaning of the words. The power to realize their full import is mercifully wanting. The mind has a dumb sense of loss - that is all."<sup>xxviii</sup> The mind's inability to comprehend immediately what has happened is a blessing of human nature.

As with the denial of dying, denial in grieving is a good thing that can go bad if persisted in too long. When the dead body has not been seen the denial might go on for years despite overwhelming evidence of the death. Each time the door opens, the unrealistic expectation of the dead person's appearance is renewed.

Children who have been lied to about a parent's death, as often happens with suicide, are especially prone to living in denial for years. Mommy is away on a trip but will come home some day.

There is one form of denial that applies to mourning though not to grief. When people have a relation that lacks social approval, the death of one of the partners is liable to cause disenfranchised grief.<sup>20</sup> The mistress of a married man or the partner in a homosexual union may not be able to express their grief. Colleagues at work will be puzzled by any display of emotion. He was only a friend; it is not as if it was family.<sup>21</sup> The grief is not denied but it does not have a healthy outlet in a ritual of mourning or a period of bereavement.

The attempt to deny mourning indefinitely is likely to have repercussions. Grief is a burden that the body must carry; the grief needs to be shared so as to be lightened. Erich Lindemann was among the first to document that some diseases commonly occur when either mourning is delayed or when denial is followed by an exaggerated reaction of grief.

Lindemann's essay is somewhat confusing because he describes the reactions of normal but acute grief and then he lists the physical and mental problems of morbid grief.<sup>22</sup> Some of the same symptoms, such as respiratory problems, lack of strength and digestive problems, appear in both parts of the study. The normal but acute reactions to grief are relatively mild and can be readily treated. What he describes as morbid grief can have life-threatening effects. He mentions as typical diseases ulcerative colitis, rheumatoid arthritis, and asthma, as well as complete disruption of the social order in one's life. The danger in such needed studies is that mourning itself may be seen as a sickness whereas mourning is the cure, to the extent that cure is possible.

The stage after denial is withdrawal, which is the period of bereavement proper. Denial is a no to death; withdrawal is a yes to death or at least a partial acceptance of death. Whereas denial proceeds with an insistence on affirming life, withdrawal is a refusal of life, an unwillingness or an incapacity to take part in the affairs of ordinary life. Withdrawal is for healing, for letting the land lie fallow.

All of the major religions recognize bereavement as an essential element in human life. Details for the observance of bereavement vary but they typically refer to how people dress, how they are addressed, what they eat, where they travel, who visits. Weeping is a usual way to express sorrow but religions provide a framework lest the wailing be excessive.<sup>23</sup> It may seem silly or even cruel that the widow had to wear black and did not go out in public for months. However,

the practices did provide space in which the mourner quite literally learned to breathe again.

If one has stepped out of ordinary life there is a risk of not returning. To mourn permanently is to be one of the dead among the living. Religious traditions avoid this result by supplying a series of markers, say at the third day, the seventh day, a month, a year. A period of bereavement is not a wandering in the desert; it is territory charted by hundreds of thousands of ancestors. At each marker along the way, a cloud of witnesses, a gathering of the community past and present, encourages a cherishing of memory in the context of a renewal of life.<sup>xxx</sup>

The final step in mourning is not a stage but a reintegration of the mourner into ordinary life. The mourner comes to a place where life wins out over depression and despair. One does not return to the same old things; instead one finds a new life with a new dimension. One will never again see life with the same eyes. The mourner now becomes capable of giving comfort to other mourners.

One paradoxical way of reintegration happens with the death of the mourner. There are numerous cases where the death of one spouse is soon followed by the death of the other.<sup>xxx</sup> Sometimes the second death seems to come from depression, and the widow or widower really dies of a broken heart. Sometimes, however, widows or widowers go through a period of mourning, show they are capable of resuming ordinary life, and then die shortly afterward. Reintegration in such cases is with the departed spouse. The bond with the dead is stronger than any bond with the living.

How long should the period of bereavement be? People vary in their needs but that does not mean some markers should not exist.<sup>xxxii</sup> Religious traditions give weight to a year-~~s~~ anniversary. That is a longer period than secular culture-~~s~~ observance of mourning but secular culture has taken over the idea of observing anniversary remembrances. The practice of observing a year-~~s~~ passing has its arbitrary side but the sense of anniversary is deeply rooted in human nature.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Six months to a year would seem an appropriate time of mourning for most people, presuming that the mourning was not delayed.

The objection raised these days might be that a year is not enough time. While allowing that that may indeed be true, I think the objection is due to blurring two realities that need distinguishing. The end of a period of mourning - bereavement - is not the end of sorrow and grief. For parents of a dead child or

for a surviving spouse in a long-term marriage, the sorrow is unlikely to ever go away. Life will never return to what it was. Acceptance, if the term belongs here, does not mean reaching an end point. It means accepting that the death of someone who was and is loved has become a permanent part of life. Not a yes to life and a no to death, but a yes to life that includes death.

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- i. Alexander and Margaret Mitscherlich, *The Inability to Mourn* (New York: Grove Press, 1975).
  - ii. Sigmund Freud, Mourning and Melancholy, *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: W.W. Norton, 1953-74), vol. XIV.
  - iii. Geoffrey Gorer, *Death Grief and Mourning* (New York: Ayer, 1979), 128.
  - iv. Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963); also, Jessica Mitford, *The American Way of Death Revisited* (New York: Knopf, 1998)
  - v. *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 2000
  - vi. Phillipe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, 550-51.
  - vii. Robert Burt, *Death is That Man Taking Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 64, points out that the Civil War memorial at Yale University that inspired the Vietnam memorial took fifty years to be built and dedicated. There was controversy over whether its praise of devotion and unity should include confederate as well as union soldiers. The Vietnam memorial could be constructed quickly because it does not ascribe any meaning to the deaths.
  - viii. Laurie Kellman, Vietnam Memorial Still Heals Wounds, *Associated Press Online*, July 19, 2002.
  - ix. *New York Times*, Nov. 11, 1987.
  - x. Jack Hitt, The American Way of Dealing with Death, *New York Times*, August 18, 2002, 4:1, 4:6.
  - xi. Samuel Heilman, *When a Jew Dies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).
  - xii. Harold Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 89.
  - xiii. *Ibid.*, 88-90.
  - xiv. Bronislaw Malinowski, The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages, in C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich,

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1989(1923), 315.

xv. Confucius, *The Analects of Confucius*, ed. David Lee (New York: Premier, 1979), 19:17.

xvi. James Atlas, *New Yorker*, Oct. 13, 1997

xvii. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (New York: Bantam Books, 1976), 61: To say that the patient is getting over it after an operation for appendicitis is one thing; after he's had his leg off quite another. After that operation, either the wounded stump heals or the man dies. If it heals, the fierce continuous pain will stop. Presently, he'll get back his strength and be able to stomp about on his wooden leg. He has got over it. But he will probably have recurrent pains in the stump all his life...and he will always be a one-legged man.

xviii. Judith Cook, A Death in the Family: Parental Bereavement in the First Year, @*Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*, 13(1983), 42-61.

xix. Rees and Lutkins, A Mortality of Bereavement, @*British Medical Journal*, Oct. 1967.

xx. Arnold van Gennep, *Rites of Passage* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 146-65.

xxi. Robert Hertz, *Death and the Right Hand* (Aberdeen: Cohen and West, 1960), 86: Mourning, at its origin, is the necessary participation of the living in the mortuary state of their relative.

xxii. Richard Huntington and Peter Metcalf, *Celebrations of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 93-118.

xxiii. Kubler-Ross, *On Death and Dying*, 112.

xxiv. For a harrowing description, see Eleanor Cooney, A Death in Slow Motion: A Descent into Alzheimer's, @*Harper's*, October, 2001, 43-58.

xxv. John Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1970), 33.

xxvi. Erich Lindemann, A Symptomatology and Management of Acute Grief, @*American Journal of Psychiatry*, 101(1944), 148.

xxvii. For a positive view of the whole process, see Thomas Lynch, *The Undertaking* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997)

xxviii. Mark Twain, *The Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper, 2000).

xxix. Although Jewish tradition warns against excessive weeping, the Talmud also says that

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Anyone who cries at the death of a good person is forgiven all his sins; *Shabbat 105b*. See also *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, ed. W. Evans-Wentz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 87, 195.

xxx. C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, 69: "Grief is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape.... Sometimes the surprise is the opposite one; you are presented with exactly the same sort of country you thought you had left behind miles ago. That is when you wonder whether the valley isn't a circular trench. But it isn't. There are partial recurrences but the sequence doesn't repeat."@

xxxi. Rees and Lutkins, *op. cit.*,

xxxii. Robert Kavanaugh, *Facing Death* (New York: Penguin Books, 1972).

xxxiii. Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1954), 51-92.