

## Foreword

Within a few months after my 19-year-old son died in a traffic accident, I began to revise my grief journal into a manuscript that became *The Fall of a Sparrow: Of Death and Dreams and Healing* (1994). I wrote it in part out of frustration from reading several books and finding few, especially those written by grieving fathers, that helped me to deal with this loss in any meaningful way. Writing *Sparrow* was in part personal therapy, and in part an attempt to offer assistance to others who were struggling with the unexpected loss of a loved one, especially a child.

Writing the book was helpful for me, but it did not resolve the issues in my ongoing effort to be at peace with the absence of my son on a daily basis. Although it was more sporadic, I continued to write essays and some poetry about my thoughts and experiences with death—a close friend died, then my sister, and my parents. Over the years, four of my essays were published. In the fall of 2006 I wrote a one-act play about the Angel of Death coming for a man who was not ready to leave and insists that he should not be taken yet. A friend and skilled writer, Paul Dominic Heckman, assisted me in revising the play, and we performed it at an annual Death and Bereavement Conference. The audience responded enthusiastically, and after the performance several people requested copies of the script. This was the genesis of the book you now have before you. I began to organize and revise my published and unpublished writing, and I worked on some new material, especially an essay with the tentative title, “Wrestling with the Angel.”

In addition to my own writing, I have collected numerous excerpts from poetry and prose over the years, which included a significant number on issues related to death, grief, and bereavement. They

represent part of what I think of as “wisdom literature” on these topics. My interest in collecting excerpts from literature stems from growing up in rural Nebraska in the 1950s and attending a one-room school. For all its drawbacks, there were advantages for a child who loved to read. Our elementary readers included authors such as Robert Burns, Edgar Allan Poe, and William Wordsworth, who would be considered too literary (meaning too difficult for children to read) by today’s standards. Students read aloud, so when I was younger I would listen to the language of the literature being read by the older students and was captivated by these literary descriptions of human fears, joys, despairs, and triumphs. In high school and in college I continued to read compelling literature, including some that addressed human experiences and beliefs about death, grief, and immortality.

Approaching the age of 30, I enrolled in a PhD program in education and began to read a wide range of nonfiction, while continuing to read literature. In addition to gaining knowledge, I also appreciated those authors who could make a comment that compelled attention. Others might have said the same thing, but this author said it in a way that made it memorable. Whenever I came across such quotations, I began to write them down and save them. With the advent of computers, I transferred these pages to a file that now contains over 300 pages of quotations. It was from this collection on a multitude of topics that I selected excerpts and quotations for this book, which I consider to be good examples of wisdom literature on issues of death and dying, grief and bereavement.

Some of the quotations are well-known passages that are often cited, while others are relatively obscure. Some can be found in prose from which another passage is more frequently quoted. For example, most people are familiar with the phrase “for whom the bell tolls,” if not from its actual source then as the title of an Ernest Hemingway novel (that became a movie). People who recognize the phrase may know that it comes from the poet John Donne (1595-1633); however, it is not from a poem but from his *Meditation 17*:

No man is an island entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee.  
(pp. 340-341)

Earlier in that same meditation, Donne writes another passage that is as compelling and inspirational, if not more so, than the more famous passage:

All mankind is of one author, and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God's hand is in every translation, and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another. (p. 340)

I would like to see someone create a book filled with such wisdom literature, not merely a book of quotations (we already have those) but passages that reveal profound insights from diverse authors on human experiences and perceptions of death, grief, and bereavement. Passages like the ones above have been the catalyst for my own thinking and writing about grief and bereavement. A few scattered showers of prose became a downpour after my son died, and after I had written a rough draft of *Sparrow*, I selected quotations from my collection to begin each chapter.

As noted earlier, four of the essays in this book were previously published, and I want to express my appreciation to the publishers for allowing the inclusion of these essays in this book. "Emerging from the Anguish: A Father's Experience with Loss and Grief" Koppelman (2000) cited in an anthology of writing on men's grief experiences entitled *Men Coping with Grief*. Two essays were published in the journal *Illness, Crisis & Loss*: "The Dance of Grief" Koppelman (1999) describing rituals and actions to promote healing; "The Culture of Life" Koppelman (2005) suggested that an awareness of death may be necessary for people to develop a genuine reverence for life. "For Those Who Stand and Wait" Koppelman (2003) an essay selected for the anthology *Making Sense of Death*, describes my attempts to be reconciled to my son's death.

In reviewing the writing to be included in this book, eight themes emerged that were related to death, grief, and bereavement, and that seemed appropriate as a framework for this book. For each of the eight chapters there is an introductory essay exploring the theme, and throughout each introductory essay the reader will encounter several boxed texts with excerpts from the wisdom literature on death, grief, and bereavement. After each introductory essay there is a poem and then another piece of writing that addresses the theme for that

chapter. This writing is usually an essay, but also includes a one-act play, a short story and, in the chapter about the loss of my sister, father, and mother, there are four poems. When the manuscript was almost finished, I decided to add a final page of quotations at the end consisting of comments attributed to people as they were about to die, and in some cases the comment allegedly represents their final words.

This description explains how the book was created, and the variety of writing is intended to illustrate how our feelings about such issues as aging and mortality, loss and grief can be expressed in different ways using different approaches to say what needs to be said. In Part 1, the first chapter describes the beginning of my personal journey with grief. People in my life had died—grandmothers and uncles and aunts. In every case they were older people whose long and full lives provided a sense of closure to lighten the burden of the loss. My real grief journey began with the death of my son. This encounter with his unexpected death brought unanswered and unanswerable questions and at times a sense of anger reflected in early poems. The chapter concludes with the first essay that I wrote after Jason's death. The second chapter explores the theme of mortality, because becoming genuinely conscious of death makes one conscious of one's own mortality, and that represents a critical point in a person's life. Leo Tolstoy insisted that human beings have not really begun to think until they had accepted their mortality. A consciousness of mortality often leads to a religious faith and may include certain beliefs about good and evil, God and the devil, so this seemed to be the best place to include my favorite shape poem—a monologue from the devil presented in the form of a question mark, the shape emphasizing the role of doubt in the search for faith. The one-act play concerns a man who was not conscious of death and had given no thought to his mortality until he was forced to confront the issue when the Angel of Death came for him.

In Part 2, the chapters examine two aspects of the grief journey. The first chapter describes a survivor searching for ways to heal from an unexpected death, and the next chapter discusses the attempt to reach a form of reconciliation with that death. Part 3 begins by examining responses to an expected death due to terminal illness or to deteriorating health. Most people will have friends or family members who succumb to an illness such as cancer or provide care for elderly parents or grandparents who struggle with health problems. When we know that someone will die soon, that expectation does not eliminate our feelings for the person or our sense of loss when the person dies, but it does change the context for that death and the way people respond to it. The chapter concludes with poetry written in the

aftermath of such expected deaths. After a loved one dies, death may become an ongoing presence in one's life, but chapter 6 argues that an awareness of death does not have to lead to despair but can become a critical factor for enhancing the quality of one's life.

In Part 4, the content of the first chapter reflects the bittersweet quality often found in writing about aging. As we age we find ourselves losing and gaining—losing some physical and mental abilities but gaining a better perspective on life because of our experiences. Wisdom says to savor the days behind us and look forward to the days before us while still paying attention to the present—the today that will soon be another yesterday. Having just turned 60, I am better able to appreciate this feeling, and it is reflected in the song lyrics included here. As an American, I live in a culture emulating youth and passionate sexuality, so the short story is a gentle refutation of the bias of the culture. It suggests that what is ultimately important are the relationships we maintain over time, and that love is a gift beyond value since it provides us with the genuine passion necessary to sustain a human being.

Finally, the last chapter discusses why we need to be prepared for death and what such preparation involves; the essay for this chapter was written especially for this book. *Wrestling with the Angel* represents the culmination of several years of thinking about death, loss, grief, and bereavement. In describing my struggle “with the angel,” this essay brings the book full circle, because the angel in its title alludes to the character of the Angel of Death from the one-act play in Part 1, who appears before a very mortal and very unprepared Adam Mensch to take him away.

The final page of the book consists of comments from various people as they approached death, and all of comments demonstrate that no one can give us the answers to our questions. In that sense these quotations illustrate a fundamental assumption of this book. With regard to all of the issues addressed, readers must be content to ask questions and select those answers that make the most sense to them, and those answers will differ for each individual. My own response is to be hopeful—for humanity in general—that we can find satisfying answers.

I became a teacher because I wanted to make a difference in people's lives—to offer not only knowledge but hope and compassion to counter the difficulties in life. I don't know that I have succeeded, but my actions have attempted to reflect the Greek proverb: “A society grows great when old men plant trees whose shade they know they shall never sit in.” My feelings still have the power they had in my youth, but my body tells me that I am aging. My students began

perceiving me as old years ago, whereas to those older than me I have not gained that distinction yet. So as I move into the status of being considered an old man by larger numbers of people, this book represents another tree among several that I have planted. And like the others, I hope there will be some, perhaps only a few, perhaps more, who will find comfort within the quiet shade provided by its leaves.

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