**Grief & Bereavement** (Brian Traynor CP, May 2018)

As many of the members of our Passionist Family Groups continue to age, we must acknowledge the sad reality of loved ones who have died and the pain and consequence of that loss. Bereavement is something we become more familiar with as we age, and few of us have been spared the experience. We also encounter friends and faith companions everywhere who suffer from the death of loved ones – sometimes after a long illness, sometimes at an advanced age and sometimes as the result of something sudden, either illness or accident. Some have lost parents, spouses or children many years ago and have lived with that loss. Some are experts in loneliness. Everyone has a story. We can benefit from some insights and sharing of the experience of grief. So let’s reflect first briefly on bereavement.

**Sigmund Freud** died in 1939. He is regarded as the founder of psychoanalysis, the area involving theories and techniques for treating mental disorders. Freud recommended that those mourning should cease from talking about or remembering the deceased. His attitude changed somewhat after his daughter died. He came to believe that the intensity of sorrow would reduce, but there would never be a substitute for what was lost. Freud based his theory around the idea that those who were grieving were searching for an attachment that had been lost, and the detachment they experienced led to some depression. He suggested that new attachments could be sought when the loss was accepted.

**Elizabeth Kubler Ross** died in 2004 and is famous for developing her five stages of dealing with grief which are not meant to be understood as progressive or linear, but many people have incorrectly understood her theory that way.

These five stages are Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Denial is a positive coping mechanism to deal with the shock or unpleasantness of the situation. Anger is another positive coping mechanism seeking to avoid the immediate pain of the situation. Anger can be directed towards anyone – the deceased, the dying, a doctor, even God. Bargaining is almost a last ditch stand to change the reality.

Bargains can be made with doctors, spouses, even oneself, and of course God. Many people make all sorts of promises if what they face can ‘go away’.Acceptance occurs when the one grieving begins to come to terms with her or his loss and is able to start moving on with life.

**Edward Bowlby** died in 2004. His own life experience created an interest in what became his ‘attachment theory’ through which he explained why emotions like anxiety, sadness (crying) and anger are often expressed in mourning. These occurred when attachments were broken.

Bowlby suggested four general phases of mourning that he described as: numbing, yearning and searching, disorganization and reorganization. Numbing which often includes emotional outbursts, provides temporary relief from the pain of loss and is related to feelings of disbelief that death has occurred. Yearning and searching is related to the reality of loss, so anger and frustration are common. These are close parallels with Kubler Ross’ theory.

The disorganization phase occurs because the reality of the loss does bring turmoil, lack of concentration and sadness. Then gradual changes and reorganization occur as the bereaved begins to move on with life. This is similar to Kubler Ross’ stage of acceptance.

These and other theories explain that grief involves a painful emotional adjustment which takes time and cannot be hurried along.

Another theory has gained great support in recent years since the release of a book in 1996 titled, ‘Continuing Bonds’. The book suggested that these linear models, end in a detachment from the person we’ve lost and they deny the reality of how people actually grieve. The authors suggested instead of becoming detached from the deceased, it is healthier to create a new relationship with them.

In this way, grief is not about working through a linear process that ends with ‘acceptance’ or a ‘new life’, where you have moved on or compartmentalized your loved one’s memory.

Rather than assuming detachment as a normal grief response, ‘continuing bonds’ considers human attachment as being natural, even in death. This is not only normal and healthy, but an important part of grief. It allows a person to continuing to recognise their ties to loved ones.

There are countless normal and meaningful ways to maintain bonds. Ongoing rituals, visits to the cemetery, remembering advice a loved would have given’ living life in a way a loved one have appreciated.

People often comment with expressions such as, “My mother is still with me, and I talk to her every day”.

Céline Dion has had her husband’s hand sculptured. Before going on stage she touches that hand as a connection with his love and presence. He is always in her heart and mind

There are many helpful and healthy ways such as this to continue bonds with a loved one. Examples include

* Talking to a loved one (not always about the past)
* Keeping photos around
* Ritualising special memories and milestones (e.g. wedding day).
* Visualizing a conversation the advice they might have given
* Keeping meaningful items

If actions like this allow a person to feel more free then this should be celebrated. It allows a person to accept the reality of the changed relationship, but not have to shut it out or forget the person. Those who begin new relationships often are torn about how to talk about their previous husband or wife at the very time when they feel this presence so strongly.

A continuing bond does not mean that people live in the past. The reality of daily life is changed by the death of a partner, parent or child. The deceased is both present and absent. One cannot ignore this or the tension this can create in the bereavement process.

Faith is vital part of how people deal with grief. In the attachment models, as people deal with anger and bargaining, often God is their target! Some who have a strong everyday faith begin to question that faith and become angry with God.

Our first reassurance should be to accept that God can deal with our heart! St Teresa of Avila is famous for her life of prayer. She recounted some words she spoke to God one day in prayer, ““I’m not surprised that you have so few friends, because you treat them so badly”

It is natural to lose heart (faith) while experiencing grief. Being angry with God or blaming God when things go wrong, can suggests God should make sure bad things do not happen to me. The reality is that bad things happen every day. 150,000 people die each day!

Most people work through these questions in their grief - but grief hurts. There might be no answer – just acceptance and trust. This is what faith is – trust in what (WHO) is unknown. Through our pain and grief we may come to see our own helplessness. We might also come to believe that God is not represented by power, but by compassion and love. That love whispers in the darkness: “all will be well, and all manner of things will be well”.

Sometimes we don’t know what to say to others about their loss. This has often been said by PFG members. The first rule about this is that silence is better than clichés! It is more important to be with people than to say anything. For those who will not visit a home because they are afraid of what to say, a wise Maori advised, “Leave your head on the gate and go in with your heart.”

Healing is a process. It takes time. Waiting doesn't fit into the 'instant' world, but we have to wait in times of suffering. Our greatest lessons can come from sorrow and pain. Kahlil Gibran wrote, “The greater sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain”. That is the story and promise of the Passion of Jesus.

Note these two songs:

Jealous of the Angels (Jenn Bostic) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JH3TTr77GIQ>

Going Home

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=- Liberia: BunbeRED5Yhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oC17gMFnw7s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20%20BunbeRED5Yhttps://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oC17gMFnw7s) : David Phelps