CELEBRATING 20 YEARS OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTORS INTERNATIONAL IN THE WORLD

presence

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION • VOL. 16, NO. 3 • SEPTEMBER 2010

The Ignatian Method • Loss and Spiritual Transformation

Biblical Eve • Meditative-Body Prayer • Abraham Joshua Heschel

presence

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

ARTICLES

FEATURES

9

20

25

35

Spiritual Transformation through Transcending Loss

Richard Boileau

Persons of faith who are dealing with grief have a rich opportunity for development and growth. Indeed, spiritual directors can observe that to navigate the dynamics of loss, there is no better guide than experience, enriched by theory, heightened by interiority.

My own case illustrates this point. Beginning with the death of my wife, Catherine, in 1988, through reflection, self-directed study, and prayer, I eventually developed the capacity to help others during this enigmatic phase of life.

Today, I assist persons struggling with grief from events as varied as the death of a loved one, divorce, or other difficult life changes in three ways: a group workshop series lasting approximately four months, private psycho-spiritual accompaniment, and weekend retreats.

My objective reaches beyond merely helping people to cope with their losses. Though the initial stages are profoundly distressing, for many this experience leads to an important crossroad that opens the way to emotional, social, and spiritual development.

Working within a Christian framework, particularly by using the paschal mystery (the death and resurrection of Jesus) as the pivotal paradigm, I present practical tools for dealing with grief in talks, reflections, and discussions that are centered on the healing power of faith, hope, and love. Although my influences have multiplied over the years, my initial inspiration came from *The Dark Night* by Saint John of the Cross and two works by Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Mysterium Paschale* and *The Christian and Anxiety.*

The uniqueness of my current approach is in the balance between pastoral, theological, and spiritual perspectives. I have endeavored over the years to offer a safe environment for healing as well as a proven framework for personal development.

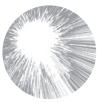
During almost twenty years of leading groups and accompanying individuals grappling with the painful and perplexing effects of loss, I have evolved an approach that is not only based on observation but also informed by the broad empirical research of experts in the field of thanatology. Combining the insights of both, my current inclination is to regard two arduous processes as vital to healing and growth in the unique set of circumstances presented by loss. The first process is to acknowledge the failure of systems that prove unworthy of the experience. Confusion, anger, and depression can result from the realization that the myths of childhood are inadequate against the complexity of adult life. The second process is to embark on a very personal quest for meaning that threads into a coherent story line the feelings and thoughts that make up the new reality.

The condition for working within these processes effectively seems to be the application of transcendental precepts advanced by Jesuit theologian Bernard Lonergan: **Be attentive to your experience; be intelligent in your inquiry** into the meaning of that experience; **be reasonable in your judgments** of the accuracy of your understanding of your experience; and **be responsible in your decisions** and subsequent actions based on the judgments of the accuracy of your understanding of your experience.

Ten years ago, Ashley Prend, a grief counselor in the United States, wrote a book called *Transcending Loss* and offered a simple formula for "SOARing to new heights": Spirituality, Outreach, Attitude, and Reinvestment. Death and bereavement educators and counselors such as Prend have a variety of ways in which they describe the stages of the grieving and coping process.

The first stage is shock. This is a period usually marked by numbness and the disruption of basic faculties such as concentration, judgment, and memory. Fears are easily exaggerated. This is not a time for introspection or theological speculation. It is a time of survival for which there is no script, only a few words of caution. Prend observes, "Whether death came suddenly, expectedly, or somewhere in between, you need to be gentle with yourself in your shock. It's a temporal stage that cannot be rushed or forced. It lasts as long as necessary until your mind begins to absorb the magnitude of what has happened.… You will emerge slowly from the fog, finding yourself sinking in the quicksand of grief" (16).

The second is disorganization, the heart of grief. Here



we find any number of feelings and thoughts and, sometimes, incoherent movement between them. These ebb and flow almost randomly. Emotional pain is felt to some degree or other. Anger and guilt may be present, as may be depression. Here, participation in activities related to the bereaved person's religious tradition may be helpful. The creative use of meaningful rituals can also be comforting and aid in finding meaning, which is the goal of the grieving process.

Prend advises, "Take it slowly, take it gently, take it at your own pace. Be patient and kind with yourself. Remember that grief cannot be devoured all at once. It must be digested slowly, in tiny, bite-sized pieces. You have been forced to embark on this journey and there's no turning back" (46).

Dealing honestly with grief is a pilgrimage and an opportunity to deal with huge existential questions with fresh intensity.

The third phase is the rebuilding of life, the reconstruction. This process begins where the five stages of death and dying in the system proposed in 1969 by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross end, namely with acceptance. Once reconciled to the reality of deconstruction, a person can explore new beginnings. But Prend warns against any suggestion that the boundary from one to the other is distinct: "A person commonly experiences both stages simultaneously, although in different measure.… On a very important level, your grief work will never be 'finished,' because your loss will always be a part of you" (57–58).

To these traditional categories, Prend adds two phases in which the spiritual director's skill and sensitivity will be particularly important: **integrating life with loss through synthesis** and **making meaning out of loss over time by movements of transcendence.** Much of this is spiritual work. The trained spiritual director will be of great assistance in helping the bereaved move through these two stages. The goal, in essence, is to gently help people to raise their consciousness of the experience of loss and their experience of God's presence through it.

Spirituality

Spirituality is the authentic journey through the maze of feelings that inevitably follow any significant loss. Dealing honestly with grief is a pilgrimage and an opportunity to deal with huge existential questions with fresh intensity. The key will be to move at the pace that is appropriate to the person and the situation.

In a paper called "Religion, Spirituality, and Assessment and Intervention," which appears in *Handbook of Thanatology*, Dr. Kenneth Doka, a Lutheran pastor and death educator and counselor, refers to a 1990 International Workgroup on Dying, Death, and Bereavement document that defines *spirituality* simply as "concerned with the transcendental, inspirational, and existential way of living one's life." Dr. Doka also quotes J. Miller from a 1994 presentation entitled "The Transforming Power of Spirituality": "Spirituality is the act of looking for meaning in the very deepest sense; and looking for it in a way that is most authentically ours" (203).

Note that the definitions offered by Dr. Doka make no explicit reference to divinity—although some would argue that it is implied—and the definitions are clearly distinguishable from what we call *religion*. They refer to a human quality that is uniquely present to some degree in all persons. They lend themselves well to the next steps that Prend proposes. Let's explore them in turn.

Outreach

Outreach is a decision to help others. It is a deliberate action taken in opposition to a basic instinct, which is to withdraw. This must be understood in context. Our initial movement is one of self-preservation, and that instinct must be honoured. No one should pressure a person to move hastily from whatever constitutes a safe haven for him or her. But in time, another impulse will emerge simply because we are social creatures; that is the need and desire for loving relationships. The spiritual director will want to foster this development cautiously and respectfully.

From observation, I suggest that **being attentive to loneliness can serve as a cue that the time to reach**

out has arrived. Missing the company of people slowly becomes distinguishable from missing the person who has been lost through death or other form of separation.

In my practice, I have developed a series of easy exercises to facilitate planning that mitigates the risks that are sometimes perceived. These consist of decisions around modest, short-term goals in the area of physical, emotional, social, and spiritual outreach.

Growth in consciousness makes our subjectivity more authentic.

Attitude

Attitude is about healthy thinking. Growth in consciousness makes our subjectivity more authentic. It enables us to make suffering meaningful by experiencing things attentively, understanding them intelligently, and making reasonable judgments and responsible decisions. This applies to all aspects of life but, in spiritual direction, is particularly important with regard to the image of God that guides our relationship with God and with others.

In *We Love You, Matty: Meeting Death with Faith*, Tad Dunne devotes an entire chapter to the deconstruction of images that often prove inadequate in the face of death. Each image contains elements of truth, but none is large enough to contain our experience: a creator of a world that will end; a maker of the world; one who snatches individuals from their families and friends; the all-powerful one; one who is watching us from a distance; a judge; one who punishes; one who forgives. **Changes of attitude often correspond to shifts in understanding of and relationship with God and the world.**

Reinvestment

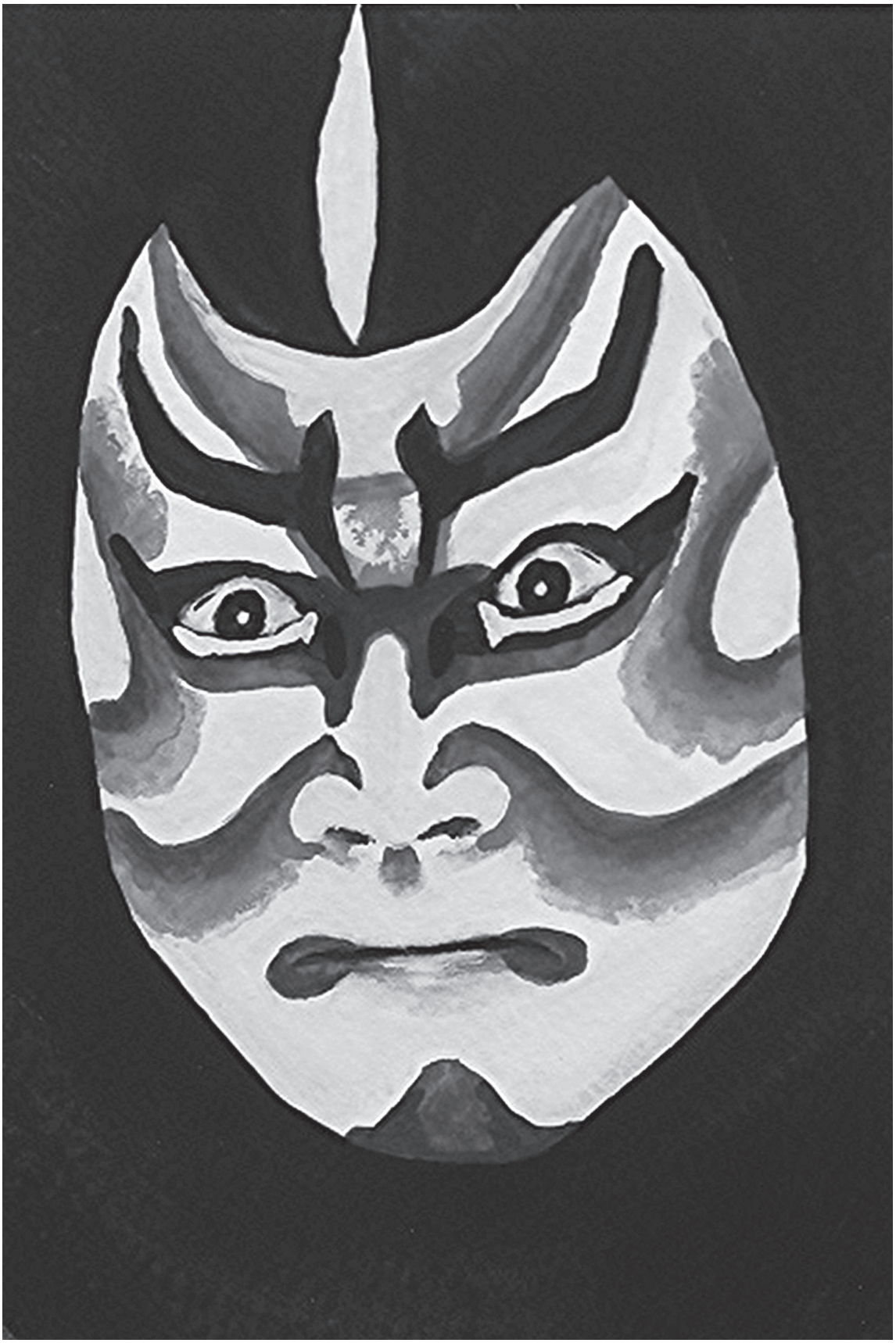
Reinvestment is the decision to actively embrace life. Prend refers to reinvestment in love, in work, in a cause or purpose, and in creativity. Each of these is important, but ultimately joy will be found or renewed in love. Once the experience of loss is illuminated by theory, it can be integrated with the spiritual values of religious tradition. This enables reinvestment that is authentic and enduring.

For many people, this is the most difficult step because it involves risks. Everyone is risk-averse to a degree, but persons whose certainties and safety mechanisms have been shattered often exercise acute caution. Also, a person may have been foundationally changed by the wrenching experience of loss and may need new ways of engaging with the world. Finally, some people are confronted with obstacles that have been present virtually their whole lives but they never had to face directly. For instance, the spiritual directee may seem eager to progress but exhibit long-standing resistance to living fully his or her identity, giftedness, and mission; to accepting limitations; or to making room for God and others in discernment.

One author who makes this connection very persuasively is Simone Pacot, author of *Reviens a la vie* (*Come Back to Life*). She proposes five rules for reengagement that are consistent with key Christian principles. These apply at any stage of spiritual development but represent a special call to the fullness of life for the bereaved.

1. The choice for life. Judeo-Christian tradition both bids us to choose life and warns against choosing its opposite. God invites us to choose the wholesome path and to refuse to become accomplices to death in all its forms, including denial of our spiritual identity, falseness in words and deeds, and passive or active self-destruction. In the Book of Deuteronomy (30:15–20), we read,

> See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the Lord your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants



"Kabuki" — Rebecca Ellen Piskura

may live, loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.

2. Acceptance of our human condition. To be human is to be finite. To live happily requires acceptance of that reality. The Bible explains this by means of an allegory—the story of the first man who, despite abundance, obsesses about what lies beyond human limitation. By means of this story, we are invited to occupy our rightful place in creation, to recognize the source of life and live plentifully within these bounds without regret, compulsion, or envy. By the same token, living plentifully means to not be limited by our own mistakes, losses, or vulnerability. To live plentifully, we must accept the fact that we are not operating in isolation; we act authentically when we are connected to our creator, who holds the truth of what is in our best interest. Without God's wisdom, we are too easily deceived.

To live plentifully, we must accept the fact that we are not operating in isolation….

In the Book of Genesis (2:16–17), "the LORD God commanded the man, 'You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.'"

3. Deployment of our unique identity in relation to God and others. During his epic walk with God, the father of the three traditional monotheistic religions learns important lessons about who he is. He is known to his family, friends, and neighbors as *Abram* (Gn 12:1). In the name *Abram* is contained the totality of what others assume to be his personality, aptitudes, weaknesses, and destiny. Consequently, that is who he thinks he is. But that is not the name by which God knows him. It is not the spiritual identity that God had in mind from the beginning. To discover it, he must leave the land of his ancestors and follow God's leadership to assume his rightful place and name, *Abraham* (Gn 17:5).

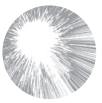
In the Book of Revelation (2:17), God says, "Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches. To everyone who conquers I will give some of the hidden manna, and I will give a white stone, and on the white stone is written a new name that no one knows except the one who receives it."

4. Quest for unity of the person inhabited by the living God. Before the time of Jesus, the Jewish people had hundreds of sanctions and laws that had to be obeyed to the letter. They would understandably think that winning God's favor would be difficult, if not impossible. They would become discouraged if it were not for the social pressure to conform as much as possible, bearing the guilt of their transgressions. Jesus reminded them that the ancient Law (Dt 6:5; Lv 19:18) contains two priorities: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27). In other words, joy depends on our being reconciled with our true identity, our creator, and creation. Joy depends on our consciousness of God's spirit dwelling within us and teaches us the ways of truth and love: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Cor 2:16).

From the Christian perspective, we are reminded that as God is one in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, we are one in body, mind, and soul. Our joy is in the unity of our person animated by God's truth and love. We breach this law when we become fragmented or obsessed with one aspect of our being at the exclusion of others. Unity calls for reconciliation and balance.

5. Life as fecundity. God's plan has always been creative. God charges us with the role of cocreators, collaborators in the building of an awesome kingdom of love: "God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth'" (Gn 1:28).

Spiritual joy comes from living as blessed by God and



embraced by the risen One; living "productively" (but not necessarily according to the world's limited definition of that word); and receiving God's love, living in it, and sharing it with others. We transgress this law when we refuse God's gifts or refuse to develop them. We deny life when we undervalue or repress God's gifts.

Transformative spirituality that is transcendent and healing includes, therefore, a determination to be fruitful in the manner of Jesus' own teaching—to be builders of a kingdom that, as we read in Mt 25:14–21,

> is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, "Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents." His master said to him, "Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master."

Transcending loss—the small and bigger deaths that dot the landscape of our life's journey—may be an elusive goal, but it is not an illusory one. It may not be necessary to our survival, but it is essential to our building and maintaining meaningful and actualizing relationships with God and others. Healing in fact does not come from some plan to recover what has been lost but a willingness to grow through the experience into a mature understanding of life in general and ours in particular. The spiritual director is uniquely placed to seize the moment and foster that growth.

It would be unrealistic to expect all occasions of accompaniment to result in significant spiritual breakthroughs. On the other hand, it would be unfortunate to miss the opportunity to encourage a person who has experienced loss to explore the four corners of this secret garden.

Mystics learned long before we made a science of understanding grief that the path to go up sometimes leads downward. According to ancient mystical traditions, illumination comes from purgation. Living involves different kinds of dying. And, in the words of Francis of Assisi, it is in dying—however we may choose to decode these terms—that we are born to eternal life.

The poet John Keats wrote that "truth is beauty." No one understands that better than those of us who have been privileged to enter the private world of the bereaved and observe their courageous quest for often-frightening truth. I have been blessed by witnessing a transformation that still fills me with awe. When the truth of a person is revealed by fire, it releases an indescribable aura. I am humbled by such a great honor and filled with joy at witnessing such bursts of new life. ■

References

Doka, Kenneth. *Handbook of Thanatology: The Essential Body of Knowledge for the Study of Death, Dying and Bereavement*. Edited by David Balk. New York, NY: Routledge, 2007.

Dunne, Tad. *We Love You, Matty: Meeting Death with Faith*. Amityville, NY: Baywood Publishing Co., 2000.

Farrell, Thomas, and Paul Soukup, eds. *Communication and Lonergan*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1993.

John of the Cross. *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*. Translated by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otiolio Rodriguez. Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1979.

Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York, NY: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1969.

Lonergan, Bernard. *Method in Theology.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Pacot, Simone. *Reviens a la vie (Come Back to Life).* Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 2004.

Prend, Ashley. *Transcending Loss: Understanding the Lifelong Impact of Grief and How to Make It Meaningful.* New York, NY: Berkley Books, 1997.

von Balthasar, Hans Urs. *Mysterium Paschale.* Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1990.

———. *Le chretien et l'angoisse (The Christian and Anxiety).* Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1994.