

Excerpt from
MOURNING INTO DANCING

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Chapter Thirteen

Notes to Those Who Would Comfort the Griever

"Pastor? Pastor?"

"Yes?"

"Have you ever seen Sonny Boy dance?"

"Dance?"

"Well, I guess not. You two don't move in the same circles."

"I think I did actually see him once, Mary. And he might have danced that night. But no. No, never."

"Oh, Pastor, one day you should see Sonny Boy *dance*."

Mary has a voice that tends toward spirituals and poetry, yet she frequently seems abashed by strong moods or by sentiment.

She has four children; her children have children. She handles babies at Fulton Clinic with calm efficiency. She has to be both stalwart and realistic and tough in a world that loves neither her nor her family much. Nevertheless, there's poetry in her nature. She bends her head to beauty as if she heard the angels rustle. I love her for loving things.

And I pay attention.

From her generous depths the word comes: "*Dance*."

Dark Gloria, whose head is bowed, nods.

And in the corner Gloria's mother murmurs, "Mm-hmm, he's a hom-dinger."

All three women are in harmony on this issue.

Paper cups of cold coffee sit at our feet. Coats heap the chair beside me. The room can't be darker than it was because it has no window, but the passage of time makes it seem darker.

Leroy James Hopson has been in surgery for three hours.

Yes I remember! I saw him, yes, at Buddie's wedding. I'm sure of it. I was the pastor presiding. I recall that I turned at the altar and saw, in the midst of the congregation, a man in a cream-white suit.

Coat and vest and pants and a wide-brimmed hat were all richly, audaciously white. The band on his hat and the bud in his lapel were a similar pink. The face of the man was grinning. A dapper little man, straight up in the pew, his head tipped back, presuming himself the focus of public attention, a celebrity. When he saw me see him, his eyebrow lifted a slight degree and his lips parted to reveal the most dazzling, snow-white teeth I'd ever seen. And if there was any doubt whether the smile was meant for me, the man raised a hand and *saluted* me. In church. Without removing the hat.

"Mm-hmm," said Marie. "He's a hom-dinger."

And Mary remembers: "They'd always end at Fly's, you know, him and his friends. And Fly's'd be jammed, and the jukebox music, and the smell of liquor and pomade and Chanel Number Five."

Marie hums her memory: "Mmmmm."

Gloria is silent.

"And there'd come the moment—"

Suddenly Mary sits erect. "Pastor, he's not a big man, but he's well-knit. And there's a flash in him can grab the rowdiest weekend crowd. D'you know what I mean? There'd come a moment when Sonny Boy'd push back the tiny table and stand up, and someone would say, 'My *man*.'" and then all the chairs and tables were snatched aside to make space in the center, and all the faces made a ring around Sonny Boy."

Gloria's head is bowed and her eyes closed. This I know: right now she is a young woman at Fly's on a Friday night, and her uncle is natty and healthy and ready.

Mary whispers, "He'd smile first."

Gloria nods.

Mary says, "He'd kill you with that smile. Oh, he's proud of his pretty teeth. Well, so he'd smile and slouch, you know, through first chords of a juke tune, and maybe slush his feet a little. A low laugh'd ripple around the room, gettin' ready. Kill them with the smile, kill them with the wait: they couldn't stand it. Sonny Boy knew. Even when he was drunk,

"Gloria, remember? Remember, baby? All at once—ha ha ha! All at once he'd drop his shoulder, Mm! He'd tighten his spine, he'd snap his hands on high, he'd clap, Mm, mm! Remember, honey? Suddenly, like a top, the man was unwinding: smoothest, sweetest, sassiest, click of a tap-dance, Mmmmm! Oh, Pastor! Tiny feet as quick as crickets. The music is fast, but Sonny Boy's faster, spinning, chattering with his toes, popping his hip. Oh, he would crouch and drag that heel across the floor, then leap to a whirling motion. He *smoked*, and the people would shout with laughter. They couldn't stand it. They clapped, and he threw back his head and laughed and danced and danced—"

Bang! The door swings open and hits my chair.

Gloria jumps.

"Hopsons?" The nurse has thrust her face into the lounge. "Is this the Hopsons?"

"No," says Mary. "Yes!" she cries.

I rise to let the woman in.

"No, no," she says. "Don't move. Just checking." She departs: *ta-tocka. ta-tock-a.*

I really do not like that sound.

The follows a silence. We're not in Fly's anymore, and Sonny Boy isn't dancing.

But Mary says, "Well, he would lift his arms like a buzzard's wings—"

"Mary!" Gloria's face is up and hard.

"What?"

"That was long ago."

"But you never lose your love for dancing."

"He's tired. Man can't climb the stairs without collapsing."

"They're healing him, Gloria."

"They're cuttin' on him. They're cuttin' his heart."

"But they can't," says Mary, "cut out his love."

Gloria pinches her lips and doesn't answer.

"Not his love for dancing," says Mary, looking directly at her cousin. "Not his love for a person."

Gloria stares at the door behind me.

"Do you remember the Tradesmen's Ball, Gloria?" Mary's language is very precise now. "This year? Not all that long ago?"

Gloria nods once.

"Did Sonny Boy dance then?"

"You know he did," Gloria snaps.

"And did women in long gowns want to dance with him?"

Gloria's mouth tugs toward a pout.

"But who did he choose?" says Mary.

"Well."

"Yes, and didn't he *bow* to his Gloria and smile with his pretty teeth? Wasn't it Gloria and Sonny Boy who swept the floor?"

"Well."

"And what did they play? What did you two dance then?"

"Jitterbug."

"Right! I knew you'd remember! No more'n a year ago. Think of that. And the lights were low, and people watching, and what did the jitterbug turn into then?"

Gloria has allowed a true remembering to soften her face. She smiles. "The two-step," she says. She has so rich a complexion. "And the two-step," she volunteers, "became a waltz."

"Girl, what a memory you got! Is Sonny Boy planning to attend the Tradesmen's again this year?"

"Yes," says Gloria.

And Mary whispers, "You see? They can't cut out his love, not for dancing, not for his daughter, not for his girl, no."

This time when the door opens, no one jumps. Neither does it hit my chair. It swings in cautiously, and after it a tall, cadaverous man steps into the lounge. He's dressed in green, his shoes and his hair in green cloth, the surgical mask at his throat, green. There is a fine spray of blood across his breast. The dots are black. This man glances at my face, my jeans, my face again.

"Oh!" Mary Moore gives a tiny bleat and rises. "This is the doctor," she says to me, and to him, "our pastor. I called him—" Her voice subsides. The reason for speaking at all seems to be fading in her heart.

The surgeon lifts his arm and rubs the back of his neck.

Mary sits again and grabs Gloria's hand.

Marie Landers has begun to rock. She's making a low sound in her nose. A humming—as if she is too busy to listen to others just now.

"Well," says the surgeon, "the operation lasted longer than we expected. I'm sorry. And I'm not sure what to tell you—"

Silence. Not even a breath stirs in the room.

"It is possible," the surgeon says, "that Mr. Hopson suffered an infarction just previous to surgery. Heart attack. Minutes before we opened his chest."

Marie Landers hums louder.

The surgeon continues: "I want you to know that everything went exactly as we'd planned it—" For the first time he seeks someone's eyes; but Gloria's are stuck to the blood on his shirt. Mary gives him attention, and he seems grateful. He says, "We're asking Mr. Hopson's heart to respond, to take over and beat on its own. Do you understand? But the muscle is so ... damaged. Mrs. Ferguson, we have some options—"

But Gloria is glaring at the blood on his shirt.

Mary Moore says, "Options?"

"Yes. We will try them all," says the lanky surgeon. "Right now the team is doing everything it can, I promise you. And as soon as he responds, I'll come back. Okay?"

Even Mary has dropped her eyes.

This young fellow seems to need an answer. "Okay?" he repeats.

So I say, "Okay," and he gives me a grateful look and backs out of the room.

I really hate this "family lounge." Windowless, bleak, unkind, and unsupplied! There is no Kleenex here for tears.

Mary and Gloria are fixed in postures of confusion. Gloria's mamma is rocking on a straight-legged chair with a wordless fury, humming.

"Mary?" I say.

She turns her eyes to me.

"Gloria? Mary? Do you mind if I pray now?"

Mary says, passionately, "Please do."

Gloria says nothing. She looks as if she's still staring at the blood.

I fold my hands and lower my head. "Jesus, we need you," I whisper. "Don't leave us now. And Sonny Boy needs you. Heal him. Strengthen him. Save his life. Please bring him_ "

"Ah!" I hear a strangled sound. Then a shriek: "*Pastor, Pastor Pastor.*"

Gloria's crying out. She has suddenly snapped to a rigid position, flat from her skull to her toes, but she's staring with terror down toward her feet.

"*My legs*" she screams. "Pastor, my *legs!* Her legs are as hard as ax handles.

"Gloria, what's the matter?"

"Oh, Pastor, they hurt! My legs hurt!"

They are vibrating in a sort of spasm, and Gloria's beginning to slide down from the couch. Her dress hikes up her thighs. The muscle above the knee is solid. The shoes shake off. Gloria's toes are splayed apart, cramping.

I move forward and kneel beside her. I grab her legs under my left arm and lift them and snatch a wastebasket, flip it and place it beneath her heels like a footstool.

"It's all right, Gloria, all right, all right—

She's hinging at the hips. Now with both arms I drive her back and up, till she is sitting; and with my fingers I begin to massage the wooden muscle.

"They hurt!" she wails. "Pastor, they hurt so bad.

"I know, I know. Close your eyes. Breathe as deeply as you can. *Mary!* Get a nurse. Baby lotion! And tell them for God's sake to find some Kleenex for this room!"

Mary vanishes.

Poor Gloria, so frightened by her own body that she breaks my heart. And she truly tries to breathe deeply. She is shivering.

"Why do they hurt?"

"I don't know."

"Pastor why do my legs hurt?"

"Maybe because you're scared. Scared to be sad." My forearms ache. "Hush, Gloria." *Hush, my sister. Hush.*

And with all her might she does.

Gloria's coal-black hair is pulled severely back from her forehead. Her eyebrows are up, vulnerable. Her eyes seem incapable of closing, watching me, starting to trust me. She has a small mouth, roundish cheeks. With the heels of my palms I knead her legs up and deep and down and deep, and she does not whimper, and I love her, I love her.

Gloria hushes. So then the only sound in the room is a humming. Oh, pity the tiny Marie! Rocking swiftly on a four-legged chair not built for rocking, forgotten

in our haste, she has wrapped her arms around herself and has found a hymn to sing. I stroke my Gloria's terrors in rhythm to this hymn:

Precious Lord, take my hand—

Then Mary returns. And the nurse appears. This woman cocks a professional eye at my massaging. "I can do that," she says.

"No!" I hiss. "You can't." It's my job and my Gloria. "What you can do," I tell her, "is give me the lotion, then go get Kleenex for this heartless room!"

The nurse withdraws.

I pour cool lotion on my sister's legs. She shivers. I rub the swifter to warm it. She closes her eyes. And the knots in her legs begin to loosen.

"Mary?"

"Pastor."

"I'm sorry I yelled at you before."

Mary does not answer me. Instead, she touches me. She lays her hand on my shoulder and keeps it there, forgiving me.

I want to cry.

Marie Landers has not ceased her humming:

Through the storm. Through the night.

Lead me on. To the light—

And so we wait till the surgeon returns to speak another word regarding Sonny Boy, Leroy James Hopson, dapper man, dancer, the smiling celebrity in a cream-white suit.

COMFORTERS: KNOW THE SCRIPT BUT READ THE GRIEVER

Clearly, griever do not all suffer the same. Some souls stick in the process for years, never coming to any sort of final acceptance. Some souls are healed by the external trappings of mourning more than by the internal transfigurations of failure and ache and renewal. Some glide with a wonderful trust straight past the battles of the second act of grief, arriving quickly at a simple sorrow, the sorrow alone: they bow their heads and are sad. None of these variations, of course, is "wrong."

The script outlined in the previous chapter as the Four Acts of Grieving is not a rule to be followed. Rather, it's a tool for interpretation, so that no one need be baffled by the sometimes outrageous or illogical behaviors of grief, neither friends nor kin nor the griever herself.

But in this chapter I speak especially to those who choose to become caregivers for one on a difficult journey: the griever's comforters. (No matter how close you may be to this person apart from her bereavement, it must be a *choice* to take upon yourself the delicate job of comforting her, a choice made willingly,

consciously, with foresight and commitment. Comforting shall require much of the comforter.)

No gesture of grief is isolated. *She* may not know why she does what she does. She may fear that her broken emotions and wild compulsions are evidence of a sort of insanity, sudden, inexplicable, estranged, and isolated. Coming from nowhere. In fact, every gesture and every mood is experienced in the stream of all her grieving, which soon reveals a continuum, a necessary form. The comforter can recognize the form according to general human patterns of behavior. Even if the griever "spirals" through the pattern, repeating certain acts again and again with greater or lesser intensity, yet because the comforter can name the behavior he is himself neither frightened nor useless, but remains a stable element in the midst of chaos.

Comforter, know where she's at in her journey *according to the script*. Though you need teach her nothing right now, you are her knowledge: you yourself have become the "knowing" that assures her of sanity and hope and healing, though she *recognizes* none of these things.

On the other hand, do not impose the script upon her, nor presume to know which act she's in without first reading her behavior. Always take your cues from her. By instinct *she* is leading; in patience you are serving.

And expect anger. Since you will be one most available to her, you'll likely become the target other moods. (1) Don't demean the mood by disbelieving. *It* is real, even if *you* are not its real cause. But (2) don't take it personally. It is love that offers yourself as the "other" in a her dramas; it is wisdom that knows you are not the other at all, but her blessed opportunity, her comforter.

When I met Gloria in the hospital, she wouldn't talk to me Her eyes had smoky glaze of rage. I don't think that what I said made any difference. There was no right nor wrong so far as her fury went because she was angry at Authority Itself, Whoever or Whatever was the cause of this hateful circumstance—and I was the closest thing she had for Authority in the moment. It was my service as her comforter that I should receive the rage without returning it or being wounded by it. (What good is the incapacitated comforter?) It was also my trust that, having exploded, she would change and love me again—especially if the explosion had not offended me and sent me away My steadfast love must finally prove to her that Love is steadfast, and life continues, and forgiveness heals.

Gloria was struggling in the second act, opposing emotion to an unacceptable possibility, the death of her uncle.

Three hours later she switched the strategy. Now suddenly she set her will against the foe, a dramatic denial of the nearness and imminence of death, because it had just invaded the lounge in the person of the doctor, his surgical "greens," and that spray of Sonny Boy's blood on his shirt.

When Gloria's legs seized up, one might have demanded that she stop acting like a child: "You know there's nothing wrong with your legs. Or one might have

panicked at the urgency and weirdness of the crisis. In either case one would have mistaken a good opportunity.

Read the griever: she was, in fact, doing a reasonable thing and at the same time giving her comforters chances to comfort. She was exchanging an impossible pain for a possible one (the mortality of Sonny Boy is overwhelmed, for the moment, by spasms in her legs). She was avoiding the greater horror by finding a lesser, stranger one: "My legs! They hurt!" The comforter does best to accept her perspective (the grimmer facts will reveal themselves soon enough) to be grateful that he now can do something at all (can touch her who so needs touching, but for whom touching can be dangerously ambiguous), to play his role without embarrassment or hesitation (even if it is, in a sense, "role-playing"), and so to love her. To prove himself an ally.

It is in precisely such a moment, when the griever makes the outrageous demand, that the comforter wordlessly declares: *I am here. I will be here. I will companion you, however far we must go together—*

And so, the covenant is established and life engaged in death's despite, by a comforter.

COMFORTERS: PREPARE YOURSELVES

Here is ministry so ancient, so common among us, so eminently human that no one needs post-graduate degrees in counseling or psychology to perform it.

Nevertheless, two preparations are necessary, both for your sake and for the sake of the bereaved. The first is general and ought to be accomplished sometime in your adulthood, whether or not you are ever required to comfort a griever. The second is specific and ought to be accomplished with direct regard to the particular griever you choose to help. Both are your spiritual preparation.

First, make peace with your own death and with Death Itself.

Second, purge yourself of any false or selfish motive for consoling this person.

Make peace with death, or the death you confront in comforting may threaten you as much as the griever and trigger in you your own process of grief. You shall be no comforter then, but one in need of comfort—and the blind shall be leading the blind.

I have met the physician who refuses to meet his own death. He's a cold sort. With terminal patients or with families of the deceased, he speaks of professional issues. All is mechanical: it works or it doesn't. It can be fixed or it can't. But between the can and the can't are percentages only and no human soul. So here is a persistent denial. Seeming so strong as to be unapproachable, this physician in fact is unapproachable because he is weak: fearful he might catch the grin of his own Dying in the face of the bereaved, his limitations, his finitude. Death.

This chilly manner is not, of course, restricted to physicians. There are as well chilly pastors, chilly counselors, parents, spouses, friends.

On the other hand, I've met doctors so overwhelmed by the tragedy of death that they themselves show signs of grief whenever the dying comes near to them. They seem (they are!) most generously human. When the patient weeps, so do they. When the patient hurts, so do they. They offer an ocean of compassion; but it can conceal trouble—like the rage that in a griever is necessary but that in a doctor comes like the shark. These (counselors, pastors, friends, any who would comfort) do not lead. They mimic. They befriend, indeed, but they can't inspire confidence, because they are not confident. They seem to a griever the most sensitive of all who surround her; they feel what she feels; but they know no hope nor serenity nor assurance for the future—and therefore what they do not do is comfort.

The comforter is called to walk a middle ground: to be familiar enough with death (and clear enough regarding his own death) that he can gaze with sincerely compassionate eyes at the grief of the bereaved (they are one on this journey together); and yet, at the same time, to be objective enough about any particular death (to be free from *death*) that he can maintain a leader's distance for the sake of the griever (no, he is not taking the same journey with her; he isn't grieving). In other words, the comforter must (1) already have engaged his own personal war with dying and (2) even now be assured of the victory to come. He knows suffering, but he, in Paul's words, does "not grieve as those who have no hope." The very character of his comfort derives from the experience of these contraries: both death and hope.

And we have a faith that does not shrink from death. The fundamental concern of our faith is *both* to reveal with fearsome accuracy the nature of death, *and* to draw the sting from it by the victory of the resurrected Christ. We, of all people, need to deny nothing true, the bad and the good. Of all people, we are most able to confess the grand proportions of death: so terrible as to defeat us all!—but defeated, rather, in Jesus.

Therefore, let comforting arise from your faith. No: comforting is not the *preaching* of this faith; it is the genuine *living* of it by those not frozen in denial nor lost in perpetual grief. You who once were a standing dust are now the walking Gospel. You are able.

And *purge your motives*, since anything less than the willingness to make personal sacrifice will not endure this journey through.

The comforter is the servant.

Expect nothing in return for your ministrations. This is both spiritual and realistic. The griever has suffered the rupture of some significant relationship; she will be unable then to give reasonable and mutual attention, to other relationship including the one she has with you. Of course: she is dying, and death puts stress on all her relationships. For a while (as grace will always have it) it becomes your commitment to uphold not only your side of a covenant but hers as well—in order that life continue for her. For the time being, and specifically for this business of

comforting the griever, expect nothing. There's nothing to give and nothing to gain. She is leading, indeed; but she ain't payin' for it; you are grace to her now.

You will grow tired. Often there will seem no end to the griever's morbidities, her unaccountable demands, her maudlin pawings, her silences and sadnesses. Perpetual watchfulness will drain you because you are her life just now. It is a godly work, to be life for another. But it's exhausting. And if you had expected something in return, you will be deeply disappointed; and disappointment may justify withdrawal; but if you withdraw—if you take life away from her—she dies all over again.

I must be as clear here as possible. Expect *nothing*.

—Not her gratitude nor the praise of the people. For she will often be angry at you, and the praise of people who do not also help will sound like a mule's bray in your ear, aggravating.

—No, nor meek obedience either. She shall not see you as her savior, her hope; she shall sometimes not see you at all; she shall at other times (if you had expected anything) seem most arrogant.

—Nor rational behavior or communication. ("She doesn't even try." may be your desperate complaint.)

—Nor even, in your private midnight soul, should you seek the rewards of self-satisfaction, the pious sense that you're doing good and are a good person, therefore. Such comforting, though overtly sacrificial, is spiritually self-centered: it judges success or failure by the comforter's feelings rather than by the griever's progress. I promise: a selfish contentment must turn into discontent, and by a terrible irony the comforter will blame the griever for it! You'll hold her responsible for the unrewarded disruption of your own life. You'll ponder whether she's troubling you on purpose. "She *likes* to be sad! She just wants the attention!"

Thus, "expect nothing" means, more sharply, "seek nothing for yourself."

If you had sought or expected anything, then it is at this point—battered, tired, feeling no accomplishment, no honor nor inner reward—that you may be inclined to quit. "I've got my own life to live. She's just using me. She's not even trying. It's ruining my family—" and so forth.

The comforter must choose to be a servant, to serve God by serving the least of his children.

The comforter is not a teacher, a moralizer, a quoter of helpful Bible verses, a preacher of timely sermons!—just a servant, serving.

The comforter is not a prophet, pointing out the errors of the bereaved, interpreting sorrow as a visitation of an angry God, but a servant, serving; and grief is the mistress of this house. Grief commands; the comforter obeys.

The comforter is not a professional mourner, matching sad stories with sadder ones in a very sad universe; the comforter cannot be that merchant of misery who takes a dangerous pleasure in having found one soul sadder than himself and who,

while seeming so deeply sympathetic, is in fact feeding on others' sorrows. That's a parasite. That one loves the grief, not the griever nor the healing.

It's necessary to know and to name such apparently "Christian" comforters (the platitudinous "preacher," the accusing "prophet," and that most humble of servants, the "parasite") and then to protect the griever from them. They serve themselves; they enjoy a false superiority over one who is vulnerable; their friendship is treacherous.

The comforter is not a professional martyr, making a show of his self-denials, helping those on social ash-heaps whom everyone else neglects.

The comforter is, simply, a servant of God, so healthy in the holy relationship that though he is no lover of grief he will live beside it for love of the griever; so happy in the divine relationship that grief shall not impair him; so empowered by his relationship with Jesus that he expects absolutely nothing from his relationship with the griever: he is Jesus come near unto her, and his presence in every sense is Grace.

Comforters, analyze your motives to purge all that is fraudulent or self-serving. This is your second preparation and will permit "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship."

SOME PRINCIPLES FOR COMFORTING

Though the causes of dying can be explained, death itself has no solutions. Comforter, you're not required to fix the mortal break, but rather to companion the broken.

Certain questions have no answer. Any answer, then, feels cheap or absurd, cheapening the questioner. What the griever most needs is to ask the questions passionately and honestly, and to be heeded when she does. So honor the questions. But though all your being yearns to solve things, do not belittle deep mysteries with piddling answers. That's what Job's comforters did to him.

In other words, the first principle of comforting is that your presence is of more importance to the griever than any solutions you might propose. This is comfort for the comforters: you don't have to say the right thing, to see to the depths of the universe, to know doctrine as wisely as do grave clerics. If you don't know what to say to a griever, say nothing. Simply, in an unembarrassed candor, be.

The griever, who suffered the sundering of relationship, needs relationship. You are her life. It requires only your proximate bodies, eyes unafraid to gaze at her, arms willing to hug her when she thinks she's about to fly apart, hands to touch her, kindness. Kindness.

Note, please: it doesn't matter which Secondary Dying she has died. The world gathers to comfort a widow. You, however, perceive death in divorce—and so you come to comfort. You see death when a dear dream has finally been destroyed, or where one was fired from a job, or in the radical ripping of a

hysterectomy, or in the imprisonment of one's beloved son. You see the death; you know the onset of grief; you come; you comfort. God is with you.

God is with you, and when the griever tests your durability she discovers eternity: you won't leave. God, with you, is with her too. For her, you simply *are*. That is the first and the most important principle of comforting. And once she trusts your graceful presence, then seven other principles may be engaged:

1. *Name*, when she is able to hear it, and *explain* as simply as possible her particular stage in the drama of grief. She will need assurance that her behavior is not unnatural. She may forget your explanation; be ready to repeat it as often as she asks. The words themselves may be her stay against an utter confusion.

2. By your uncritical responses, *grant her permission* (and the time and the space) to perform what her present act of grieving demands of her. Don't force things, but *listen* to any mood in her, even her rages. These may be hidden in shame or else overt and powerful. Let them occur even if the anger is against God. On the one hand, be not aghast; on the other, do not echo what she says. If you are startled, she loses an ally now. If you agree with her furies, she loses the ally in the future when she will need to believe that God is good.

Rather, *listen* with honest attention. Restate her sentiments, asking if that is what she meant; and so she'll know that listening (so much a salve to the torn spirit) is happening. If she needs to be sad for seven months, allow for sadness. Affirm it. Trust that (in almost every case) the griever's instinct is accurate, and she does need the time. If she wants to repeat certain memories over and over, let each repetition be new to you. The point is not to learn something you hadn't known before. The point is relationship, manifest in plain listening.

3. *Attend*, especially during periods of distractedness, *to her basic needs*. Grief can neglect the body, its food and dress and cleanliness. Grief forgets the requirements of society, bills, lawns, kids, gas, taxes, voting. But if these things are not accomplished, chaos comes indeed. With the help of the whole community, maintain these other relationships until she's ready to take them up again. In order to learn what duties need to be done, pretend you are she; but when you do her duties, let it seem a matter of course and no big deal. Don't let your kindness cause her guiltiness. And surely do not patronize her, as though you reached down to her from a lofty health.

Always watch for signs of revival—so that the instant she's able to shoulder her load, you slip away and vanish from that particular juncture.

(So critical is it that you "expect nothing"—especially here. Your hope for some gratitude might communicate itself and double her burden: guilt for her failure, obligations to thank you equal to your work.)

4. Always, *express confidence in her*. Find ways to gesture your undiminished appreciation. She should know that you never cease to believe that her worth, her abilities, her goodness—her particular virtues—will rise at the right time, and resume her life again. In you she will have a sort of savings account; in

you she will find evidence of her faith and strength and good purpose, especially when she can't find them in herself. You'll create certain phrases that characterize the best of her, and you'll repeat them till she trusts them: "I know you don't feel it now, but you're the finest architect I know." "The wisest parent." "A singer that gives me joy." And this: "I love you, Gloria. Nothing will change that. I love you."

5. *Stay with her*, stay with her, stay with her: abide.

The whole world gives a griever only so much time as the world itself can stand to be sad. Short time. Abbreviated grief. And then it demands that she get on with it. The world will attend a funeral; but two weeks later, when she sits in her kitchen staring at her empty hands, it doesn't know. It's back at work, wondering where she is. Stay with her: holy stability and the human touch. Stay.

6. And though you learn from her the amount of time she needs to complete any single act of grief, the genuine love in you (not a snifty pride in you) will notice when it's gone too long. So you will *encourage* her to move to the next act simply by presenting its next actions as reasonable possibilities. "Are you angry these days?" you say. "When you sit all alone, what do you feel?" "Are you sad?" you say. The question does not trouble you, and so it doesn't trouble her. And always you indicate that you're willing to hear whatever the furnace in her soul casts up: whatever.

7. But throughout the process, comforter, *take care of yourself*. You will need an emotional support of your own. Earnestly I suggest that you surround yourself with a group of people not involved in this matter. Let the group covenant:

—to pray with each other for each other;

—to praise one another in knowing detail, and to offer a continual encouragement;

—to do something else than your various ministries together, like playing bridge or tennis, laughing loudly, gathering regularly when there is no crisis at all, on holidays, for feasts, with all the children, looking forward, perhaps, to a unifying worship—gathering simply to prove the commitment of this group, the unity and love.

If you are to be life to one bereaved, then you must find nourishment from others unbereaved. And so this support group must be yours, not the griever's. It can't be a body of people as large as a congregation but one well able to name you in love. It needn't know the confidential details of your ministry; but it will affirm you nonetheless, and hold you up to God.

This is common sense. It will establish your own life and health so that you maintain a realistic perspective from which to comfort them who have lost exactly that perspective.

Oh, comforter! The peace of the Lord be with you, that it might be with them whom you serve and console. Amen.

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