

Never-ending Love

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Sharing Stories, Prayers and Comfort
for **Miscarriage** and **Infant Loss**

Edited by **Anne Louise Mahoney**



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Introduction

“I just don’t know what to say or do.”

So often, in the face of suffering, we find ourselves doing or saying nothing out of fear of making things worse. The chapters of this book are a confirmation that for many people experiencing miscarriage and infant loss, the absence and silence actually contribute to and worsen the pain of loss.

Thankfully, there are many things we can prayerfully consider as a response to the grief of parents and families, individually and in our communities of faith. Reading this book is a wonderful step on the personal and collective journey toward our church and our world being a safer place for this particular kind of grief.

Maybe the most significant thing we can do is normalize being and becoming a safe space for people to share the stories of their losses. These pages hold the sacred stories of lives that existed only briefly on this side of heaven, told lovingly by the parents with aching arms and souls. Practise listening with an open heart. Read with reverence. Pay attention to unique ways that each of these writers experienced their loss, waded through it and made meaning. Watch for the people who were walking alongside. You’ll learn in these pages that there is no

one right way to respond, but there are many ways to respectfully make yourself available, offer support and be a part of a healing journey.

Because miscarriage is such a profoundly interior and hidden loss, I invite you to begin by reflecting on your own connection to this subject. Have you experienced a loss of your own? A child, niece, nephew, grandchild or close friend? Have you had a difficult situation in trying to give support and feeling like it didn't go well? Have you walked alongside someone and asked what more you could do? Pull out a journal or go for a walk and reflect on your reason for caring. Are there any wounds that God may want to heal in you? Doing this healing work of your own first will allow you to enter into others' pain with less likelihood that your motives will intrude on their grief. May the pages that follow be a part of your healing, too.

As you read, take note of the many things individuals have said and done that the writers have found helpful. Write them down so you can refer back when you're preparing to connect with a family after a loss. Pray over the choices and ask God to direct you to the one most needed in the moment. Trust that saying or doing something with empathy and humility is better than doing or saying nothing at all. Apologize and try again if needed. When offering practical supports, remember that generalized offers of help put the responsibility on the grieving to call and ask, which can be overwhelming and exhausting. Offer specific supports that you are able to follow through on and give the other person permission to accept or decline without shame.

Communal responses are also a powerful part of changing the culture of silent isolation. When our churches have posters up in hallways and bathrooms, brochures advertising options for support at the entrances, services advertised and offered regularly, and prayers of the faithful for miscarried children and

their families, we make the whole community more aware of the frequency of these losses and the supports available. Consider being a part of efforts in your church and/or diocese as well as your broader community to strengthen and sustain miscarriage resources and ministry.

Finally, I invite you to pay attention to the seasons of grieving as articulated by the stories in this collection. The hope and possibility and uncertainty of pregnancy. The loss. Grief and confusion and doubt. An embodied path to healing and a God big enough to hold the pain. The role of ritual and spiritual practices in gradual healing. The power of sharing. It is impossible to know where people are at, how they are feeling or what they need without asking them. May these pages give you courage and hope that reaching out to ask is always a gift, especially when those you are connecting with have the freedom to accept or decline support.

These writers have given their perspectives with such beauty and honesty and generosity from their own varied perspectives. May their words inspire your own journey of healing and hope for yourself and your community.

The little ones remembered in this book are part of a great communion of saints whose lives are almost entirely eternal. May they pray with us and for us for a world that never takes for granted the miracle of a single life and grieves well the ones we haven't gotten to hold.

Leah Perrault
July 28, 2023

Gifts and Graces

Reflecting on Loss

Brenda Merk Hildebrand

For almost 20 years, the memory of our little one born too soon was a dark place of confusing pain, misunderstanding and loss. Most of the time, it was easy to live around this emptiness. Family, friends, work, community and parish commitments offered a life that was full and abundant. Three children came into our home, their presence a joy and a blessing. The all-too-short life of our little one, ending in a miscarriage, faded into the background. And yet, each year, on what would have been her birthday, I quietly remembered the child of my heart.

It seemed wise to carry on. It was wise, and good, to carry on. The world certainly did not want to dwell on this difficult loss. Women were to bear all losses quietly and move on quickly. There was no funeral, no memorial service, no formal acknowledgement of this life or this death; it simply did not fit into the usual categories of grief.

When the time was right, and I was ready, God invited me back to that place of darkness so it could be filled with light. Tearful, I dared to ask the questions that had long been unanswered: “You know, God, that all life has purpose and all life is sacred. Why did our little one have to be born too soon? What was her purpose? How did her life matter? What difference did she make?”

What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light;
What you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops.

(Matthew 10.27)

I waited, quietly attentive, while the answers came. Seen only by me, our little one had awakened in me a love for life and a willingness to protect it. I treasured more deeply the pregnancies, births and lives of our children. My work as a childbirth educator was deeply enriched. I was more sensitive to the joy and the pain that can accompany this life-changing transition. When my class of grade 6 and 7 Catholic students asked what I thought about the intrinsic value of all life, I could answer very clearly. As I write this, I wonder about the lasting effect that answer might still have, and I am chuckling because the question was posed when I was almost eight months pregnant with our next child.

Until this time of healing prayer, and the recollection of those events, almost 20 years after that difficult experience, I had not even been aware of the ways in which this little one had lived on in my life. It was time to honour her legacy.

It was time to give this little one a name. It was time to share the darkness and the light, beginning with my husband and our children. I still treasure my husband’s sincere love as he looked at the baptismal gown that was worn by our other children. It was a symbol of what had been, to that point, an inward journey. I am grateful for his willingness to share that experience.

Recalling that at every Baptism, parents are asked to speak aloud the name they have chosen for their child, I asked if she could be named Amy Marie. Amy means “beloved,” and I shared my belief that she was beloved and fully at home with God. I acknowledged the pain I felt at the Baptisms of each of our other children when I received the blessing given to a new mother. In those years, the blessing noted that the mother gave thanks to God for the gift of this child. All good. The next sentence asked the mother to give this child back to God. That was not as easy. I had already given one child back.

The healing process brought good news into my life. Yes, one child had been reluctantly given back. What I had not seen, until that time of prayer-filled healing, was that Amy Marie had been gently returned to me. I had been blind to the quiet blessings her life had offered. And in that time of quiet, the promise offered by St. Paul became real.

We know that all things work together
for good for those who love God,
who are called according to his purpose.

(Romans 8.28)

While this healing process was still fresh, a dear, sensitive and thoughtful friend offered two roses: one for me and one for Amy. One red and one white, they were held together with a ribbon, symbolizing that we are forever united. Our love is never-ending.

Throughout the healing process, I learned to re-view the past and to see it from a new perspective. The gift of this new perspective has allowed me to live more deeply in the present moment. I see and hear and perceive in a new way.

When people ask me how many children we have, I answer in the usual conventional manner: “We have three children.”

Every once in a great while, something prompts me to say “four,” following up with an acknowledgement of the little one who was born too soon.

On each of those occasions, the person with whom I am speaking has become quiet. After a minute or so, the story comes. I have been privileged to hear of the stillbirth of twins. The story had not been shared with anyone in the 50 years that had gone by since that most difficult day. Another shared the shame and pain-filled isolation of a hidden pregnancy that had ended in miscarriage. No one else had ever known. Others have expressed guilt, feeling that it was somehow wrong to carry pain, judging their grief to be less valid because their loss happened earlier in pregnancy than the losses that others had experienced.

In each of those conversations, the very act of bringing the experience into the light brought some measure of healing. It was visible in their faces. Something of the burden had been lifted. The impact of each sharing has been profound.

In every act of honest, open sharing, I speak from the place within me that has known God’s healing love, and I can now speak of it, quietly and clearly. Whenever the moment for these conversations arises, I am reminded that this burden is carried close to the heart. The grief is real. Voices become softer; eyes often glisten with tears. Gestures of touch become especially gentle.

This is exactly what happened when I responded to a request to share my experience with a group of church women. Wise and deeply sensitive, the pastor knew that my story would help them to connect with their stories; too many were carrying deeply hidden grief.

After hearing a brief sharing of my story, the women were invited to take small tealight candles, symbols of the losses they carried. As the basket of candles moved from one to the next, I

quietly blinked back my surprise, shocked at the number some women were taking.

Each woman was then invited to light her candles from a large central candle. Not a word was spoken. Each received all the time needed. In that respect-filled room, and as it felt right to each person, all were invited to share their story about the candles they had placed.

I blinked back further surprise. In greater number than the stories of their own losses, they shared the stories of their mother's miscarriages, stillbirths and early infant losses. Two generations of grief. A few stories expanded across more generations: their grandmothers and their daughters.

Until that day, most were unacknowledged grief.

It was a blessing and a privilege to bear witness as they set down heavy burdens, inviting healing and wholeness into the wounded and weary places of their lives. The stories were sometimes accompanied by the release of pain-filled emotions. There were tears. Having sensed the times and places where tears were deemed inappropriate or unwelcome, many were very practised at blinking them back.

The feelings of loss and the burden of grief can become so intrinsic to our being that we do not always know they are there. Until... the moment when we somehow *know* that this is the time, this is the place, and these are the people with whom, and through whom, we begin to receive the gift of healing and greater inner freedom.

It is an act of faith.

It is an act of courage.

It is an act of trust to be vulnerable,
to share our wounds with another.

I am grateful to those who accompanied me on my journey. They were incredibly wise, caring and compassionate people. I am still grateful for all they offered from the deep well of their gifts. My journals note the gifts, graces and lessons received along the way. They remain in mind and heart. And yet, I must acknowledge that none were perfect in their understanding of my experience or in the words they offered.

The gap between their support and guidance and my deep need is real and necessary. There had to be a space that was God's – and God's alone. I needed to connect with that unique place of emptiness that can only be filled by God. I would not have sought that place if it had been completely filled by human beings.

They saw their role clearly – they were there to help me find my way. These guides gently directed me toward the One whom I was seeking, even when I did not know it. They were wise enough to know that the journey could not be accomplished alone and wise enough to know that only I could do it.

We need one another. And we need our selves. We are the only human being with whom we live out our whole lives. We had best not abandon our selves.

In denying our grief and hiding our sorrow, we leave part of our selves by the side of the road. We return, in spirit, inviting healing into that time and place. We must do so in a particular way: we go back with someone.

One wise guide knew that her role, necessary as it was, also had its limitations. She knew when to step back, allowing God's healing power to come into that time and place. The wisdom of her solid admonition is deeply treasured: "Do not go back alone. Go with God. Take whomever else you want with you. Just do not go alone."

I was advised to invite the prayerful presence of particular people. Some were still alive. Some are members of the Communion of Saints. Some are recognized as official saints within the Church; many are known only to those with whom I share life. I recalled receiving a small wooden icon featuring St. Gerard Majella, patron of expectant mothers. It was the first gift I received from my mother when she learned we were expecting a baby.

It was she who kept watch over me in the hours after the miscarriage, making sure I did not hemorrhage. Although she carried deep, hidden pain from her own losses, her gifts of faith and attentive love are still held in mind and heart. She was the first person I invited to accompany me on the journey back to that time and place.

Having gone home to God, our special people are now blessed with a wisdom and a sense of peace that was not fully theirs while they lived on earth. They have graduated from the school of life and are now able to be the people they would have wanted to be while they were here, living and learning alongside us. Their love is never-ending.

Healing from the loss of our little one brings me a deeper appreciation for the enduring promise: in death, *life is changed, not ended.*

*

The story offered in these words is part of the good news – the gospel of my life. Imperfect as they are, I still trust that in them you will find gifts, graces and lessons to bless your journey.

I hope your story becomes part of the gospel of your life – the good news of the times and places in which you experienced

the loving and healing compassion of Jesus, the Christ. He came to show us the way. The profoundly good news is that his love is never-ending.

***Brenda Merk Hildebrand** has a deep passion for lifelong learning, education, and spiritual and palliative care. She believes that when we die, we are simply born into eternal life.*