

A New Parish Guide to
GRIEF MINISTRY

Creative Ways to Implement a Program
of **HEALING** and **GROWTH**

ANNE MARIE S. MAHONEY

 **TWENTY-THIRD
PUBLICATIONS**
twentythirdpublications.com

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments.....*xi*

Introduction.....1

PART 1: Background

Chapter 1 Why a “Creative Bereavement” Program?.....6

Chapter 2 The Program and How It Works10

Chapter 3 Facilitating a Bereavement Program..... 21

Chapter 4 What Should You Know about Grief?.....30

Chapter 5 Preparing for Your Program..... 41

PART 2: The Program

Basic Setup and Information.....50

Session 1 Introduce Your Loved One.....52

Session 2 Tell Your Story.....58

Session 3 Holding On and Letting Go.....64

Session 4 Hear a Special Song.....70

Session 5 Visualize Your Grief74

Session 6 Cherish This Place81

Session 7 Preserve Your Memories84

Session 8 Plan Your Future.....88

Bibliography.....94

Templates.....97

INTRODUCTION

*Someone I loved once gave me
a box full of darkness.*

*It took me years to understand
that this, too, was a gift.*

[MARY OLIVER, *THE USES OF SORROW*]

S ometime after my husband, Brian, died, I reflected on all that had transpired and realized that I hardly knew myself. Whoever or whatever I was before he became ill was not who I was at that juncture, nor is it who I am today. And therein lies the story. Grieving is ultimately about a story and how one allows it to unfold, page by page. Grieving is painful and lonely and hard. Grieving is being lost in a box full of darkness. Grieving is a long journey with no GPS and only a vague idea of where the destination might be. How do we get there? What tools do we need to climb out of the darkness? I hope this “Creative Bereavement” program is at least the gift of a flashlight and a map for the grievers in your community.

You sleepwalk through that first year following the death of a loved one, doing what must be done in the moment and hoping for the best. One day, about a year after the death, you wake up and ask yourself, with

real awe, “What just happened?” That is the moment the grieving begins in earnest. The paperwork is done, relatives have gone back to their routines, and friends have stopped asking how you are doing. You feel alone, not quite sure who you are anymore, and you do not see any ready support or relief. You are lost in “the box full of darkness.” I needed comfort and there was nowhere to turn.

Sixteen months after my husband died, his brother died of a similar illness. His daughter who had cared for him called me the afternoon following his death. She was chaperoning her son’s class trip to a museum. Sitting on a bench while the kids ate lunch, she reached out just to talk. She vented about her father’s death, her struggle to meet his needs, the waves of emotions rushing over her. She was feeling overwhelmed with grief and responsibilities. I had been caught in those same waves, which sometimes felt like riptides. I mostly listened. Her feelings and questions were so familiar. This sparked an idea about offering others an opportunity to “come cry with me.”

Meanwhile, in the year following Brian’s death, the spouses of four friends died as well. We banded together, dubbed ourselves “The Merry Widows,” and gathered for potluck dinners every few months. At first, we shared information about life insurance, financial planning, and headstones. That morphed into mutual support over struggling children, annoying in-laws, selling a

business and a house. As the drama settled, we spent long hours exploring the deeply personal experiences of being youngish widows. Saving his tools and fishing gear. Leaving his hat and keys on the table by the front door. Keeping his favorite ties on the valet in the bedroom. Holding on and letting go. And what gave us comfort—his favorite song, his favorite meal, his favorite sweater.

Busy lives, pressing responsibilities, well-meaning friends and family all work to deny us the unfettered opportunity to grieve. By the time we hit that first-year milestone, seemingly everyone wants us to “get over it” and “move on” or “get a new life.” The Merry Widows helped each other. Where, I wondered, do others turn for support? Where is the guidebook that shows others how to grieve effectively?

I remembered that I would be moved to tears by a jewelry store commercial that played “I Got You Babe” in the background. It was one of “our” songs. When Lady Mary railed against her Downton Abbey family over the sudden death of her husband, I cheered. I had been there. I was mesmerized by an episode of the television show *Bones* that portrayed an Army Ranger who had lost one of his soldiers. So close to Brian’s Vietnam experience. These were all triggers for my story. There was something powerful in my emotional response to these media experiences. I found each encounter uniquely healing.

With all these pieces floating in my head, a program began to gel as I started to explore how I got through the first couple of years following my husband's death using touchstones in the arts—and how others might do so as well. As a parish pastoral minister, I had the knowledge and experience to incorporate the arts into a bereavement program. I found that the programs available elsewhere were not adequately meeting the long-term needs of grievers. Slowly, I formed "Creative Bereavement" by gathering all the tears and pain along with the laughter and joy to give others some insights into picking up the threads of their own stories and moving forward after the death of a loved one.

This book is the result of my work, one of the gifts I discovered deep in the box full of darkness. I combine my own experience of both grief and education in grief and loss along with what I have learned from the

groups I facilitated. This program can serve as a template for your own program. Use what works for you. Make it your own.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part offers basic information on grief and loss, leading a bereavement group, and hints about setting up and running the program. The second part contains the actual session details. Use these as an outline or a script. Rearrange the topics to suit your group. Bring in your own songs, Scripture, articles, or favorite video clips. Incorporate movement according to your group's comfort level. Know your participants and choose materials accordingly. The program should reflect what is meaningful to your group. The bibliography contains the sources from which I gathered material.

I hope you find the information useful and the program healing. May your grievers find their gift in their box full of darkness.

The Program and How It Works

*I will arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made:
Nine bean-rows will I have there, a hive for the honey-bee,
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.*

*And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,
And evening full of the linnet's wings.*

*I will arise and go now, for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements grey,
I hear it in the deep heart's core.*

[WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS, "THE LAKE ISLE OF INNISFREE"]

When I was starting to develop my “Creative Bereavement” program, I attended the funeral of a former neighbor. At the end of the Mass, his daughter stood to deliver the words of remembrance. I expected a thoughtful eulogy for a beloved gentleman. She rose with a smile, stepped to the ambo, and explained that her father’s favorite poem was William Butler Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” She read the poem and sat down. I was surprised and disappointed. Then I went home and reread it, line by line. I realized how much wisdom it held about death and grief. Yeats, an early-twentieth-century Irish poet, was known for his belief in the “thin space” between life and death, between the present and the hereafter, between our perception and awareness of the continuing presence of our deceased loved ones.

“And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow...” Grievers are looking for that peace. The drop-by-drop peace of understanding that our loved one is gone but remains with us in spirit, in memory, in love, in the thin space between night and day where we hear them in our deep heart’s core. And so, in my program I try to respect the line between teaching and sharing and to always picture myself standing on that roadway, listening with the deep heart’s core.

The topics I present and the information I include offer a path to peace as well as sharing tools for processing and coping with grief. I learned that my participants want to find peace in listening to their loved one’s favorite song or gathering photographs of a family reunion or keeping their husband’s work shirts, their child’s stuffed bear, or the last jar of tomato sauce their mother put up.

The Program

The death of a loved one is a life-altering experience with permanent ramifications. After the immediate coping with the death has passed, the survivor often looks for ways to manage the ongoing grieving process. This bereavement program is designed to give those who have lost a loved one an opportunity to explore and express their grief in a spiritual environment through story, art, music, video, meditation, and activities. This program is intended to be a sequel to the traditional immediate grief support that may be offered through a hospital, hospice, or parish.

The prayers, Scripture, and guided meditations have a Christian grounding but are appropriate and welcoming to those of many faith traditions. The activities are designed to be engaging without being intimidating. One need not be a Rembrandt, Mozart, or Shakespeare to participate in the art, music, and writing activities.

The core of the program is the eight sessions that explore themes of grief and loss leading to hope, using the arts as

tools. While I give you scripts for the eight-session program, “Creative Bereavement” can be tailored to your specific situation and needs. I encourage you to use the music, video, and articles that are available to you and that make sense for your group.

I have been successful at fashioning six- and four-session programs from the base of eight topics. You could easily do a five-, three-, or two-session program to suit your community.

Single sessions can be created from any of the themes or a blend of several themes. For example,

for some, loss is not confined to death. Loss includes having to sell one’s family home, move to a different town or state, or cope with health challenges and mobility issues. There are myriad losses to grieve, and the principles are the same. For many, committing to a multi-week program is not possible, but coming to a single session may give grievers basic information on grief and loss and some tools for dealing with both. Regardless of the format you choose or the number of sessions you offer, it is critical to always balance providing helpful information with

This bereavement program is designed to give those who have lost a loved one an opportunity to explore and express their grief in a spiritual environment through story, art, music, video, meditation, and activities.

allowing space for processing while encouraging future actions.

Prerequisites

- Schedule each session for 75 to 90 minutes plus some gathering time. Include 15 minutes for light refreshments as participants arrive.
- Welcome all grievors but encourage participants to be a year or more past the death of a loved one. It takes time to be ready to write new chapters for our lives.
- Welcome adults of any age who are grieving the loss of any loved one.
- Assure participants that they only need to share with others as much as they are comfortable sharing and to participate as much as they feel comfortable participating.
- Assure participants that no talent in the arts is needed, only a willingness to try out the activities.

Caveat: This program is not appropriate for children or youth. Their ability to process death and their psychological needs are different from adults and should be treated by professionals trained in child psychology.

Format

Each session is built around a theme. The eight themes explore various dimensions of grief and loss. Each session follows a similar structure so that participants know what to expect. Predictability creates a comfortable zone for them.

Each session is divided into four movements:

- Engage
- Learn
- Reflect
- Apply

What comprises each movement will vary depending on the topic. Each session includes:

- Review and overview
- Opening Scripture
- Meditation
- Information on grief and loss
- Video clip and response
- Reflection and sharing
- Activity and participant interaction
- Closing Scripture, reading, or song

SESSION 1

Introduce Your Loved One

GOAL

Identify our loss and resulting grief and how that grief manifests.

In this session we will:

- Introduce the program, format, and materials for each session.
- Give participants an opportunity to introduce their deceased loved one(s).
- Open an awareness in the participants that Scripture, music, films, poetry, art, and meditation can offer opportunities to grieve and to heal.

MATERIALS

Activity Heart shapes cut from heavy paper or card stock.
(See Template.)

Empty Bench cards on card stock. (See Template.)

Handout with Empty Bench meditation questions.
(See Template.)

Video Sleepless in Seattle—Scene #4, 12:45–22:19
or YouTube “Call Scene” (9:05)

Music “Keep Me in Your Heart”
music and lyrics by Warren Zevon

“My Dear Old Friend”
music and lyrics by Patty Griffin

Welcome, Introduction, Overview

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest....I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.”

[MATTHEW 11:28, 29B]

Facilitator Introduction

Briefly introduce yourself and share your background. Highlight whatever training or coursework you have that leads you to bereavement work. Be clear about your skills and background. If you are not a healthcare professional, psychologist, therapist, social worker, etc., state that very clearly.

Overview of the Eight Sessions

Explain that each session will:

- Have a theme related to grief and loss.
- Follow the same format, providing continuity and predictability.
- Focus on learning about aspects of grief and loss.
- Include time for meditation, sharing, and a hands-on activity.
- Include Scripture, a song, and a video clip.
- Offer a safe place to reflect, process, share, and “find rest for your souls.”

Overview of Session 1

In this introductory week, we learn who our loved ones were to us. We also explore some of the techniques we will be using each week.

Ground Rules

- Respect yourself and others.
- Share both the talking and the listening time.
- Keep within the group what is shared within the group.
- Share only what feels comfortable to share when you are ready.

- Honor the silence, which is as valuable as the talking.
- Remember that everyone has suffered a terrible loss.
- Remember that all losses are equal. No loss is harder, more tragic, or sadder than any other. There is no perfect time, place, age, or relationship for death.
- Share your experience but don't give advice. One size does NOT fit all. If you want to begin a statement with “You should...”—stop. Each person grieves differently and recovers differently. Resist saying, “I know how you feel...” You don't.
- Understand that grief and loss never completely end. Eventually, we learn how to live with it.
- Slip in quietly if you arrive late, we'll get you caught up.
- Crying is OK. So is laughing!

(Remind participants about these rules as you go along, since people will slip into saying, “I know how you feel...” and “You should do...”)

ENGAGE

Participant Introductions

CONVERSATION: Invite participants to introduce themselves one at a time. Ask what brought them to the group or what they hope to learn from the group.

Create the Remembrance Board

Hand out the heart shapes and markers. Invite participants to write the first name of their loved one(s) on one or more hearts. Give the group a minute to name their hearts. Play soft instrumental background music.

Who Was Your Loved One?

CONVERSATION

Invite participants to introduce their loved ones. Include the person's name, their relationship to the person, and how long it has been since the loved one died. If they are comfortable, they can share a memory of the loved one.

The facilitator begins with a self-introduction, including any recently deceased loved ones to set the tone and model what to say.

After the sharing is finished, invite participants to stick their hearts on the prepared Remembrance Board, which will be set up for each session.

PLAY: "Keep Me in Your Heart" by Warren Zevon as hearts are mounted on the board. Note that a dying Zevon wrote this song as his farewell.

Having participants get up and go to the board gives them a stretch break. Encourage them to take the opportunity to refresh their beverage or snack.

The Empty Bench Meditation

Draw participants' attention to the photo of the empty bench on the card that has been placed at each person's seat. Invite them to picture themselves in the moment described, thinking about their loved one.

He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

[MARK 6:31]

Imagine yourself walking around a nearby pond. The walking path is wet and muddy in spring after it rains but cool in summer. The trees along the path are bright and colorful in autumn, while the path is white and crunchy in winter snow. All year round, it is a peaceful respite from the noise of the road and nearby play area. The path feels lost in nature. It is shaded by big old trees, including chestnut trees that drop their smooth nuts in spiky pods in early autumn and flowering berry trees that burst into soft white and pink blossoms in spring. There are always ducks and geese in the pond and occasionally a long-necked swan.

In a clearing at the edge of the path, between a tall ash tree and a white birch, stands a bench. It is made of wood that is the deep amber of maple syrup. The surface of the bench glows with a soft patina that feels silky to the touch. The curved seat and arms cradle anyone who stops to rest. Two can share the bench quite comfortably. When you sit on this bench, the parted bushes

offer a perfect vista of the pond. Just taking a few moments on this bench makes you feel peaceful and content.

You discover that the bench is a memorial to a local resident who died on September 11, 2001. On the back of the bench is a brass plate with his name, his dates of birth and death, and a note that he graduated from the high school in 1984.

You notice that people rest on the bench. You see an elderly walker taking a break, his dog stretched out on the grass beside him. You notice people of all ages reading books and newspapers, enjoying a warm day on the bench. Often you see a couple sitting on the bench, with one person's head resting on the other's shoulder. One afternoon you observe a young man, undoubtedly a high school student, sitting on the bench with a notebook on his lap, pen in hand. He is looking intently at the pond, studying the surroundings, taking notes. You suspect he was catching up on a biology project. You think, how wonderful that people come and use this special bench. That people who never met the deceased or don't even pause to read the brass plate nonetheless find peace or, in the case of the high school student, answers by resting on his bench. This bench is a special gift to everyone who walks along the path beside the pond.

Can you picture yourself sitting on a comfortable bench, away from the demands of your life, taking just a few minutes to rest and remember? Imagine that you are on that bench now. Take a deep breath and

let it out slowly. Feel the sun on your face, a cool breeze through your hair. Smell the flowering bushes. Feel the bench cradling you.

Take another breath.

Invite participants to answer the questions found in Templates in their minds or on paper.

PLAY: "My Dear Old Friend" while participants reflect and write.

Share Your Loved One

CONVERSATION

Invite participants to share what they might have written on a brass plate and why. This is your special memory and the beginning of understanding your story with your loved one. The idea of "story" will be a theme throughout our sessions. We are telling our story today with a character, your loved one, and a single word or phrase.

LEARN

The Second Year

The *Sleepless in Seattle* clip reinforces the ideas of loss, the effects of grieving, the second year, preserving memories, and beginning to move forward. The bench makes a guest appearance as well. The second year is often considered the hardest for grievers. That is when the reality of the permanent loss sets in, as you will see in this clip.

PLAY: *Sleepless in Seattle*

Note the following points as questions or statements, or invite responses:

- The Christmas setting. *Holidays are loaded with memories and difficult to navigate.*

- Sam and his son Jonah on the phone with psychologist Dr. Marcia Fieldstone. How prescient and worried Jonah is. *Jonah knows his father needs help.*
- Dr. Marcia's question: "Are you sleeping?" Sam's response after Jonah's prompting: "No." *Grieving has physical effects.*
- Sam on the bench describing his deceased wife to Dr. Marcia. *Time and space for memories.*
- His wife died a year and a half earlier. *Sam is deep into the second year.*
- Dr. Marcia: "Tell me what was so special about Maggie." Sam responds, "She made everything beautiful." Then, slowly and thoughtfully, he lists her attributes, much like I asked each one to do in the meditation. Dr. Marcia: "What do you miss?" Sam: "It's Christmas." Then describes his memories of her at Christmas.
- Dr. Marcia asks how Sam is coping. Sam's response may resonate with you: "I'm going to get out of bed each morning and breathe in and out all day. Then, after a while, one day I won't have to remind myself to get out of bed and breathe in and out."
- Note that the scene cuts away with "Somewhere Over the Rainbow."

REFLECT

CONVERSATION: Invite reactions and thoughts:

- Can you see yourself in this clip?
- What does it tell us about grieving?
- What are the challenges/experiences of the second year?
- What would you say to Sam if you could talk to him?

APPLY

Consider this statement from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross:

The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not "get over" the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again, but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same, nor would you want to.

CONVERSATION: Is Kübler-Ross' statement good advice for Sam? For you?

Closing Reflection

This poem may speak to how you are feeling. Grieving is hard!