

Bereavement: A personal journey, an unfinished symphony



Etta McEaney reacts to the small group discussion on loss of a child, during the afternoon session of the bereavement seminar held Oct. 5 at St. Mary's Hospital. "When you lose a child," said one group member, "you're burying your future."

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and humanitarian values, and flouted the strictures of the Southern culture into which he was born and against whose bigotry he collectively chafed. He was an immoderate discusser and accomplished linguist who spoke fluent French, German, Russian and operatic Italian, knew more than a smattering of Greek, Latin, Gaelic, Hungarian and Japanese, and could tell you the linguistic root of almost any word. He knew, in fact, something about almost everything except the practical applications of intensely technical subjects, and he couldn't cook anything except hard-boiled eggs. As my youngest sister once pointed out, he didn't have much common sense, but he had a lot of uncommon sense.

"Telling the story is part of the search," says Dr. Kollar, as I realize I've lapsed too long into private reverie. Still, the catharsis is perhaps more beneficial than I want to admit, the feelings have been dammed up for so long. "Usually, as time goes by, the story is told less. At that stage, resolution begins."

Resolution, as we sometimes refer to it — or resignation, or ultimately, *diminishment* of grief, which Dr. Kollar calls "a personal response to the loss of a significant other." Anger, guilt, denial, anxiety, helplessness, attacks of yearning or distress, withdrawal from normal life, anorexia, depression, sleep disturbances, somatic symptoms (headaches, gastrointestinal upsets, aches and pains), tears, prayer, religious ceremony, and even relief or a sense of emancipation can all play a significant part in recovery from the acute stages of grief.

"There are no answers," says Connie Mindell. "There's no road map of *here* and *here* and *here*, and the grief will be finished."

Apparently not, I conclude, as I listen to a panel discussion of various religious expressions of grief, or talk afterward with Father Joseph Brennan and Father Jim Schwartz about Judaism and the Catholic sacrament of anointing the sick. I'm reminded by Connie Mindell of the almost spiritual power of words to promote healing, in my own personal confrontation with grief. "Give sorrow words," she quoted from Shakespeare's "MacBeth" just before the conclusion of her morning talk. "The grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart and bids it break."

Something akin to that sentiment must have moved me, inexplicably, to write the following poem two weeks after my father's death, on the occasion of his memorial service. We had Mozart, a quote from Paul Valery's "Le Cimetiere marin" ("Will you sing when you are vaporous?" in my literal translation), the dignified setting of Brockport's Morgan-Manning House, and Brockport chaplain Roy Agte, who is always there for my family on what translate as sacramental occasions.

The only thing remaining was the spoken word, and I set these down to be read aloud, in the form of a "coronach," or Scottish funeral dirge played on bagpipes:

CORONACH for Paul II

1. Dirge

Your last solo
you couldn't sing for me,
even transcribe the libretto
in that lost language,
misplaced chronicle
of characters and dust.

Still, I might have played it for you
had I found either wind or ear
to breathe for you, to hear
cries pitched above human suffering,

the mite in the lobes of the cat
who has lost his balance.

So we have walked
again this corridor,
deaf angels humming Mozart
in a meadow of pure light.
As you, with your uncommon sense,
played out my childhood on a broken flute
that knew its melodies by ear,
I listened to it whistle:
All our lives we may be doing
quiet things that shake
the roots of trees.

2. Lamentation

You stood, unhindered now by cures,
before the hidden wellspring,
your strength my weakness;
it was my right arm. Unaided by my voice,
you faltered on the pitch,
a variable star.

"I didn't know," you said, "what augury
to ask. I just went rotten inside."
Lifting you up out of sawdust,
I drew your robe tighter around you,
as if our viscera weren't that much closer
to the skin.

3. Consecration

Sawdust,
the stuffings out of nightmares,
the scattered dreams of pain clean
as a surgeon's knife,
yet winnowed out of life.

A few birds wander by,
speaking their own languages.

I cast you down on the water,
aulos, mimicker of reeds
crumbled to fine ash,
of bones, of
interstellar dust.

McQuaid Octoberfest

The Parents' Club at McQuaid Jesuit High School has set its annual get-acquainted Octoberfest at the school on Friday, Oct. 18, from 7:30 to midnight. There will be a cash bar, German buffet and dancing to the music

of Harold Tausch and the Bavarians.

Tickets are \$8 per person, and reservations are requested. They may be made through Betty Buehlman, (716)624-4185, or Faye Schindler, 385-1696.

Theologian To Speak

David O'Brien, professor at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Mass., and author of "American Catholics and Social Reform," will speak at St. Mary's Church, 15 St. Mary's Place, on Saturday, Oct. 19, 7:30

p.m. His talk is entitled, "American Catholicism Since Vatican II: Is Renewal Over?"

Dr. O'Brien, a theologian, author, historian and scholar, will also speak at each of St. Mary's weekend Masses.

R & R Weekend

Immaculate Conception Church, Ithaca, has set its second Renewal and Reconciliation Weekend to start at 6:30 p.m. Friday, Oct. 18, in the church school, 317 N. Plain St. A Saturday session will start at 8 a.m. and

end at 7:30 p.m. with a Mass of praise and thanksgiving.

Rochester diocesan priests and lay persons will give talks on the theme "God's Love Is Everlasting."



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