

Beginning Experience punctuates periods of loss, failure

By Teresa A. Parsons



Perhaps the memory that lingers longest after a Beginning Experience weekend is "the bell!"

Without distinction, its shrill clanging punctuates moments of tearful self-revelation and high hilarity, recalling participants to the reality of a meal or a break, or the beginning of another session.

The bell every BE participant remembers is as apt a symbol as any for a program designed to help people close past chapters in their lives and move on to grapple with the realities of the present and the future.

Most often, what people are seeking to let go of when they come to a Beginning Experience weekend is a marriage relationship that has ended because of death, separation or divorce. But not everyone has to have been married. Sometimes, participants have suffered the death of such family members as a parent. Still others come to mark the loss of a friendship, a job or even a home.

Rather than sustaining people through the first stages of loss, BE is designed for those who have survived the trauma of shock, anger or bewilderment and are ready to turn the corner toward a new life.

Two years after separating from her husband, Lori (not her real name) considered her singleness a positive step. It was not, however, an easy one. Her past — 24 years of marriage

"Some people may never get on with it, but you need to realize that you can't hang onto the past, not even the good parts of the past!"

Lori's needs were in many ways typical of the people who seek a Beginning Experience weekend, according to Nancy Magee, a former president of the BE board and a team member for many weekends.

"These are not people who are still at a point of saying 'if only' this or that," she explained. "They are basically able to say 'I'm not half a couple anymore. I'm OK on my own.'"

Since Beginning Experience was introduced locally about 10 years ago, it has served as the "retreat" arm of the diocesan ministry to separated, divorced and bereaved Catholics. As such, it is largely supported by referrals from parishes or regional separated/divorced/bereaved ministry groups. The flow works the other way as well, since BE channels many participants toward involvement with separated/divorced ministry.

The BE weekend itself is a highly structured two-and-a-half-day program of thematic presentations, private reflection time and small group discussions. The entire program is organized and presented by a group of people who have participated in a previous weekend themselves.

Although Catholic-based, the program is not limited to any one denomination. Among its premises is that religious experience — whether through scripture, prayer or a community of fellow believers — can help heal the bitterness of a failed marriage or the loneliness of losing a loved one.

Lori had been away from the Catholic Church for nearly 10 years before she began

to the Church.

"The reality is that you can grow just as well from this point all over again and you can grow straight and blossom, just as you did in your teenage years," she said. "You are still God's child. He loves you and He will help you through this ... Nothing can be so devastating that you can't be a productive Christian and productive in your life."

Through the parish group, she heard about BE and signed up for a weekend in October, 1986. Like the other strangers who showed up at Camp Stella Maris of a Friday evening, she was nervous and a little fearful. Team leaders consciously try to defuse that initial anxiety

were crying and thought: "Oh, it's OK. Everyone's feeling this way."

"Listening to those stories — many of them far more traumatic than anything I had gone through — brings all your emotions to the forefront," she said. "But somehow you know it's going to be all right. It makes you aware that you're never alone."

Beginning Experience doesn't mark a new beginning for every participant. Some retreatants attend the program more than once either to deal with the same loss or in connection with a variety of different life experiences and losses.

One reason Lori believes the weekend helped

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**Nancy Magee
BE team member**

with the warmth of their welcome. Lori recalled that they put her to work helping to prepare refreshments.

Because the weekend is so intensely emotional, members of the team carefully screen applicants. They generally require that participants have been separated or divorced for at least one year, and that they hold no hope for reconciliation.

"We're not pushing people not to reconcile," Magee explained. "But if someone comes to a weekend and they're still hanging onto some hope, the weekend can do more harm than good."

Potential participants who are receiving counseling are also required to consent with their therapists to ensure that the weekend will not disrupt their treatment.

Lori as recalled struggling to hold back her tears as participants began to share their stories. Then she realized that others around her

her was that team leaders and presenters don't presume to offer answers. Instead, each of them spoke from his or her own experience of loss. "They tell you, 'These are things we know that can help you,' and it's all done in a wonderful loving and caring atmosphere," Lori said. "One of the things that's come out of that experience is that I'm friends with my ex-husband ... But maybe the most beneficial thing for me is that I see myself in a whole new light. I used to think of myself as just a wife, or just a mother. Now, I realize I'm a whole lot more than 'just' anything."

Meanwhile, Lori kept wondering throughout the weekend how she could become more involved in Beginning Experience. Always on the lookout for a possible recruit to the team, those who lead the weekends routinely recommend promising candidates for leadership training. Lori has since taken the training in

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**'Lori'
BE participant**

to a husband who was manic/depressive — remained very much a part of the present as she struggled to regain her self-esteem, to emerge from beneath a burden of guilt, and to find release from the anger and pain that had accumulated during those many years.

"I really felt very good in my singleness, but it was not without problem areas," she said.

attending events sponsored by a separated, divorced and widowed support group at Assumption Church in Fairport. "I felt a lovely camaraderie and friendliness there," she said.

Too often, she observed, church communities regard divorced or separated people as second-class citizens or damaged goods. For her, BE was a giant step in the journey back

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