

MEN AND GRIEF

*Charles W. Schraub, M.Div, LMSW-ACP
Offered by Porter Loring Family Care Services*

Grief is an old friend of mine, although I can't say we were ever formally introduced. I came to know its name only through hard experience. Biblically, to know someone's name is to know that person intimately, from the inside-out. For those of us who mourn, there is no doubt but that we have had more than a passing acquaintance with the shadow of grief.

My wife, a talented artist, recently produced a shadow box featuring pictures of my father at various stages of his life. The title of the piece is "I remember the smell of his white shirt, the smell of his white shirt, I remember". My father died as my mother frantically attempted to resuscitate him one hot August night. I was five years old.

Whenever I put on a starched white shirt I think of my father. I remember sitting on the porch waiting for him to step off the bus as he returned from work. I remember racing to meet him, being swept up into his big arms, the smell of his white starched collar and the feel of the gum or candy he would have in his shirt pocket. I remember the smell of his white shirt.

Men do not do well with grief. I suppose no one does, really. We men, though, seem to think we have no right to grieve. Or, if we have finally discovered that we do indeed know that demon called grief, we would rather that no one else share in our sadness. We keep these moments to ourselves, for the most part.

Perhaps we do want others to share in our sadness but only to a point. From my experience with men in grief, I would say that most men find it easier to mourn loss alone. But while it is "easier", it is not always better to mourn alone.

Fifteen years ago I made a silent 8-day retreat with a director in the Rocky Mountains. My purpose was to renew my relationship with God. God's purpose was that I would renew my relationship with my father.

I don't remember what led us to my father that particular day. The director picked up on something I said or some gesture I made. He asked me to tell him about my father. In a rush of feeling, I explained that my father died, thirty-five years ago. And in a flash I was standing next to my mother again as she hysterically attempted to revive him. All the grief that a child can muster flooded my being that day. Unable to stop weeping and feeling very shamed I excused myself to walk in the cold Colorado air.

The little boy who had become "the man of the house" the day his daddy died never really wept for him. Men don't do that. We tend to mourn alone. To mourn with others would make us vulnerable to those two unmanly feelings: fear and insecurity. And

unable to weep, we sometimes become angry, even violent, or we sink into the hopelessness of depression. I became angry. I spent much of the rest of my adult life angrily trying to find a father.

Several days later in that retreat I buried my father. The kindly priest director gave me a ritual book so that I could preside over my dad's funeral. No one saw me weep that day. It didn't matter. And when the service was over, pick and shovel in hand, I walked to the crest of a hill and dug a hole for my dad. As far as I am concerned my Texan dad is buried in Colorado. We have to bury our dead, no matter where we may lay them.

Through the graciousness of Porter Loring mortuary in San Antonio, Texas, I am able to be a co-facilitator of a group for men who are in deep loss from the death of a spouse. We try to take them where they are. They can come and go as they please. We don't lecture them on what they are feeling. They don't need to speak. They are asked to listen respectfully to the others. We do the human and manly thing: we offer a brief prayer, we break bread together, we bring a gift of cake or cookies, we laugh and we cry. But no one needs to hide.

The overwhelming experience is that the men find a deep sense of comfort and support from each other. They find out there is no right way or wrong way to grieve. They are not pressured into saying something they may later regret. They can be angry or sad. They can laugh or they can cry. They can acknowledge their sin and guilt without fear of judgment.

There is a picture in the shadow box my wife created. It is of a little boy, tightly holding his mother's hand. He is skinny and wan. She is resolute. They are walking forward. She knows they are going to make it.

But, you know, there are still times when grief comes as a shadow with a force so strong that my eyes burn and my throat tightens. Grief never really leaves. It only lightens its presence in the house. Unless grief is acknowledged, it makes itself a most unappreciative tenant. Better to acknowledge it, live with it and move on with it than to pretend it never came to your house.

So it is with men and grief.

Charles W. Schraub is a pastoral counselor and clinical social worker. He is Director of Siloam Counseling in San Antonio, Texas.