

# GRIEVING MINDFULLY

Loss is a part of everyone's life and we suffer loss in many ways. Grief touches us all and often we are changed profoundly by the experience. None of us will leave this life without losing relationships that matter. Grieving mindfully offers us an opportunity to pause and look at the deeper questions of life, to find personal meaning and purpose, and to deepen our relationship with God.

Priests are no strangers to dealing with loss. We grieve our own losses as everyone does, and we are privileged to be part of others' lives as they grapple with losses of their own. People rely on us to help them deal with their sorrow and find meaning in their loss, to guide them to be mindful of the blessings of life as well as its sorrows and to help them find God in the midst of their pain.

We grieve not only our relationships. Our attachment to special places helps define our sense of place and purpose. They represent our history, our values, and our connection to God. People can grieve their loss deeply.

## *Some Thoughts on Grief*

- Grief is a profoundly personal journey. It is never the same for any two people. It is as unique as each life and relationship.
- Every time we lose a relationship or are faced with uncertainty, we grieve the loss of a predictable and safe world we thought we could count on.
- Grieving mindfully is being consciously aware of the pain of love after loss.
- Grieving takes time; it cannot be rushed. We do not simply "move on" or "get over it." Long after the initial experience of loss, grieving still goes on.
- Grieving is helped by feeling supported, having someone acknowledge our pain.
- Grieving is helped by honoring memories, by the telling of stories, by remembering both the good and the bad.
- The initial reaction to loss is often numbness, the feeling that it is "unreal." This is often followed by anger or depression as the extent of the loss or a sense of personal helplessness is experienced.
- We grieve because we love. As we heal, that capacity to love becomes the foundation for a life after loss.
- Without ongoing encouragement and support, many people will remain mired in their pain or choose unhealthy means of coping.
- Resilience is one of the goals of mindful grieving. Resilience in the face of loss is tied to spirituality. Spirituality provides us with a context to grieve by offering greater meaning and hope. Spirituality helps us build resilience.
- Loss forces us to experience life's impermanence. Resilience fosters in us the motivation to move beyond our pain, to focus on what endures, and to cultivate compassion, spiritual depth, and healing.
- Faith offers the ultimate message of hope: there is no loss without redemption, no cross without the promise of resurrection.

# COPING WITH CHANGE

1. *Life is about change.* We experience change from birth through life. Sometimes we embrace it. Sometimes we do not. The difference between these two depends on several things.

- The most obvious: When a change is *perceived as positive* or beneficial it's easier to accept than when the change is perceived as negative or as diminishment or loss.
- Change that is *our own idea*, and over which we feel we have some control, is experienced more positively. Change that is imposed from the outside or that makes us feel powerless is negative.
- When we feel *supported and encouraged*, change is experienced more positively. When we feel we're alone, or our needs or perspectives are ignored, or not supported, change is much more difficult.
- *Change that is clear* to those involved: knowing when it has a beginning, a clear duration, intensity and purpose, is easier to accept. When change is unclear, fuzzy, with unknown facets, and especially when it's open-ended, it is much harder to deal with. Open-ended anxiety, where we don't know what's demanded of us or how long we have to hold out wears us down. It leads us to the breaking point.

To choose to change is an important part of living a meaningful life. That doesn't mean that all change is welcomed or that every change will be meaningful.

2. *We are creatures of habit.* (Rule-governed). It's part of what it means to be human. We thrive when we know what to expect and can assure ourselves that we can cope. Changing routines can be disruptive. Take anyone outside their comfort zone (what they are used to, feel confident about, and is predictable) and they will experience an increase in stress.

3. *Not everybody deals with change the same way.* In general, according to one expert, about 10% of the population welcomes change. Another 10% refuses to change. The remaining 80% will fluctuate between resisting and embracing change.

4. Change is profoundly personal but also has *implications for our relationships*. Relationships can be fractured or restored, strengthened or lost. Working through change together has more lasting impact than trying to navigate change on our own.

5. Inherent in any significant change are the *experiences of loss and grief*.

6. Sometimes change is about growth or diminishment. Most of the time *it's about both*.

The Church in the United States, as in much of the world, is currently experiencing three important changes: demographic changes in membership, the availability of priests to serve, and cultural changes that question the relevance and viability of faith.