Introduction

We spend a good portion of our lives working diligently to acquire those things that make life rich and meaningful—friends, a wife or husband, children, a home, a job, material comforts, money (let's face it), and security. What happens to us when we lose any of these persons or things that are so important to us?

Quite naturally we grieve over the loss of anything important. Sometimes, if the loss is great, the very foundations of our life are shaken, and we are thrown into deep despair. Because we know so little about the nature of grief, we become panicky when it strikes us, and this serves to throw us deeper into despondency. What can we learn about the "grief process" so that we can better cope with it?

Does people's faith have anything to do with the way they grieve over whatever it is they lose? For instance, when we lose a job, or lose a loving friend, or fail in school, or are disliked by the people at the office because of our unpopular convictions, does our grief at these times have anything to do with our faith?

Faith plays a major role in grief of any kind. But not in the way some people think. They often seem to have the idea that a person with strong faith does not grieve and is above this sort of thing. Moreover, these people imply that religious faith advocates stoicism. They might even quote the two words from Scripture "Grieve not!" They forget to quote the rest of the phrase in which these two words are found: "Grieve not as those who have no hope" (1 Thessalonians 4:13).

But religious faith—at least the Jewish-Christian faith—has never said that a truly religious person does not grieve. What it has said is that there are good ways and bad ways to grieve and that what a person considers to be of most importance in life will definitely affect the way he or she grieves.

The theme of this book is "good grief" because we will try to explore the good aspects of grief. We will try to describe not only the pattern of grief but also what we can learn from it. And since everyone in a lifetime must, from time to time, confront the loss of something or someone he or she loves, this booklet is for everyone.

If we include our "little griefs" along with our "large griefs," we can say that grief is as natural to every person as breathing. It is inevitable! You cannot live without experiencing it in a thousand different ways. Such a seemingly inconsequential thing as your husband phoning at the last minute, just before guests are arriving for dinner, to say that he has to work late throws you into a mild form of grief. Or perhaps the boss under whom you have worked happily for

ten years is suddenly transferred, and the new one is pompous and overbearing. This is a form of grief. How you handle these "little griefs" will, in some measure, tell you how you will probably handle the larger griefs when they come.

It is now possible to predict fairly well some of the things that will happen to all of us when something or someone very essential to our particular way of life is taken away. Before we describe the pattern that most of us follow, however, let us be sure we can picture grief in several more forms. We certainly mean to include grief related to death in this discussion, but we can observe the same grief process at work in many other kinds of losses as well.

For instance, one of the more common grief situations arises out of our mobile culture. In America, one out of five people moves every year because of change of employment or promotion. The uprooting of families on the American scene has been going on long enough for us to be able to identify certain forms of emotional instability that result from it. The uprooted family is cut off from stabilizing relationships in the community that every child and adult needs so much. Every member of the family is adversely affected as they are pulled away from people and things that have grown dear to them.

There is every reason to raise the question whether corporations that transfer their key employees every two to five years are doing a wise thing, either for the family or ultimately for industry itself.

Let us look at a particular family that has been transferred three times in several years. They have lived in the present town for two years, and their children, after some difficulty, finally feel comfortable with their playmates and at school. The company now "invites" the father to move for the fourth time. The mother in this family says that they have never before felt such a sense of belonging as they have in their present town. They had hoped they could stay there a long time. But her husband is on his way to a vice-presidency, and the corporation operates on the assumption that it is good for its executives to move frequently.

In the light of our new knowledge of psychosomatic medicine, we are not so sure it is a good idea. We who have spent years teaching in hospitals and medical centers see a great many sick or upset people who have come into the hospital during such an uprooting experience. I have seen children who are thrown into turmoil three months before the move and for three months or more after the move.

Certainly such practices contribute to the instability of our society, and business institutions would do well to take a second look at the long-term results of such constant moving.

Or think of the problem of divorce. Certainly divorce is a situation that creates grief in the hearts of those who have now lost someone who once was dear to them. It is almost like a living death to see the one whom you continue to love turning his or her back on you, figuratively slapping you in the face.

Another form of grief may be retirement. Not all people look forward to arbitrary retirement at any age. They feel that they are good for at least another ten years. They

hope their employers will make exceptions in their cases. But when that birthday comes they, too, receive the summons. And many of these people leave their jobs with heavy hearts, having lost all reason for living.

We think of grief in relation to a man in his forties who is laid off indefinitely because of a business recession.

Then there is the person who has worked diligently to gain advancement, who has worked overtime and weekends to demonstrate ability to fill a particular position. After several years that job is finally open, and he is sure he will be chosen. But the boss remembers he has a nephew who needs a job, and the nephew takes over. Is this a cause for grief? Of course it is!

Another grief situation may center around the children of a family. A child is lost not through death but through marriage. He takes all his belongings from his room, and the house is lifeless. A house once filled with laughter and joy is now as quiet as a tomb. Or another child may turn against her mother and father and live her life in a manner completely contrary to their teachings. Or perhaps a college-age son or daughter who is deeply in love and making plans for marriage discovers his or her future mate has been untrue, and the wedding plans must be canceled.

A list of losses would be inexhaustible. We can lose our health, our eyesight, our hearing. We can lose our home through fire or tornado or financial ruin. In some families, grief comes with the loss of a pet that has been a part of everything that has gone on in that household for ten years or more. Any of these things, and many more, can set in motion a cycle of grief.

Grief is a natural part of human experience. We face minor grief almost daily in some situation or another.

To say a person is deeply religious and therefore does not have to face grief situations is ridiculous. Not only is it totally unrealistic, but it is also incompatible with the whole Christian message.

The one Bible verse every Sunday school child knows by heart is the two-word verse "Jesus wept." These words describe a man who, when grief came, was able to weep, for he wanted and needed to express the feelings within him.

When we say, "Grieve not," then we imply we are to be Stoics like the Greeks of old. But we do not subscribe to the philosophy of the Stoics. Christians should know the difference between Stoicism and Christianity. The Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments, see grief as normal and potentially creative.

I suggest that in this eight-word portion of Scripture we put a comma after the first word so that it now reads, "Grieve, not as those who have no hope," and then I would add "but for goodness' sake, grieve when you have something worth grieving about!"

We ministers discovered some years ago that many of the people we counseled were suffering from some form of sorrow they had not as yet been able to work through. As we

began to try to understand the problems of our parishioners in distress, we sensed they were reacting to the loss of some precious relationship or possession in much the same way people react to the loss of a loved one through death.

We also began to sense that people in sorrow—from whatever cause—tend to follow a pattern that includes several stages.

The idea of stages of grief was first suggested to us by Dr. Erich Lindemann, professor of psychiatry at Harvard, who described the grief process in an article titled "Symptomology and Management of Acute Grief," published in *The American Journal of Psychiatry* years ago.

In this remarkable study, he demonstrated the difference between normal grief reactions and abnormal or morbid grief. He showed the importance of helping the grief-stricken person face up to the struggle of "working through" grief. The person has to be helped to "extricate himself from the bondage to the deceased and find new patterns of rewarding interaction."

Dr. Lindemann then described five things he saw in acute grief: (1) somatic distress, (2) preoccupation with the image of the deceased, (3) guilt, (4) hostile reactions, and (5) loss of patterns of conduct.

Dr. Lindemann's studies encouraged clergymen to deal more objectively with grief reactions in their parishioners. They soon found that parishioners who faced up to their loss by wrestling openly and honestly with the problem came

through the grieving experience stronger, deeper, and better able to help other people with their grieving.

Of course, this wrestling with problems connected with loss also caused the parishioner to reevaluate her own religious convictions. This meant that the parishioner began to question aspects of her faith and often went through periods of doubt in which she questioned the relevance of the Christian faith to personal problems. If, however, she was able to maintain some kind of relationship with God through regular worship and through fellowship with people of the congregation who really cared about her, then she looked upon the struggle as a growth experience that actually deepened her faith. Like Job of old, she was beset on all sides, but she refused to give up her basic faith.

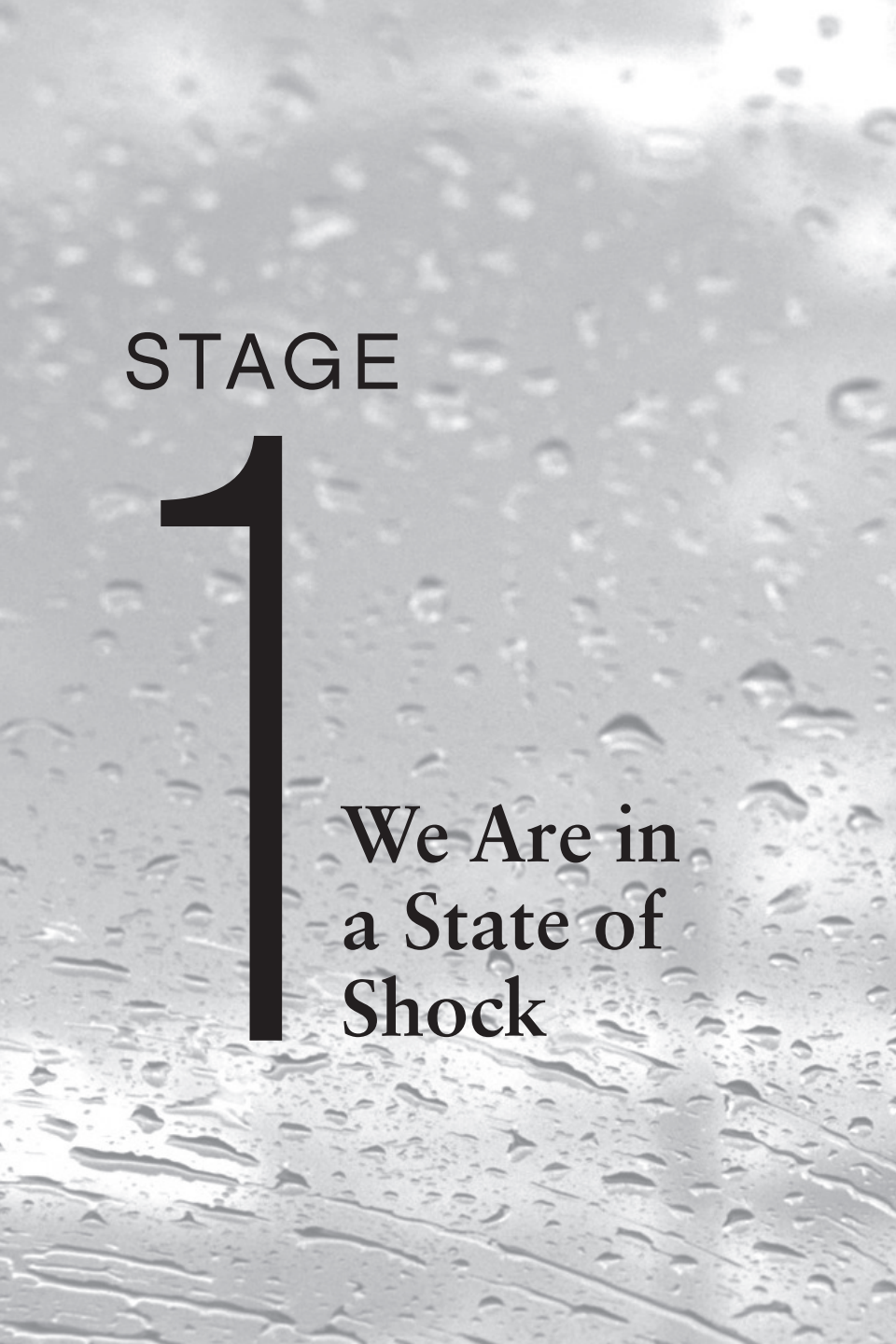
Through the centuries, people who have been able to face grief in the knowledge that God still cares about them have said that grief can be counted among the great deepening experiences of life.

The ten stages of grief described here must be understood to be the normal process through which most people must go as they face up to their loss. In other words, we will be talking about the road the majority of humans must travel in order to get back into the mainstream of life.

As we look at these ten stages of grief, remember that every person does not necessarily go through all these stages, nor in this order. Moreover, it is impossible to differentiate clearly between each of these stages, for a person never moves neatly from one stage to the other.

But you, O Lord, are a shield around me,
my glory, and the one who lifts up my head.
I cry aloud to the Lord,
and he answers me from his holy hill.

—Psalm 3:3–4



STAGE 1

We Are in a State of Shock

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God has so made us that we can somehow bear pain and sorrow and even tragedy. However, when the sorrow is overwhelming, we are sometimes temporarily anesthetized in response to a tragic experience. We are grateful for this temporary anesthesia, for it keeps us from having to face grim reality all at once. This shock stage—or perhaps it should be called a countershock—may last anywhere from a few minutes to a few hours to a few days. If it goes on for some weeks, it probably is unhealthy grief and professional help ought to be sought.

But do not be afraid of the shock that often comes in the early stages of grief. Sometimes at the funeral home we see the sorrowing wife and find that she is almost radiant as she greets those who have come to offer their sympathy. People say, "What serene faith she has!" We tend to equate faith with a stoical attitude, not with tears. Yet, the truth of the matter may well be that this woman is experiencing a temporary anesthesia that is helping her along until she is ready to move on to the next stage of grief.

We tend to equate faith with a stoical attitude, not with tears.

The minister, upon seeing this woman in what at least appears to be shock, will arrange to visit her after the funeral, knowing that one day soon this strong exterior may break down, and he will have to help her face her true self. In fact, in some cases he may even encourage her to break down and express openly the strong emotions she was not able to admit earlier.

A man who was unexpectedly fired from a job he had held for twenty years put it this way: "I was so stunned by what they told me, I walked around as if I was in a trance. What they said just did not register. I heard the words, but they had not 'reached' me yet."

Shock is a temporary escape from reality. As long as it is temporary, it is good. But if a person should prefer to remain in this dreamworld rather than face the reality of his loss, obviously it would be very unhealthy.

This is one of the reasons it is good for us to keep fairly busy and continue to carry on as much of our usual activities as possible during the period of crisis. It is certainly not good to have someone take over completely for us at such a time and make all our decisions for us.

Well-meaning relatives and friends might hinder the grief process by forcing us to sit inactively by. This would be much like the surgery patients in the past who were coddled and told not to do anything, not even turn over in bed for several

days after surgery. All of this had the effect of making the patient sicker, and it required a much longer period for him to make his comeback.

The same thing is true with grief. The sooner the person has to deal with the immediate problems and make decisions again, the better.

The housemother of a large sorority house at a midwestern university says of her many experiences with girls who "receive bad news from home": "I always make it a point to be right there near the girl the whole time she is making telephone calls and preparing to leave. But I always keep her as busy as I can, letting her do her own packing and making her own minute-to-minute decisions. The other girls in the house always want to wait on her hand and foot, but I've learned that this is the worst thing you can do for a person at such a time."

To sum up: Be near the person and available to help if everything breaks down, but normally do not take away from him the therapeutic value of doing everything he can for himself. This is what will help a person most to come out of his trance and "get on with his grief work," as Erich Lindemann might say.

Even though a person does come out of the initial shock, he will undoubtedly experience times in the succeeding days and months when the unreality of the loss comes over him again. Every now and then he will say, "I just can't believe it

has happened. Intellectually I know it did, but I guess I just have not really accepted it emotionally."

The biggest hurdle is "accepting it emotionally."

For all of us, the biggest hurdle is "accepting it emotionally." We just do not want to believe it, and so unconsciously we set as many barriers in the way as possible, making complete acceptance a very slow process.

Although you want to avoid making major decisions, what decisions are you able to make that could restore a sense of reality? In the midst of loss, it may seem everything has been uprooted. What are the anchors you are able to take hold of now? Are you able to identify the barriers that keep you in a state of disbelief? How could you address them?

How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?
How long must I bear pain in my soul,
and have sorrow in my heart all day long?

—Psalm 13:1–2