



# Engaging Aging

## Change, Loss and Grief: Companions on the Journey

**By Dr. Ray Mattes, IHM, D.Min.**

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*"Then let yourself be lost. Let yourself leave for a place whose contours you do not already know, whose cadences you have not learned by heart. Let yourself land on a threshold that mirrors the mystery of your own bewildered soul."*

*Jan Richardson*

*The Cure for Sorrow*

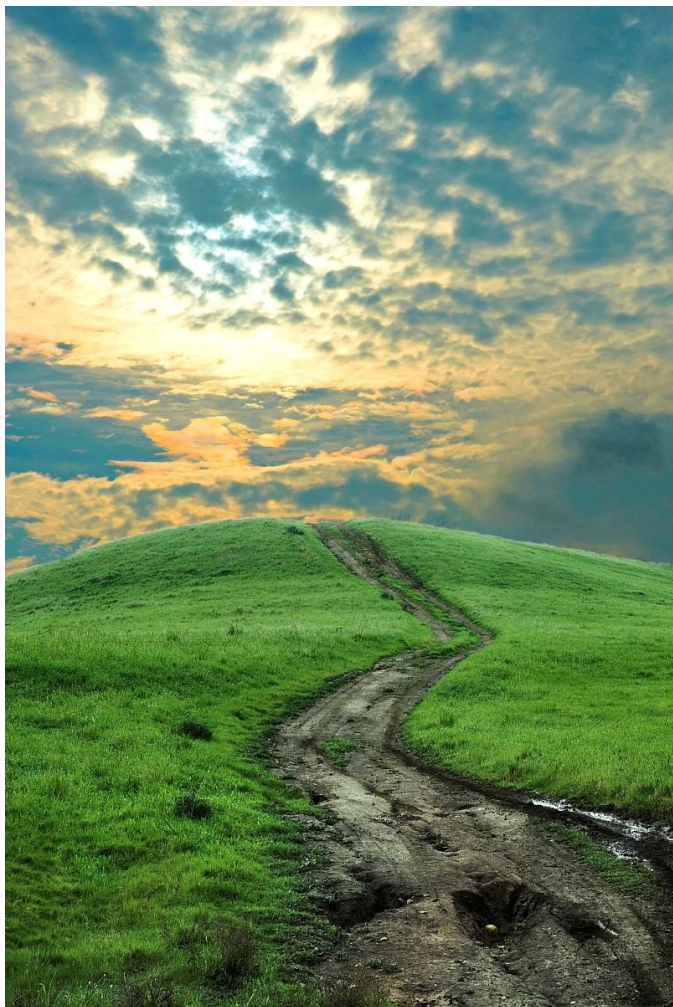
Recently, during a workshop to a religious community, one of the members spoke of the "rapid pace" of losses within the community. She proceeded to describe the past few years in terms of the number of members who had died, relinquishment of sponsored institutions, closure of ministries, implementation of alternative governance structures and, more recently, the sale of the congregation's motherhouse.

As she spoke, I was reminded of the words of Jan Richardson (see sidebar) and the similarities between what was being described and the image of a journey. Specifically, it is the journey which Celtic spirituality refers to as a *peregrinatio*. Author Karla Kincannon defines *peregrinatio* as "a wandering into the unknown" void of any specific destination but one that calls the traveler ever deeper into undiscovered terrain. Such a journey requires the relinquishment of the familiar and an embrace of uncertainty regarding what awaits one during the journey itself. Love is ultimately what calls the individual forward and guides the steps taken amidst the changes that invariably occur. In the end, the traveler may never return to the place of origin or, if one does return, one is forever changed by the experience.

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As we move through the life course, our very wandering is similar to the concept of *peregrinatio*. We move from place to place, life event to life event, and situation to situation with, perhaps, a general idea of what lies ahead and, at other times, perhaps not. Yet, we go forward because of the life that calls us to movement. Some of us may be more cautious or determined in our wanderings than others, but regardless of the approach, one still moves forward. In so doing, we embark upon a journey of change that leads to transformation.

What we may not immediately recognize is the fact that change itself is a process of both relinquishment and gain. All change entails some form of loss. Some losses experienced are mi-

nor resulting in little to no impact apart from being necessary for ongoing growth and development. Others, however, may be major, resulting in grief reactions within us. The impact of the loss is always determined by the one experiencing it, the connection held to that which was lost, and the contextual circumstances surrounding it. Author Judith Viorst, in her book *Necessary Losses* states that “we live by losing, being left and letting go, and sooner or later with more or less pain, we all must come to know that loss is indeed a lifelong human condition”. Change and loss become companions on the *peregrinatio* that life invites us to embark upon.

**There are a variety of types of losses** that may range from material possessions, roles held by the individual, relationships and systemic losses to functional losses due to physical and/or cognitive decline. There are also those losses that impact the way one views the self at a particular stage of one’s life, the future and the world at large. As such, loss may manifest itself in many forms. While multiple factors can and do influence loss, identifying the impact of loss in both its obvious and not so obvious forms may be helpful for individuals in addressing issues and gaining a sense of equilibrium from which to continue the journey.

The more important a person, item, object or activity is to an individual, the more deeply the loss is experienced within a person. The manner in which the loss unfolded can also impact one’s felt experience. Questions may arise such as whether or not the loss was expected, unexpected, natural or unusual. Additionally, the timeframe in which the loss unfolded as well as whether or not it is permanent or temporary also impacts the individual. The person’s past history of the ways in which one addressed losses throughout life, along with the skills, tools and

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means of managing that served them, come into play.

**From a gerontological perspective** multiple losses that occur in rapid succession in some older adults may be seen as being a precursor to other losses that may follow in short order. Losses in people who have provided a person with both support and comfort, ways of doing things and places where one once lived and ministered may all occur in a short duration of time, resulting in a depleted ability to rebound before the next loss is experienced. This possible rapid succession of loss that accumulates in later life may result in what is referred to as “bereavement overload” defined as an experience that leaves one with a sense of being overwhelmed by multiple losses and drained of resources and energy with which to cope.

While change and loss are companions along the *peregrinatio* to which one is called, so too is grief a particular companion to loss. Grief emerges as an indication of what we have held dear. It is a sign of the importance we have placed on what has been lost in our lives and cannot be regained. Life has changed as a result of the losses experienced and its natural emotional reaction is grief.

**Grief, as a process**, does not have a specified time frame. It does not contain a set of rules that one follows nor does it occur in precise stages through which one moves in linear fashion. Grief is as individualized and fluid as the individual who experiences it. There is no such thing as “the right way to grieve.” Its experience in life can be one of a roller coaster of emotions with twists, turns as well as ups and downs in a timeframe that does not have a marked ending. This is especially true as one begins to process the losses that initiated the grief only to be confronted by new losses and yet another invitation

to move deeper along the unfolding journey. At some point in time, the intensity of the emotions may level off for the person as one comes to integrate what had been lost into the life that is now being lived.

Researchers Margaret Strobe and Henk Schut speak to this integration of grief as being a process which encompasses the everyday life events of the person who has experienced a significant loss. According to this approach, the stressors experienced by the person around the loss move in a back and forth motion between focusing on what has been lost, experiencing the emotions that arise and seeking to make meaning related to what has occurred. At the same time, the individual attempts to cope with what has occurred by beginning to reorient the self within the context of a changed reality. This back and forth movement focuses at times on what has been lost and at other times upon the changes such loss introduced in one’s life. Healthy coping strategies tend to emerge from such movement assisting the individual to process the loss and grieve its impact.

Psychotherapist, Francis Weller, offers another way to look at grief through his assertion that grief is a means by which one is invited to return to the essence of the self. As such, grief work is sacred as it originates from depths within an individual. It is first and above all else, soul work through which “we are remade in times of grief, broken apart and reassembled”. According to Weller, grief enters into the life course through what he refers to as “gates of grief”.

**Considering the gates of grief**, the first gate is the grief that arises when someone or something we have loved is lost to us. This gate may be entered through the physical death of an individual that was close to us. It may even be entered through the loss of a relationship that



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was once life-giving but is no longer. The tangible losses of home, treasured possessions or even one's physical or mental health are also entryways through this gate.

The second gate is the places in one's life that have been "untouched by love". These places are areas where shame, avoidance and/or embarrassment reside. They are the places where one most often attempted to hide and distance oneself due to a sense of their being viewed as non-desirable. Within this gate rest the unlived life and dreams that we may have held onto. Perhaps, it is a decision made which, in hindsight, one regrets and now questions. The need exists for one to embrace these painful moments of life with compassion and allow oneself to see them in a new light as having served as guideposts along our journey thus far. For out of all the decisions made and those left unmade there exists the opportunity for both grace and growth that serve to move one further along the journey.

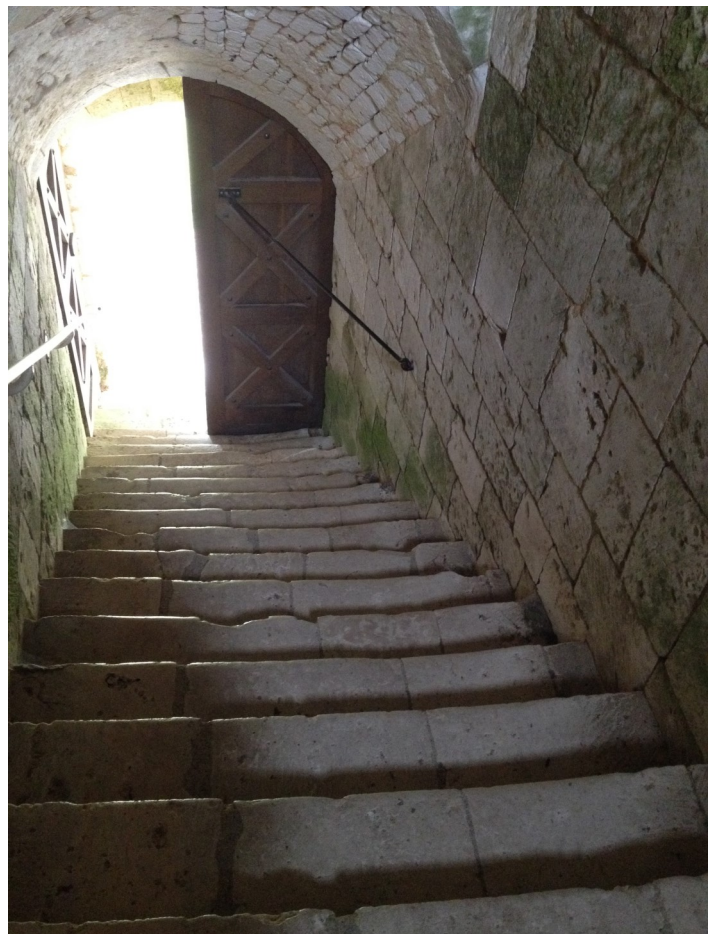
Being surrounded by the pain, uncertainty, natural disasters and geopolitical conflicts of the global community can impact the individual and serve as the third gate of grief, according to Weller. The depletion of natural resources, the impacts of climate change and the instability created by political tensions all have an impact upon us. We are not immune to the collective loss and sorrow experienced by others as we belong to an interdependent world.

When our expectations concerning life, dreams and our personal visions fail to manifest themselves in the manner we had assumed that they would; when one's hopes do not materialize and our expectations regarding life, ministry and commitments do not exactly coincide with the life one is now living, we experience the fourth gate of grief.

Finally, there is the gate of grief that is formed by the experiences of sorrow, pain and loss felt by those who have gone before us. The grief of ancestors may be carried forth over a period of generations into the systems to which we currently belong.

Whichever gateway one enters on the grief journey it is important to recognize that each person will grieve in a different way from those around him/her. The experienced losses which trigger grief are processed differently depending upon a variety of variables, from the meaning one has placed upon the loss that has occurred to circumstances surrounding the loss.

An important consideration is when losses occur within a congregational setting as not every member will have the same reaction to what has been lost nor, necessarily, experience grief sur-



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rounding the loss itself. For example, the loss of a congregational ministry may be more readily experienced by those members who ministered in that particular setting as opposed to members who were never missioned there. Even among those who were missioned at the same location, one's experiences of the ministry itself will impact the grief reactions that may be generated.

Some emotions associated with grief can include sadness, anger, loneliness and anxiety. All of these emotions are normal as they are related to the body's way of reorienting itself to what has occurred. Unprocessed issues of grief and loss are cumulative. Recent losses are built upon the previous ones that an individual has experienced. Issues surrounding a prior loss that have not been processed or re-framed can be triggered when new losses are experienced.

Essential to the journey through grief is allowing oneself the freedom to experience grief in whatever way grief manifests itself. In doing so, it is giving oneself permission to embark upon the path toward healing. It is important to note if the emotional manifestations of grief experienced by an individual severely inhibits one's ability to engage in life, whether personal, communal or ministerial. If one is unable to engage, professional assistance may be necessary as the emotions experienced may indicate the presence of clinical depression.

**While there are many approaches** to processing the changes, losses and accompanying grief that one encounters along the journey, author Carolyn Baker suggests a three-fold approach that may be used in both personal and communal settings. The approach begins with the simple act of noticing what is unfolding around and within one. By drawing one's atten-



tion to the area where grief awaits, this may assist one in acknowledging the reality of the loss experienced. In our noticing, we are invited to embrace the emotions surrounding the loss as we remember.

In our search for meaning around what was lost and the ways one's life has changed, it may be helpful to move from a place of inner pondering to outward expression of the grief through creative endeavors such as writing, journaling, drawing and/or painting. I am reminded of a community whose retreat center was partially destroyed by the fires and subsequent flooding of the past year. As a means to collectively address the grief around the natural disaster, members were invited into a communal journaling exercise in which they first wrote a letter to the mudslide that created the devastation. After a period of sharing, they wrote another letter from the perspective of the mudslide itself.

**Finally, as we continue to process the grief,** an important, if not essential, dimension is to share with others what we are experiencing. This can be a challenging endeavor as culturally we collectively hold a stance of distancing from aspects of life that may cause discomfort or unease. At times, one's desire to share the

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grief may be met with the other's need to ease our pain. This experience can leave one feeling that they were not listened to or of their own experiences having been easily dismissed.

In their work with individuals around grief and loss, grief specialists John W. James and Russell Friedman have identified six commonly held dominant cultural myths associated with the grieving process. These cultural myths are often used in an attempt to assist the grieving person in the processing of the grief experienced. As such, they are well intended but can have negative results. The six myths are: not feeling bad; replacing the loss; grieving alone; being strong; keeping busy; and time healing all wounds. They tend to create an environment where an "incorrect foundation for dealing with loss is established".

Being open to receiving ongoing support from others is to engage in the process of both searching for meaning while also integrating the loss into one's life narrative. According to pastoral counselor Melissa M. Kelly, the search for meaning is the key to contemporary approaches to understanding grief. Personal narrative is an integral part in this search as it encompasses the totality of one's lived experiences. In the face of change, loss and/or grief an individual's life narrative has been interrupted.

In some cases, the accessibility of support may be complicated by the realities of community life which do not always provide one with a safe space in which to engage in the exploration of personal reflection and the memories that impact one's life story.

Therefore, it is the role of the one who does provide support to do so in an environment where safety and a hospitable space are maintained. Those engaged in the provision of care encourage the individual to seek out hospitable places

within their own support networks where vulnerability, emotions and the grief may be processed. To companion another as one processes the grief experienced is to accept a two-fold ministry; that of offering care for the narrative the individual has constructed for their life and assisting the individual through the gifts of presence and receptive listening in the expansion and meaning contained within the narrative itself.

## Resources

Baker, Carolyn (2011). *Navigating the Coming Chaos: A Handbook for Inner Transition*. New York: iUniverse, Inc.

James, John W., and Russell Friedman (2009). *The Grief Recovery Handbook: The Action Program for Moving Beyond Death, Divorce, and Other Losses*. 20th ed. New York: Collins.

Kelley, Melissa M. (2010). *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press.

Kincannon, Karla. (2005). *Creativity and Divine Surprise: Finding the Place of Your Resurrection*. Nashville: The Upper Room.

Richardson, Jan. (2016). *The Cure for Sorrow: A Book of Blessings for Times of Grief*. Orlando: Wanton Gospeller Press.

Stroebe, Margaret, and Schut, Henk. (2010). "The Dual Process Model of Coping with Bereavement: A Decade On." *Omega*: 61 (4), 273-89.

Viorst, Judith. (1986). *Necessary Losses*. New York: The Free Press.

Weller, Francis. (2015). *The Wild Edge of Sorrow: Rituals of Renewal and the Sacred Work of Grief*. Berkeley: North Atlantic Books.



## Change, Loss and Grief: Companions on the Journey, continued

### From the Offices of NRRO Brother Bob Metzger, SM, Associate Director for Planning and Education



At the end of September, I will conclude 10 years of ministry at the National Religious Retirement Office and will be returning to ministry within my Marianist community. Prior to this, I was a volunteer consultant for the Office for 21 years. Throughout my service to NRRO, I have visited and worked with about 125 religious institutes.

This ministry has been a real blessing in my life and I will be forever grateful for the trust these congregations have placed in me in sharing their stories and their lives. I have worked with women's and men's congregations; with apostolic, monastic and contemplative communities; and with institutes belonging to CMSM, CMSWR, LCWR, or unassociated institutes. Every community's history, charism and life-style is different, yet we all share a common goal of serving God through the people with whom we work.

I will be forever grateful to the donors in Catholic parishes across this country who have made all this work possible through their generosity. Thanks to these donors, NRRO has raised more than \$800 million in the 30-year history of the Retirement Fund for Religious collection.

I conclude with a quote from the founder of my congregation, the Society of Mary (Marianists), that has helped me in my work with religious institutes: "I am like a brook that makes no effort to overcome obstacles in its way. All the obstacles can do is hold me up for a while, as a brook is held up; but during that time it grows broader and deeper and after a while it over-

flows the obstruction and flows along again. That is how I am going to work."  
Blessed William Joseph Chaminade.

### Through Grief to New Life: Spirituality for Meeting God in Transition Times

NRRO is sponsoring a new workshop for elected leaders and members of religious congregations. Presenters, Sister Mary Hopkins, OP, and Brother Wayne Fitzpatrick, MM, will be addressing the power of unresolved grief, its impact on communities, and healing processes for religious.

**DATE: October 8-10, 2018**

**LOCATION: Detroit, MI**

Registration forms available at <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/resources/upload/NRRO-Grief-workshop.pdf>

### Tending the Vineyard Video Series

NRRO is pleased to announce Tending the Vineyard video series to promote effective property planning among religious institutes. The videos are designed for use by religious institute leaders and members, as well as lay staff and stakeholders who aid institutes in assessing and managing properties. To access the videos, visit <http://www.usccb.org/about/national-religious-retirement-office/tending-the-vineyard/index.cfm>

## Calendar 2018

### September 21-23

- CMSWR Assembly, St. Louis, MO

### September 25-27

- Planning and Implementation workshop; Lutz, FL (filled)

### October 8-10

- NRRO workshop Through Grief to New Life; Detroit, MI

### October 30-November 2

- RCRI Conference; Orlando, FL

### November 13

- NRRO Webinar with Sister Geraldine Hoyler, CSC on government benefits; 1PM EDT

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[www.retiredreligious.org](http://www.retiredreligious.org)

The National Religious Retirement Office coordinates the national collection for the Retirement Fund for Religious and distributes these funds to eligible religious institutes for their retirement needs. Our mission is to support, educate, and assist religious institutes in the U.S. to embrace their current retirement reality and to plan for the future.

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