

# BLESSED ARE THE MOURNERS

By NICHOLAS MORANO

**W**ESTERN man lives either consciously or unconsciously in terror of death;<sup>1</sup> for, basically, the processes of living and dying are intimately interwoven. In the course of his living, man denies this fear. It is only in the moment of death and of mourning that he is forced to confront his own mortality. To live fully, and at the same time to prepare oneself to face death, requires a revolution in consciousness which transcends a man's normal thinking and feeling. Kubler-Ross has shown how terminally ill patients work through certain emotional stages to enable them fully to absorb the impact of their own imminent death.<sup>2</sup> It is an intricate process, this preparation for death, which reflects profound changes in consciousness and emotionality. Denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance: these are major feeling-stages which can be identified. Similarly, throughout the normal developmental stages of life, emotional responses pass more gradually through like phases. Thus, through repeated experiences – loss, disappointments, and mourning – the concrete sense of 'my own mortality' may become gradually absorbed and accepted. However, since western man often lives exteriorly, various forms of interpersonal intervention often seem necessary to reacquaint him with his inner experiences.

Genuine emotional acceptance by another restores an individual's self-esteem, enabling him to feel significant as a person. When forthcoming, it is indeed a gift, a blessing on the human level, which enhances the freedom to grow and to become. When experiencing a sense of the Divine, it is christian grace which renews the spirit, awakening the individual to higher levels of consciousness. The 'Blessedness of the Mourners' implies a psychological transformation in consciousness from the human to the spiritual, wherein the person feels deep gratitude for life in the face of death and the acceptance

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<sup>1</sup> Becker, E.: *The denial of death* (New York, 1973).

<sup>2</sup> Kubler-Ross, E.: *On death and dying* (New York, 1969), ch 3-7.

of death in the process of living. This profound assent both to life and death describes man's inner posture at the heights of his dignity and humanity. The translation of this knowledge into a vibrant, existential reality, giving coherence and meaning to his daily living, is one of the most significant challenges for modern man. Eventually, he expands the boundaries of meaning and purpose beyond the personal, and, giving expression to his highest longings, looks upward and beyond to the universal source and rhythm of life.

The death of a loved one may precipitate one of the deepest self-confrontations in life. Long-buried memories and feelings are uprooted; the profoundest beliefs about life, death, God, eternity, pervade the consciousness; and, simultaneously, a piece of ourselves is torn away painfully as we grieve the loss from this world of love, warmth and tenderness. Out of the enormity of the emotional impact, the individual's responses unfold in bits and pieces, enabling him to face gradually the intensity of the experience. Though it is often more grave and devastating, the mourning process evokes reactions common to those experienced in other major life-crises, which are broadly similar to the stages of dying.<sup>3</sup> The underlying direction of the emotional process is from initial denial and avoidance, through the stages of fear, panic, guilt, and anger, into the phases of bargaining and depression. As the dying person accepts the reality of his fate, he enters a period of deep loss. This is 'preparatory grief' for the final separation from all he loves in this world.<sup>4</sup> Here, the experience of the mourner is closest to that of the dying person. For he, too, must confront the grief and loss of separation from a loved one. All the unfinished business of an intimate relationship parades in summary through the mind and heart. Feelings of regret, hurt, anger, guilt over survival, past joys and hopes tumble into the consciousness.

The positive constructive stage towards which the process moves is one of inner acceptance. The terminally ill patient accepts his imminent death; the bereaved accepts final separation from a loved one. The emotional quality is distinct from resignation and bitterness; rather, it is an acceptance embracing both the life and death poles of existence, a total affirmation of self-absorbing failures, limitations, successes, and accomplishments. A higher level of consciousness is achieved, within which the ordinary extremes of thinking and

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<sup>3</sup> *Op. cit.*

<sup>4</sup> *Op. cit.*, p 86.

feeling are resolved from a transcendent perspective, where the 'boundaries of individuality and universality meet'.<sup>5</sup>

However, the western socio-cultural pressures to conform often leave the individual isolated and alone with his deepest personal feelings: he has been conditioned to bury the deepest layers of his experience and personality. He therefore needs encouragement, acceptance and human support, in order to embark upon an active struggle to reshape, and to experience again, many of his basic emotional responses to life. The patients of Kubler-Ross were enabled to face the various emotional stages, and to experience the final acceptance only through intensive psycho-therapeutic intervention.<sup>6</sup> Among the counter-productive social pressures were the unconscious attitudes of hospital staff and family members which militated against the goal of emotional resolution. Fear of death, the isolation of the dying person within the hospital, the unwillingness of family members to allow the dying to leave them: these were some of the specific problems. So, too, cultural pressures often work to impede or to block the adequate and full resolution of the intense feelings of grief and mourning. The need for genuine comfort and aid for the bereaved from family, friends, and other loved ones is particularly significant at this time.

The primary goal in support of the mourner is to be genuine and realistic about death, his loss, and to help him face the psychological present, whatever it is.<sup>7</sup> For each person it is a unique experience, involving cultural background, personality factors, attitudes towards death and the hereafter, as well as the diversity of rituals and ceremonies. However, beneath the complexity, the common process involves facilitating the full expression of appropriate feelings of grief, guilt, anger, regret, etc. When denied, repressed, or only partially re-lived, grief can lead to the subsequent emergence of serious psychiatric symptoms.<sup>8</sup>

The subjective state of those offering comfort is deeply intertwined with that of the mourner. Therefore, to allow the expression of intense feelings throughout the entire process of mourning requires an individual who possesses relative personal security and the freedom to be honest with himself. Otherwise distortions from the un-

<sup>5</sup> Keleman, S.: 'Styles of dying', in *Voices: the art and science of psychotherapy*, vol 10 (Summer, 1974), p 45.

<sup>6</sup> Kubler-Ross, E.: *op. cit.*, ch 12.

<sup>7</sup> Murphy, G. in Feifel H (ed): *The meaning of death* (New York, 1959), ch 19.

<sup>8</sup> Murphy, G.: *op. cit.*

conscious could influence the process. A person's availability to another requires rare qualities of maturity and character. His own personal growth, through suffering and loss, enhances his sensitivity and identification with the suffering and pain of others. He needs more, however, since he must be able to surrender his own needs, and calm his own fears in the interest of the other person. Here the freedom to enter another's world empathically, in the face of disturbing anguish, anger and hostility, demands a person who has faced the darkest layers of his own personality. The recognition and resolution of the unconscious fear of death and annihilation leads to the common psychological difficulties in tendering authentic human support to the mourner.

The attendance of family and friends at wakes, funerals, and burials provides enormous support in giving witness to the bereaved of their care and affection. The customs of providing for the daily needs of the mourners affords them the needed opportunity to withdraw from life temporarily to express the deepest grief. Time spent with the bereaved is crucial. Long silences may be necessary to allow them to ready themselves to speak and to remain silent as they wish. Patience, the capacity to be silent, to remain open and receptive, to listen compassionately, to speak sensitively as needed, the freedom to touch warmly without words: all these are essential qualities for the individual who wishes to offer genuine support to the mourner. Common errors are those premature verbal demands to 'be strong', to 'bear up well', which possibly forestall in the bereaved the opportunity to express feelings honestly and openly. Also commonly found is the exaggerated hysteria which often masks the deeper negative feelings of guilt and anger over desertion. A most frequent error is to control the expression of all feelings. Where this has become habitual, a whole complex of psychosomatic symptoms is often to be found. Thus discomfort is manifest in the stilted, mechanical behaviour associated with ceremonies of funerals. Whereas the readiness to respond sensitively and appropriately, to allow and to be receptive to the most intense feelings of others, demands that quality of profound humanness which is the result of a life-long struggle to become oneself. For modern western man, becoming more fully human has not been natural.

Until recently, modern western society, in its one-dimensional, action-oriented emphasis, has been remiss in its regard for the inner man. In America, the 'psychological revolution' of the twentieth century has attempted to redress the error. Recent decades have

witnessed the burgeoning of depth-psychologies, height-psychologies<sup>9</sup> and the rapprochement between existential philosophy and western and eastern spiritual disciplines. It is clear that the deeper one plunges into the study of fundamental human questions, the greater the convergence of many fields of knowledge.<sup>10</sup> One basic issue in recent psychology is man's capacity for profound personal change, and his potential for maximum growth. Our tradition has largely underestimated human potential. If western man is sceptical, he need only peruse some of the documented feats of eastern yogis in gaining mastery over ordinarily involuntary bodily processes. Biographies of western mystics and saints dramatize the individual's capacity for transcendent growth. It cannot be doubted that some individuals do change profoundly and dramatically, and that all men change naturally through developmental stages from birth to death. The question is how each individual is to gain active mastery over his own psychological development.

'Know thyself'. This is mainly accomplished through the confrontation, awakening, and progressive discovery of the unknown layers of the personality. Both the darker forces of self-destructiveness and the need for self-development and growth are often forgotten possibilities. Major life crises such as death, illness, birth and divorce create opportunities for self-confrontation and possible growth. An inner readiness to respond, to allow the emotional reactions to unfold, paves the way for self-renewal. Where the response is consistent, the individual becomes open and flexible, more fully himself. It is through this process of personal development, the strengthening of character, the enlargement of self-boundaries towards others, that christian service and charity are humanized. To deny the negative urges and feelings is as anti-human as to shrink from our highest longings. To face ourselves as we truly are is the most withering and exhilarating challenge for man.

To walk the path of self-understanding is the only way for the individual to translate the truth and wisdom in the world into an existential reality. He needs to assimilate and to integrate into his way of thinking, feeling and living those positive qualities towards which he aspires. Human development starts with basic acceptance

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<sup>9</sup> Maslow, A.: *Towards the psychology of Being* (Princeton, 1962).

<sup>10</sup> This was illustrated by a seminar in New York on Thanatology, which 'led to prolonged discussion of various philosophical and religious systems of belief as well as to the relevance and validity of research in parapsychology'. *Newsletter* no 24, American Society for Psychical Research (Winter, 1975), p 3.

of mother for the infant, awakening basic hope and trust. 'At the centre of being, inseparable from the concrete experience of feeling alive',<sup>11</sup> this authentic hope threads throughout the emotional responses to dying<sup>12</sup> and to living.

Psychologically, the intrinsic value of genuine mourning is that it forces the individual to surrender himself emotionally to the inevitable. Profoundly and totally helpless, he yields all his specific hopes with the dead loved one to that larger unspecified hope of after-life. Through the experience of loss, an erosion of unconscious feelings of omnipotence can take place. Thus the individual may come to terms with his deepest psychological defence against facing his own mortality. Furthermore, from the core feeling of painful loss there emerges an inner reverence for life which is at once a recognition of death: a sense of awe, wonder and mystery in the face of the unfathomable. Deep gratitude and appreciation for the gift of life are the roots of human faith, hope, and humility. These qualities represent the psychological basis for authentic transcendence of the human. They open and prepare the individual to experience God's grace of acceptance, unearned and unearnable.<sup>13</sup> Here, in the depths of human experience, we find the subtle awakening of higher spiritual realities. As Einstein has said,

The most beautiful and most profound emotion we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the source of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know what is penetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom, and that the most radiant beauty which dull faculties can comprehend in only their most primitive forms: this knowledge, this feeling, is at the corner of true religiousness.<sup>14</sup>

Psychologically, western man's struggle is to restore or to discover meaning, commitment and direction in his life. If he can experience coherence between his deepest values and the daily flow of his life, his inner being will be revived.

At moments of death, mourning and loss, we are closest to the

<sup>11</sup> Morano, N.: 'Beyond polarities', *Voices: the art and science of psychotherapy*, vol 5 (Spring, 1969), p 81.

<sup>12</sup> Kubler-Ross, E.: *op. cit.* ch 8.

<sup>13</sup> Imara, M.: 'Dying as the last stage of growth', in Kubler-Ross, *Death: the final stage of growth*, (New York, 1975), ch 6.

<sup>14</sup> Einstein, A.: *Newsletter* vol 13, no 8 (1972) of the Jersey Society of Parapsychology Inc.

convergence of intense psycho-spiritual forces. Then, through the eruption of a panoply of complex feelings, we experience both the finiteness of life as we know it and the intimations of transcendent realities. We discover the power of love, the full breadth and limits of our beliefs. We experience a reaffirmation of life in the face of death, and a renewal of the spirit.

Through the christian symbolism of death and resurrection, we are able to face death and celebrate the promise of reward for the soul of the departed in the after-life. This same symbolism can be effectively applied through all phases of human development. Psychologically, the essence of all change, of all crises, is the death-rebirth experience. Daily we die to a part of ourselves, daily we are born anew. To change we must die to old patterns of thoughts and behaviour, and give way to new, deeper layers of ourselves. In all major life changes, a 'leap in the dark' is necessary.<sup>15</sup> The moment of letting go is an act of profound trust. The final 'leap' is death. Here the absolute trust in the beyond facilitates the confrontation.

The process of psychological growth and spiritual development are intertwined and commingled. The pathway toward psycho-spiritual integrity moves horizontally from self-absorption and narcissistic willfulness towards selfless caring and communication with others. Vertically, it advances from materialistic self-idolatry toward self-surrender to an authentic inner metaphysical consciousness, wherein the individual recasts the human in the light of the divine perspective. If 'the beginning of all spirituality is the fearless belief in truth',<sup>16</sup> then the full flowering of spiritual life is found in Christ-consciousness. Here the highest levels of humanity are graced with the divine Will acting in one's life. This movement towards psycho-spiritual total transformation is man's deepest challenge. It is a long, arduous and awesome struggle with no easy steps.

This universal search, whether conscious or unconscious, is towards wholeness, psycho-spiritual integrity. It is to awaken within the depths of consciousness 'a sense of Presence, of an ultimate ground of reality and meaning, from which life could spontaneously flower'.<sup>17</sup> This is man's ultimate goal.

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<sup>15</sup> James, W.: *The will to believe* (New York, 1956), p 31.

<sup>16</sup> Schweitzer, Albert: *Newsletter* vol 3, no 7 (1972), of the Jersey Society of Parapsychology Inc.

<sup>17</sup> Merton, T.: 'The significance of the Bhavarad Gita', in *The Bhavarad Gita as it is* (New York, 1968), p 19.