

# WINTER OF THE HEART

## The Spiritual Journey through Loss and Grief

By KATHLEEN FISCHER

**A**GEING BRINGS WINTER TO THE HEART. Sylvia, nearing her seventy-third birthday, discovers that after many decades in the same home, she can no longer manage and must leave her familiar surroundings for a strange new apartment. Ray, vigorous and active all his life, is visited by a stroke just before his eightieth birthday. He suddenly finds his speech slurred, his walking precarious, and his memory unreliable. Ruth, writing of her life at ninety, says: 'Many things are different which were not before. Friends die left and right.'

We prize long life, but dread its diminishment. Time can build up, but it can also take away friends, health, home and possessions, vision, hearing, life itself. Letting go is required at every point in the life cycle, but in the later years losses can multiply, diseases become chronic, and time seem too short to replace lifelong relationships. That is why many who write about old age find the key to happiness in how we face loss. Can we express the painful feelings it evokes? Are we able to recover hope, assess our remaining resources, and invest in other activities and relationships?

Ministry with older adults and their families has taught me something of this journey through the winter of the heart: the faith questions that arise, the spiritual practices that offer support, and the crucial role of a community in providing healing and hope.

### *God in the midst of loss*

In one of the nursing homes where I worked, I visited regularly with a widow whose deepest anguish was that she could no longer walk. She hated the limits a wheelchair imposed on her. One day she began our conversation with the question, 'Do you know what I really want to know? I want to know why God lets me live. My sister died in childbirth when she had little ones depending on her. I can't do anything for others, so why am I still here?'

The experience of loss raises starkly the central spiritual question: what does this suffering say about my relationship with God? Family

members watch the stripping of mind and body that occurs during their father's slow diminishment with Alzheimer's disease, and they begin to ask, what kind of God would allow this senseless suffering? A woman whose daughter dies of an inoperable brain tumour wonders if this means that she herself did not have enough faith, that she did not pray with as much confidence as she should have. A man who experiences a stroke asks why God is punishing him. Another woman, in her late nineties and ready to die, believes God has abandoned her: 'I pray and pray and nothing happens. I think he has forgotten about me.'

I am often tempted to try to answer the questions that surface in the agony of loss. One of the most helpful things I have learned to say is, 'I don't know'. Once I relinquished the temptation to defend God, I realized that those in the midst of grief did not want explanations from me. What they needed was a companion who was not afraid to walk with them. If someone could receive their expressions of anger and sadness without fear or judgement, God could lead them into their own answers. The process that allows us to integrate each loss with our experience of God is primarily a work of grace. The freedom to question and protest is integral to it.

On the journey of ageing, our image of God is slowly being transformed in the darkness. What we do need in the midst of grief is some assurance that this darkness can be the darkness of God, that God is with us even when the divine presence cannot be felt. The poet Denise Levertov describes it well in 'Candlemas', her poem about Simeon opening his ancient arms to the new light of the child Jesus (Lk 2:22-32).

What depth  
of faith he drew on,  
turning illumined  
towards deep night.<sup>1</sup>

Like Simeon, we must cling to faith even when its supports seem slim. It is easy to look into the darkness and despair, to clutch more desperately at what is slipping away.

Much depends on how we have learned, over the years, to image God's ways of working in the world. Do we see God primarily as the cause of our suffering, or as a source of strength in dealing with it? It is not easy to do theological reflection during times of deep grief. We are often exhausted, unable to concentrate, and filled with strong emotions. But there are ways to draw on more sustaining images of God even in troubled times, ways to access more fully the rich resources of our common heritage of faith.

Many biblical passages show us a God who under all circumstances – even in anguish – is to be trusted. This God shares the pain of those who suffer. God is ‘moved to pity by their groanings because of those who afflicted and oppressed them’ (Jg 2:18). A compassionate God cries out against suffering.

For a long time I have held my peace,  
I have kept still and restrained myself;  
now I will cry out like a woman in labor  
I will gasp and pant.

(Isai 42:14)

This God promises to be with us through all the diminishments of age.

In your old age I shall be still the same,  
when your hair is grey I shall still support you.  
I have already done so, I have carried you,  
I shall support and deliver you.

(Isai 46:4)

Even when only dimly intuited in the midst of loss, this image of a God who is with us can bring consolation and hope.

In recent years we have revived the use of the psalms of lament in our communities. These are prayers that cry out to God for justice in the face of suffering and seek the healing that God alone can give. Filled with feelings of anger, helplessness, confusion and doubt, the lament is nevertheless a prayer of faith and trust in God’s promise and saving activity. We cry to a God who understands our struggles and whose intention is that we experience peace.

I am worn out with groaning,  
every night I drench my pillow  
and soak my bed with tears;  
my eye is wasted with grief,  
I have grown old with enemies all round me.

Away from me, all you evil ones!  
For Yahweh has heard the sound of my weeping;  
Yahweh has heard my petition,  
Yahweh will accept my prayer.

(Ps 6:6–9)

The anger we feel in the midst of loss may be directed at God. We may need to express our sadness and disappointment repeatedly. We may

feel that we are a burden to those we love. Revival of the biblical prayers of lament can increase our communal comfort with the strong emotions that accompany grief.

The Christian tradition also offers us another resource for hope in the midst of loss. We believe that the divine compassion will overcome evil and death. Jesus' death and resurrection is the first-fruit of an all-inclusive harvest. It holds out promise for us even when our experience is a painful stripping away of what we have known and loved. This paschal mystery is the key to meaning in the journey through loss, promising to turn our tragedies into something positive. It tells us that life comes from death. Each loss, even death itself, can be a breakthrough into new life. It sometimes appears in quiet ways. A man who came to our retirement apartments after a suicide attempt expressed it this way:

All alone in my home after my wife died, I could see nothing ahead of me but a black curtain. I didn't think I'd ever feel anything good again. I would have fought hard not to come here if I'd been strong enough. Now, the most amazing thing is happening. The way everyone's been treating me, I'd say I'm learning something about love.

From Jesus' experience we also learn that this turning of loss into gain is God's gift. We contribute to the process by our receptivity to grace, but every passage through loss is a small resurrection, God's healing power at work in us. Since resurrection is a transforming process, where we arrive will not be an exact replica of what we left behind. As one woman said: 'I lost my eyesight, not my vision'. Or as a man told me: 'I'm learning to focus not on what I am forgetting, but on what wonderful things I can still remember'.

In the very last section of John's Gospel, a risen Jesus speaks to Peter.

'I tell you most solemnly,  
when you were young  
you put on your own belt  
and walked where you liked;  
but when you grow old  
you will stretch out your hands,  
and somebody else will put a belt around you  
and take you where you would rather not go'. . .  
After this he said, 'Follow me'.

(Jn 21: 18-19)

As we face the final phase of the life cycle, the paradox at the centre of the Christian faith reveals a God who makes the desert bloom, puts flesh on dry bones, and breaks the planted seed into new life.

*Spiritual practices for seasons of mourning*

In the midst of loss, we reach for the familiar. At a senior centre where I was working, a woman fell and broke her hip. She was very frightened, and we could not reach her family, so I accompanied her in the ambulance to the hospital. All the way there she prayed Psalm 23, 'The Lord is my shepherd . . .' over and over again. In a similar fashion, a man who had come to our facility when his Parkinson's disease worsened told me that he was learning to repeat the first words of the Our Father, letting them drift through him in such a way that they blocked other anxious thoughts. Though he had never been formally taught centring prayer, he had found a way to rest in the awareness of God with a phrase he had known since childhood. The repetition of familiar prayers anchors us in the divine presence during times of sorrow.

Grief is a bodily, emotional experience, and the most helpful spiritual practices acknowledge this. In *Two-part invention*, Madeleine L'Engle says that during her husband's slow, painful death from cancer she swam every morning and slowly recited various verses she had memorized. The movement of the body through the water helped mind and heart to work together, and when she had finished her alphabet of memorized poems and prayers, she felt sustained by the deep rhythm of faith.<sup>2</sup> Familiar rituals and hymns, the rosary beads, a plain wooden crucifix to clutch in one's hand, inspirational sayings tacked up on mirrors or doors, collections of prayers committed to notebooks or memory – these can support us during times of grief. A rich and varied sensual context, created by items such as colours, lights, flowers or incense, is likewise important.

It is helpful to know that our patterns of prayer may change during a profound loss. A woman whose established method of prayer was centring prayer found that she could not pray in that way for months after the death of her husband. The feelings she encountered were too terrifying for her. She returned to making the stations of the cross. The rhythm of walking and quiet meditation was release and comfort for her.

Loss of any kind marks a dying to the self we once knew. It is a point of transition. For this reason, reminiscence and life review are helpful spiritual practices for such periods. In the Bible, people of faith are

asked at each important transition, each exodus or exile, to remember again all that God has been in their lives. Like us, the Israelite people experienced the grief of letting go. They had to leave a place that was familiar. They confronted an uncertain future and the experience of the desert. For them, as for us, these experiences threatened both their identity and their life dreams. One of the comments I hear repeatedly from the older people with whom I minister is: 'I never thought it would turn out this way'. It is at once a protest against the way things are, and a lament for all the possible futures once envisioned. The losses of the ageing process, including the experience of nonfulfilment, come as a painful and repugnant surprise.

Though life review involves looking at the past, its purpose lies in the present; it is a search for meaning, reconciliation and identity. In one of her essays on old age, the Jungian analyst Helen M. Luke speaks of this process as a winnowing fan.

Now that the harvest is gathered and you stand in the autumn of your life, your oar is no longer the driving force carrying you over the oceans of your inner and outer worlds, but a spirit of discriminating wisdom, separating moment by moment the wheat of life from the chaff, so that you may know in both wheat and chaff their meaning and their value in the pattern of the universe.<sup>3</sup>

Remembering our lives can build a sense of who we are and have been in God. In telling our most painful memories to someone, we repeat our suffering and allow it to evolve into something else. As an experience of prayer, life review brings before us again those times when God upheld us during difficult days and evokes gratitude for gifts received.

According to the developmental psychologist, Erik Erikson, the nearness of death creates a crisis during which we evaluate our accomplishments and failures in order to find meaning in life. Doing this successfully enables us to find integrity rather than despair.<sup>4</sup> As a retired teacher watched more and more of the things she had counted on slip away, she said that the questions that became central and demanding were these: what is the meaning of my life now? What is *my* meaning? How does the accumulation of the years speak to me? Another woman put it this way: 'As I think of the death of my husband, my mind keeps remembering things from our past, and I am trying to learn what all these things mean for me now'. If this process is solitary and private, it can lead to guilt and anxiety. However, it can also bring serenity and a renewed sense of God's love. It goes best in the presence of a good listener or in a group.

Life review usually happens spontaneously, but tape recordings, scrapbooks, photograph albums, genealogy charts, and even pilgrimages help. As we review our lives before God, a pattern of lifelong values may emerge; we see with satisfaction the legacy we are leaving. Such review may also call us to unfinished spiritual work such as the resolution of conflicts, acceptance of responsibility for past deeds, forgiveness and reconciliation with others. Or it may show us ways to live the values of a lifetime in fresh ways even after the experience of loss.

Stories of faith, both biblical accounts and writings of those with sorrows similar to ours, strengthen this life reflection. The witness of those who have known our experience – widowhood, chronic disease, stroke – inspires and strengthens us. So do biblical stories of struggle and hope. One woman writes that, in the midst of declining physical powers and the loss of several family members within a brief two years, she turned to Scripture for solace.

There is, for me, a deep significance in the ancient story of Jacob's wrestling with the angel. He prevailed, but walked lame thereafter . . . It speaks to me of the cost of the spiritual odyssey; of entering on a journey, not knowing where it will lead but being ready. It speaks of an authentic detachment if I am to live out my days in truth before God.<sup>5</sup>

Story is powerful at such times because it lodges in our hearts. There it reaches the emotional roots of our pain. For example, if we journey again with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel, we can identify with their downcast spirits and feelings of desolation. Though it is springtime in Jerusalem and the bustle of festival preparations is all around them, they cannot enter into the celebrations. Their expectations have been dashed; their world lies in ruins. We hear the gospel call to let go, as Jesus joins them and asks that they ponder his vision of events. We also hear his promise that he will be with us in the community that breaks bread and drinks wine in memory of him. This community is to be a sacrament of presence and promise for us.

### *Community as sacrament of hope*

Genna was a woman in her eighties who struggled with depression and a very low sense of self-worth. She and her daughter came to see me because Genna seemed to have no interest in living, and the family could think of nothing to do to help her. Genna and I searched together for ways to find meaning in her life; she tried anti-depressant medications – but it was the young volunteers who ran the soup kitchen in

her parish who literally saved her life. They told her that they needed her cooking skills. They provided transportation so that she could get to their centre. They called to check on her when they did not hear from her. They were sacraments of hope for her, their love and interest bringing her back to life.

A spirituality that sustains us in the midst of loss is intrinsically communal. Grief does not go well in isolation. A community offers us a place to express our emotions, to celebrate rituals and to continue giving to others.

Those who are grieving need people who can handle strong emotions. If they must protect others from their feelings, they will not be able to heal. It is often hard for family members and friends to listen to strong expressions of grief, because it evokes guilt or a sense of helplessness. I have been struck by how often family or friends tell an older relative coming to a nursing home: 'Isn't this a lovely place?' 'I know you are going to like it here.' Telling the person what they *should* feel may protect us from their sadness, but it prevents their own real feelings from emerging. On the last night of his life, Jesus tells his disciples in the garden of Gethsemane, 'Wait here and watch with me'. The Gospel of Matthew describes Jesus as sorrowful and troubled: 'My soul is very sorrowful, even to death' (26:38). In his anguish and fear, he is asking his disciples to keep watch. Not to *do* anything, but to *be* with him. Moments of grief are often unalterable; what helps people move through them is the attention and presence of others.

One of the things that makes ageing difficult in our culture is the lack of ritual. There are few rituals to mark the passages of the later years, and physical limitations and transportation problems prevent many older persons from participating in the eucharist as often as they would like. While working in a nursing centre with persons with Alzheimer's disease, I found that one of the most strengthening experiences for them was the sacrament of anointing. As they were called by name and anointed with oil, many wept openly or responded for the first time in many months. They experienced the power of touch, the laying on of hands. The sacrament acknowledged that their whole system was hurting and affected by this disease. Family members discovered that the ritual somehow strengthened them to take up their heavy caregiving role with renewed energy.

As a sacrament of healing, anointing makes visible the presence of family and other members of the healing team. It is also a sacrament of vocation, calling a community to the deeper meaning of sickness and old age.<sup>6</sup> We are reminded that both frailty and strength mark us all. In



the spirit of Jesus we believe that sickness and suffering need not destroy our humanity. The meaning of Jesus' death and resurrection is brought to us at this fragile and vulnerable time, and we are able to witness to the entire community regarding its meaning.

Sacraments such as eucharist and anointing should not be isolated rituals, but find their place within the total ministry of Christians. A community of persons who care is a symbol of a God who cares. Their presence says: God is with you. You are not alone. There is hope and help for you.

If a community is to be this kind of sacrament, all its members must deal with their attitudes toward ageing. Some of the losses older people experience stem not from the ageing process, but from the prejudice we call ageism. If we are uncomfortable with our own ageing and potential frailty, we will try to ignore those whose physical disabilities foreshadow our own future. We will marginalize those older people in our midst and increase their sense of isolation. Once internalized, negative stereotypes regarding old age become a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy. Sometimes the healthy spiritual response to loss is not adjustment, but protest.

Besides eliminating the unnecessary losses that accompany ageing in our time, the Christian community must contribute toward a new view of ageing. The prayer of the first Pentecost tells us that in the power of the Spirit our young men and women will see visions and our old men and women will dream dreams (Acts 2:17-18). This promise of the Spirit does not minimize the physical sufferings and spiritual struggles of the later years, but it stresses that God is the source of meaning for all of life's stages, not simply those times of youthful vigour, efficiency and productivity. Coming to terms with the losses of ageing requires a fresh vision, one that values the gifts of the older people in our midst and allows them once again to become our teachers and guides.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In Denise Levertov, *Breathing the water* (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1987), p 70.

<sup>2</sup> See *Two-part invention: the story of a marriage* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), p 169.

<sup>3</sup> *Old age* (New York: Parabola Books, 1987), p 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Identity: youth and crisis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1968), pp 139-140. See also Edmund Sherman, *Reminiscence and the self in old age* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> Constance I. Young, 'One person's journey', *Generations* (Fall 1983), p 43.

<sup>6</sup> This understanding of the sacrament of anointing is developed by James L. Empereur SJ in *Prophetic anointing: God's call to the sick, the elderly, and the dying* (Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1982).