

Stonebriar Psychiatric Services

News & Views

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Adjustment to life
changes

Ages Served

Adult
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Children ages 10 & up

Grieving by Proxy

When we think about grieving, we generally think about the loss of an individual. Perhaps this might be through death, the breakup of a relationship, or perhaps simply because the individual moves away. About two weeks ago, I had an interesting experience that I have thought about a good deal and that has raised a number of questions for me in terms of both my reaction as well as what I observed in others.

I was returning home from running several routine errands on a very routine day. Coming close to where I was to turn, I saw through the trees billowing smoke and flames coming from a house in a neighborhood close to where I live. It appeared to be in an area where I frequently walk my dogs. I also heard sirens. I had planned to walk Aggie and Maggie when I got home, so we walked our usual route in the direction of this fire. I felt curious about it, but something else also seemed to draw me. I've never personally experienced a house fire, but have known some who did. I wondered if it was someone that I knew or had talked with before when walking the dogs. When I got to the end of the street, there were fire trucks, policemen, and more people than I have ever seen in that neighborhood before. As I would later see, there were also more cars pulling in off the highway to see this fire.

Even though no one could get close, it was clear that the house belonged to a family that I had previously talked with, at least the father and son, as one morning I tried to help them find their dog that had gotten loose. My first fear and question to the nearby officer was whether everyone had gotten out safely, and he replied that they had. I asked about the dog, but he didn't know. I watched for perhaps 10 or 15 minutes along with a gathering group of individuals, many of whom I'm sure were neighbors and many who had just stopped to see what was going on. Everyone looked somber. I almost felt guilty standing there watching, as though I were intruding into a very private moment, which I knew the affected family must be experiencing. I felt extremely sad, somewhat frightened and in awe, as the flames poured from the roof, and at some level, I'm sure grateful that no flames were coming from my house. As I continued on the walk, I was amazed at how many cars were driving in various directions trying to get a closer look. What was it that drew me and all the others, to the viewing of what represents a very tragic event in this family's life?

I have thought about this a great deal since that day. I walked by there the next day with my usual companions, Maggie and Aggie, and even wondered what I might say should the owners be there. Was there anything that I could do to be of help, anything that I could offer? But I still could not answer the question of what drew me there in the first place or what created such strong feelings as I looked at the burned-out remnants of what had been a very beautiful home for what seemed to be a very nice family. I put myself in their position and what it would be like walking

through the rubble. Finding scorched pictures of family vacations, furniture or other possessions that perhaps had been picked out together with or for a loved one, or any of a number of other possessions that might have physical or emotional value. It felt a bit like a feeling I've had before when driving down the road and seeing an old, rundown, and dilapidated structure that once had been someone's home or barn. One wonders what it was like in its "heyday", what the family was like, and what was the life like that they had enjoyed there.

It then occurred to me what may have drawn me and many others to the fire or why old barns and houses that are falling down are so often the subject of paintings and photographs. I believe that these may represent a process of "grief by proxy". At some level, we all realize that possessions, enjoyable events in our life, and certainly even people, are at best temporary in this lifetime. We don't like to think about it, but we know it's true. Ms. Copeland, my colleague at Stonebriar Psychiatric Services, wrote an excellent article in the October, 2008, newsletter on the process of grief, and I would recommend that you go back and take a look at it. But this idea of "grief by proxy" still fascinates me as a possible explanation for why most of us tend to be curious onlookers at tragic events. I am not able to quote any particular psychological or psychiatric theory, but I believe that it is because we spend so much time and energy trying to deny the temporal nature of life, whether it is our own, our loved ones, or our possessions. We just don't like to think about the fact that all of these things, including life itself as we know it, can be gone in an instant. Observing someone else's house fire or auto accident allows us to touch this reality from a safe distance. But the truth is that, rather than just giving us solace because it wasn't us, it should provoke us to examine our priorities. What is really important to me in this life? What would enable me to handle it if I were to lose it? ... and what would give me hope to go on?



Do you have topical requests for future newsletters? Let us know at: NewsletterQuestions@stonebriarps.com



With regard to this, I would just like to share a few quotes that have stuck with me. One is by Arnold Glasow, and which was a favorite of one of my former pastors, who said "You can't take it with you. You never see a U-Haul following the hearse". I really know that one is true, but I just wish I could remember it when I need to keep things in perspective. With regard to priorities, activities, and major decisions and actions in life, none is perhaps more pertinent than the words of Jim Elliot, the missionary whose story is told in the book, Through Gates of Splendor, who stated "When it comes time to die, make sure that all you have to do is die." If you can consistently live with that as your life philosophy, there will be no regrets.

Not wanting this to seem morbid, and certainly not to provoke feelings of hopelessness or despair, I would hope that ultimately considering these issues would enable one to conclude with an air of realistic hope expressed in the words of Ethel Waters, when she said, "I'm not afraid to die. I'm kinda looking forward to it. I know the Lord has His arms wrapped around this big, fat sparrow."



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