

Remembering the Dead Rightly

BY REGINA EASLEY-YOUNG

We can over-identify with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, make an idol of the deceased, or harbor the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them. Remembering the dead rightly—with love that is undistorted by our passions—is a difficult spiritual discipline.

Catherine and Robert were married for fifty-eight years. Though terribly sad after Catherine's death, Robert found himself filled with gratitude for their life together. After her husband Joe's funeral, Linda had nothing but resentment about his never having time for her and their children.

Jerry and Susan found their twenty-two-year-old son dead in his bedroom. While admitting their continuing doubts about God's love and providence, after three years they have glimpses of peace from time to time. Their neighbor's teenage daughter died in a car accident, and after three years the parents cannot seem to move past their bitterness over this tragedy.

Karen's alcoholic father had been abusive. After his death, over time, she eventually came to terms with the kind of life he had lived. Janice, from a similar family, could never be honest enough, even with herself, to admit to the kind of man her father had been.

As these contrasting stories show, remembering those who have died is rarely easy and straightforward. Indeed, remembering them rightly is a difficult spiritual discipline. In this essay I will explore three related questions: From where does the right remembering of the dead arise? What can grief teach us about right remembering? Can the Church help us to do this well?

Before we turn our focus to remembering *others* who have died, let us note that within the Christian tradition the spiritual matrix for the right remembering of the dead begins with the practice of frequently and rightly remembering that we will die one day ourselves. The writings of the fourth-century ascetical fathers and mothers of the desert regularly insist that we remember, and not evade, the thought of our own deaths. For example, Evagrius of Pontus, the most educated and prolific writer of the desert fathers, teaches, “[One] should always act as if he was going to die tomorrow; yet he should treat his body as if it was going to live for many years.”¹ St. Hesychios the Priest gives the following instruction: “Be watchful as you travel each day the narrow but joyous and exhilarating road of the mind, keeping your attention humbly in your heart...thinking of your death and invoking Jesus Christ.”² The early monastics were regularly taken to the monastery’s ossarium where the bones of their dead brethren were stored. The point of the visit was to remind the monks of the inevitability of their own deaths.

Remembering our own death, then, is not a morbid activity. Rather, it is a powerful spiritual practice that causes us, at least for a few moments, to abandon our preoccupation with illusory concerns. It lays the spiritual groundwork for thinking about the meaning of death and for remembering the dead rightly.

THE NATURE OF GRIEF

Grief is a natural, yet painful, response to our suffering the irrevocable loss of someone to death. We are created to be in relationship with one another as the Creator is in relationship with the created. We are made to be co-creators of life and of love; we are made to know and to be known. Because of this, when we love other persons we experience pain at their death. The separation from a loved one through death can usher us into the process of grief that may seem, at times, to trample our souls.

The phases of grief—shock and denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance—are well known. Most of us make our way through each phase, though not always in this order. Some may be frozen temporarily in one phase (typically, anger or depression), and in unusual cases a griever may remain frozen in a phase and not move through the cycle. Our experience of grief will certainly be tinged with particular issues of estrangement, anger, guilt, or forgiveness toward the person who has died. Nevertheless, it is instructive to consider these phases of grief and why they often occur in the order listed above. The initial shock and denial of a loved one’s death, along with the lingering ache that accompanies a time of grief, can plunge us to unwelcome depths. Anger and depression often settle in for a time. We may experience a spiritual crisis as our beliefs about how life works come unraveled. We may struggle with theological questions about God’s control and God’s love, reliance on the Church’s teachings, and the effectiveness of prayer. In my own experiences of grief and in the experience of those I have

walked beside as a hospice chaplain, these hard questions were asked, but silence was the answer. We press for answers to the questions of “Why?” or “Why me?” but often we are given only more mystery.

The amount of internal turmoil that comes in grief’s wake can be immense. This is the way of grief. Grieve, we must. It is simply the normal response when a great loss occurs in our lives.

TWO ROLES GRIEF PLAYS IN REMEMBERING

Grief often plays a distorting role in remembering the dead. It leads us down the road to despair which distracts us from remembering them truthfully and with love. For this reason, to rightly remember the dead requires the emotional maturity of *apatheia*. The early Christian spiritual writers used this Greek word to describe the spiritual stage in which our thinking and loving are not controlled by our passions, including grief and despair.

St. Isaiah the Solitary’s words pertain here: “Be attentive...guard your heart...so that nothing destructive can separate you from the love of God.”³ Our human love is immature and inadequate. It must be strengthened by mature love, or *agape* – the selfless and self-giving love that God has for us and that we, in turn, can learn to have for God and others. It is this mature love that allows us to remember the dead rightly. *Agape* can only grow within the context of *apatheia*, but its maturation there comes at an advanced stage at the end of a long spiritual journey.

For this reason *apatheia*, the state of not being distracted from love by our passions, is the first and proximate goal of the Christian journey toward remembering the dead rightly. Though few people attain *apatheia*, it remains the norm for the Christian life. It is our spiritual task to translate all of our relationships and remembering into this new level of being.⁴ But we do well to note that *apatheia* is not our ultimate goal. As Christians, we are called to remember those who have died with a spiritual love, *agape*. The state of *apatheia* is simply the fertile ground in which this spiritual love – which is unselfish, non-clinging, and non-sentimental – can grow.⁵ “*Agape* is the progeny of *apatheia*,” Evagrius writes, and “in front of love [*agape*], passionlessness [*apatheia*] marches.”⁶ Thus, to practice love at its purest, we must live in the mode of Christian *apatheia*, and in this mode we will be wary of grief and despair distracting us from or distorting our remembering the dead.

So far I have described how the powerful emotion of grief over someone’s death might inhibit our remembering the dead rightly. But grief can play a very different, productive role which surprisingly may move us toward *apatheia* and *agape*. Grief forces us to acknowledge hard, objective truths such as the wonderful gift that someone’s life was to us and the demand that now we must give them up to death. When a loved one dies, a common question is “How can the Creator of life ask us to let go of this one we have loved?” Indeed, it can feel like part of us dies when a loved one has died. This reality-orienting movement of grief, however, can lead us to the pattern

of love nurtured by *apatheia*. Grief plays this productive role when it causes us to give up some of our “normal” responses to death, such as a prideful demand for intellectual answers, a desire to avoid any suffering, the illusion of control over death, and the false impression that we have life all figured out. Grief can lead us to a surrender, a giving over, a sacrifice. If we allow our hearts to be open to it, over time (though, often a very long time) grief can instruct us in ways of detachment and humility. For this we can be grateful.

BARRIERS TO REMEMBERING RIGHTLY

One barrier to rightly remembering the dead is over-identifying with the powerful emotions that accompany grieving – that is, we unconsciously assume that “I am my feelings.” When our loss is acute, we may be tempted to live as if sorrow and despondency comprise all of who we are. We live in a cocoon of these feelings. Our emotions become even more overwhelming when the deaths we grieve are complicated by homicide or suicide, result from preventable accident, or involve the innocent in miscarriage or childhood.

Grievers may not want to let go of their feelings for fear of forgetting their deceased loved one; they inordinately cherish the feelings themselves as a connection with the departed. The length of time that we should carry this kind of pain may depend on several factors; the work of grief is more tender and agonizing with certain kinds of deaths. However, we should beware of over-identifying with our feelings in a way that leads to despair. It would be much better if, in due course as our hearts stay open, this suffering should cast us onto the way of transformation. To remember God in our pain is one way to overcome this barrier and remember the dead rightly. St. Mark the Ascetic urges, “Let all involuntary suffering teach you to remember God.”⁷

Another barrier is making an idol out of the deceased. This reveals our unhealthy state of dependence on our loved one. We want to feel happy and feel like our needs will always be met, and we believe it was the deceased who gave this to us. We do not want to face the fact that our loved one will no longer be present to meet our needs. We do not want to be reminded that we are now alone, because the one we depended on has died. So, we grow depressed and isolated, we live in the past, and we are unable to deal with the challenges of the present. As one family member of a deceased hospice patient said to me, “If I could only feel her with me, then I would be OK.” This is making an idol of the deceased.

In order to maintain the illusion of their sufficiency, grievors may remember only the good about the deceased and ignore the negative. This is a second illusion, of course, and it is not right remembering either. It would be much better if, in due course, this sentimental clutching the memory of the deceased should reveal to us the immaturity of our over-attachment to them.

The illusion that we cannot live without the loved one might then be transcended, and we would free them from taking the place of God in our lives.

A third barrier to rightly remembering the dead is our estranged or hostile relationships with them. Perhaps while they were alive our relationships were damaged by divorce, the abandonment of children, (their or our) addiction or abuse, or other trauma. Even after their death, such relationships may continue to poison our spirits and limit our ability to love them and others.

In order to maintain our equilibrium, we may not admit these unresolved relationships (to ourselves or others) or acknowledge our lingering anger and resentment. These deceptions are not right remembering either. While the process is complex and easier described than submitted to, it would be better if, in due course, grief led us to acknowledge the reality of these relationships and to release the deceased and our thirst for vengeance into God's hands.

THE ROAD OF GRATITUDE

Though few of us achieve the state of *apatheia* and love one another with *agape*, we are pilgrims on a journey toward these spiritual ideals. So, how do we know we are making progress toward them, especially in regard to transcending the powerful barriers we face to rightly remembering the dead? I think a harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude.

John Claypool, a former Baptist and Episcopalian pastor, writes in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler* about grieving his eight-year-old daughter Laura Lue's death from leukemia. In sermons he preached over a span of three and a half years, he traces his reaction to her diagnosis, a relapse, the shock of her death, and the reality of his grief. He confesses doubts, asks probing questions, and shares his suffering while striving to remain true to his faith and scriptural teachings and to seek solace in his congregation.

Claypool describes three paths available to grievers. Some travel the "road of unquestioning resignation" which counsels "We must not question God." Others follow the "road of total intellectual understanding," which is "the way of explaining everything completely or tying up all loose ends in a tidy answer." Claypool tried each of those paths, but found they were "dead ends." Only the the third "road of gratitude" held promise for leading him out of the darkness of grief.⁸

Claypool's understanding of gratitude was shaped by a seminal childhood experience. His parents had borrowed a neighbor's washing machine at the beginning of World War II, and over the time of using it he had forgotten how it came into his family's possession. So, when the neighbors reclaimed the washing machine, Claypool was quite upset. His mother put things in perspective for him. "Wait a minute, son," she admonished. "You must remember, that machine never belonged to us in the first place. That we ever got to use it at all was a gift. So, instead of being mad at its being taken away, let's use this occasion to be grateful that we had it at all."⁹

Such gratitude “seems to me to be the best way down from the Mountain of Loss,” Claypool concludes. “Laura Lue was a gift, pure and simple, something I neither earned nor deserved nor had a right to. And when I remember that the response to a gift, even when it is taken away, is gratitude, then I am better able to try and thank God that I was ever given her in the first place.”¹⁰

THE CHURCH’S TASK

We have seen how the right remembering of the dead arises from a state of *apatheia* that nurtures *agape*, and explored the roles that the powerful emotion of grief plays both in distorting our remembering and in orienting it toward reality. Now I turn to my final question: how can the Church guide us on the spiritual journey toward remembering the dead rightly?

First, the Church can teach the spiritual disciplines such as surrender, detachment, compassion, and forgiveness that lead toward the way of *apatheia* and *agape*. This is the way of Christ, the “essential gesture of his life, his willingness to die on the cross to all he had known and loved.”¹¹ There is a well-delineated path that leads persons to *apatheia*, taught through the centuries but largely unknown in the Protestant West. It requires a community and mentors, for persons cannot reach spiritual maturity on their own.

Second, the Church can provide rituals for right remembering. Powerful ceremonial acts speak to us at a deeper level than mere words. In the church year, for example, All Saints’ Day reminds us of those who followed Christ before us and showed the way of *apatheia* and *agape*, and Ash Wednesday is rich with symbols that remind us of our mortality.

My congregation has more local rituals that profoundly affect peoples’ remembering. One of these rituals is literally walking beside the person who has

experienced a tragic death. For several years, a group of church friends accompanied a mother to the gravesite of her deceased teenage son on his birthday. Bringing flowers and sitting on blankets beside the grave with her, we listened as she remembered and told stories of his life. This has been a solace to the mother that she is not alone in her grief; the congregation has not forgotten her. This helped her to remember rightly. After a few years,

How do we know we are making progress toward the spiritual ideal of undistorted love when it comes to remembering the dead? A harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude.

she no longer needed this ritual. Another local ritual of the congregation occurs in the support group for young parents who have experienced miscarriage and infant loss. The parents share their feelings of loss and then light candles in memory of their babies. This addresses in a non-verbal, symbolic way the parents' doubts and confusion, theological questions, and isolation. One participant said that the group changed her life, moving her from despair to wholeness by helping her to rightly remember. A final example is the Service of Light and Darkness held during Advent. As the names of the deceased are read aloud during this liturgy, grieving persons light a candle in their memory. This ritual helps participants to remember rightly during a time of the secular year – the anticipation of family joy at Christmas – that can distort remembering the dead with added pain, loneliness, or sentimentality. It provides a place for the grieving to acknowledge again their suffering and reminds them that the Church and God walk beside them.

Third, the Church can teach and model gratitude for life and for all that it brings. Scripture does not counsel an "attitude of gratitude." It shows us how to move beyond exhausting intellectual discussions, complaining, and striving, to resting in the reality and goodness of what our lives are. A friend relates the relief he felt while walking a prayer labyrinth as a spiritual exercise. He found himself praying, "Thank you for my path." He had never felt thankful for the sometimes difficult route his life had taken. He was able to let go of disappointment and resentment for the way his life had gone, and of wishing for other things that had not happened. As John Claypool observes, remembering our loved ones with gratitude to God provides a route beyond the darkness of despair.

CONCLUSION

We will die. Our loved ones will die. "What is your life?" the author of James asks in regard to the fragility of our existence, "For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14b). For these reasons it is essential that we learn to think rightly about our own deaths, and to rightly remember others who have died. "When we love and remember the dead [with *apatheia* and *agape*]," Vigen Guroian says, "we prepare ourselves for the mystery of death and eternal life."¹²

As we reflect on our own death and endeavor to remember rightly the deaths of our loved ones, let us recall these words from Theognostos the Priest.

When you are no longer at the mercy of your obsessions and you feel the love of God burning ever more deeply in your heart, when you come to the stage when the thought of death no longer fills you with dread – for you look on it merely as a dream of the night or, more to the point, as a welcome liberation – then you have indeed found the pledge of your salvation. On that day you will be filled with ineffable joy, for you carry the Kingdom of God within you.¹³

NOTES

1 Evagrius the Solitary, "Extracts from the Texts on Watchfulness," §1, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, compiled by St. Nicodemus of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, and translated from the Greek and edited by G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 53. Available online at archive.org/details/Philokalia-TheCompleteText (accessed May 15, 2013).

2 St. Hesychios the Priest, "On Watchfulness and Holiness," §29, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 166.

3 St. Isaiah the Solitary, "On Guarding the Intellect," §22, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 26.

4 Thomas Keating, *Invitation to Love* (New York: The Continuum Publishing Company, 2003), 103.

5 Robin Amis, *A Different Christianity: Early Christian Esotericism and Modern Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 326.

6 These quotes are drawn respectively from *Praktikos* §81, in Evagrius Ponticus, *The Praktikos & Chapters on Prayer*, translated by John Eudes Bamberger, O.C.S.O. (Trappist, KY: Cistercian Publications, 1972), 36, and *Ad Monachos* §67, in Evagrius Ponticus, *Ad Monachos*, translated by Jeremy Driscoll, O.S.B. (Mahwah, NJ: The Newman Press, 2003), 53.

7 St. Mark the Ascetic, "On the Spiritual Law," §57, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 1, 114.

8 John Claypool, *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler: Living and Growing through Grief*, revised edition (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 2004 [1974]), 54 and 58.

9 *Ibid.*, 64.

10 *Ibid.*, 64-65.

11 Cynthia Bourgeault, *Wisdom Way of Knowing* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 67.

12 Vigen Guroian, *Life's Living toward Dying* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 39.

13 Theognostos the Priest, "On the Practice of the Virtue," §12, in *The Philokalia*, Volume 2, 361. This translation is from John Anthony McGuckin, *The Book of Mystical Chapters: Meditations on the Soul's Ascent, from the Desert Fathers and Other Early Christian Contemplatives* (Boston, MA: Shambala Press, 2003), 125.



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