



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

### Focus Articles:

📖 Remembering the Dead Rightly  
(*Death*, pp. 34-41)

### Suggested Article:

📖 All My Life is Vanity  
(*Death*, pp. 42-45)

### What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to [Christian\\_Reflection@baylor.edu](mailto:Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu).

### Christian Reflection

Center for Christian Ethics  
Baylor University  
One Bear Place #97361  
Waco, TX 76798-7361  
Phone 1-866-298-2325  
[www.ChristianEthics.ws](http://www.ChristianEthics.ws)

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

# Remembering the Dead Rightly

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.

### Unison Prayer

May God the Father, who remains faithful in life and death,  
God's Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, whose own death and resurrection give us the promise of new life,  
and the power of the Holy Spirit, whose daily presence transforms our world,  
empower our journey towards sanctity and fill us with the hope of resurrection and new life. Amen.

### Scripture Reading: Colossians 3:5-14

### Reflection

"Grief is a natural, yet painful, response to our suffering the irrevocable loss of someone to death," Regina Easley-Young observes. "We are created to be in relationship with one another as the Creator is in relationship with the created. ... Because of this, when we love other persons we experience pain at their death."

Grief plays a productive role in remembering the dead when it "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," she writes. It may lead us to abandon poor "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." For this we should be grateful.

But grief often distorts our remembering the dead, she warns, especially when it leads to despair or is "tinged with particular issues of estrangement, anger, guilt, or forgiveness toward the person who has died." Ancient Greek had a name for such distorting emotions: *pathos* or passions. Paul warns the Colossians to be rid of them (3:5). Rejecting passions in this negative sense, early Christians valued the emotional maturity of *apatheia*.

Thus, Isaiah the Solitary (c. 370-491) counsels, "Be attentive... guard your heart... so that nothing destructive can separate you from the love of God." Evagrius (345-399) teaches "Agape is the progeny of *apatheia*" and "in front of love [*agape*], passionlessness [*apatheia*] marches." Easley-Young explains their reasoning: "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*," a spiritual stage "in which our thinking and loving are not controlled by our passions, including grief and despair."

Easley-Young identifies three grief-induced barriers to remembering the dead rightly. In the throes of grieving, we may:

- ▶ *over-identify with our feelings*, cherishing them in order to maintain a connection with the departed loved one. This often leads to despair. Easley-Young writes, "It would be much better if, in due course as



## Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Robert B. Kruschwitz, the author of this study guide, directs the Center for Christian Ethics at Baylor University. He serves as General Editor of *Christian Reflection*.

© 2013 The Center for Christian Ethics

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.'

- ▶ *idolize the deceased*, remembering only the good and ignoring the negative. In their absence, "we grow depressed and isolated, we live in the past, and we are unable to deal with the challenges of the present," she notes. "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."
- ▶ *nurse anger toward the deceased*. "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."

### Study Questions

1. What barriers have you faced, or helped others to face, in remembering the dead rightly?
2. Easley-Young writes, "How do we know we are making progress toward [*apatheia* and *agape*]...especially in regard to transcending the powerful barriers to rightly remembering the dead? I think a harbinger of progress in most situations is the emotion of gratitude." Discuss her observation.
3. According to Easley-Young, how can congregations provide rituals that encourage right remembering of the dead?
4. How does David Bailly's painting *Vanitas* suggest that we remember the artist (and the dead, more generally) rightly?

### Departing Hymn: "How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds" (verses 3, 4, and 5)

O Jesus, shepherd, guardian, friend,  
our Prophet, Priest, and King,  
our Lord, our Life, our Way, our End,  
accept the praise we bring.

How weak the effort of our hearts,  
how cold our warmest thoughts,  
but when we see you as you are,  
we'll praise you as we ought.

Till then we would your love proclaim  
with every fleeting breath;  
and may the music of your name  
refresh our hearts in death.

John Newton (1774), alt.

Suggested Tunes: ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE

# Remembering the Dead Rightly

## Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2 or 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

## Teaching Goals

1. To see how grief plays two roles in remembering the dead—a positive role of promoting the realization of loss and a negative role of distorting emotions, which can lead to despair.
2. To identify some common barriers we face in remembering the dead rightly.
3. To discuss how your congregation can encourage remembering the dead rightly.

## Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Death (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “How Sweet the Name of Jesus Sounds” locate one of the familiar tunes ST. PETER (Reinagle) or DUNDEE in your church’s hymnal or on the Web in the Cyber Hymnal™ ([www.hymntime.com/tch/](http://www.hymntime.com/tch/)).

## Begin with a Story

Regina Easley-Young, who served as a hospice chaplain for many years, recalls how differently people remember those who have died. She writes, “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.”

## Unison Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading aloud the unison prayer in the study guide.

## Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Colossians 3:5-14 from a modern translation.

## Reflection

In this study we shift from preparing for our own death to remembering rightly those who have died. Following early Christian usage, Regina Easley-Young identifies the barriers to proper remembering as “passions,” or disordered emotional responses that distort love. Thus, the solution of *apatheia* (literally, “without passion”) that allows the growth of *agape* is not a denigration of emotion *per se*, but a studied resistance to distorting emotions. She points out that one of the Church rituals that can instruct and enable us to remember the dead rightly is worship on All Saints Day. Eric Mathis’s liturgy (*Death*, pp. 52-62) for this Church feast leads us to rightly remember the deceased members, or saints, in our congregations along with historic saints.

## Study Questions

1. Regina Easley-Young identifies two barriers that ‘inflate’ our memory of the deceased and often lead to despair over our loss (over-identifying with powerful emotions that accompany grieving, and making an idol of the deceased) and one barrier that ‘lowers’ our memory of the deceased and leads to bitterness (harboring the poison of estranged or hostile relationships with them). With sensitivity, encourage members to discuss their struggles with these disordered emotional responses. Have they experienced other barriers to remembering the dead rightly?
2. Easley-Young summarizes John Claypool’s experience of grieving his daughter’s death as recorded in *Tracks of a Fellow Struggler*. “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 third ‘road of gratitude’ held promise for leading him out of the darkness of grief.” In this third way, he saw his daughter as “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.”

Discuss how seeing the deceased as a gift from a gracious God (though, perhaps, one that has been defaced by circumstances or the person’s sin) may set our memory of them aright.

3. In addition to the special services of the church year that focus on remembering our own death (Ash Wednesday) and those who have died (All Saints Day), she describes more local rituals that help people remember the dead rightly. For example, in her congregation a group of church friends accompanied a mother to the gravesite of her deceased teenage son on his birthday and listened as she remembered and told stories of his life. Others formed a support group for young parents who experienced miscarriage and infant loss. At a Service of Light and Darkness held during Advent the names of the deceased are read aloud and grieving persons light a candle in their memory. Consider how these rituals might address the barriers to right remembering of the dead.
4. Heidi Hornik explains how the details of *Vanitas: Self-portrait of the Artist, Still Life* (1651) “suggest that Bailly is not depicting a transitory moment in his life, but is reviewing the artistic works completed through his lifetime. This is how the artist wanted to be remembered after his death.” For instance, he cleverly depicts the whole course of his life – as a young man holding his middle-aged portrait and facing his own death (in the form of a skull). Though we might think of his self-portrait (or of any artist’s self-portrait) as an attempt to preserve the artist’s life through his painting, he has wisely presented both his youthful and middle-aged selves as elements in a nature morte (literally “nature dead,” or still life).

Bailly seems to depict his life and artistic accomplishments in an appropriate way – neither sentimentally transcending the human condition of morality, nor collapsing in despair in the face of death.

## Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.