

**The Eulogy as a Tool in Grief Work**  
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*Attitudes to which the bereaved are especially susceptible--denial, guilt, anger, and a sense of meaninglessness--can be dealt with through the sensitive and skillful use of the eulogy.*

The Eulogy is a duty no rabbi can escape. Sometimes it is an onerous one; sometimes it is a personally painful one. All too often in the busy pressure of our lives it becomes one of those things that we just must do, and that we take for granted. Yet it is one of the most significant things that we do. All too often we handle eulogies rather mechanically. We have a stock framework and sort of build from it, and wonder whether in those cases we do really help the family as much as we might.

If the eulogy can be significantly important, how then shall we write one to have the greatest effect? In a recent issue of "The American Rabbi," Rabbi Robert Kahn suggests that:

...a funeral sermon ought to begin with a text or parable. The wise preacher will begin his funeral discourse by seeking and selecting a text, whether from the Bible, Rabbinic literature or other sources on which to tie his thoughts.

The author then goes on to point out that: "There are a group of them (texts) which almost preach themselves."

Others, in writing about eulogies, point out how one must be scrupulous, be honest, how one must make sure to praise the dead, and other such words to the wise. Linn and Schwarz note "...that the function of their eulogy is to do honor to the dead and to comfort the bereaved." Perhaps here we might consider in what areas the bereaved need comforting and how the eulogy can help do this. Perhaps it might be better to know what the immediate needs are at the time of bereavement and how we can help meet them.

Lindemann, Bowers, Jackson and many other authors point to a number of problems that the grieving person is faced with; problems with which we should be able to help the bereaved deal. First, there is reality--the fact that he who was, is no more; that dead is dead. There are great tendencies to deny the reality; to hope somehow that the deceased will walk into the room, that he will reappear. Lindemann points out that "There is in the early stages of mourning preoccupation with the image of the deceased." The feeling is present that if only one does not rearrange the world in which the deceased lived, does not move his clothes, or change his room, that somehow he will reappear.

The problem of guilt is one which every mourner must face. There is always a feeling of guilt toward the deceased. The mourner asks himself, "What is there that I could have done that might have changed all this; is there something more that I could have done; could I have been different?"

With guilt walks guilt's partner-anger. Anger is always present in bereavement. There is a feeling of hostility toward the dead, toward others in the environment; and often enough toward oneself. The widow may be angry with the husband who has "gone and left her." She may be angry with the doctor whom she may consider responsible for the death, and hostility may be directed in a great many areas. Linn and Schwarz point out that:

A grieving person is always an angry person. Love is mingled with hate and the note of anger is unmistakable in the widow's weeping complaint about her husband-'Why did he do this to me?'

Another of the problems that the mourner must face is that there has occurred a loss in the meaningful patterns of his life. We might say a loss in what Lindemann calls "the patterns of conduct," which leads to a loss in patterns of meaning. The mourner questions whether life has a meaning, especially in the case of a sudden and tragic death. Anger and rage combine to make the question a more pointed one. Jackson points out:

When a man or woman in full vigor is stricken, we cannot accept it as natural or well ordered...Our grief is made more poignant by a lack of understanding; it is made sharper by the fact that it was unexpected. It seems more cruel because when death is sudden or untimely it always finds us in the midst of plans and hopes and dreams that must now be forever unfulfilled.

In many tragic deaths, finding the meaning is not easy, and yet somehow we know that man can only live as Viktor Frankl has pointed out, by "Looking to the future, sub-specie, *aeternatis aeternitatis*." He can only live with the sense that things have fallen into some kind of meaningful pattern. Meaning is also lost because people establish patterns of conduct around the lives of others—a wife gets used to her husband calling at lunch time; or a husband gets used to a wife having dinner on the table. One gets accustomed to certain noises and movements associated with the dead partner, and these are now no longer into the ordered pattern of life. This loss of meaning and the very sudden adjustment of the pattern must be dealt with by the mourner if he is to pass through the mourning successfully.

All of these feelings must not only be recognized, but must be released. One of the great dangers is keeping a stiff upper lip, being overly poised, and thereby not coming to grips with these feelings, some of which are difficult for a person to face up to in our society. One does not wish to be on the verge of hallucinations in denying the death of someone; one does not enjoy being burdened with guilt. One feels uncomfortable with anger and rage directed against God or man, and one wants to find some kind of meaning and not to admit that there is no meaning; and so, their feelings must be gotten out. The literature in so many places has pointed out that such feelings must not be denied and no matter how they come pouring forth, they must be given that opportunity.

One last word about the needs of the grief-stricken, tied indeed, to a good deal that has just been said, and that is that there must be some hope for the future, that this is not the end. Freud has been quoted as saying:

Our conscious behavior...relates to the problem of death almost exactly as primitive man. In this respect, as many others, primitive man lives unchanged and unconscious. Our unconscious does not believe in its own death; it behaves as if it were immortal.

And here, too, the rabbi must meet an important need—the need that man feel that this cannot be the end, that in both the life of his beloved and in his own life, there is something beyond or indeed implicit in the death of anyone else, —his own mortality. This is often one of the most difficult things for many rabbis to do, and yet it is the very basic assumption of our calling that life is something beyond the processes that go on here on earth.

These are some of the things involved in the psychodynamics of mourning, and some in which the eulogy can be of great help to the mourner. I believe the eulogy

can and should be built to help meet these various needs which are both general in that they apply to most mourners, and specific in that each case experiences this individuality. As a teacher of mine at Seminary pointed out: "For you it may be funeral number 893; for them it is number one." Jackson points to this obliquely when he lists the things a funeral must do:

It must face the reality of death and (must) help free you from guilt and self-condemnation; it must help you express your feelings and direct you beyond the death of the loved one to the responsibilities of life. It must in a personal way help you to face a crisis with dignity and courage and provide an environment where loving friends and relatives can give you the help you need to face the future with strength and courage, and the funeral also gives testimony that there is a tomorrow; others have faced and lived through it with grief, and they point the way for you.

The part of the funeral that can most do this is the eulogy. It can be structured in such a way as to directly help the bereaved find significant comfort and to make a beginning of grief work.

Morris Y. went into the hospital for minor surgery. I received a call the next day that he had died on the operating table. He had been a vice-president of the Synagogue, quite active, a small, wiry, very healthy young man who everyone thought would live to be a very old age. His wife was shocked, as were all who knew him. She went through almost all of the stages of mourning. She experienced real hostility and anger about which she felt quite guilty and had to be assured again and again that the rabbi did not blame her for her anger; that he understood that she would be angry with everyone including God himself. She had been deeply dependent on her husband during the thirteen years of their marriage. During that time, they had grown closer and closer in a very affectionate way. She tended strongly to deny his death and indeed, any time she heard the sound of a truck near the window, she would open the curtain, expecting to see him at the wheel. She refused utterly to remove any of his clothing, and brought herself only with great difficulty to dispose of some of those things--his tools and other effects--which represented him to her. She had some guilt feelings toward her husband, mingled with anger. The guilt was transferred onto others and she would say, "I didn't drive him the way the other women drive their husbands. I never asked for what they all asked of their husbands." And she would come back to that theme again and again. "What do they want from their husbands; don't they realize how lucky they are; why do they push them so hard?"

And yet, she was terribly embarrassed to admit that she was a bit angry also with her husband for leaving her. "Rabbi, I guess it's all right that I'm sometimes angry with Morris"--and she shared her children's feeling when they questioned why he died so suddenly--"We could have arranged one day when we would have treated him like a king." Or she would ask me again and again, "You know I always loved him, didn't you, Rabbi? And he was always sure of my love. He told you that, didn't he?" The anger that went along with the guilt was directed in fairly healthy ways though she was a bit uncomfortable with it. She would question why she had this bitterness toward others and whether she was always going to have it. Was it all right to be angry with her husband? Why was she so bitter toward the doctor who operated and toward other women who didn't appreciate their husbands?

Morris had always prided himself on being a European husband who made all of the important decisions in the home. She had focused her life around him and in over-solicitous care of their children. Suddenly having him dead tore this pattern apart and took a great portion of the meaning out of her life. The one reality that she turned to again and again to restore some meaning was the children. "If I didn't have the children, I don't know what I'd do."

Though she grasped at this, she still had a sense of great emptiness about any meaning in life, especially with the sudden death. She searched first for an answer from the doctors on why it had happened; there was none; the loss of meaning was more poignant, since during the last few years they had grown closer, understanding each other more and more, and as she put it, "Morris himself had really achieved a certain degree of equanimity these last two years. He used to tell me that he now knows what it was he wanted in life, and now this had to happen" Among the problems that the eulogy had to face was that a life so suddenly cut off at its peak still had a meaning.

In this situation, I knew the deceased well; yet in most situations the same can be done. Sometimes careful listening to what the family has to say can point the way for us to give specific validation to these general needs. Even when one comes in "cold", one can assume that the overwhelming majority of these needs must be handled, and that handling them, and understanding the guilt and rage and the other factors involved, would be the preferred way to help the family, rather than using or weaving a framework out of a text.

In this eulogy, the beginning dealt with the reality and the suddenness of the death by not mincing words as to what had happened, but indicating that he who was so alive was now just so dead; that he was dead and that he would not be back. This

was experienced with great shock by all of those assembled, including the rabbi, who was a friend of his, and if the rabbi could express his own broken-heartedness, it might be permissible for others to express their feelings. The guilt was dealt with by pointing out to the widow that all that he had become would have been impossible without her love and affection; that indeed, their relationship and how much they meant to each other, and what she gave him, was something he could have found nowhere else. The attempt was made also to give some meaning to this and to discern a meaningful pattern in his life, and indeed it was phrased just in that way: "To give some meaning to the years that you sheared". The pattern that dominated was the pattern of growth. This young man who had little in the way of a propitious background, had accomplished a great deal and had grown all along the way. The institution from which he was being buried-the Synagogue-had been the format for that growth, and the people who were there for the funeral in droves had all been touched by his life. His life had not just passed through this world meaninglessly--there was indeed a pattern of growth and significance to it. One also had the obligation to point out that there was a pattern of meaning that had to be picked up now; a pattern to which the wife was going to respond-and that was, of course, the children. This had to be done obliquely because there was another child involved from a previous marriage who was a source of some embarrassment in this situation. The very fact that so many had come to the funeral, so many were able to cry, was not unimportant. The inclusion in the eulogy of a personal mention by one person who would never have come to the widow's mind as being a mourner-the maintenance man at the Synagogue-helped to comfort and sustain her and made her sensitive to some of the meaning in her husband's life. The maintenance man had depended on her husband and considered him to be an indispensable part of the Synagogue life. I also wanted to touch on the eternal, and this was done by picking up a reference that the deceased had made to a prayer that he had not said since wartime, one that is used in Judaism as the confessional.

By using that allusion and indicating that we prayed that the God of Israel walks with him today was a recognition of one of the basic needs we all have. We want to know that our life does not just end with the grave. It is not always easy for clergymen who have a liberal bent in religion to affirm with the same simplistic faith what generations before have affirmed, but some reference to it must be made, and it can be said in good conscience and in a way that is helpful to the bereaved.

## THE EULOGY

Morris was so young, so vigorous, so full of the future, and now he's dead. He had plans and hopes, and now they are not to be, for his life was cut short so suddenly and so meaninglessly. How shall we speak today of a sorrow beyond words? Yet speak we must, though the words be but a pale reflection of the reality that was his life, and the depth of our sorrow.

I was his rabbi. More than that, he and I were friends. It was a friendship that grew over the years. He built the house my wife and I lived in, and if it was once, it was a hundred times that he was there to check something, fix something or add something, and share a cup of coffee and some conversation with us. We used to sit on Friday evenings in my study or stand in the night air when it was warm, and talk of all those things friends talk of. We talked of our families and friends, our jobs and frustrations, of the Synagogue, its people, its problems and its prospects; we talked of little things and big ones; we talked of all the things that make a friendship. There was in our relationship a clarity and an honesty that makes friends of people. He got to know me and I got to know him; he taught me and I taught him. Our paths crossed in a thousand ways these past seven years-and now he is gone. What shall I say, more than that I am brokenhearted.

He loved this Synagogue and he gave to it unstintingly. He gave of himself and his resources. This pulpit, the one there which the cantor uses, the ark behind us-are all the work of his hands. You could always call on Morris to bring, to fix, to set up and to do, all with no fuss and a genuine cheerfulness. We can count on the fingers of our hands the times he was not here on a Friday night these past seven years. We can count on the fingers of our hands the times the Kiddush cup was not filled by him, the Synagogue not opened and closed by him, a mourner not escorted into the service by him. He touched the lives of many of you here this day. He called you to see if you had a High Holyday ticket, and he made sure that there was a place for you to sit when you came here. He called asking you to do the Mitzvah of making a minyan at a house of mourning. It will indeed seem strange this coming week not having Morris organize and guarantee that the minyan and prayerbooks will be there. He met with those of you who had young people preparing for Bar Mitzvah, explaining before the Bar Mitzvah what had to be done and what you could expect. He gave of his own money; he sold raffle tickets, whatever there was in the Synagogue that needed doing-Morris could be turned to, to help do it. It might be the planting of the front lawn or in the last note that was in his box, getting Molly some bolts for the Memorial Board. Things big or little, all of these he did without complaining, with cheerfulness and without the need of great recognition, for as he used to say, he got his wages in other ways. It

was as if he had taken as his life's motto the words of Rabbi Tarfon, who used to say:

The day is short and there is much work to be done. The laborers are sluggish, the reward is great, and the Master is insistent. You are not obliged to complete the task, but neither are you free to desist from it.

Indeed, his day was too short, but he did much with it and it is our task to complete the work. In this Synagogue he will be missed. His place will not be easily filled.

And it must be said that this Synagogue did something for him. It gave him something unique and he knew it and treasured it. It helped him to grow and to realize so much of the man that he was. He became Ritual Chairman almost by mistake and he would be the first to tell you that he knew nothing of ritual when he started. What he did have was a truck that could be used to move chairs at a time when we were at the Masonic Temple and needed chairs moved, and so he would tell you he was chosen. Had you told him that he would one day be a pillar of the Synagogue, he would have chuckled; and yet he was to become that. He grew into the role. He developed tact and confidence, the ability to overcome his innate nervousness and to speak before the Board and others-and gradually he had the awareness that something indeed had happened to him, and that this congregation had grown to love and respect him. He and I spoke of it just two weeks ago in one of our Friday evening chats. He told me of the wages he got from all his work here and what it meant to be an officer and a vice-president of the congregation. He spoke of his happiness and how he sensed that people felt positive and good towards him, and how much this meant to him. It meant a great deal to him. And it didn't happen in a day; but it did happen; and it happened here. In recent months-just in the last few weeks-he was moving into new areas, concerned with the congregation's future and trying to guarantee that future. For him indeed, this was Beth El, the House of God, in the most meaningful sense; for here the Almighty helped him discover the person within, the Morris we came to cherish.

The boy who came from Austria bore the name of Israel, and like his namesake of biblical times, he was destined to struggle and to be scared, but like him, he was destined to grow. Perhaps the great pattern of his life was the pattern of growth. He grew, he was defeated, but he dusted off his pants and got up and plunged ahead to more growth. Circumstance dictated that his education be limited, but he became a voracious reader. The bookshelf of his home is packed with books which he had read-history was a favorite. Morris grew. In his personal and business life, when he was down, he got up and moved on. There was a

restlessness and a searching in him which did not guarantee that growth would be easy, but made it happen, and over the years he found himself. The boy who came from Austria grew over the years into a man-a man of whom one might say, in the words of Shakespeare:

...the elements so mixed in him, that nature might stand up and say to all the world-This was a man.

His life was cut short just when things were best. Part of our great pain is that this growth was so suddenly and abruptly stopped, just when it seemed in fullest bloom.

The pine hath a thousand years,  
The rose but a day  
But the pine with its thousand years  
Glories not o'er the rose with its day,  
If each but serves its purpose  
Ere it passes away.

Susan, I know what Morris meant to you. I know also what you and the children meant to him. We know that though we share your pain, there is no pain like yours, and we know of his concern and of his love for you. But I think you should know this-you gave a great deal to him. Your love and devotion were priceless to him. You gave him stability and understanding. Perhaps the greatest thing of all was the ever-growing sense of communication that was taking place between you and that bode so well for the future. A good marriage is one in which life gets better and fuller, and together, you and he were discovering that. That knowledge will not lessen your pain, but it will give meaning to the years you shared. We pray that you might be able to take up the strands that are left in a garment so abruptly torn, and weave them into a pattern of meaning.

I loved him and many of us here loved him. We want you to know that. Many have become aware of the myriad ways in which he touched their lives; and he touched many lives in many ways that we don't know. Many of us can only echo the words of Mr. Dave Greaves who said: "I have lost a good friend, for he was a man who cared."

I saw him at the hospital Thursday night. He was chipper and looking ahead, though underneath no doubt not a little nervous about the routine surgery. He told me that he had said the Shema the night before, for the first time since his Air

Force service. And I'm sure he said it Thursday night as well. I hope and pray that the God of Israel walks with him today, and that he will find a just reward for all that he was and some recompense for all that he might have been; and I pray that the God of Israel and all men-who is the Baal N'cahmot-may comfort us in our sorrow; help us to endure our pain and move on in testimony to all that was good in his life.

This eulogy is not an unusual or an outstanding one, but it does show how the eulogy can be a means of providing the framework for the grief work that must be done. That work is a major task for anyone who has suffered loss. To base the eulogy on a text and then weave it into something that fits the text more than the situation may be clever, but not helpful. The religious leader has a unique chance to bring the insights and meanings of his position and his knowledge to the task of comforting the mourner; that is, he can do it if he knows what the needs are and how he can build the eulogy to meet those needs.

The eulogy can be a vital tool. It is a public expression, one in which others concur by their very presence, and one which can provide a framework for dealing with the reality, as well as the guilt, anger, rage involved, and the ultimate meaning of life and death. It can be a source of hope and courage to the family and to the mourners who must go on. It is not a task that can be taken too lightly. It is not one that can only be learned in a homiletics course. What we need is a deeper understanding of the psychodynamics of mourning and how the eulogy can meet those needs to perform one of the most important jobs that we are called upon to do.

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