

THE ART OF GRIEF:

Utilizing journaling and art to cope
with and integrate our losses.

*8 Modules for facilitating
Bereavement Support Groups*

Written by:

Rev. Dn. N. Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ, OSL

In partnership with:

The Lighthouse Foundation of New Jersey

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Celebrating National Hospice Month 2008

THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 5:

“People Who Try to Help”

Introduction to Module:

Throughout the process of grief, people all about us try to help. It is a natural response that people have as they connect with us because of the pain they see or assume that we are experiencing. It begins long before the death itself – when the death is known of in advance. People begin the support process as soon as a loved one is diagnosed with a terminal illness.

There are many stages or phases to the grief process that occurs for us before, during, and after loss. The stages and phases exist for us as we are losing someone or something, but they also exist for the people who come to offer support.

People who offer support are doing so out of their own connection to loss and grief. Some of the people will be helpful because they have processed their own grief and loss to a greater extent than others – who will be less helpful. Because the two processes are not running on the same time table, it gets very complicated.

Some things that people do or say will feel appropriate to them because they fit in with where they are at in processing their grief. But those things will feel or seem horrendous to us or the person who is currently in the midst of the loss. They will not match up to

the experience of the one who is sitting in the middle of a fresh loss.

This dissonance is sometimes harsh and painful for people. One of the best ways for people to begin to move beyond the dissonance and get back to healing amid grief is for them to acknowledge to themselves the things people have done or said. They should also acknowledge how this has hurt.

Having a group to acknowledge these hurts in is vital and can help the griever to understand that not everyone will say the wrong thing. People in the support group will be more likely to understand what they are feeling most immediately.

People in the group will also be at different places in the process, but they will more readily understand how seemingly meaningful gestures can hurt. An image that may help is the image of two gears turning. When they are in sync with one another, the gears interlock and move toward their intended goal. But, when they do not fit, they cannot work toward one end.

“Don’t Forget” Checklist:

- _____ A box of tissues
- _____ Email or call everyone to remind them of meeting and to bring think about people who have tried to help them throughout this process
- _____ To have one sure way of getting in touch with every member in case of cancellations
- _____ Have plenty of paper, pens, pencils, journals and art supplies on hand (markers, paints, crayons, poster paper, brushes, finger paints)
- _____ A Post-It type flipchart and markers

- _____ Handouts of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Posters of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Handouts of local and national grief resources
- _____ Folders or binders for people to collect items in
- _____ Soft, “wordless”, relaxation music and CD player
- _____ Candle and matches
- _____ A referral list for yourself to make referrals when peoples’ grief becomes complicated or dangerous
- _____ Buy a copy of: Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief by, Martha W. Hickman (and have copies available for the members, too)
- _____ Choose a poem, song or ritual that you will use for your closing of each session. You must close with the same closing every week throughout the sessions.
- _____ Assign time frames to the agenda

Closing Activity, Reading or Song:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There is no text or other markings on the paper.

THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 5

AGENDA OUTLINE:

- Welcome and Introduction of all members– play music softly in background until the meeting actually begins
- Ice Breaker –**PIECE OF THE PUZZLE:** Facilitator should cut a puzzle out of poster paper ahead of time. (There should be one piece for each member of the group.) Have participants decorate their piece to represent who they are and what they feel they can contribute to the group. Once participants are done, have them share what they have on their piece. Participants should then assemble the puzzle. Facilitator should initiate a discussion on the power of everyone coming together, how much more of an impact a put together puzzle can have, than separate pieces, and how a final product could not be reached without a contribution from every piece of the puzzle. It would be good to find a nice healing poster of a natural scene or some people doing a great deed of kindness.
- Reading from Healing After Loss
LIGHT CANDLE
This book will provide educational data and an organizing point for the group grieving process. It is important to read it twice, once now, and then again

toward the end of the session. It is best to just read the selection that is set aside for the date you are meeting, but you certainly can choose another to read. You should either purchase one for each group member or have them purchase one themselves. This is a vital tool.

- Discussion about “Contracts”

Let people know that it is important to discuss why everyone is here and what is expected for people to gain from these sessions. There are purposes, goals, and rules to how a group should run. Remind them that there are “agency purposes, goals, and rules” for this and “individual purposes, goals, and rules” for this. Start out the discussion by stating the agency goals (listed below on the handouts). List them on “Post-it Flipchart” paper and hang them up. Add to these (in a different color) items listed by the group members themselves.

- Discussion about “People Who Try To Help”

Go around the circle and ask people to share people who have tried to help them throughout their loss. Remind them it is ok to share about people who have actually helped and people who have meant well but did not help.

It will be important to bring in the notion that the dissonance comes from the varied experience people have had with life and loss and the varied ability people have in processing life and loss. Some people will open to the pain of loss and some will close to it. This, plus

individuals' varied life experiences will create harmony or dissonance. The "gears" image above may help.

People are allowed to pass if they are not able to share.

- **Journaling/Art Time**

Now it is time for them to journal about the people who have tried to help. They can do this however they wish. They may want to write out a list of all those who have offered help and then next to the names list out how they have tried to help and whether that was helpful or not. Or they may just wish to list out all of the helpful things and all of the non-helpful things people have offered as assistance. Be sure that people also write out what it is that they need that would be helpful for people to offer or say. When you are finished, ask them to do a quick sketch with markers of what it feels like when someone says the absolute wrong thing; and then, what it feels like when someone offers healing comfort.

Leave your qualifiers for the project vague like they are listed above so that people have the freedom to interpret and create in whatever direction they are able or led to go. Tell them that it is their impression of what they think the assignment is that is most important. They should create based on what comes to mind when they hear what the assignment is.

- **Sharing our "Creations"**

Go around the room and share the creations with the group. Allow people to elaborate or remain vague based on their desires and capabilities at the moment.

Remind them they may pass if they do not wish or are not able to share.

- Reading from Healing After Loss

Reread the earlier selection.

- Closing – *Extinguish Candle after Closing*

Use the closing of your choice – use it every week.

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This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

THE ART OF GRIEF

WEEKLY TOOLBOX

Ideas, Links, Activities, and Readings for Group Members

- Check out <http://newpathcenter.blogspot.com/2007/10/what-helped-us-in-our-grief.html> and see how this family listed out what really helped them.
- Check out how this site talks about grief and the process <http://www.babycenter.com.au/pregnancy/griefandloss/understandinggrief/>
- Check out these suggestions for what is most helpful for grievers to receive from people and when people ask what they can do, perhaps offer one of these ideas http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/412659/7_ways_to_help_people_with_their_grief.html
- Spend time with your journal this week writing about ways people have tried to help that have hurt or backfired. Then counter these experiences with examples of people who have offered help that have truly helped.
- Write about the notion of other peoples' suffering that comes from them watching you suffer with this loss.

THE ART OF GRIEF

PURPOSE:

- The purpose of our group is to give everyone a safe and neutral space in which to allow their feelings of grief and loss to come out.
- It is also our purpose to connect with other individuals who have experienced deep loss so we can feel normal and connected to people who do understand.
- It is also our purpose that we will be available to help people resolve and solve issues when they are ready and ask for help.
- It is also our purpose to allow people to try new forms of expression. These forms include (but are not limited to) painting, journaling, sketching, drawing, sculpting, montaging, writing poetry/story/song, and performing.

GOALS:

- To enable people to express what is going on inside
- To enable people to feel they are being heard
- To enable people to create
- To enable people to heal amid their grief and loss
- To provide a routine and safe environment for mourners

RULES:

- We begin and end on time
- One person speaks at a time
- We do not try to solve anyone's issues unless asked
- We do not monopolize a conversation or session
- We are allowed to pass in discussions if we are not able to share

On the Journey

By Father Deacon Thomas Johnson-Medland
Morrisville, Pennsylvania

When I went into Ted's room I knew what to expect. The social worker and I had been talking about his case in light of some new developments, and we both felt confident that Ted had begun the journey — his final journey in his body.

It had been only an hour before that we had received the message that Ted was not doing well. He had become severely weak, listless and was fading in and out of consciousness. At one point he had sprung up in his bed and proclaimed, "They have taken my car and my clothes." That was the tell. That small statement opened us to the fact that Ted had begun the journey. He was looking for a way to leave.

In hospice work, it is often the small signs that give us the most clear directions. When our patients begin to withdraw into themselves and begin to use the language of birth or traveling, we know they are getting ready to depart.

Many people say, "He is not making sense anymore," or, "She is talking to people who are not here." What some caregivers do not know is that the patient is making total sense and they are talking to people who are there. The sense they are making; however, belongs to their own singular journey. They are making sense, but it is from within the framework of their own lives — their own past, present and future — not ours.

In the process of dying, a person begins integrating all of his



life into a short span of time. In crisis deaths, we talk about watching our lives pass before our eyes. Well, yes that does happen, and it happens in slower deaths as well. Life passes before the eyes of the dying. The dying try to make sense out of all they have experienced and try to make peace with those experiences. Actually, we all are trying to do this.

The mind plays back all the tapes of past experience (as well as present experiences), in order to resolve all that it has been through. The mind is trying to bring some unity to a life lived. What onlookers see and hear from their position, is a person making peace with their whole lifetime. What we see is the mind making some closure for itself.

In death, the life of a person is going to be transformed. It is as if all of life has to be drawn back in, compressed and pushed together, so the person may squeeze through the passage into death — so the person can make the journey. These moments of isolated incidents that we experience as the "person being out of sorts," are really moments when the patient — through the full capacity of his mind — is re-collecting his life and trying to sort through it to bring closure and resolution.

Later that day, Ted was able to tell me that he "needed her to go and get the coupons." Everyone in the family was sure he was talking about the bank deposit slips, and

they instantly began scurrying about looking for them. However, I knew he meant *tickets*. He was going on a journey, and he needed a ticket. There was no need for him to make any financial deposits at the time. He was speaking from the inner world of feeling, and metaphor. It is a world we often speak from when we do not hold so tightly to the filtering and controlling mechanisms in our minds. The old "Freudian slip" is an example of information sneaking past our inner toll booths.

I was able to pick up on the communication he was giving because I recognized the sound of an uncontrolled response. I am around them all the time. Most families are not prepared, or because of the grief, they are unable to hear the inner messages given by their loved ones. It is a difficult time. In most cases, it only takes reminiscing with the family: "He is going on a journey," for them to become aware of the content of the inner messages.

Ted asked me if I had change. He could "not make the change" that he "needed for the thing." Normally, people would have said he was hallucinating. He was making a journey, a great change, and did not feel he had what it took to get through the turnstile to buy a ticket. I told him that I knew the change was difficult, but that he had done a lot of work to prepare him for it, and I thought it looked as if he were ready.

Before I left, I told him, he should go when he was ready to go. I told him his family had plenty of support and they would make it. He needed to go on his journey when he was ready.

He said, "She is here to take me home now."

As I was leaving, I told the family what he had said and prepared them for the fact that he was getting ready to leave. He was going on a journey. Two days later, Ted died. He made the journey. Took the trip.

Generally, this kind of perception for the worker is only opened after years of working with, listening to, and feeling amidst the lives of people "on the edge" — people in a position of change and transition. The phrases that seem to come from nowhere are really belches from the deep self that are there to help those who are being attentive. Sometimes, the patient is able to hear these cryptic and laconic phrases, and understand them for what they are. Most often, the deciphering of these messages requires the assistance of a trained "midwife of the soul" ... a birther of the inner world, someone who has seen these things, heard these things, and felt these things before.

This is the role of the pastoral caregiver in the work of death and dying — of any soul work. The pastor must work with the stories of each individual's life, and retell them in such a way as to provide the distance necessary for the patient to understand the ebb and flow of their own tale. This gift comes from working with the stories again and again.

I had met with Ralph six times in the two weeks before he died.

He had been unable to speak more than a short sentence at a time during those meetings. As his health left him and he turned more into himself, he began to widen his eyes and focus on things just over my shoulder — things I could not perceive. I asked him what he saw. He answered, "whatever!" I knew the sightings were important for him, as he began to reach for them, first with one clasp hand, and then with two. I knew Ralph was beginning to experience the arrival of heralds. Something was coming to help him get on the path. As he reached and smiled and then reached some more, I knew I would not see him again. Ralph died that night.

"Before I left, I told him, he should go when he was ready to go. I told him his family had plenty of support and they would make it. He needed to go on his journey when he was ready."

I come to expect these experiences. I know that if I am present at the end stage of my patient's lives, I will be present at these glorious and sacred mysteries. I see my role as comforting the patient with words of assurance — "that these experiences are normal and a part of dying" — and helping the families recognize that what is happening to their loved ones is not so much about them, but about

the patient's need to get ready for the journey that they will take by themselves (that is, without the family). This is normal. This is necessary.

Often, if I feel the patient is approaching end stage, I will share such stories with the family, to help them recognize the end and affirm its normalcy. Many people believe the dying person is losing his mind when these things happen, but I like to think they are not so much losing their minds, as experiencing the *transformation* of their minds. Transformation of the mind, includes the re-equipping of the mind with the ability to perceive the spiritual; something that is all but buried in our "contemporary, living world."

It takes practice to not misinterpret the rather simple communications our patients make prior to these experiences of transition. We can easily become too zealous to witness the awesome mysteries of transition, and hear wrongly what is being said.

All in all though, listening to what our patients tell us, and believing it, is the basis for any pastoring we do. As we are more and more in the midst of the process of dying, the process itself will teach us how to interpret what is being said, how to believe it. We will make mistakes, and we must learn to exist within a mercy that allows for missing things, or being too late to understand. In the greater continuum, if we are there to hold the hands of those that are dying, we will gain a feel for the process that is unfolding. This will become our heart.



THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 6:

“What Has Been My Strength”

Introduction to Module:

Throughout our lives we have several pillars which support us. We tend to gain our strength from the same areas. This is true for the short run and for the long haul.

If you think about ways in which you daily gain strength, there is a good chance that these things give you sustenance through major periods of your life. Maybe it is reading, or walking, or shopping or friends. Whatever you use to connect to feelings of stability, strength and wellbeing on a day to day basis is being hardwired into your life over time.

As we approach the notion of what gives us strength during the grieving and loss process, it will be important to remember that the person we have lost will somehow figure into our strength. Whether it is through activities that we did only with this person, or qualities that strengthen us that are characteristics of this person, or similar hopes we have shared with this person.

We need to honor these connections and we also need to look at how we have gotten through things in the past and how we may have replicated those same things in this critical juncture. There will be occasional outliers in terms of new things that people have learned to do during this particular phase of life/ But, for the most

part, things that have helped us to gain strength in the past will be the same things that help us to gain strength in the present.

Often, while our loved ones are still with us, we may have been encouraged to look at photo albums together to cope with the pain of the illness. Even when we are not facing great pain and suffering, we tend to feel a sense of inner strength from remembering how complex and expansive our lives have really been.

Part of the reason we can gain insight and strength from reviewing photos and where we have been is that as powerful as the mind is, it tends to only remember what is before it at the moment. So, bringing out things that can help us to recall where we have been through our lives can be powerful.

Think about reunions with folks you have not seen for decades. The stories (both good and bad) tend to open us up and feel as if we are larger than just this moment now in our life. We are reminded of all of the depth we have; of all that is in us that has helped make us who we are.

This kind of review builds strength. People that journal regularly or paint or have some type of artistic expression gain this same sense of inner development when they review their creations.

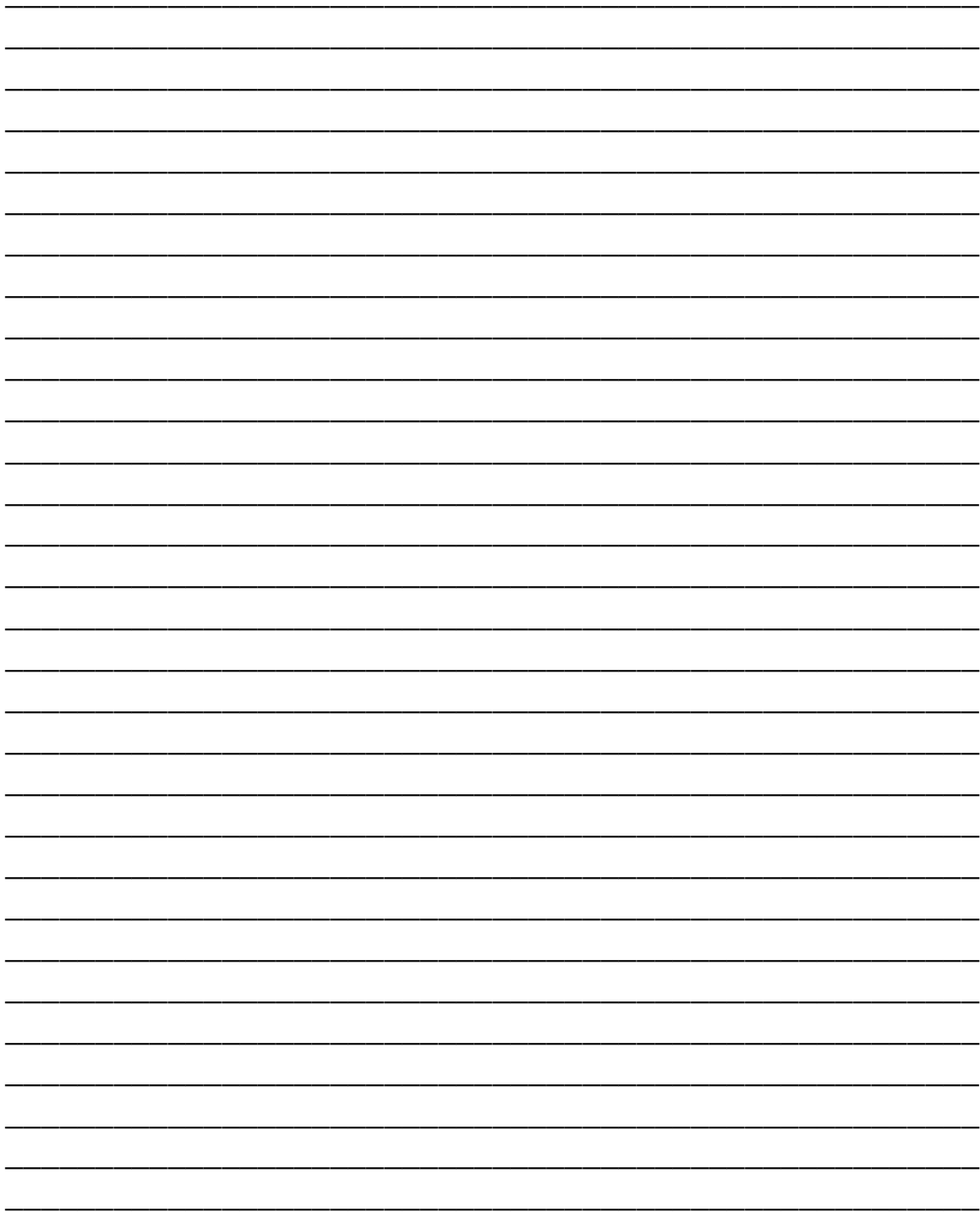
It will be important to bring this notion up so that the participants will make the connection that the work they have done here will enter into the landscape of their lives. It will be a source of encouragement at some later point in life.

This is also a large reason why people collect and place material objects all around them. The objects connect them to people, places, or times that gave them inner strength. Being around these objects bolsters people up.

“Don’t Forget” Checklist:

- _____ A box of tissues
- _____ Email or call everyone to remind them of meeting and to bring think about people who have tried to help them throughout this process
- _____ To have one sure way of getting in touch with every member in case of cancellations
- _____ Have plenty of paper, pens, pencils, journals and art supplies on hand (markers, paints, crayons, poster paper, brushes, finger paints)
- _____ A Post-It type flipchart and markers
- _____ Handouts of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Posters of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Handouts of local and national grief resources
- _____ Folders or binders for people to collect items in
- _____ Soft, “wordless”, relaxation music and CD player
- _____ Candle and matches
- _____ A referral list for yourself to make referrals when peoples’ grief becomes complicated or dangerous
- _____ Buy a copy of: Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief by, Martha W. Hickman (and have copies available for the members, too)
- _____ Choose a poem, song or ritual that you will use for your closing of each session. You must close with the same closing every week throughout the sessions.
- _____ Assign time frames to the agenda

Closing Activity, Reading or Song:



THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 6

AGENDA OUTLINE:

- Welcome and Introduction of all members— play music softly in background until the meeting actually begins
- Ice Breaker - **WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW:** Tape a blank piece of paper (poster board - kind of like a billboard over the person's head) on everyone's back. The members are to write a compliment or positive comment on everyone's back. At the end of the session, explain that a lot of times we tend to give compliments behind someone's back and it is not very often that we actually say these things to people's faces. We sometimes take for granted the positive aspects of others. If you wish, you may also explain that criticisms often are given behind other's backs as well, and that it may be more effective if they go to the person, instead of others. Have the group members pair up with someone they would like to get to know better and remove the paper from each other's backs. They should then explain to that person why they would like to get to know him/her better.
- Reading from Healing After Loss
LIGHT CANDLE
This book will provide educational data and an organizing point for the group grieving process. It is

important to read it twice, once now, and then again toward the end of the session. It is best to just read the selection that is set aside for the date you are meeting, but you certainly can choose another to read. You should either purchase one for each group member or have them purchase one themselves. This is a vital tool.

- Discussion about “Contracts”

Let people know that it is important to discuss why everyone is here and what is expected for people to gain from these sessions. There are purposes, goals, and rules to how a group should run. Remind them that there are “agency purposes, goals, and rules” for this and “individual purposes, goals, and rules” for this. Start out the discussion by stating the agency goals (listed below on the handouts). List them on “Post-it Flipchart” paper and hang them up. Add to these (in a different color) items listed by the group members themselves.

- Discussion about “What Has Been My Strength”

Go around the circle and ask people to share what things have given them strength throughout their lives. What have been the things that they have done that gave them a sense of stability, wellbeing and personal power/growth. These should be things that they know that they have drawn on throughout their lives in both difficult and easy times.

Now ask them what things have given them strength in this time of grief and loss. How have they drawn the

power and energy they need to live every day, to heal amid loss, to get through this critical part of their life's journey? There should also be some time spent discussing what strength is and how it manifests in peoples' lives.

People are allowed to pass if they are not able to share.

- **Journaling/Art Time**

Now it is time for them to journal about the ways they have found strength. It will be vital for them to start out with things that have been there all along – journal about ways they have found strength throughout their lives. Not just today, but first write out all the ways they have found power in their lives from when they were young, up until before this loss entered their life.

Once they have addressed that, have them go on to how they have found strength during this leg of the journey. Be sure they include specific things that have helped them feel grounded and like they are mending.

When they are finished journaling this out, have them sketch, using whatever medium they would like (either in their journal or on separate paper) what they look like as a strong, energy filled and powerful, stable person. They may include any of the things that give them strength in the piece or they may simply design it to be what they look like as a strong individual.

Leave your qualifiers for the project vague like they are listed above so that people have the freedom to interpret and create in whatever direction they are able or led to go. Tell them that it is their impression of what they

think the assignment is that is most important. They should create based on what comes to mind when they hear what the assignment is.

- Sharing our “Creations”

Go around the room and share the creations with the group. Allow people to elaborate or remain vague based on their desires and capabilities at the moment. Remind them they may pass if they do not wish or are not able to share.

- Reading from Healing After Loss

Reread the earlier selection.

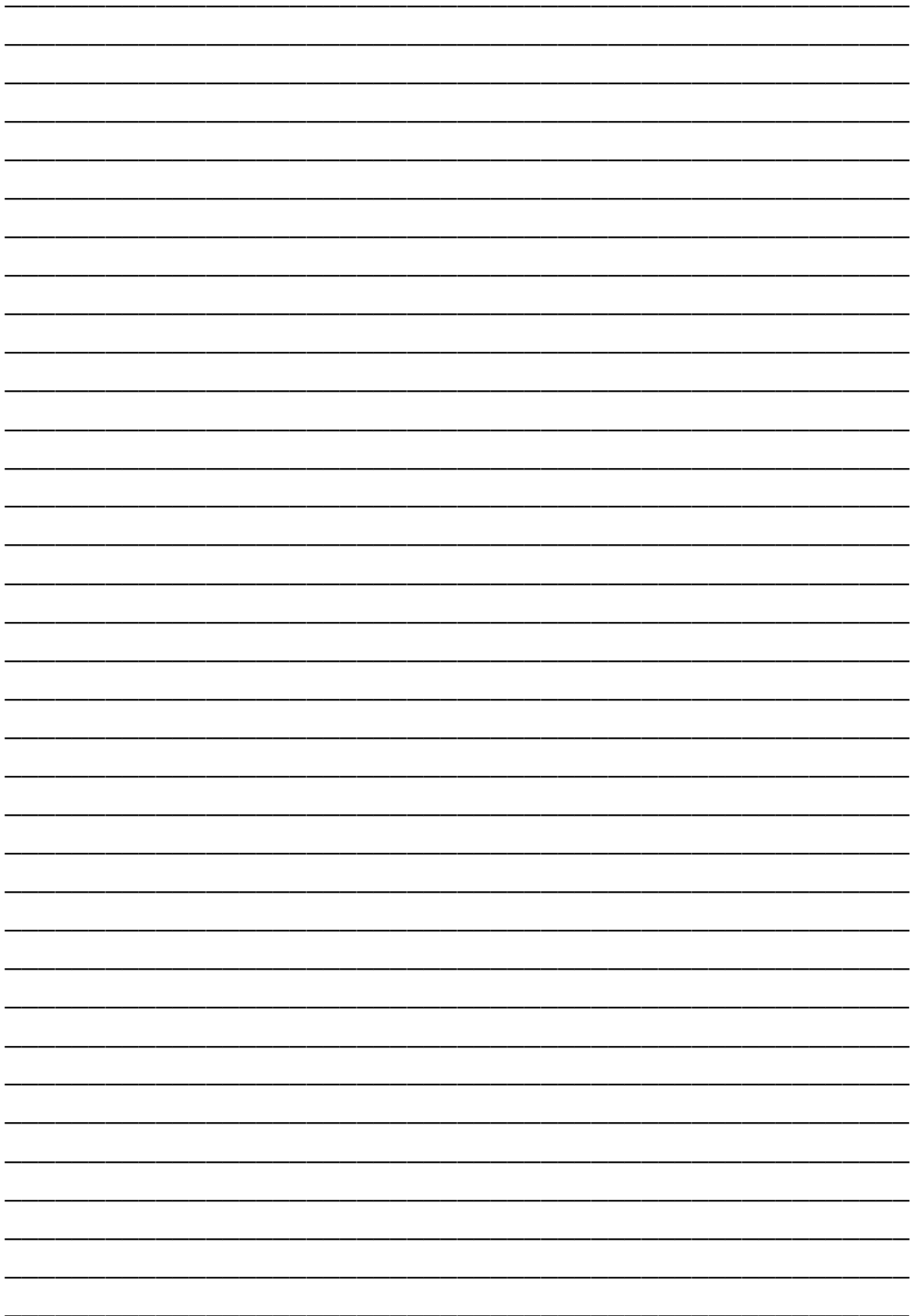
- Closing – *Extinguish Candle after Closing*

Use the closing of your choice – use it every week.

[illegible]

Before you can lead others with this discussion, you should write out your own experience – THIS IS NOT TO SHARE, just for you to experience the exercise:

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.



THE ART OF GRIEF

WEEKLY TOOLBOX

Ideas, Links, Activities, and Readings for Group Members

- Check out some of the notions and ideas in this collection on how we create meaning in our lives via our mind and its thought power:
http://www.successconsciousness.com/free_ebooks/mind-your-mind.pdf
- Google INNER STRENGTH and see what comes up. What sorts of things are associated with inner strength from other peoples' perspectives and create a list of those things found.
- Create a list of qualities of inner strength that come to mind when you consider the lives of other people all around you/ These may be people you know or people you admire because of their work, or writings, or beliefs.
- Who do you consider to be STRONG. Make a collage of their photos that you print out or copy. This may be family members or great people from history. But, place this collage of STRONG PEOPLE in a place that will give you hope and courage throughout the day.

THE ART OF GRIEF

PURPOSE:

- The purpose of our group is to give everyone a safe and neutral space in which to allow their feelings of grief and loss to come out.
- It is also our purpose to connect with other individuals who have experienced deep loss so we can feel normal and connected to people who do understand.
- It is also our purpose that we will be available to help people resolve and solve issues when they are ready and ask for help.
- It is also our purpose to allow people to try new forms of expression. These forms include (but are not limited to) painting, journaling, sketching, drawing, sculpting, montaging, writing poetry/story/song, and performing.

GOALS:

- To enable people to express what is going on inside
- To enable people to feel they are being heard
- To enable people to create
- To enable people to heal amid their grief and loss
- To provide a routine and safe environment for mourners

RULES:

- We begin and end on time
- One person speaks at a time
- We do not try to solve anyone's issues unless asked
- We do not monopolize a conversation or session
- We are allowed to pass in discussions if we are not able to share

Letting Go

By Tom Johnson-Medland
Morrisville, Pennsylvania

I was pleased to see all of the hard work she had done. She was actually at peace, calm, relaxed and gentle in her bed of dying. Just last week she was agitated and unable to focus, worried by dreams and impressions.

She gracefully reached out and draped her hand over mine. "It is so good to see you, Father."

"It is so good to see you, too, Harriet. You look so fresh and at ease. You must have been very busy this week," I said. "I have been."

Harriet is yet another hospice patient who has affirmed the power of letting go, forgiveness, and good hard work in trying to integrate and reconcile pain, anger and separation. She has shown me that we all carry baggage with us and, for all of us, moments will emerge when it becomes apparent that it is time to put the baggage down and move on; time to walk with no grasp, no care, no responsibility.

The week prior to this visit, Harriet was in mental distress and turmoil. She was having frightening dreams about her loved ones chasing her about and picking at her skin with their long, bony fingers. "They were scary. They looked like ghosts; like specters. And all of them were dead. They would not leave me alone."

We had spent some time that day talking about these haunting dreams. As time wore on, Harriet related that all of these "loved-ones" were not only dead, but they were all people with whom Harriet had some unfinished business.



They were all people who had snubbed her and ignored her after she had married. It became clearer and clearer to Harriet, as she spoke, that these relatives were visiting her for a reason. They were trying to tell her something. She insisted they were coming to her for forgiveness. They wanted to be set free from some kind of limbo. They were there for themselves.

I reflected to her, "That sounds plausible." I then asked if it were not possible that, "maybe they were picking at you to help you out of your situation. Maybe they are not here so much to get off the hook, as to let you off the hook. I mean, if they wanted to get off the hook themselves, couldn't they wait a few weeks to see you face-to-face to beg?"

She agreed.

"Is it possible, Harriet, that all of this agitation and picking you are feeling is attached to some anger, pain or abandonment you might be holding onto? Could those feelings be attached to the way your relatives treated you? Maybe they are picking at you to try and get you to say something – sort of picking something out of you? Or, maybe they are trapped in your heart and mind and are trying to get out." There was a long pause.

Harriet agreed there were things



she was holding onto concerning those relatives, and maybe that was why they were tormenting her. It had not occurred to her that her dream could be about helping her out of her own anguish.

I told her it was common for us to think about forgiveness in terms of letting other people free, but in fact it may be more about freeing up things in ourselves and improving the space we inhabit inside ourselves.

So often we view forgiveness and reconciliation as an outward flowing energy and gift: forgiveness flows out from us, to another person to heal them. But, in most cases, the strongest healing action of forgiveness is an inward flowing energy and gift.

Forgiveness allows us to let go of the pain, anger, humiliation and responsibility associated with the actions and responses of others. Forgiveness is not always about helping other people to be set free, or for them to receive grace and healing. Forgiveness is also about setting ourselves free from things we have held onto for too long.

This was the case for Harriet. I was reminded that each of us has a unique story we are writing through the living of our lives. If we can step back and look at all of the chapters at once, or from some

distance, we may get an understanding of some of the underlying currents and themes. In this case, Harriet was allowing herself to be pestered by her dead relatives so she could heal some inner wounds before she died. What a dream.

Harriet told me of the forgiveness she offered her relatives. "I closed my eyes and pictured each relative – one at a time. I told them how much they had hurt me. I told them they had been cruel. I told them I was not happy with what they did, nor did I think it reflected any kindness, but that I would forgive them so I could move on and become more loving.

I told them that I was not going to hold onto the pain and hurt and

anger anymore. I did not need it. If they wanted to accept this forgiveness, it was up to them. I put down the suitcase I had been holding and brushed off my hands. Then, I gave each of them a piece of fruit and asked them to try to be kind to me. I walked away. I felt so calm and clear. I felt like I had moved ahead and become free."

I could not believe the change in her appearance. Even as she told me the work she had done, she became lighter, freer. She was at ease.

Harriet died that week. She died peacefully, in her sleep. The day before she died, she dreamed of a beautiful walk on the beach. There were no pestering relatives, just miles of rhythmic pounding

waves, and the hypnotic serenity they bring – a freedom from carrying nothing.

I am continually amazed at the depth of the human spirit. Our lives are intricately woven, wired, and connected. It seems everything that happens in our lives is somehow a part of, or a step to, some other place in our lives. Amazing. Simply amazing.

I thank all of the hospice patients who have helped me feel this. They have helped me by all of their hard work. Thank you.



THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 7:

“How Do I Hear Them Now”

Introduction to Module:

It is very common, particularly right after the loss, for us to hear the individual that has died. Sometimes we audibly hear their voice, but more often we hear inside of us the things we would either expect to hear them say or wish we would hear them say if they were still alive.

At first this may seem like a curse to people. But, as time goes on, what people begin to recognize is this is a way of honoring the person and the connection they have had with who we are and what we do. It is also a way of reminding us that we are not really only ourselves alone. We are an amalgam or composite of the thousand and one experiences we have been through and amassed throughout our length of days on this planet.

We store everything that we have seen, touched, heard, smelled, and tasted inside of us for the duration of our days. The Buddhists call the place we collect this information in our “store consciousness”.

All of the things we store are like seeds. And, although we sometimes stumble on a memory stored in this consciousness by accident because something triggers its emergence, we also have the ability to choose which of these seeds we water and develop

into something more. Some seeds will also lie dormant and unwatered.

We may hear people when we pass a favorite bakery of theirs. Or, perhaps we hear them at the Thanksgiving table. We may see them when we go to their favorite park, or we may hear them when we do something of which we know they would disapprove.

The seeds of remembrance are really all around us. Immediately after the loss we are sitting down right in the middle of a pile of seeds. Everything brings their voice or sight to mind. We actually can literally see the person repeatedly because the seeds are so many.

As time passes we often long to have more experiences of the person than we actually do, feeling somehow that our loyalty is waning because we have less encounters. And, in the years well beyond the loss we actually learn to savor those moments that the seeds get watered, seeing them as a direct link to someone who has built a major portion of our lives.

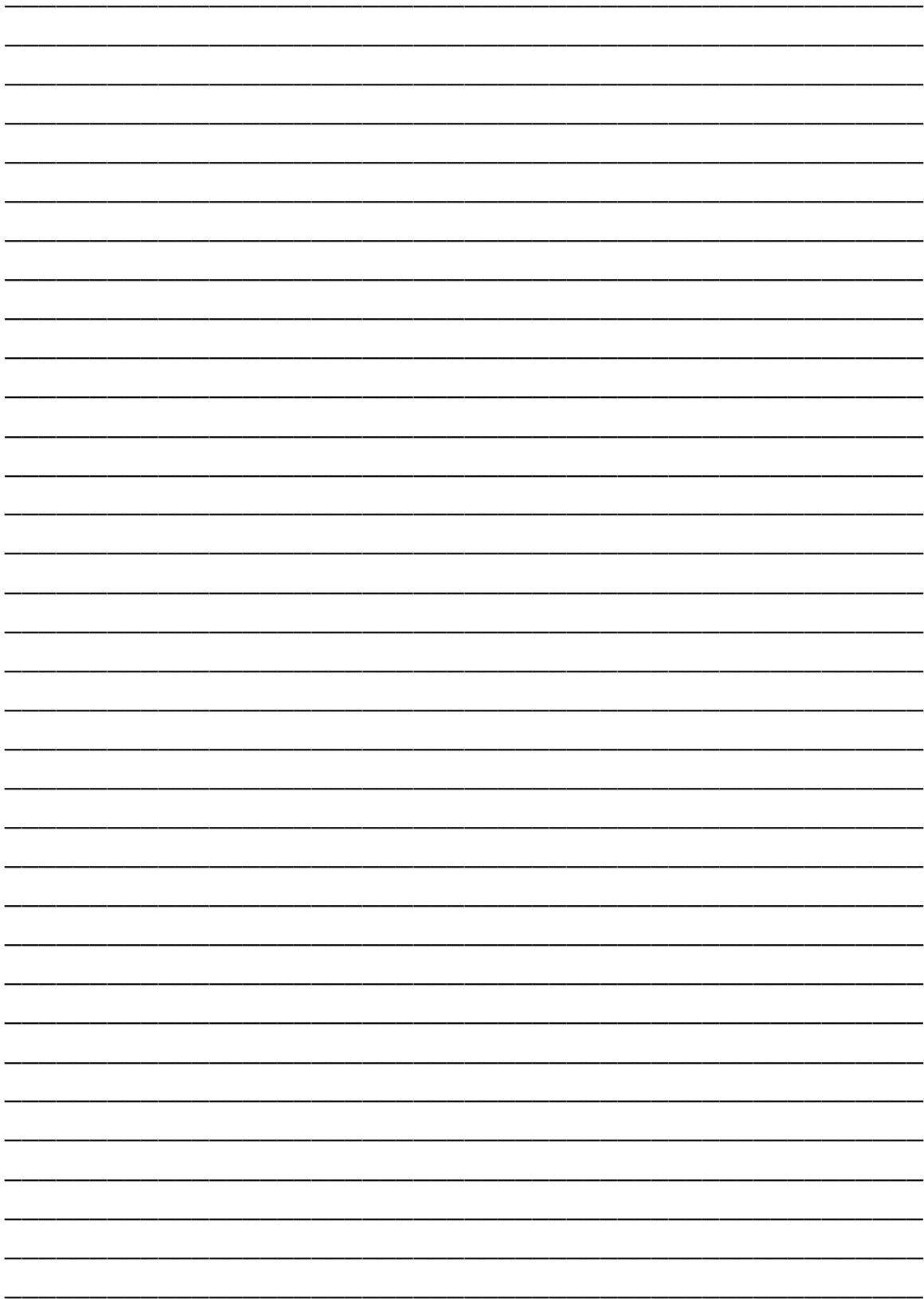
It will be vital in this session for folks to figure out how it is they are currently interacting with the one who has died. How are they hearing that person in their life today, when do they think of them, or wish they were around?

This is a chance for folks to actively think about going into their “store consciousness” and sort through the seeds they have there. They may actually wish to draw this out to give it more concreteness. They may also wish to sort out which ones they plan to water and invest with meaning by tending them to full growth.

“Don’t Forget” Checklist:

- _____ A box of tissues
- _____ Email or call everyone to remind them of meeting and to bring think about people who have tried to help them throughout this process
- _____ To have one sure way of getting in touch with every member in case of cancellations
- _____ Have plenty of paper, pens, pencils, journals and art supplies on hand (markers, paints, crayons, poster paper, brushes, finger paints)
- _____ A Post-It type flipchart and markers
- _____ Handouts of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Posters of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
- _____ Handouts of local and national grief resources
- _____ Folders or binders for people to collect items in
- _____ Soft, “wordless”, relaxation music and CD player
- _____ Candle and matches
- _____ A referral list for yourself to make referrals when peoples’ grief becomes complicated or dangerous
- _____ Buy a copy of: Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief by, Martha W. Hickman (and have copies available for the members, too)
- _____ Choose a poem, song or ritual that you will use for your closing of each session. You must close with the same closing every week throughout the sessions.
- _____ Assign time frames to the agenda

Closing Activity, Reading or Song:



THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 7

AGENDA OUTLINE:

- Welcome and Introduction of all members– play music softly in background until the meeting actually begins

- Ice Breaker

- Reading from Healing After Loss

LIGHT CANDLE

This book will provide educational data and an organizing point for the group grieving process. It is important to read it twice, once now, and then again toward the end of the session. It is best to just read the selection that is set aside for the date you are meeting, but you certainly can choose another to read. You should either purchase one for each group member or have them purchase one themselves. This is a vital tool.

- Discussion about “Contracts”

Let people know that it is important to discuss why everyone is here and what is expected for people to gain from these sessions. There are purposes, goals, and

rules to how a group should run. Remind them that there are “agency purposes, goals, and rules” for this and “individual purposes, goals, and rules” for this. Start out the discussion by stating the agency goals (listed below on the handouts). List them on “Post-it Flipchart” paper and hang them up. Add to these (in a different color) items listed by the group members themselves.

- Discussion about “People Who Try To Help”

Go around the circle and ask people to share about how they are connecting with their loved one at this time. Do they hear them at critical junctures, or see them in the landscape at the park? Do they hear their voice as they shop, or do they long for a connection while they plant the fall flowers?

The things they share do not need to be large events or experiences. Just a simple connection may be all they experience: like seeing them in the new grandbaby’s smile.

People are allowed to pass if they are not able to share.

- Journaling/Art Time

Now it is time for them to journal about how they have found connections. If it a reoccurring feeling of the person’s presence while they walk through the garden, then write about it. If it is hearing their insistence while shopping for a new dress, then write about it. Perhaps it is how they anticipate hearing or seeing their loved one at the upcoming Thanksgiving Dinner, then write

about it. As always, people may feel free to sketch paint or color their entry.

Leave your qualifiers for the project vague like they are listed above so that people have the freedom to interpret and create in whatever direction they are able or led to go. Tell them that it is their impression of what they think the assignment is that is most important. They should create based on what comes to mind when they hear what the assignment is.

- Sharing our “Creations”

Go around the room and share the creations with the group. Allow people to elaborate or remain vague based on their desires and capabilities at the moment. Remind them they may pass if they do not wish or are not able to share.

- Reading from Healing After Loss

Reread the earlier selection.

- Closing – *Extinguish Candle after Closing*

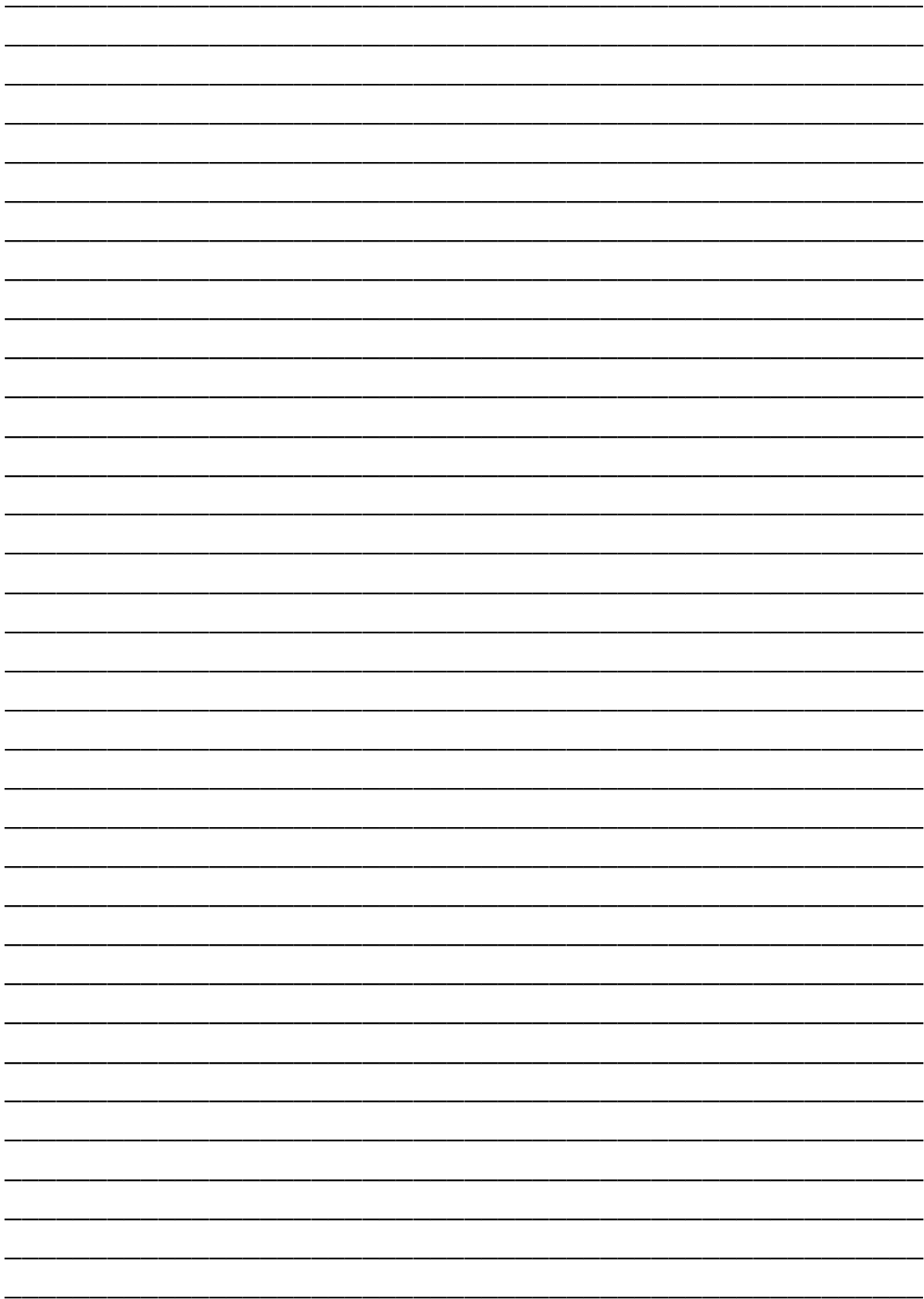
Use the closing of your choice – use it every week.

NOTES: _____

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Before you can lead others with this discussion, you should write out your own experience – **THIS IS NOT TO SHARE**, just for you to experience the exercise:

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THE ART OF GRIEF

WEEKLY TOOLBOX

Ideas, Links, Activities, and Readings for Group Members

- Read the simple understanding of store consciousness that Thich Nhat Hahn describes at:
http://www.explorefaith.org/tnh/tnh_pm.html
- Write about all of the seeds you would like to water that are in your store consciousness.
- Draw a garden and allow different sections of the garden to be various segments of your store consciousness: the patch in the back is my memories of childhood, in the front of my current life. Label some of the plants and flowers.
- Google store consciousness and read more about the ideas there.
- Write a list of all the things you would like to plant in your life and nurture to full growth: love, joy, patience, integrity, adventurousness, etc..

THE ART OF GRIEF

PURPOSE:

- The purpose of our group is to give everyone a safe and neutral space in which to allow their feelings of grief and loss to come out.
- It is also our purpose to connect with other individuals who have experienced deep loss so we can feel normal and connected to people who do understand.
- It is also our purpose that we will be available to help people resolve and solve issues when they are ready and ask for help.
- It is also our purpose to allow people to try new forms of expression. These forms include (but are not limited to) painting, journaling, sketching, drawing, sculpting, montaging, writing poetry/story/song, and performing.

GOALS:

- To enable people to express what is going on inside
- To enable people to feel they are being heard
- To enable people to create
- To enable people to heal amid their grief and loss
- To provide a routine and safe environment for mourners

RULES:

- We begin and end on time
- One person speaks at a time
- We do not try to solve anyone's issues unless asked
- We do not monopolize a conversation or session
- We are allowed to pass in discussions if we are not able to share

From the pulpit

The silent space

Father Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ

Often in our lives we run up against losses that knock us off the path—or at least slow us down considerably. These losses make us feel as if we have been blocked from any chance at progress, perhaps even made to go backward—away from our goals and patterns of growth.

We suffer losses not only as hospice caregivers but also as people—as children, parents, lovers, and friends. Each step along the path of life reveals not only beautiful vistas and gorgeous panoramas but also difficult scenery, painful horizons.

We seek to hold life in the balance. We try to give equal time to the pain and the joy, mingle tears and laughter. To focus on only one aspect would be to disregard the deeper places in us and forget how complex we truly are.

Throughout each day, we go about the task of consoling. We listen to people's suffering and let them know they have been heard. We tell them what they have said, so they may hear themselves.

So many people do not hear how deeply they feel hurt, or how deeply they feel joy. Then we, the counselors, try to enable them to search their lives for solutions, resolutions, and peace.

As easy as it may be to increase a dose of medication or blindly tell people that nothing is wrong, we choose the more difficult path. It would be simple to anesthetize a symptom, hide an emotion that may ruffle a feather. It is much more difficult to listen, to hear, and to search deeply to be sure that the salve is not numbing an important realization.

We have all held the hand of someone crying from pain and realized that their anguish could be assuaged by the call from a

family member reaching out. Some pain results from a lack of forgiveness. This consolation is far more obscure: the opioid that would ease this pain is tender mercy and compassion. These consolations take their toll on the caregiver.

One day, we will notice that a patient sounds lonely as she recounts the tales of her children when they were young. Another day we will hear vigor and unabashed pride as we hear the stories of a person's hike of the Appalachian Trail.

We turn toward these people and verbally model for them what it means to comfort and console. We let them know we heard them. We say things like: "Sarah, that is so touching. It sounds like you miss those days when your children were young." Or, "Harry, you must be so proud of that hike. What a major accomplishment."

Once we have let them know

we have heard them, we are set free to help them resolve or connect with those moments in a fresh and fulfilling way. We will then be able to add to what we said by saying, "Sarah, have you talked to your girls today? They would love to hear you share that story again." Or, "Harry, I bet Joe would love to come over for coffee and look at those pictures of the hike. You two are such good friends."

But, when the commotion of providing care settles, and when the intense activity of our visits subsides and the patients are all gone, we are worn out. We may be exhausted physically, or we may just be a bit touchy emotionally—perhaps even crabby.

How should we grieve? Where should we turn? What shall be our consolation? And what of the moments when the grief has moved closer in on us and entered into the circle of our close friends and families.

First and foremost, I believe it is essential that we clear the decks for five to 15 minutes daily. We must learn to sit down and do nothing.

Vow not to budge until you have completed some form of quiet time—no phones, no distractions, just stillness. Eerie, and echo-filled at first, this quiet time will become a source of rejuvenation.

Creating a silent space that is meant for your own healing is critical. It is good to create a central image for routine visualization that can help you settle into the quiet space, such as a cave or a secluded grove of trees.

Visualize the locus hidden within your heart. Imagine a path that leads to this place in the heart and then travel on it.

Once you have arrived in the garden, or grove, or cave of the heart, just be still. Something will emerge that needs to be heard. Listen to what you hear and notice what appears in your mind. It will be important.

At first, the things we hear or notice may be distressing, but this means that we need to acknowledge that we are in distress. Soon, we will hear and notice things in a less pressing way. The process moves us toward calm, even when the issues of our life are immense.

From within that quiet space will emerge what we need to hear. As with the people we console, we must first listen to hear what it is we are saying before we can attempt to resolve the issue that lies at hand.

Sitting allows things to come up from within us. Once we hear what we are trying to say to ourselves, then we can look for the remedy. Once we know we are sad, we can seek how to express it or ways to work with it. Once we hear ourselves say we are exhausted, we will be more readily inclined to not push ourselves too much. Once we realize we love someone, we will then be sure to find the opportunity to share that emotion.

Remedies may come in the form of learning some new way to cope, or by reading some texts designed to help people gain supportive information, but they

may also come from sharing what you heard inside with someone dear. That person is then given the opportunity to provide care for you. Others hold the keys to treasure chests and attic doors in our own lives.

We may find that we long for forgiveness. We may notice that we just want to cry. We may recognize deep gratefulness and thanksgiving. We may find unbridled laughter. All of this is within us.

We sometimes schedule it right out of the experience of our lives. Stillness reconnects us with our own journey.

These steps are not easy to accomplish—the path difficult. But this is the proper way toward consolation. It is exactly what we ask of our patients and their families:

1. Take some time for yourself, by yourself, to listen to what is going on inside.
2. Share what you find with those on your path, and seek a remedy or way to express what you have found.

May the work that we do and the people we meet remind us that consolation begins with stillness. May we trust enough to know that all life seeks to grow. May we notice that all plants turn toward the sun. May we feel that all oceans move in rhythm to the tugging of the moon. May we recognize that all people long for wholeness—and that we are one of those people.

THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 8:

“What Have I Learned About Myself”

Introduction to Module:

The nature of grief makes it difficult to feel good about learning anything from – anywhere in the process. It may feel like we have become disloyal to our loved one if we acknowledge any form of learning or growth from, during, or after the loss.

Although our loved one would want to know that we are coping and growing in spite of this death, it still feels awkward to acknowledge our learning or growth. That will not change because for the most part we would rather have our loved one instead of the learning or growth from the experience of loss.

But, regardless of the layers of complication that attend the learning/growth or movement that we have made over the past months, we still have shifted and grown. It is vital to see this shift and learning/growth and to acknowledge it. As with all other pieces of this coping process, we have done it before – during other losses – and we will do it again.

The marvel of life itself is that it finds a way. In some other circumstances or examples of growth – more particularly in someone or something else – we would look at its growth and emergence through a difficult time and say it is beautiful. Perhaps

acknowledging our growth through loss as a marvel will feel somewhat better and less disloyal.

Nonetheless growth has occurred and we are going to look at that today. It may appear to be simple: I can balance the checkbook now, I have learned to cook, I go to Temple on my own, or I have learned I don't mind crying as much as I thought, but it is never really simple. There have been hundreds maybe thousands of small movements and advances to get us to that one place. It is not simple.

It may appear to be more complex: I have gone back to school to get my Master's and then Doctorate; or, I have learned that I really don't thank people for how they impact my life. But, again, hundreds maybe thousands of small shifts have gotten us to that point.

Many will measure growth in being able to get through a holiday special family meal or gathering. Others will notice it in being able to go to the beach again – or the mountains – that special place that our loved one enjoyed. Some will have learned that they were too dependent or too aloof.

Still others, who held some sort of trauma bond with the deceased, may find some amazing and powerful sense of freedom and growth and be living some whole new life they never imagined; the range will be wide and varied.

Lists are always helpful in times of grief. They are neutral and simple, not threatening and or burdensome. They help us to remember things we will have a hard time with during the chaos – like where to go and what needs to be done. But, they also give us a chance to mark down some internal feelings and images without having to spend too much time or energy invested in the process. We can build a list of ways we have grown or what we have

learned about ourselves and then walk away from it without getting too in depth.

Lists are safety valves for acknowledging things. In these sessions we have used them opposite artistic rendering because they provide a good place to begin. Our journaling and painting or drawing allows us to build on the information in the list when we are ready and able. So, again, let us begin to list things. Today let us list the ways we have grown or what we have learned about ourselves amid this loss.

Some ideas:

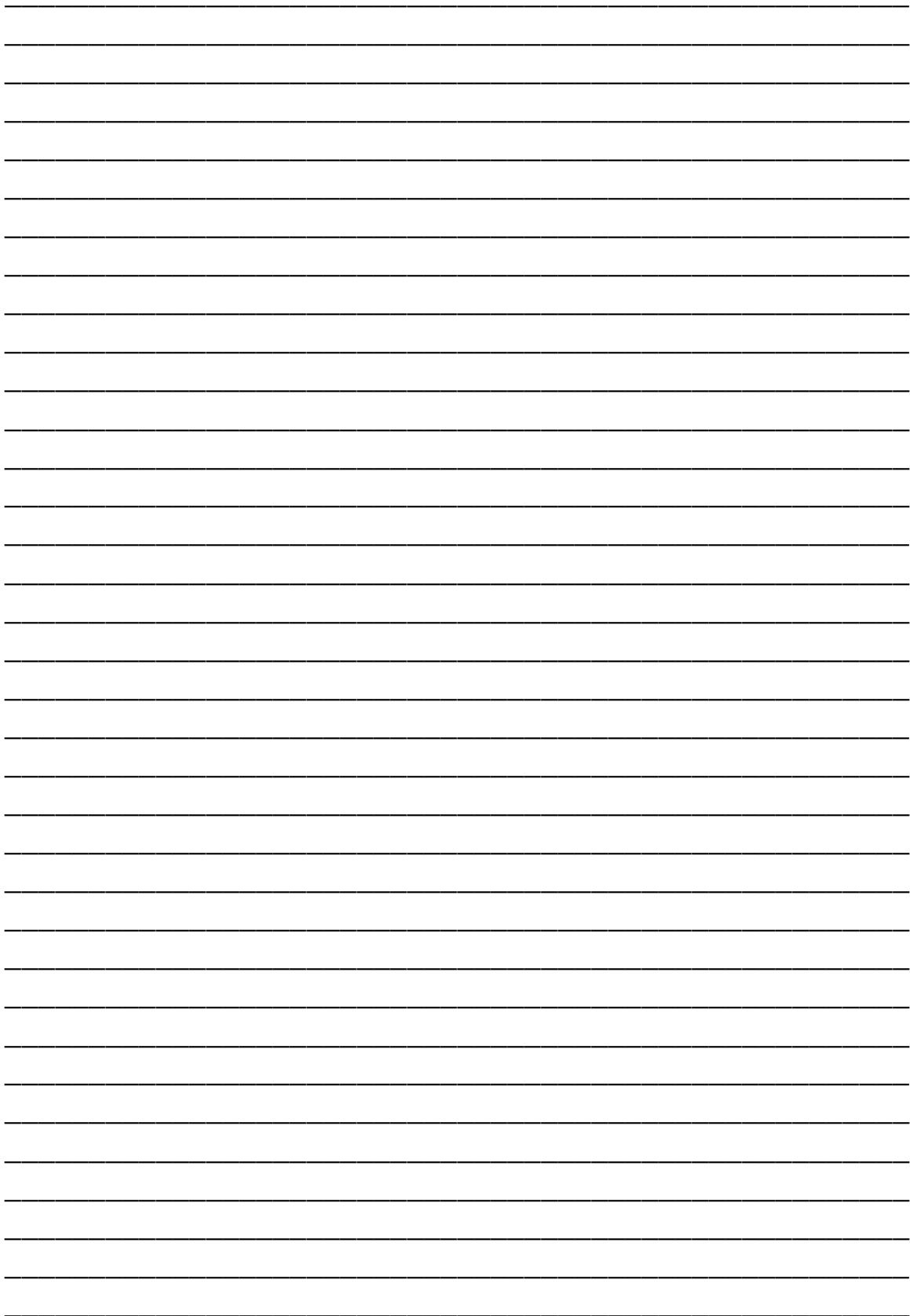
- I can cry
- I can balance the checkbook
- I can connect with my children
- I understand an earlier death
- I can go out by myself
- I can talk about difficult things
- I can receive help from my friends
- I have been able to clean out the closet
- I have been able to send all the bills on time
- I have been able to ask for help
- I made it through the insurance nightmare
- I have been able to forgive
- I have been able to love again
- I am no longer numb
- I have been able to keep track of my keys

There can be no greater or lesser to this list, no grading of importance. Every one of these things will feel like a major accomplishment when it is surpassed. The often heaviness of grief makes any movement feel monumental, so enforcing this notion in the group will be vital.

“Don’t Forget” Checklist:

- _____ A box of tissues
- _____ Email or call everyone to remind them of meeting and to bring think about people who have tried to help them throughout this process
- _____ To have one sure way of getting in touch with every member in case of cancellations
- _____ Have plenty of paper, pens, pencils, journals and art supplies on hand (markers, paints, crayons, poster paper, brushes, finger paints)
- _____ A Post-It type flipchart and markers
- _____ Handouts of Purpose, Goals and Rules for the Group
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- _____ Handouts of local and national grief resources
- _____ Folders or binders for people to collect items in
- _____ Soft, “wordless”, relaxation music and CD player
- _____ Candle and matches
- _____ A referral list for yourself to make referrals when peoples’ grief becomes complicated or dangerous
- _____ Buy a copy of: Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief by, Martha W. Hickman (and have copies available for the members, too)
- _____ Choose a poem, song or ritual that you will use for your closing of each session. You must close with the same closing every week throughout the sessions.
- _____ Assign time frames to the agenda

Closing Activity, Reading or Song:



THE ART OF GRIEF

MODULE 8

AGENDA OUTLINE:

- Welcome and Introduction of all members– play music softly in background until the meeting actually begins

- Ice Breaker

- Reading from Healing After Loss

LIGHT CANDLE

This book will provide educational data and an organizing point for the group grieving process. It is important to read it twice, once now, and then again toward the end of the session. It is best to just read the selection that is set aside for the date you are meeting, but you certainly can choose another to read. You should either purchase one for each group member or have them purchase one themselves. This is a vital tool.

- Discussion about “Contracts”

Let people know that it is important to discuss why everyone is here and what is expected for people to gain from these sessions. There are purposes, goals, and

rules to how a group should run. Remind them that there are “agency purposes, goals, and rules” for this and “individual purposes, goals, and rules” for this. Start out the discussion by stating the agency goals (listed below on the handouts). List them on “Post-it Flipchart” paper and hang them up. Add to these (in a different color) items listed by the group members themselves.

- Discussion about “What I have Learned about Myself”

Go around the circle and ask people to share what they have learned (how they have grown) from this experience of loss. This should include the entire process of the loss.

Be sure to bring some sort of discussion to the fore on feelings of disloyalty that were discussed above so that these issues can be out on the table at the fore and enable people to participate without as much guilt.

People are allowed to pass if they are not able to share.

- Journaling/Art Time

Now it is time for them to journal about the people who have tried to help. They can do this however they wish. They may want to write out a list of all those who have offered help and then next to the names list out how they have tried to help and whether that was helpful or not. Or they may just wish to list out all of the helpful things and all of the non-helpful things people have offered as assistance.

Leave your qualifiers for the project vague like they are listed above so that people have the freedom to interpret and create in whatever direction they are able or led to go. Tell them that it is their impression of what they think the assignment is that is most important. They should create based on what comes to mind when they hear what the assignment is.

- Sharing our “Creations”

Go around the room and share the creations with the group. Allow people to elaborate or remain vague based on their desires and capabilities at the moment. Remind them they may pass if they do not wish or are not able to share.

- Reading from Healing After Loss

Reread the earlier selection.

- Closing – *Extinguish Candle after Closing*

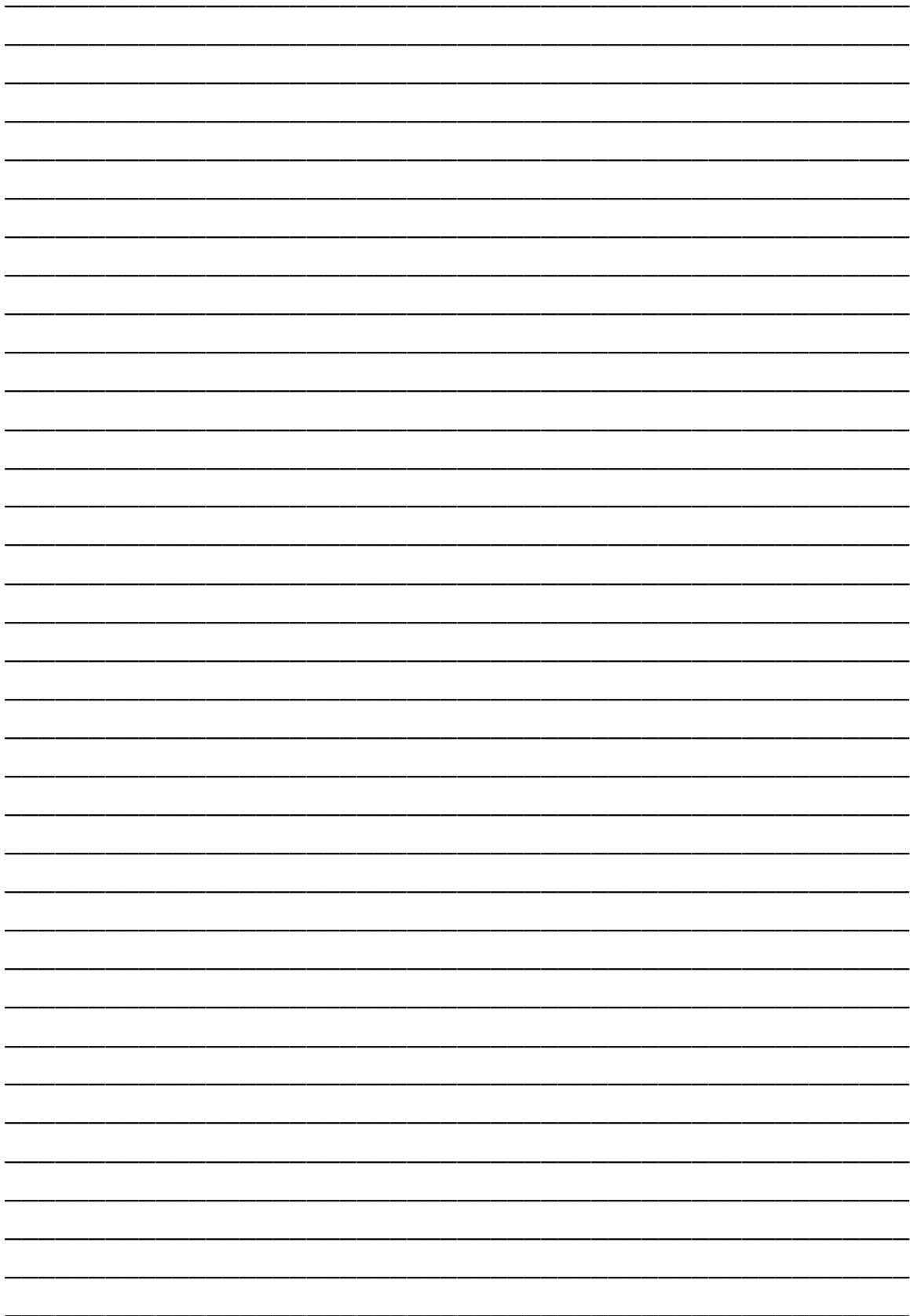
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NOTES: _____

[illegible]

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THE ART OF GRIEF

WEEKLY TOOLBOX

Ideas, Links, Activities, and Readings for Group Members

- Check out these sites for things we may have learned:
<http://www.allaboutlifechallenges.org/Grief-Process.htm>
<http://community.seattletimes.nwsources.com/archive/?date=20051118&slug=didion20>
<http://www.myspouseisdead.com/2008/03/gifts-from-grief.html>
- Begin a section in your journal for (as the above link calls them) gifts from grief. Don't just list them, but write about them, or paint and draw them out
- Call someone who has been worried about you and share some of what has been going on for you
- Consider writing an article for your church or temple on gifts you have gained from grief, make it available to other folks who have been where you are

THE ART OF GRIEF

PURPOSE:

- The purpose of our group is to give everyone a safe and neutral space in which to allow their feelings of grief and loss to come out.
- It is also our purpose to connect with other individuals who have experienced deep loss so we can feel normal and connected to people who do understand.
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GOALS:

- To enable people to express what is going on inside
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RULES:

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Coming back home

Father Dn. Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ

It started sometime in autumn of this past year. Amid the falling and the browning of the leaves, somewhere between the arrival of the whirling winds and the crisping air, came the notion that I was settling into this life—that I was coming back home.

When it passed through the cells I hold dear—calling them my mind, but knowing them now to be more of a colander through which thoughts and notions and recollections endlessly sift—I took note of it. Something about the thought drew attention to itself and made the larger part of me mark it as something special.

I clearly thought, “This forty-fifth year of my life will be about being at home in this life that is currently mine.” Something about it felt like I was coming back to the place I started from, but this time I would be in this place with a special knowledge. This time I would be aware that I was here, and this time I would be at home with the idea of being here.

*Father Dn. Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ,
Lighthouse Hospice, Morrisville, Pennsylvania.*

That is when I realized it.

Having heard myself say this thing over and over again in several different ways, I had the stark realization that, really, this is the best we can hope for—that, like Eliot, if we could arrive and know this place for the first time, even though it is home, then we will have done something with our lives.

Since the autumn months I have churned the idea over and over again. It comes out sounding one way one day and then another on another, but the premise is somehow always the same. We spend a large portion of our earthly lives taking in experiences and cataloging them, sorting them and grouping them. Somewhere in the process, if we collect enough experiences or the proper sequence of events, or just get lucky one day, we start to recognize some underlying connection or recurring theme—a sort of “meaning.” These awakenings can happen several times in our lives, but, always, when they happen they seem to condense, organize, and redirect the nature and purpose of what we may have considered to be our destinies or paths.

It so happened that in the autumn of this past year, I settled down into my life and felt that it was my home. My life would serve as my place to be at this time.

I discovered, in the churning of this notion, that this homecoming has a lot to do with nature. There seems to be a large shift, in our society, away from things natural. We are developing all sorts of items and gadgets that redirect and redistribute the stuff of quarks and gluons, like the Internet, which carries our messages as the mind carries thoughts and whims. But when it comes to technology, we have not been turned on so much by the processes we have tapped into—the similarity of computerized function and human mentation—as we have fallen for the trinkets we have made to carry out the processes.

We have made a golden calf and then fallen down in front of it. It is as if we have forgotten that we just made the thing. What is so odious about a golden calf is that it is a collection of atoms fashioned into an identity that is supposed to lift us above the crafted entity itself, into the higher

realms of Being. When we fall for the illusion we have made, we are putting our toy before the very mystery of it all and choosing the toy as our meaning.

Standing on the shores of the mighty ocean opened me to the “tinniness” of all that is not raw nature. Sitting on the loamy, soft earth in a grove of cedars on a knobby hill overlooking Tohickon Creek showed me that simple and unaided beauty feeds us. It is in the wilds that I have found the essence of these thoughts and the gentle awareness of these larger-than-life truths.

Throughout my life I have lived through long stretches where I have been out of the woods and away from the shores. When I go back, it is obvious that I have been away from something that feeds me. I have, upon my return, plainly felt that I have come home to myself.

Over the years of my life I have had these awakenings again and again. It is the recurrence of these awakenings that has helped me to feel what went on in me in the autumn of this year. Having been away from my center repeatedly in my life and having the good grace to return to it—even if by happenstance and serendipity—I have created a neural pathway that recognizes return. It was in

that one moment, unaided by larger natural events or surroundings (for I was squatting down in my backyard to pick up a piece of wood), that I recognized that this whole chunk of life I call my own was about my feeling comfortable and at home in my flesh and in my being. All of this was informed by my connection to the earth and my recognition that this connection somehow feeds me.

This connection to the earth and all things natural feeds us all. I have seen it in my parents, in my children, in my wife, in myself, and in my friends. I have seen it in the eyes and hearts of dying patients as they relive their days on this Earth in the tales they tell. And I am emphasizing my connection to this homecoming, forged in the autumn of this past year, to highlight the value of all things natural. The earth, the wind, the ocean, the stars, loamy dirt, dry leaves, dewy mornings, and the like have invisible ways of informing us that we are a part of something larger than ourselves. They send out thousands of stabilizing tendrils that secure us to meaning.

If we deny these things to the dying, if we hold back the awesome and thunderous presence of the Earth mother from those who are disintegrating, we are

keeping them from fitting their dying into the greater scheme. When we feel our dying is just about us, we have made ourselves to be alone, but when we see it is a part of a larger cycle of life and death, then there is hope. We are not alone. It may be as simple as pointing the bed toward the open window to see the sun or trees. It may be arranging a trip to the beach or woods with wheelchairs and oxygen. We must not deny our dying the earth and the air. We must expose our dying to the fullness of life, that they may feel at home in their dying, and, with them, we must take our children, too.

Being at home is not something that we will always feel—it comes and goes at peak moments in our lives—but every day we are creating the pathways for remembering it. We may be able to help our dying by placing them in the presence of deep and powerful energies that will prompt notions of being at home.

“We shall not cease from
exploration
And the end of all our
exploring
Will be to arrive where we
started
And know the place for the
first time.”

T. S. Eliot, “Little Gidding”

Bridges, paths, and water

Father Dn. Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ

These selections are from a larger piece of the same title by the author.

There is something that is haunting about water. Not just her power to drown or destroy. There is a lot of silence in her, and a lot of aged knowledge from seeing and passing all that has been. That is her wisdom.

I believe that bridges and paths hold many of the same elements—for me, anyhow. There is silence in them; there is aged knowledge and wisdom, too.

I have often pondered by them and pondered about them. I have sat for hours on end staring at them and surrounding their essence with my “self;” and surrounding my “self” with them. I have put my feelings into them and drawn them back into me to feel what it is to be a bridge, a path, to be water.

All in all, I would have to say, the part that haunts me is their stillness. Hidden in the apparent motionless of each is the ability to move things. Whether it is

water’s placid talent of carrying things on her back along her banks, or a bridge’s easy courtesy of allowing passage from one side to another, or a country path’s sinuous invitation to slowly amble, each may appear still but in reality be all about movement.

It is that conundrum that draws my interest. It is that Icon that elicits my adoration and awe. A place of such motion is yet a place of utter stillness. Odd, isn’t it? Stillness and motion being in the same place at once.

And there is another aspect that draws me. It is the sense that these things mirror deeper, more majestic truths. One way in which they do that for me is that often, both paths and waters start at a point far away, a place we cannot see. They move away from that unseen place and move closer to us—to our seen place.

This reminds me of space and time. It reminds me that our best guesses and our most ancient myths try to piece together how we have come out of the unseen. It is a *mysterium tremendum*, a great mystery.

This great mystery sort of begs the questions wrapped around the Big Bang. This mystery of things moving toward us and becoming more visible, more solid, creates the question, “If we go back, do we eventually see all things merging into one? And behind that, is the VOID at this place?”

What follows are words and pictures that reveal stillness and motion, movement from and toward, passage through space and time.

Capturing the illusory nature of life and its images is a grasping at mist, and yet in trying to make out what is before us and all around us, we do find a few laconic and lapidary images that will make themselves into idols of rapture and amazement. We find a few pearls of wisdom to help carry us through our days on this earth place.

These things, these things that we try to figure out and these things that we invest with meaning; it is these things that we can only hope to discover. If we find any of them in one lifetime, we are home.

If we find out what it means to be a bridge, or a path, or water, then we discover a piece of our own “selves.” For, surely, we are not only apart from the things around us, but we are a part of the things around us. All about us are things that inform us about how life is and who we are.

It is very clear to me in the hospice work we do that we often become bridges, or paths, or water for those we care for. We often see how people who are dying become bridges and paths, and water for the people in their lives.

There is a wonderful quote from Shantideva’s Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life that reads: “May I be a protector for those without one, a guide for all travelers on the way; may I be a bridge, a boat, and a ship for all who wish to cross the water.”

This quote sets out a way in which we may be the still motion. We may be an object that helps move folks from one place to the next. We may be a vessel for those who need transport.

In hospice, the journey is clear. People move from this physical life to what comes next. However, our faiths paint the picture or “write” the image (Orthodox Christians speak about the craft of icon painting as “writing” icons) it is clear that there is movement through life into the afterlife.

For that movement through life we need many vehicles, each at various stages of the journey and for differing tasks. Sometimes we may need to cross water, at other times it will be a desert. Each time a vehicle of slightly different calibration and shape will be needed.

As hospice workers and as people who lend aid to other travelers throughout life, we must remain flexible, available, and open. If we do not, we may not be of service.

If a person needs a path across a hot desert, being a boat will be of no use. If a log bridge is needed to cross a stream, being a path will be useless.

Being compassionate requires suppleness and discernment. We must ferret out the need and be able to adapt our “selves” to the task at hand.

The poems and photos that follow are simple amblings about the vehicles that can get us from one place to another in a motioned stillness. These amblings are meant to call unto the deep places in us and settle us into a feeling of comfort about the many roles we play in helping people move through this earth-place to what lies ahead.

Simply Heather

Looking through the heather
the heart of the mountain
turns to azure cool depths.

Climbing stone on stone
moss wraps its limbs
around moist hardness.

A wind sails over the whiskers
of a seal sleeping on a pile
of seaweed. Why are we so
determined to remove ourselves
from this feeling of awe that
surrounds us in the wilds?

I could write these lines
again and again.

The ocean comes in to lick the
shore, and we are embarrassed.

The sun screams out beauty
in its descending pinks
and oranges,
and we cover our ears. Why do

we complicate the beautiful
array of mismatched and untied
strings by tying
odd ends together?

A Coldness

I reach down deep in the dirt
and there is a coldness.

Not the coldness of being rude,
but the coldness

of rugged surviving.

Surviving against all odds;
surviving in the face of a
fierce and mighty foe.

Thistles grow like this.

Heather grows like this.

In the face of death,
some people grow like this—
grow towards deep
strength and coldness.

Standing on the edge
of the waters

the purple and the mist are
a ways off. They lift
me up and bolster me
from my heart.

Seals and gulls flop
and poke themselves
through the seaweed,
looking for treasures
and for things to do.

They are toughened by this.
They have saved themselves for
life and for death—being able
to play. They have
saved themselves
from building bridges, and roads
and nuclear reactors.

They all slip, back into the cold,
surviving against all odds,
against
the desire to overdo and subdue.

Against the desire
to create monstrous
chaoses that they
will become unable
to live without. And soon,
unable to live

with. They slip through
the golden
weeds, soaked with
wet chill cold, and are gone.

Stones and Moss

I am captured by the stones.
The way they sit there—
piled and scattered—
in and out of relation
with each other.

The mosses can fold themselves,
if they like,
over the stones,
making mortar of themselves
for mounds of shifting rock.
They hold me, too.

I sit here,
among them,
and am unable to move;
sucking in the sun
and the rain and the water
and listening to time pass
with the moon.

Windworn

Those portions of our
lives that disappear.
Folds of flower flesh
turning to paper with
the passage of time.
Those things are the
stuff the wind blows away.

It comes in sometimes,
quickly from its place
beyond the horizon, and
just picks up whatever it

wants. It throws it down
and watches it bounce.
This wind has power. It
can take things from one
place to another. And,
sometimes it makes
things go away.

I think I have felt it carry
away pieces of who I am
moving still pieces of
who I am from here to there.

I am alright with that. Some
of those pieces I never did
like. Some of them I will just
plain miss. All in all, I like
the cleansing power of the wind.

Swan

Paddled under on the
broken leg of a swan,
I feel your love
deep in my lake.

Hearts entwine and
flop over with the rising
and the falling of the tides.

Muds stir and plants roll
in the murky waters of
my heart, moving to the
rhythm of that broken leg.

And when she comes proudly
from that lake, she stretches her
wing way back, and in its silent
brokenness,
that wing stares
at you, with her eyes and shows
all the wanting

and needing behind
that pride. She is in some pain;
some pain from just sitting.

Her white is stark
against the water.

Serenity now turns with
her in a small tilt of
the neck. She marks my
eyes with a new gaze.
She knows she must leave
and she does.

Into the water,
our tails raised to
the skies, we look,
searching desperately
for the next thing
that will become a part
of us, and then leave again.

River Bending

We are not here
long enough
to watch the river
change her shape.

But she does.
I have felt it.

We can see her swell
and dry, but we do
not get to see her
curl and cut and
grow old. She is an
old thing. She goes
back a thousand,
thousand years.

We cannot see all the
changes, but we can
feel them. They are
in there.

From the pulpit

Facing changes in prayer

Father Thomas Johnson-Medland, CSJ

Introduction

Prayer is a vital part of our lives. When we enter into crises, prayer goes with us. As valuable as it is and as central as it may be, when we go through a period of suffering, the nature of our prayer life changes. It enters the trauma, along with the rest of our lives. No area is left untouched.

I often find myself counseling people on ways to adapt their prayer life to the changes in their body throughout the dying process. As their body weakens, the need for prayer is still as strong; but, they are not physically capable of mustering the focus necessary to pray as they once did.

For some, this will mean forgetting well-memorized and heartfelt prayers. For others, they will lose the ability to know how to pray; while in the past, extemporaneous prayer came quite naturally to them. Their inability to pull words together coherently is troublesome and causes much frustration.

Ritual gazing

I generally ask people to keep a picture of Christ, the Virgin, Buddha, the Ten Commandments, the Prophets, or some other religious artifact close to their bed—within viewing distance. I ask them to spend a little time each day gazing on the image and offering a short prayer (while still able).

I ask them to send the image love, caring, tenderness, appreciation, thankfulness, gratefulness,

joy, and compassion. I ask them to send these things from their hearts and from their eyes. I ask them to communicate simply and silently from within.

Gradually, we build a practice that will help when they become weaker. Through this process, they are extending and retraining their ongoing spiritual selves. Changing the nature of prayer life is a way of concretely preparing for the changes that lie ahead. Primarily, the goal is to shift the awareness of prayer from a mindful task of remembering prayers or ways of praying, to a new heartfelt task of gazing and admiring. This shift to gazing and admiration will become more and more important as people weaken, lose their train of thought, and become unable to speak. The focus on admiration also opens people's hearts to the

presence of God in stillness and quiet rest.

Benevolent glances

There is an old story of two religious masters who came to meet each other for the first time. One was the head of Western Christendom, and the other was the head of a large Buddhist sect. The Western master sent an emissary to the Eastern master's monks to establish knowledge of proper protocol. How should they greet one another?

The Eastern monks said they should bow respectfully, be silent, gaze on each other's visage, and see the presence of the Divine in each other. This seemed proper to the Pope, so that is how they greeted one another when they met.

This kind gazing is called "benevolent glances," and it is an ideal practice for silence and meetings. As death approaches, the practice of silence becomes more and more necessary. Perhaps it is not a silence that the dying prefer or call forth, but the weakening condition of the body and the mind necessitate it.

Communicating through glances

I encourage people to think about communicating through their glances. That is, I urge them to send love and joy, appreciation and acceptance through their eyes and the warmth of their heart. They should send these things to each person that comes to see them.

This encouragement and request also comes with instructional

words about their disease progression and weakness—at some point their abilities to do anything else will become exhausted. I urge them to practice this way of communicating while they are still strong, so it is not a surprise or too difficult to practice when the actual need arises.

Silent prayer

This is no different with prayer. Prayer is the communication we have with the Most High. As we progress to death, it will also become limited and reduced—as will all forms of speech and communication. Therefore, it is best to practice forms of prayer that require no verbal communication and minimal use of energy.

Practice will enable us to feel less awkward when the actual need arises to pray this way all of the time. It will also ensure that we are able to perform this form of prayer in a more refined manner. Practice makes perfect.

Losing the ability to communicate

Recently, I spent time with a man named Bob. He had a brain tumor and was clearly losing his ability to communicate. Ideas were clearly presenting themselves to him—interiorly—but, he was unable to get them out to those around him. He was losing his ability to put words to thoughts, ideas, feelings, and impressions.

It was painful to be with Bob. It became increasingly more difficult to watch him struggle and to see his resulting frustration. I

worked more openly with him than I have ever worked with any other patient. Bob wanted things to be all out on the table. His frustration led me to give him a week-by-week explanation of the limitations he was up against. It was clear that we needed to review alternate forms of communication.

It was more apparent in Bob than in anyone else—we are not our bodies. He and I spoke about this idea and he affirmed, throughout the diminishment of his skills, that he understood he was more than simply his body. He was more than what he was able to communicate.

Conclusion

There comes a time in the illnesses unto death that we have no control over what comes next—not that we ever really do. But, we do have control over our coping with what comes next. Silent prayer and ritual gazing are ways of coping with the weakening condition of our bodies, minds, emotions, and drives. They are forms of communication that can be applied to all of our relationships, not just the one we share with the Divine.

The space in us that routine prayer creates can often become a healing balm in and of itself—a peaceful, serene cave of the heart. Just beginning the daily routine of prayer can flood us with images of peace, compassion, tenderness, and comfort. This routine may not heal our bodies, but it will tenderly nurse and soothe our minds, our hearts, and our souls.