

After the Casseroles

REDISCOVERING

HOPE IN GRIEF'S

JOURNEY

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J.T. JONES



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Dedication



IT IS WITH my deepest sense of appreciation I dedicate this book to all those who have shared their grief journey with me in more than twenty years of my facilitating bereavement support groups. These brave and wounded souls are my true teachers and my mentors.

Also to Jessie Mae Jones, my paternal grandmother. It was through her diaries I learned that the day comes when there are no more casseroles for every bereaved soul.

And to my late brother, Bruce Alan Jones, MD. Bruce was a driving force in bringing Hospice care to Lenawee County, Michigan. At the time of his death in 1990, he was the medical Director of Hospice of Lenawee. Scores of families have been helped because of Bruce's foresight in palliative care, his uncompromising compassion, and his dedication to those whom he served.

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Special Thanks



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To the many who have shared their grief journeys with me in bereavement support groups over more than two decades. In having openly shared their stories, these many dozens of people, searching for hope and healing, gave me an immeasurable library of insight into bereavement. I have used some of their stories but have fiercely protected their confidentiality. We can learn much from their grief journeys. All names are changed and every identity will be protected for eternity.

I particularly thank my grandmother, Jessie M. Jones, for driving out of her way every Sunday morning to take me to church when I was a child. That simple kindness ultimately led me to become a Christian pastor. It was my widowed Gran Jessie who also wrote in her diary

“. . . it has been a long time since anyone has sent a casserole.”
Those dozen words gave birth to both this book and to helping others in their grief journey.

In Christ,
J. T. Jones

Preface



MY PATERNAL GRANDFATHER died at age forty as the result of a farming accident. My grandmother remained a widow until her death at age ninety-two. She was never able to fully recover her emotional, spiritual, and mental equilibrium in her six decades of widowhood. She lived a long life that was filled with all manner of busyness. She seemed to function as a distant observer to her family and her community. In many ways, hers was a sad existence that was often punctuated with bouts of depression. She called those her “glum days.”

My grandmother was a lifelong diary keeper. From her teen years until the dark veil of dementia descended on her late years, she logged the events of every day of her life. After her death, I read many of her journals. I was particularly interested in the events that followed an October afternoon in 1944, the day my grandfather was attacked and gored by a bull. He died only hours after that gruesome mauling.

Her diary recorded the event in great detail. She told of neighbors who came with condolences and casseroles. She wrote about the memorial service. She chronicled the cost of

the funeral. Over the following weeks, she wrote of the visitors, the cards, the calls, and the outreach of many who were touched by my grandfather's death.

She told of the dozens of neighbors who came to the farm one Saturday morning, and before the sun set that day, all the crops were harvested. A farm work bee was common in those days and spoke to a deep sense of belonging within the community. When one suffered, all suffered. They were practical folk who never overlooked the most basic of human needs when crisis struck a member of the community. She was the recipient of a remarkable outpouring of compassion by a caring community in the form of calls, cards, and casseroles. Their practicality did not ignore who would milk the cows, gather the eggs, fill the granary, and till the land.

There was a single entry in her diary about six months after his death. In her cramped writing style with its distinctive slant, she wrote:

I am so sad. I am so blue. No one calls. No one comes. No one even mentions my beloved Henry's name. It has been a long time since anyone has sent a casserole. They must have all forgotten.

Those fewer than forty words pierced my heart. In her glum moment that was awash in melancholy, she had brilliantly stated one of the central truths regarding grief. People care, but eventually they move on. It was clear she had come face-to-face with this solemn reality. The bereaved linger in their sorrow, while the well-meaning and deeply-caring go on about their lives. It is a natural human response for those who grieve to feel forgotten. It is not a critique on how much or how little we care. Rather, it is simply human nature. Those closest to the death of a loved one often feel abandoned in our eventual absence. Loneliness sets in, and too often if unaddressed, it tends to stay.

No more casseroles was more than a metaphor for my grandmother. It was how she measured her perceived abandonment. There had been hundreds who showed their respects, shed tears with her, reached deeply into their lives and offered support in many ways. But now they had all gone home and back to their busy lives. Simply put, there were no more calls, no more cards, and no more casseroles.

The journey through grief nearly always comes down to an individual trudge. It is not that family, friends, neighbors, or faith communities no longer care. It is more a matter of practicality. Those closest to the death are far more deeply affected than those who care from a distance. For the bereaved, the result is the feeling of abandonment. The bereaved may feel abandoned by family, friends, neighbors, faith community, and even by God. The aloneness that comes with the passing of a loved one is seldom one of fleeting sorrow. Grief seeps into every facet of the bereaved's life. It brings disarray in one's physical, mental, emotional, financial, and spiritual well-being. Tragically, this great malaise is too often endured alone.

There comes a time after every death when everyone goes home. For a moment, the brief respite from the crowd of caring folk may be welcome. As a friend once said, "When my mother died, so many people wanted to hug me that I just got my fill of hugs." A time to grieve alone, to weep openly, and even to boldly and loudly scream one's deep sense of frustration may feel liberating. However, one soon learns that the loneliness is exacerbated by aloneness. If there ever were a time when we need people, it is in the grief journey.

As a tribute to my grandmother and the millions of others who endure unresolved grief, I humbly offer these strategies on how to rediscover purpose, meaning, and the resolve that will lead to a healing heart. These are practical ideas that are soundly based in a faith in God's grace, but are not the exclusive domain of any particular religion. The following pages are filled with the

healing experience I have gleaned from working with hundreds of bereaved persons. These strategies will help the bereaved better understand the grief journey. The common pitfalls found along the road to healing will be clearly explored. Many proven and practical ideas will be offered on how to deal with loneliness, celebrate holidays, regain strength, and rediscover hope when faced with life's harshest sorrow.

Most of all, my greatest hope for the bereaved is to learn how to dine on hope when there are no more casseroles.

Purpose



THE HOPE FOR those who read this book is to receive assistance on the uncharted journey through grief following the death of a loved one. Regardless the cause of death, the reader's relationship to the deceased, or how recent or long ago the death occurred, the central goals remain the same. They are:

- To provide a sense of belonging and help bereaved individuals to begin to understand the scope of grief
- To help recently bereaved persons learn the skills of how to live alongside the grief that accompanies the death of a loved one
- To address and validate the spiritual, emotional, and physical brokenness that often accompanies grief
- To reconnect bereaved persons with a life of worth and purposeful living
- To develop within bereaved persons a source of help and encouragement for future persons in the midst of the grieving process

Bereavement Myths and Facts



Myth: Immersing myself in busyness will cure my grief.

Fact: A busy mind does offer temporary escape from grief, but unfortunately it is only a short-lived fix.

Myth: I am a strong person. I can deal with my sorrow on my own.

Fact: Perhaps you can rediscover a sense of bliss on your own, but that has little to do with strength.

Myth: Support groups are for weak people.

Fact: Support groups are for all bereaved people.

Myth: Fewer tears are proof that I am getting past my grief.

Fact: Tears are not a standard of measurement on the scale of bereavement.

Myth: If I have a difficult time with sorrow it means I am not a person of faith.

Fact: The death of a loved one brings deep sorrow to believers and nonbelievers alike. Faith is an important tool for many in the healing journey, but it was never intended to fully protect one in the time of loss.

Myth: Grieving the death of a loved one should last about a year.

Fact: There is no right or wrong time frame for grieving. How long it takes can differ from person to person.

Myth: Simple faith-based solutions will quickly bring about healing.

Fact: Clichés don't cut it! "He/she is in a better place." True, but I want him/her here with me.

Myth: The best plan for a speedy recovery is to ignore my grief.

Fact: Trying to ignore your pain or keep it from surfacing will only make it worse. For real healing, it is necessary to face your grief and actively deal with it. To ignore grief is like putting it in a mason jar and placing the jar on the top shelf of the pantry. One day it will ferment and explode. Likely that explosion will happen when least expected and at the most inopportune time. Grief must be addressed, even if doing so brings initial discomfort.

PART I

THE GRIEF
JOURNEY

What Is this Thing Called Bereavement?



TO BE BEREAVED is to be plunged into a state of unrelenting grief and sorrow. Bereavement is the shared state of sorrow following the death of a loved one. To be bereaved is to be deeply saddened by death.

There is a commonality to bereavement. It has rather predictable stages. Psychiatrist Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross was a pioneer in studying the subject of dying. Her work, *On Death and Dying*, published in 1969, was a groundbreaking study on a long-neglected subject. Kubler-Ross presented five stages of death most terminally ill patients have in common. They are: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. In her last published book, which is lesser known, she wrote on grief with the same keen mind for observation. In *On Grief and Grieving*, she studied the syndrome of bereavement.

Both of these works are classics in their respective fields and each helped to shape and inform much of what we know today about end-of-life issues and the healing journey for the survivors. Before Kubler-Ross, dying and bereavement were

not well-studied topics. We, the living, owe her a deep sense of gratitude for the work she did to start the conversation we now have in this most important part of life.

It has been argued that no culture has ever been capable of fully embracing both ends of the spectrum of life. The Victorians, who endured gruesome wars and high infant mortality, had much to say about death. Victorian literature and art focus on death, but at the expense of human sexuality. The same can be said for our ancestors from the Puritan tradition. In our time, the pendulum has swung to the opposite end. Our movies, literature, and art are filled with sex, while avoiding even considering death as much as possible. It is no great surprise that those who are bereaved feel like they are going against the grain of our modern world.

Like Kubler-Ross' theory of predictable stages of dying, there is a large pool of symptoms that often accompany bereavement. One might have several or many of these common symptoms, which range from poor appetite, sleeplessness, inability to control emotions to confusion, listlessness, fatigue, rage, depression, and a myriad of other possibilities. These form a somewhat predictable routine we refer to as the bereavement syndrome.

The sorrow one endures following a loved one's death is part of the human condition.

We are one in bereavement. It is common to being human. The sorrow one endures following a loved one's death is part of the human condition. The only way to avoid ever having to deal with grief is to never love another. However, to live a loveless life would be exponentially worse than to suffer

grief.

The particular events leading up to your loved one's death, or the cause of death, can add additional layers to your grief. Suicide, AIDS, Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), murder,

medical malpractice, alcoholism, or drug abuse can bring along additional layers of guilt, anger, or a feeling of powerlessness.

However, death is death. Regardless of the cause of your loved one's passing from this life, every bereaved person holds in common a deep sense of loss. Additionally, there is often some measure of anger and feelings of powerlessness and confusion.

To compare stories is a futile endeavor. A long, lingering illness does allow for some degree of acceptance over the shock of a sudden and unexpected death. Yet one cannot pre-grieve. No matter how difficult and lingering the final chapter might be, we are still caught in the grip of sorrow. The reality is never fully grasped until your loved one passes from this life.

Think of your present state of grief as one of cause and response. Cause matters little; your response matters a lot.