# Grief without stages

by Thomas G. Long in the June 28, 2011 issue



Near the end of the last round of presidential primaries in 2008, the race between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton broke decisively toward Obama. Resolute Hillary supporter Lanny Davis was devastated by the prospect of her defeat. Davis had served as special counsel to Bill Clinton and had devoted much energy to Hillary's effort. He was more than discouraged; he was so grief-stricken and distraught that he googled Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief to pinpoint his location on the emotional journey. "Denial? Yes," he said. "Anger? Definitely. Bargaining? Well, OK. And depression? That's definitely what I was going through." Only when Obama lavished praise on Hillary in his convention victory speech did Davis find himself approaching the last stage: acceptance.

This incident opens Ruth Davis Konigsberg's book *The Truth about Grief: The Myth of Its Five Stages and the New Science of Loss,* which is setting off seismic shock waves in the world of trauma counselors, funeral home providers of "aftercare," and others who help the bereaved navigate the choppy waters of grief. Konigsberg challenges not only Kübler-Ross's tidy scheme of grief stages but also the whole idea that grief is a therapeutically manageable process that moves through any stages whatsoever.

As Konigsberg tells the story, Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying,* which outlined the emotional stages through which dying people move, was based on poorly grounded, idiosyncratic and highly impressionistic research. The book might have slipped quietly into oblivion, but it unexpectedly caught fire in the public imagination.

Kübler-Ross's wobbly theory  assumed a life of its own in the popular imagination.

People quickly seized the five stages of dying, turned them into stages of grief over death generally and then into stages of grief over any loss. Kübler-Ross the scientist occasionally tried to nuance and qualify her original claims, but Kübler-Ross the media darling sometimes played along with the runaway expansions of her ideas. "You could say the same about divorce, losing a job, a maid, a parakeet," she said in a 1981 interview. A cottage industry of bereavement counselors and grief managers developed. New and improved configurations of the stages of grief were developed, along with treatment plans to heal the wounds. The language of rights was trotted out on behalf of the bereaved: the right to grieve and to take the necessary time to do so. Ironically, the "right to grieve" morphed, says Konigsberg, into the loss of the right not to grieve according to plan. When spouses remarried "too quickly," for example, people whispered that they were short-circuiting the proper stages of healthy grief.

The problem with all this is that there is no solid evidence that these theories about grief's stages are true. In fact, the evidence we do have, says Konigsberg, points to grief as unpredictable, wild and undomesticated in its form and intensity. It breaks like a storm over us and then calms, seemingly without reason. With the possible exception of deeply pathological grief, attempts to manage grief therapeutically are largely useless—and may harm people more than they help them.

Konigsberg's views are controversial, and some pastors, therapists and grief counselors are reacting to her book with denial, anger, bargaining and the rest. When Konigsberg asked Richard Shultz, one of the first social psychologists to raise questions about Kübler-Ross's work, why the idea of five stages persists against all the scientific evidence, he said, "Because they have great intuitive appeal, and it's easy to come up with examples that fit the theory."

Theologians have been raising objections to Kübler-Ross's ideas for a long time. The idea that people sail across the stygian stream toward some tranquil stage of acceptance is not an empirical observation. It is bad theology, a product of Kübler-Ross's smuggled Neoplatonism, which stands in tension with Christian eschatology and the biblical concept of death as the final enemy.

Beyond this, the larger notion that grief moves through some kind of process toward resolution probably owes more of a debt to American optimism than to Christian

hope. Grief is not mainly a psychotherapeutic unfolding; it is a perilous, unruly and emotionally fraught narrative task. We are all players in human dramas, mundane mostly but also filled with grandeur and deep pathos. When someone dies, the plot threads unravel, the narrative shatters, and those of us who are part of the story "go to pieces." The work of grief is to gather the fragments and to rewrite the narrative, this time minus a treasured presence.

But we do not do this alone. In the wilderness of grief, God provides narrative manna—ust enough shape and meaning to keep us walking—and sends the Comforter, who knits together the raveled soul and refuses to leave us orphaned. Sometimes the bereaved say they are looking for closure, but we Christians do not seek closure so much as we pray that all of our lost loves will be gathered into that great unending story fashioned by God's grace.