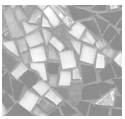

Introduction

MILLIE IS A sixty-three-year-old Caucasian woman whose husband, George, died five months ago. Millie has had a sometimes harrowing life, including physical abuse and neglect as a child and removal from her family. Millie's first husband was physically and verbally abusive to her. Her second husband, George, was a kinder man, although their marriage was emotionally distant. At fifty-two, Millie decided to pursue a lifelong dream of teaching, and George supported her in this. When George became ill, a part of Millie resented having to leave her teaching job to take care of him, and she felt some relief when he died. But now the full reality of his death is hitting her. She is in terrible financial straits and may lose her home. She is not sleeping or eating well. She has had disturbing dreams in which she feels visited by George, who chastises her for feeling relief when he died. Millie feels like her life is falling apart, and she doesn't know what it all means. She is confused and terrified about her future.

Millie has struggled all her life to feel any sort of secure or loving connection to God. She feels that God was not with her when her parents abused her and she was taken away. God was not with her when she was moved from foster family to foster family. She has made her way in the world without any help from God. Millie says the closest she has ever come to naming her experience of God is the Bible story about the

shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine sheep to find the one that has wandered off. She is the one that has wandered off, but in her experience, the shepherd has never come to find her. Millie occasionally goes to church, and sometimes she finds the prayers and music comforting. She has not been to church since George's funeral.

Robert is a thirty-eight-year-old African American man who has been married to Grace for eleven years. He is pursuing a divinity degree as preparation for ordination. Robert and Grace tried to have a child for eight years, and they rejoiced when Desirée was born. Almost immediately, however, Desirée began to have health problems, and she died at three months of age. Robert and Grace were devastated. They turned to their community of friends, family, and church to hold them up. Robert experienced a crisis of faith as he realized that the theology he had embraced up to that point did not help him in his devastation. For many months, all he could do was to pray the psalms of lament and to rail against God. Robert felt that he had to let God know exactly how he was feeling. He also questioned whether he could be a minister and deal with people's horrible losses. Very gradually, over the past year and a half, Robert has begun to feel that he can now be a more compassionate minister because of his own heartbreak and devastation. With the help of their church community, Robert and Grace have established a scholarship fund in Desirée's memory. Recently, Robert and Grace have begun to talk again about creating a family.

What is grief? As these two vignettes demonstrate, grief can look and feel very different for different people. Millie and Robert have both suffered major losses, but they are not responding in identical ways. Their experiences of grief are particular, complex, intricate, and multidimensional.

The experience of grief has been a source of intrigue and curiosity throughout history, and it continues to stimulate thought and theory in various fields, such as theology, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and medicine. Unfortunately, while so many fields are concerned with grief and with those who are grieving, these fields tend to function in isolation from each other. A striking example of this phenomenon is the substantial disconnection that exists between the world of ministry and the secular world of grief research, theory, and care.

In the secular arena of grief research, theory, and care, our understanding of the experience of grief is evolving, and the last twenty years or so have constituted a virtual quantum leap in this evolution. Secular grief researchers, theorists, and clinicians have revisited and challenged many long-accepted and even petrified dimensions of traditional grief theory. For example, many contemporary grief theorists have critiqued the concept of "stages of grief" as inaccurate, seriously limited, and unhelpful. Proposals of stages or phases of grieving suggest an invariant universality of human experience that neglects individual, familial, societal, cultural, and contextual factors. In contrast to some of the limiting and prescriptive "stage" talk, some contemporary theorists describe the affirmation and/or reconstruction of meaning after loss as the "central process in grieving" (Neimeyer 1999, 67).[1] Also, in contrast to the long-standing psychoanalytic understanding of grief as requiring the total *decathexis*—that is, withdrawal of emotional energy—from the deceased person, some current theorists and clinicians describe the natural place of continuing bonds with the deceased in the ongoing lives of many grieving people (Klass, Silverman, & Nickman 1996). Such new and creative work has revolutionized the secular field of grief theory and care.

Although ministers are very often on the front lines of caring for those who are grieving, they sometimes do not have access to such contemporary theory and research to inform their care. For example, recent research has delineated five specific trajectories that grief seemed to follow in one population; this research has clear implications for who may need help with their grieving and who may be likely to move through their grief with resilience and hope (Boerner, Wortman, & Bonanno 2005). Ministers without regular access to cutting-edge research may not know about these trajectories and the possible implications for appropriate pastoral and spiritual care.

At the same time, ministers are deeply concerned with the religious, theological, spiritual, and pastoral dimensions of the grief experience. These areas are seldom addressed in the secular grief field at large. For example, national surveys consistently reveal that close to 90 percent of the U.S. population describe themselves as religious or spiritual (Miller 2007a). Yet in the indices of two recent handbooks on grief written by some of the world's foremost theorists and published by the American Psychological

Association (Stroebe, Hansson, Schut, & Stroebe 2008; Stroebe, Hansson, Stroebe, & Schut 2001a), there is not a single reference to God.

In light of this serious and unhelpful disconnection between the secular and ministerial worlds in the area of grief, the goal of this book is twofold. First, I hope to offer ministers the most up-to-date theory and research in grief to inform their care of others. They and the people for whom they care deserve nothing less. But this theory and research should not stand in isolation. If it cannot be integrated with the religious, theological, and pastoral paradigms out of which ministers work, it is of limited value. Therefore, my second goal is to model a significant integration of this contemporary theory and research with important religious, theological, and ministerial perspectives.

In exploring any field that can be highly theoretical and abstract, I find metaphors helpful. Metaphors offer us a way of connecting words and ideas with images, concrete matters, real life. I find the metaphor of *mosaic* helpful and expansive in considering grief, and I propose that in many important ways grief is like a mosaic. Throughout this book, I will develop the metaphor of *the mosaic of grief*. Of course, no metaphor is perfect or complete, and slavish adherence to a metaphor may eventually lead to distortion or force fitting of one's ideas. Also, I do not mean to trivialize or romanticize grief by equating it with a work of mosaic art. There is nothing romantic about deep pain and agonizing loss. I keep these cautions firmly in mind as I offer some introductory thoughts about mosaics and about the mosaic of grief.

Mosaic as Art Form

Mosaic is an art form that is both ancient and contemporary. Early mosaic remains date back to several centuries before the birth of Jesus, and today artists around the world continue to craft mosaics. Mosaics are formed by the combination and arrangement of multiple small pieces or fragments of material, called *tesserae*. The tesserae may be made of glass, tile, ceramic, marble, or gemstones. Some mosaicists also work with discarded materials, such as broken pottery pieces or shards of china. The particular combination of these individual pieces forms a whole, the mosaic.

The spaces between the tesserae are called *interstices*, and the interstices are a significant part of the overall design of the mosaic. That is, what is *not* there is as significant as what *is* there in the formation of the whole. Sometimes, the eye of the observer may be drawn more to the interstices than to the tesserae.

Every mosaic is unique because of the many particular features that comprise a mosaic. For example, some mosaics are thematic and seem to present something of a coherent story. Others depict specific figures, such as people or animals, in vivid detail. Other mosaics are largely abstract and invite the eye simply to wander over them. With the particular arrangement of the tesserae, some mosaics convey shadow and depth. Others seem rather flat and one-dimensional. Some mosaics suggest flow or movement, known as *andamento*, such as that of a river winding its way through the work. Others seem static. Some mosaics do not seem to have a pattern or design when seen up close. However, as with an impressionist painting, a pattern emerges as one steps back from the mosaic.

The colors used in mosaics are endlessly variegated. Some tesserae beautifully reflect or refract light. Some are laced with dazzling gold or silver. Others are opaque or muted. Some have rich undertones. Others are clear or shiny. Some seem to take on new and unexpected shades because of the colors of the surrounding tesserae.

Mosaic art is difficult and painstaking. So many elements must be integrated, such as material, color, placement, and pattern. The mosaicist may intend one pattern, only to discover that an unexpected pattern emerges due to the many variables in this art form. Some say this art is not for the faint of heart. And yet mosaics are among the most beautiful and enduring artistic creations of all.

Mosaic as a Metaphor for Grief

How is grief like a mosaic? At this early point, I would like to suggest two initial aspects of this metaphor. First, as no two mosaics can ever be exactly the same, so no two experiences of grief are the same. As each mosaic is particular, fashioned by many individual elements configured

in unique ways, so each person's experience of grief is particular. It is formed by the unique interplay of all aspects of one's life—one's past, one's relationships, one's ways of making meaning, one's experience of the Divine, one's history of losses, one's sense of community, one's cultural perspectives, and so on. Let's recall the two vignettes from the beginning of this chapter. Both Millie and Robert have experienced significant loss, and each is grieving. However, their experiences of grief look quite different. Each is fashioning an intricate mosaic of his or her own.

In order to begin to imagine a particular mosaic, such as that of Millie or Robert, we might ponder questions such as these: How secure and safe were their relationships to important people as they were growing up? How secure and safe are their relationships in adulthood? How do they experience their relationship with God? What is their history of various losses? How have they found or made meaning following these losses? How do they understand God's role in their suffering? How have they kept going in their grief, and how helpful have religion and religious community been? How are they remembering or connecting with their deceased loved one now? How hopeful do they feel about their future? All of these dimensions of life, and many more, may be constitutive parts of the mosaic of grief.

While no two mosaics are the same, there is still much we can learn about mosaic art in general, some of which I have introduced above. Likewise, while we must keep the particularity of one's grief always before us, this does not mean that there is nothing we can say about grief in general. This is the second aspect of the mosaic of grief that I would like to propose at this point. It is important to learn what we can about the general elements and forms of grief, balancing this learning with an honoring of the particular.[2] If we are limited in our understanding of grief, we risk seeing only part of the mosaic. We risk seeing some colors and not others. We risk seeing flatness where there is fullness and form, like trying to watch a 3-D movie without the special glasses. We risk seeing interstices or gaps that are in fact not there. The great risk is seeing another's mosaic of grief in only partial, limited, or incomplete ways. And this often means that the care one offers is partial, limited, or incomplete.

Description of Terms

This book is also a mosaic. It is made up of the pieces about grief that I think are critical, arranged in a particular way. There are gaps, some because of what we do not yet know about the experience of grief, others due to my own limitations of perspective. Each chapter will add to the color, pattern, and intricacy of the whole. As the mosaic of this book emerges, I hope it offers a fuller understanding of the human experience of grief than either ministerial or secular perspectives alone can offer. I begin by addressing how I understand and use key terms throughout the book.

Types of Loss

The vast majority of work done on grief has been with reference to the grief following a death. While death of a significant other is clearly an important and often life-changing experience of grief, we also know that death is not the only loss that can prompt grief. In their classic work *All Our Losses, All Our Griefs*, pastoral writers Kenneth Mitchell and Herbert Anderson expand the discussion of grief by positing that "unless we understand that all losses, even 'minor' ones, give rise to grief, we shall misunderstand its fundamental nature. . . . Loss, not death, is the normative metaphor for understanding those experiences in human life that produce grief" (1983, 18–19). They then offer six categories of loss that may prompt grief; any single experience of loss may touch on one or more of these categories:

1. *Material* loss refers to the loss of actual physical matters, such as a prized possession or one's childhood home.
2. *Role* loss refers to the loss of a familiar role or function, such as that of competent manager after retirement or that of spouse after a divorce.
3. *Relationship* loss refers to the loss of a particular way of relating with another or others, such as with colleagues after a job layoff or with one's parent who is in physical or mental decline.
4. *Systemic* loss refers to loss that an entire group or system experiences, such as what city dwellers may experience when an

important landmark is torn down or what an office staff experiences when a colleague moves.

5. *Functional* loss refers to the loss of use or functioning of a part of one's body, such as loss of mobility following a paralyzing accident or the slow deterioration of one's vision as one ages.
6. *Intrapsychic* loss refers to the loss within one's own psyche of a way of thinking about oneself, one's future, or the world, such as a painful recognition of one's limitations or the abandonment of a lifelong dream.

While much of the discussion in this book focuses on the grief following a significant death, I hope readers will also be able to draw connections to the many other life experiences that can prompt grief.

Bereavement

Some researchers use the terms *grief* and *bereavement* essentially interchangeably. I find it helpful to distinguish between these terms. *Bereavement*, as defined by psychiatrists Harold Kaplan, Benjamin Sadock, and Jack Grebb, "literally means the state of being deprived of someone by death" (1994, 80). In this book, the term *bereavement* is used to describe this actual state of deprivation or loss, without presumption of any particular response. That is, one may be bereaved without necessarily experiencing grief.

Grief

In this book, the term *grief* is understood as one's response to an important loss. This response is sometimes marked by "severe and prolonged distress" (Weiss 2001, 47), which may be manifested in various ways.

Mourning

Mourning is typically understood as the psychoanalytic term for grieving. It also refers to "the societal expression of postbereavement behavior and practices" (Kaplan, Sadock, & Grebb 1994, 80), which are often

prescribed socially or culturally. In this book I will generally refer to *grief* rather than *mourning*. When the term *mourning* is used, it is understood as largely synonymous with *grief*.

Minister

This book is written primarily for those who minister to others in times of grief. This includes those who are ordained, preparing for ordination, or preparing for ministry as lay church leaders. This book is also written for other religious professionals, pastoral counselors, spiritual directors, and spiritually oriented psychotherapists. Finally, it is written for interested relatives and friends of those in grief. For the most part, I will use *minister* to refer to all of these groups of people. In a fundamental sense, in tending to others in need, all are truly ministering. I hope that this book will assist all who minister to offer compassionate, substantive care to those who are grieving.