

gifted for leadership

How to Help a Family in Grief

This download gives practical suggestions of what to do and what to avoid in shepherding a grieving family.



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Introduction

A Death Observed

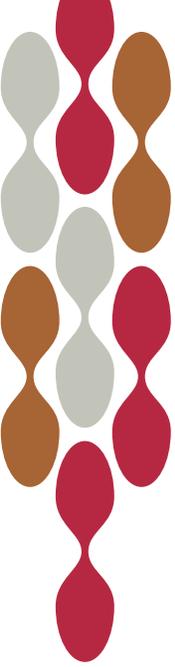
By Christine Jensen



I've watched two people die this year. Two people who were absolutely alive, but who drew in their last breaths and are now no longer with us. The first was my new friend Emily, in the spring. Then one month ago today, my mum.

Before this year I had seen a total of four dead people. Perhaps I should say four dead bodies, because the people had gone. One was a stranger in a hospital. Two were strangers by a roadside. The other was what remained of my dad.

Right now I feel quite thoroughly acquainted with death. There would be no complaints from me if I didn't see its shadowy face for some time. And yet it has taught me things. It has shaped my soul. It has shown me the reality of my relationships, the reality of my vaporish existence that makes me want to add "God willing" to every plan I speak out. The unadulterated solidity of



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A Death Observed

death close-up has changed me. It has enriched my existence with the discomfort of its proximity. But the unexpected benefit of death is that one learns about what it means to truly be cared for, to truly be pastored, to truly have someone be wholly "with" you when death has wrapped its arm around your shoulder.

It is these moments that I want to let you into. I'd like to walk you through our story from the initial shock of hearing the news, through the week of waiting for the end, to mum's death and its effects. Along the way I'll simply select the best and worst of the pastoring experiences that wove their way into our history. But first, perhaps a little context will help.

My mum was a 78-year-old Island woman from the Outer Hebrides, Scotland. She had been a missionary for much of her life. Mum had been recently widowed, and she seemed to be grieving well and was surfacing to a new level of confidence and rhythm in handling her new single life. My sister found her collapsed on the bathroom floor, still conscious but disorientated. She was unable to move her left side and had little strength to move her right. Mum had had a major stroke. At the hospital she received very good care, but 18 hours later, she experienced a massive brain hemorrhage and lost consciousness.

This is the experience that birthed this download.

Blessings,

Christine Jensen

Leader's Guide

How to use this download for a group study



This download can be used for individual or group study. If you intend to lead a group study, some simple suggestions follow.

- 1. Make enough copies for everyone in the group to have her own guide.**
- 2. Depending on the time you have dedicated to the study, you might consider distributing the guides before your group meets so everyone has a chance to read the material. Some articles are quite long and could take a while to get through.**
- 3. Alternately, you might consider reading the articles together as a group—out loud—and plan on meeting multiple times.**
- 4. Make sure your group agrees to complete confidentiality. This is essential to getting women to open up.**
- 5. When working through the Reflect questions, be willing to make yourself vulnerable. It's important for women to know that others share their experiences. Make honesty and openness a priority in your group.**
- 6. End the session in prayer.**

Hearing the News



Lori, a friend of mine, picked up my 7:30 a.m. crisis text and called me back. She asked what was happening, was shocked with me at the news about my mum, and then told me that if I wanted a hug, she was sitting outside my house. She had literally driven over just in case she was needed. She held me, and knowing that I had recently also lost my dad, just kept saying, "It's too much, it is just too much." In five or so minutes of connection Lori gave me permission to let the news land with full impact. Then she offered to call back in a day or so to arrange to look after our children, cook dinners, run errands, or any other task I might need carried out.

She did just that, and followed through, tangibly loving our family in the midst of the crisis. Three weeks later, Lori has had us over for dinner, has sent a condolence card, has invited me to "just talk about your mum" over coffee, to go



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Hearing the News

swimming together for the sake of normality, and has offered that we "lean into [her] during this season of grief." We are loved, treasured, safe.

What I Learned:

- Don't avoid people who are grieving. Be physically present and at hand.
- Listen well; don't assume you know what they need.
- Feel with (reflect) the emotion of the person who is grieving/in shock. Let them lead.
- Give permission for them to be where they are.
- Keep it brief.
- Offer specific, practical help, but deal with the details later, at a time when they can be processed.
- Deliver what you have offered.
- Continue to hold the grieving person after the funeral through various avenues of communication, practical help, and the offer of gentle normality.



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Hearing the News

Reflect

- ◉ *Which of these suggestions are easy for you? Which ones difficult? Why?*
- ◉ *What are some practical ways you can give someone permission to "be where they are"? For example, if they are angry, how can you give them permission to work through their anger?*
- ◉ *Why would it be important to deal with the details later after they are over the initial shock?*

A Patient Existence

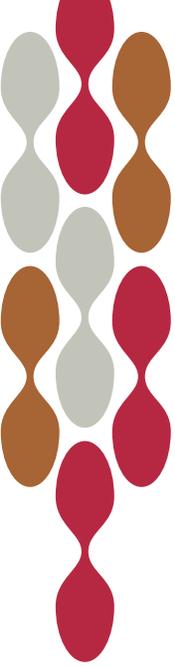


By the time I arrived at the Stroke Unit, it was 4:00 p.m. on Saturday. My sister and brother-in-law had been with mum since she collapsed. They were visibly drained. A couple who knew mum were leaving in tears, leaking anguish as they made their way down the corridor.

Mum was in a room by herself. It was light and functional, but for the small shrine of pictures that had been set up in the corner. Images of her three grandchildren huddled together on a shelf, the newest of whom was just four days old.

My mum, my sweet treasure of a mum, lay still and hushed in the afternoon sun, weakly stumbling from one irregular breath to the next. The only other noise was the constant background hiss of the oxygen. Her upper face was porcelain pale and wax-like, without a shadow of a wrinkle. I had seen that look before, but only on the dead.

In the warm quiet, I became aware that this room existed



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A Patient Existence

in much more than just the physical realm. This was a soulish space. A sacred circle had been drawn around this moment in time and more was taking place than what could be seen. The door to heaven stood ajar. I drew up a chair, took my mum's hand, and began to thank her for who she was.

I cannot tell you the number of people who told us that unconscious people really can hear what is going on around them. And so in the face of the unknown, we continued to talk to Mum and made sure not to say anything that might offend her or cause her distress. However, not everyone was open to maintaining this ground-rule. Visiting hour became a place of intense vulnerability, as well as exceptional comfort, as pastors, visitors, neighbors, and friends came to pay their respects.

Some of those visits were just awful.

For example, Susan, the wife of Mum's previous work colleague, visited and from the outset didn't even acknowledge my mum. She never greeted her at all. Mum may as well have already been dead. She evidently was in Susan's mind, and so stories erupted within minutes of her arrival about when her own mum died. I was dumbstruck by the utter lack of sensitivity towards us as a family, the deviated focus onto her grief rather than our own. When that was followed by "Have you thought about who will take the service?" I was dumbstruck. I wanted to point at my mum and shout into our visitor's face, "My mum isn't dead! Look at her, she's still breathing! She's still here and she can hear you talking like she's dead already!" But we, the patient's family, were the vulnerable hosts in a bizarre form of deathly hospitality. And we're British, so we try very hard not to rock relational boats.

We dropped eye contact, didn't respond to the questions, focused on Mum and adjusting her oxygen mask, started talking



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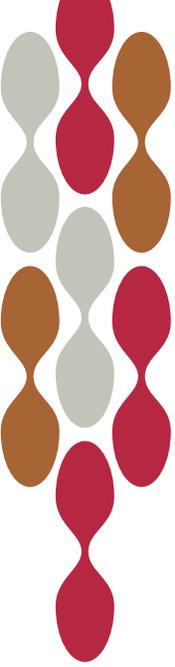
A Patient Existence

to Mum as an aid to steering the conversation back on to the reason for Susan's visit. She didn't pick up any of our social cues. Our visitor continued on about her own stories, her own unresolved grief, her own regrets, wishes, and the details of her mother's death, her son's death, her father's death, her sister's brother-in-law's death.

I realize in hindsight that what I was listening to was Susan's raw pain. But as the visiting hour went on, my thoughts turned from defending my mother, to defending myself. I stood with my arm against the cold bedrail, consciously thinking, "Shut up. I don't care right now that your mother died. I don't want to hear right now about the tragedy of your son's death. All I know is that at this moment we're watching our mother die, and it ought to be about her, not you, our family, not yours, our present pain, not your unresolved grief." Harsh thoughts, I know. In retrospect, with distance, I can sift through them and have understanding and patience. But at the bedside, holding my mum's unresponsive fingers, someone else's pain was too great to even consider sharing.

Paul, a previous colleague and employer of Mum's, called in and there was no doubt that he was touched by my mum's deteriorating condition. He found it difficult to maintain composure. Yet there was a disconnect between what he was evidently feeling and what came out of his mouth. He was unable to mention even the possibility of death. The closest he came was to allude to the fact that Mum's condition was serious. He prayed for healing but without any conviction, almost apologetically, as if that was what one ought to do as a Christian.

The comfort he brought was fragile with his own denial of what was staring him in the face. There was not a single acknowledgment that we were camped out in the valley of the shadow of death, yet it oozed out in every pore of his being. He was unable



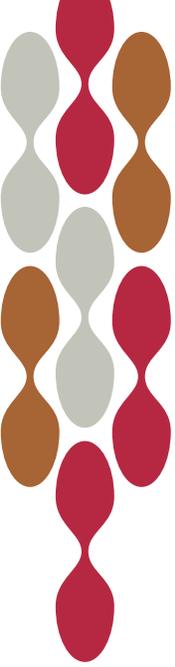
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to articulate a goodbye to Mum because of the depth of his own pain. As a family we felt we had witnessed a visit on two levels. First, the audible one that gave a ragged impression of Christian hope and faith, but felt really like denial. Second, the visible visit that radiated the guts of Paul's belief, that of unbearable pain in the face of deep loss. His deep emotion was testimony to the impact of my parents' lives on him, but as their relatives, we were not pastored, comforted, or held. Neither was Mum. We were merely the awkward spectators of a hastily dug shallow grave in which Paul's own despair had been laid.

What I Learned:

- Acknowledge the existence of the person you are visiting, even if they cannot acknowledge you. Common courtesy is still valued, even if only by the family. Remember that the unconscious person may very well hear every word you say.
- Keep your own grief stories in check. If you want to bring comfort, then the focus of the visit or call is not you.
- Listen, ask questions, don't assume, be sensitive to the family's social cues and respond to them kindly.
- When you know that the end of life is in sight, acknowledge its presence thoughtfully, not with fear, but with gentle honesty.
- Tailor your words to those you speak to in order to sensitively encourage them where they are.



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- Face death with the real confidence of your faith. If you feel you may be overwhelmed with personal grief, take some time before your visit with the dying person and their family to really process and come to terms with your emotions.

Reflect

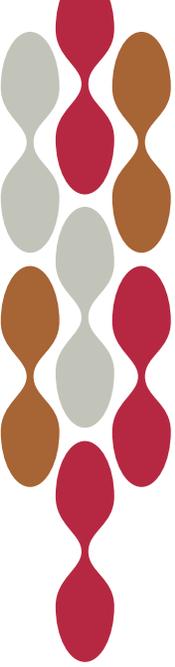
- *Why is it important to treat the dying as if they are still living?*
- *Why is it also important to acknowledge that a person is dying so they can realistically deal with it?*
- *How do we find a balance between those two opposites?*

The Waiting



Until this month, I thought the deathbed scenario was solely a feature of epic Bible dramas, or the inspiration for great old painters who wanted to portray their history as heavier and more important than it really was. Now I know the deathbed. I have experienced its crisp clean lines, its rise and fall, its tones and glories. It's an ancient thing. Like childbirth. Expected, yet surprising in its groaning reality. It is an altogether human experience that yet is somehow embossed with the watermark of the Spirit.

At first we anticipated the end in every hour. We dared not step outside the room for fear of missing it. But Mum was an Island woman, one who had weathered many a storm. Her deterioration, although evident, was much slower than expected. And so we settled into a rhythm of care. Morning greetings followed by updates on who had called, written, and sent messages. Then we followed Mum's routine of morning worship, readings from her *Daily*



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The Waiting

Light, along with the Psalms. We sat with mum, stroked her, talked, and sang our way through the hymnbook. Then before bed, we would read again, pray, and go through the little rituals of our own personal goodbyes.

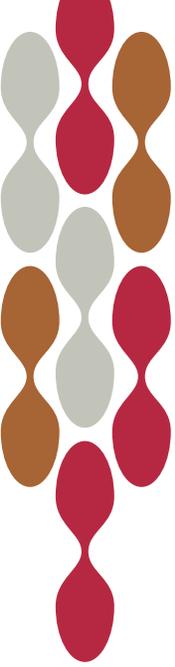
Every moment was saturated with the waiting, the imminence of the final journey. The timeline was fuzzy. The fixed point was no longer the day of the week but the unpredictable punctuation of a breath that would go untaken, and another, and another, and another, until a great gasp from mum would motion death to step back a little—till the next time.

The emotional strain was constant and visceral. By the fourth day the physical exhaustion and the cabin-fever collided. Taking breaks, remembering to eat and drink was elusive. Thank God we had friends who could do that thinking for us, and who repeatedly went out of their way to meet those needs before we were even aware of them.

Maya, a family friend, responded to our family in practical and consistently thoughtful ways. Maya provided an individually portioned main meal that was healthy, tasty, and even included forks, napkins, drinks, and sweet treats for later. She included messages of love and prayer for each person. We were touched by the attention to detail and the notes that we were able to come back to and process at a later time.

Kirsty, a pastoral care worker, drove out to visit three times that week. She arrived into a constantly shifting landscape of grief and fatigue, and tailored her care accordingly. We came to find solace in her consistency and treasure the shared experience of navigating Mum's last journey together.

Lynda, the senior nurse on the Stroke Unit, was a godsend. She popped in every morning she worked to touch base, listen, answer any medical question that had arisen, and normalize



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the whole experience. Lynda spoke highly of Mum, engaged with her story, showed respect, and empowered Mum's dignity. For example, she said, "There's no law that says you have to keep the curtains open if you want a bit of privacy. You just do what you want; she's your mum." As with Kirsty, her presence and consistency were anchors in a tempestuous week.

John, our pastor and family friend; William, a friend of my parents; along with a visiting church elder and friends of my sister, all exhibited similarly palliative traits. They were entirely present for Mum and for us. They looked each of us in the eye and shared our pain. They held us physically and spiritually. They didn't offer answers or explanations, but unashamedly settled down into our individual experiences of the moment. They did not flinch in the face of death, but gently prepared us for its coming. They talked about and to Mum, recounting memories of first encounters and precious moments as well as asking how we were managing that day. The familiar and the ordinary were part of the texture of the conversation. These people became family by sitting in the isolated starkness of the inevitable and quietly loving us there.

It was not unduly heavy. The real hope of heaven and freedom was spoken, but sensitively, with gentle strength. The Scriptures were read. Prayer was genuinely offered. Curiosity was expressed: "I wonder what it will be like to look into Jesus' eyes," "What do you think the welcome for your mum will be like?" They encouraged us that Mum was already communing with her Lord: "He has her, he has her." When the time came, meaningful goodbyes of "see you again" and "I'll come and see you soon" were offered with affection. In some measure, we experienced safety, even beauty, because we experienced the full truth of our fragile reality and were not entirely alone.



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The Waiting

What I Learned:

- Make sure that those at the bedside are eating regularly and well. When providing meals, think through everything that is needed and eliminate every effort for the recipient.
- Encourage the rhythm of rest. Be consistent in your visits so that the family can know when to expect you.
- Be yourself and be normal. You don't have to be an expert; you just need to be there.
- Give the family the freedom to do what they think is right for their dying relative.
- Look directly at those who are grieving; they often get reduced eye contact.
- Presence, holding, listening, normalizing, sitting, praying, remembering—these are the offices of the pastor.

Reflect

- *How can you be yourself when you are visiting and refrain from being the "expert"?*
- *Why might making eye contact be so important?*
- *How can you better practice presence, holding, listening, normalizing, sitting, praying, remembering?*

The Last Visiting Hour



Friday was a quiet day. There was nothing left to say. We had cried, sung, laughed, and talked. It seemed we were merely waiting for God. The silence was unassuming—much like my mum—yet it comforted the awkward corners of my soul. The evening's visiting hour began without a hint of visitors. No pastors, friends, or family knocked on the door. We welcomed more space.

At about a quarter past seven, I noticed that Mum's face looked particularly pale. Her breathing was steady, but paying closer attention we realized her breaths had become quite shallow. Mum's lips were opaque, with an unhurried blossoming of powder blue. We uncovered and lifted her arms out from under the crisply laundered sheet. Her fingers were no longer softly pink. Mum was now slipping from one life to another. After sitting in the hush of the moment for a while, it seemed appropriate to sing Mum's best-loved Psalm (the 23rd), which was so naturally followed by "Amazing



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The Last Visiting Hour

Grace." By the end of the hymn, mum was with her Savior, surrounded no doubt by a much more glorious harmony. Her last visitor was, I'm sure, her favorite. Her shepherd came to carry her home.

What Not to Do When a Person Dies

Joy, a Christian hospital worker, met us on the way out of the hospital. On hearing that my mother had died, she immediately offered her hearty "Congratulations!" Rationally speaking I realize that she was reminding me of truth I actually believe. But it's all in the timing isn't it? Joy was unable to mourn with those who mourned. She had jumped a little too triumphantly to her theology of hope, heaven, and ultimate healing, all of which is good and true, but we reeled for some time from her inappropriate lack of humanity.

Albert, a previous pastor, had a similarly jubilant take on our loss. His pastoring included advice such as "We Christians have no need to cry," coupled with the assumption that "Your mum just wanted to be with your father." No, we Christian children needed to cry. Also, if Albert had visited my mum a week before, he would have heard her planning to write her life story and working out the details of the trip she would take to hold her newest grandchild. He never would have come to the conclusion that she was in a rush to die.

Phone calls of condolence began to come in just hours after Mum passed away. Some brought healing through the simplest of words. However, it must be said that the vast majority of phone calls ended up with our family pastoring the caller through their own various tragedies. I would pass my sister at the kitchen table as she forced down her own desperate grief whilst offering repeatedly, "Oh, I'm so sorry" to the caller. She ministered to



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The Last Visiting Hour

strangers over the past deaths of their loved ones. We all did, hour after hour, day after day, sometimes for up to half an hour at a time. It was entirely exhausting and gave little room to experience our own loss.

Duncan, a supporter of my mum and dad's missionary work, managed his own grief with an obscure if not odd request. It was the oddest of all the worst experiences we had as we were leaning on one another in the stillness by Mum's flower-laden grave. Our family and friends had gathered somberly in the summer sunshine as we laid her remains to rest. It was a place of intense vulnerability. We were unprotected and open with the effort of having to say our final goodbyes. Duncan took his camera out of his large black coat and confidently asked that I stand with my siblings to pose for a photo at our parents' graveside. We were speechless. Not one of us had the strength to even say no, and in the moment we felt like we were being mugged.

What I Learned Not to Do:

- Never congratulate a recently bereaved person. Mourn with those who mourn. Do not avoid walking through the valley. God is there with you. He is closer than we think. He has himself experienced death. Yes we want to make sense of this business of dying, but it does not make sense. Because at the heart of it, death is not what we were created for; it jars with the essence of our being. This is why it helps noone to assume the "reasons" why someone "chose" to die.
- If you are going to call, write, visit, or engage with a grieving person, consider what their pain elicits in you, what personal memories their pain evokes. Make every



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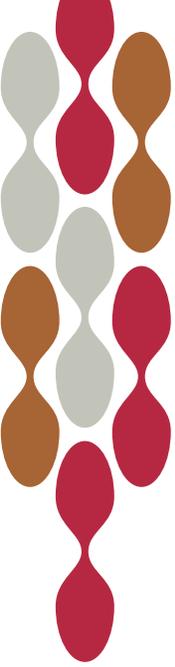
The Last Visiting Hour

effort to deal with your own grieving before stepping into someone else's. If you have not addressed your own pain, you will bring it with you and it will interfere with your ability to minister.

- Acknowledging the loss is the single most significant thing a pastor, friend, or acquaintance can do. Stick to opening sentences like "I'm so sorry to hear the news about. . ." and "We grieve with you." You are not causing greater pain by reminding the bereaved person of their loss, you are simply conceding your awareness of their reality and your willingness to, in some way, be a part of it.
- In the crisis days of grief, do not allow your own manner of coping with the loss to further injure the family of the dead. Photos, questions of property, requests for sentimental items, money, or any significant decisions should be postponed. Be intentional about protecting and enabling boundaries for the bereaved, not crossing them.

A former teacher of mine named Nell found out about my mum two weeks after the funeral. She emailed with deep sorrow for my loss and an invitation to her home for tea "to talk about your mum." She gave details of possible dates and asked that I bring photos of my mum to share with her. That morning was a gift.

Someone had intentionally organized uninterrupted time, an oasis of space, simply to aid me in unraveling my thoughts. What I thought would be an hour-long visit turned into three hours. She asked "what, how, when, who, then what" questions. She listened, poured tea, and listened some more.



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The Last Visiting Hour

At no point did Nell indicate she had other things to do. Her presence and willingness to be interested in the dying details of someone she had never met began a healing process in me. I am truly grateful. Nell sent me away laden with sweet-smelling roses from her garden, warm scones from her oven, and the knowledge that someone cared deeply enough to share in my unseen experiences.

What I Learned to Do:

- Simply because the funeral is over, does not mean the grieving is done. If you are late in hearing about a death, respond with the same level of care that you would if it had just taken place.
- Ask concrete questions and listen in loving silence. The willingness to listen, to be present, to be unhurried, is a healing gift.

Final Thoughts

It is bittersweet, this parting. When we parked in the moonlight on Mum's driveway and stepped into the house again, I was struck by how much smaller it had become. How much quiet had crept into the walls. We have moved on, a little. Yet my soul is bruised. I feel altogether older than my years. It is a painful journey, but God has us. He's had us all along. And in the journey we are held, and have been held, loved and tended to by his people. The worst of whom are trying their best, and the best of whom are an inspiration.



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The Last Visiting Hour

Reflect

- *How can you encourage a person who has experienced loss about their eternal hope while still acknowledging their loss?*
- *Is there someone whose loss is still fresh, even though the funeral is over? How might you practically help that person?*
- *What was most helpful and applicable to you from this download? Why?*

Additional Resources

Articles, books, and Bible studies to help you further



Articles

Impatient With Grief—Time does not always heal—and this, too, is hope. By Jen Pollock Michel, available on TodaysChristianWoman.com.

What Good Grief Looks Like When a Daughter Dies—Walking the way of grace in the midst of my grief. By Ben Witherington, available on ChristianityToday.com.

A Daughter's Grief Observed—Meghan O'Rourke's luminous 'The Long Goodbye' traces the final months as her mother succumbs to cancer. By Rachel Stone, available on Her.meneutics.



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Additional Resources

Books

Experiencing Grief, by H. Norman Wright (B & H Publishing Group / 2004). Sooner or later, we all face a dark journey—the passage through grief. Written to encourage anybody who's recently endured a loss, this brief, powerful book leads readers through five essential stages: shock, rage, despair, release, and finally peace. A thoughtful gift in lieu of a sympathy card.

I Will Carry You: The Sacred Dance of Grief and Joy, by Angie Smith (B & H Publishing Group / 2010). This book is a powerful story of ultimate loss—a parent's loss of a child—interwoven with the biblical story of Lazarus, helping those walking through the difficult seasons of life to mourn and still have *hope*.

Online Resources

Overcoming Grief—The 6 sessions included in the study are for anyone who is dealing with the process of grieving or is helping a friend through grief. You'll receive a Bible-based guide for personal use or group discussion. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.

Grief—Whether you're supporting a grieving friend or mourning a loss of your own, these 9 studies from Psalms will help you express what you're feeling and lead you to the arms of our compassionate God, who weeps with us, listens to our cries, and understands our pain. Available from **ChristianBibleStudies.com**.



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Additional Resources

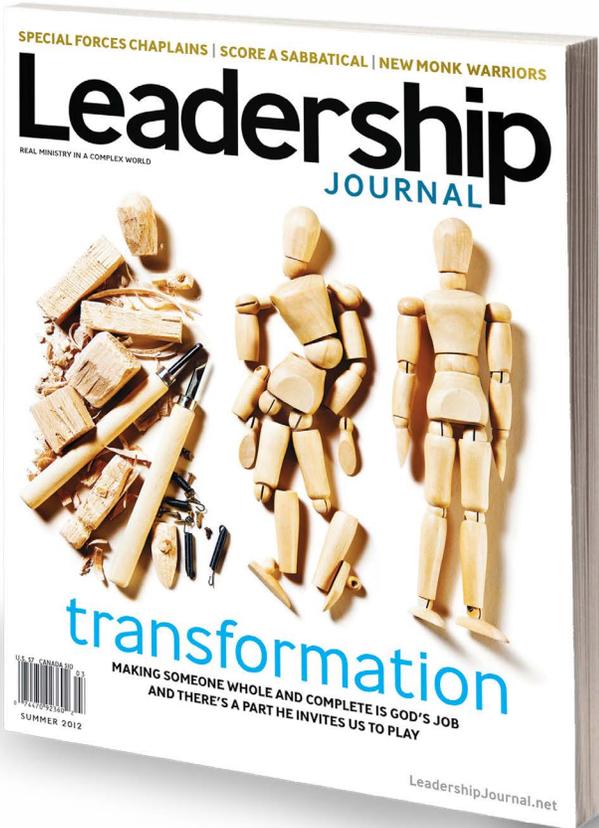
Ministry to the Dying—The church is uniquely equipped to care for people at the end of life. But how? Dying men and women have diverse and urgent needs. This training tool will help you establish principles of ministry in the final days and hours of life. Various articles will teach you about home and hospital visits, how to prepare your congregation for death before an illness or injury sets in, and how to minister to families and friends losing a loved one. Available from **BuildingChurchLeaders.com**.

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