CHAPTER 1

Companions in the Pain

At some of the darkest moments of my life,
some people I thought of as friends deserted me—
some because they cared about me and it hurt them to see me
in pain; others because I reminded them of their own
vulnerability, and that was more than they could handle.
But real friends overcame their discomfort and came to sit
with me. If they had no words to make me feel better,
they sat in silence (much better than saying,
"You'll get over it," or "It's not so bad;
others have it worse"), and I loved them for it.

—Harold Kushner, *Living a Life That Matters,* 123-24

We learn what to say, in part, by listening to what is being
said. If we let the person tell us where he or she is,
we will soon learn how best to respond.

—Thomas Oden, *Pastoral Theology,* 299

Blessed are those who mourn,
For they will be comforted.

—Matt. 5:4

Eight-year-old Becky was late getting home from her friend Christine's house. Again, and even though her father had warned, "Becky, the next time you're late, you're going to be in big trouble."

When Becky walked in, her father demanded, "I told you to be home at five! What do you have to say for yourself?"

"Well," Becky began, "I was playing with Christina, and she dropped her doll and broke it . . ."

The father interrupted: "And I suppose you were helping her pick up the pieces."

"Oh, no, Daddy. I was helping her cry."

This old story captures the role of the helpers in responding to the bereaving. To be bereaved is to be *reaved. Reave* is a wonderful old English word that means to break, to plunder, to rob, to tear apart, or to deprive one of something. Thus, the griever can say, "I am *reaved"* and be precise.

Many bereaved do believe their world has been torn apart, and in reality it has been forever changed.

Many bereaved believe their lives, memories, and futures have been plundered.

Many bereaved believe they and their families have been torn apart.

Many bereaved, as they age, believe they have been robbed of emotional companions. We can replace lost

objects, but we can't replace children, spouses, siblings, friends, and a shared future with them.

The grief sharer's role is to help them grieve.

Penelope Wilcock illustrated: "Our response to the helplessness of others is to take rescuing action, to be the cavalry coming over the hill" (*Spiritual Care of Dying and Bereaved People,* 4).

How can we be the cavalry for someone going through grief?

First of all, grief sharers must ask, "Am I willing to be changed by this experience?" Gerald Sittser, whose wife, mother, and daughter were killed in an automobile crash, writes that "Good comfort requires empathy, forces adjustments, and sometimes mandates huge sacrifices. Comforters must be prepared to let the pain of another become their own and so let it transform them. They will never be the same again after that decision" (Gerald Sittser, *A Grace Disguised*, 159).

In Judaism, temple or synagogue members who care for the body, especially the ritual washing, after a death are called the *Chevra Kadisha,* or "Holy Society." These people are always "on call," because most Jews are buried within 24 hours.

As a Christian, you, too, can be "on call" to opportunities for intentional sharing. Through your

presence, you can make a difference—even when you don't know what to say or do.

No one should have to walk alone through the valley of death's shadow. "When Job's three friends, Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zopar the Naamathite, heard about all the troubles that had come upon him, they set out from their homes and met together by agreement to go and sympathize with him and comfort him" (Job 2:11).

Like Job's friends, we can walk *with* the bereaved if we see and seize the opportunities for grief sharing.

A COMPANION ON THE PATH

Two men sat eating breakfast one morning in 1871. One had been lost in the jungles of Africa for five years until Henry Stanley, a reporter for the *New York Herald*, found him with the now-famous words "Doctor Livingstone, I presume."

The men developed an intense friendship, but now it was time for Stanley to return to New York. As they finished their meal, Stanley broke the silence: "And now we must part. There is no help for it. Good-bye."

"Oh, I am coming with you a little way," Livingstone said. "I must see you off on the road."

As they walked, finally Stanley stopped and said, "Now, my dear doctor, the best of friends must part.

You have come far enough; let me beg you to turn back."

Livingstone studied his friend and replied, "You have done what few men could do—far better than some great travelers I know. And I am grateful to you for what you have done for me" (George Seaver, *David Livingstone: His Life and Letters,* 595-96).

Like Livingstone with Stanley, your task as a grief sharer is to see the bereaving "off on the road." You cannot do your friend's grief for them. You are not called to supervise or critique that person's grief. You are, however, called to *witness* this person's courageous efforts to come to terms with loss. Like a cheerleader on the sideline during critical points in the game, you call encouragement to those on the field. By your gifts of care, time, and silence, you, too, may eventually hear, "You have done what few . . . could do. . . . I am grateful to you for what you have done."

Grief care is an opportunity to be a companion on the path, a companion in the rough times, a companion for the moment when hope lights the way—and a companion in the daily struggle of grieving. One of the most significant things you can ever do is to be a grief companion.

You may protest—"But I don't know what to say." You are not the first person to utter those words. When God tapped Moses to lead the Israelites, he protested:

"O LORD, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue" (Exod. 4:10).

The Lord responded to Moses as I think he would respond to decliners today, "Now go; I will help you speak and will teach you what to say" (v. 12).

That promised assistance should have been enough to overcome Moses' hesitation, but it wasn't.

Moses pleaded, "O LORD, please send someone else to do it" (v. 13).

Someone else. We're so good at passing the buck.

"Oh, Ruth can do it. She's so organized. Or Bill—he always knows just what to say. Or how about Ann? She's a stay-at-home mom and has plenty of time. How about Carl and Mabel? They're retired. It would give them something to do."

The Sovereign of the universe invites you to participate. You'll miss out if you cling to "I don't know what to say."

In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in New York City and Washington, D.C., people naturally asked, "Where was God?"

In a grief's weary, dreary days, God shows up through his field reps, people such as you. These individuals don't necessarily know what to say or what to do. But they show up, sit down, and stay awhile.

In *The Art of Being a Healing Presence* James Miller reminds us, "There are three things you can do to help someone. The first is to listen. The second is to listen. The third is to listen some more" (39).

Grief sharers always look for an opportunity to actively care. You can never "fix" an individual's grief, but you can wash the sink full of dishes, listen to him or her talk, take his or her kids to the park. You can never "fix" an individual's grief, but you can visit the cemetery with him or her.

Grief sharing is not about fixing—it's about showing up. Coming alongside. Being interruptible. "Hanging out" with the bereaving. In the words of World War II veterans, "present and reporting for duty."

The grief path is not a brief path. It's a marathon, not a sprint. Because of their own apprenticeship on the path, grief sharers have learned the accuracy of Theresa Huntley's assessment—"Although the grief that you carry remains with you forever, ideally it will become a part of—rather than all of—your life" (*When Your Child Dies,* 47).

The issue is not "getting over" grief or "moving on" (or any of the other clichés we have created to signal our impatience with grief). The issue is what the bereaving will do *with* their grief. And who will share their grief with them? Who will be with them on the most difficult parts of the path?

In my neighborhood is an impressive private school for boys that is a result of a deep grief. In 1953, six-year-old Bobby Greenlease was kidnapped and murdered. Many parents would have turned bitter, but Virginia Greenlease and her husband poured themselves and their financial resources into Rockhurst High School and Rockhurst University, donating the land that became the high school campus. Over the years, Mrs. Greenlease paid the tuition for many boys.

Why were the Greenleases so generous? They never forgot the round-the-clock kindness of Rockhurst's Jesuit priests who became grief sharers with the distraught family. Virginia Greenlease lived 48 years after the incident, balancing the memories of her son's kidnapping with memories of a great high school and the boys who "did well" (Tim Higgins, "Virginia Greenlease, Benefactor of Rockhurst Schools, Is Dead at 91," B1).

Like Becky in the opening story, you can help people cry. You can help people lament and laugh. Remember in reality, in time, the positions will be switched, and those who have received comfort and condolences will be the comforters. Sooner or later, everyone walks a grief path. Will that path be yours alone, or will it be shared?