AUDIT
your own grief experience

"Children are people experiencing life, not just getting ready for it" (William C. Kroen).[1]

"To help children in this process, we must confront our own fears and begin to search for the words that we do not have" (Phyllis Silverman).[2]

When you talk to a child about grief, at least four individuals are represented in the conversation: the child, you, the child's deceased, and your dead. Before we examine practical caring acts, it is important to reassess your experience with an awareness of grief. As a potential care-er, you need to reflect on three questions developed by nurse educators Priscilla LeMone and Karen Burke. You may want to, in the words of young adults, "hang out" with these questions—originally developed to help nurses confront grief issues:

- What are my personal feelings about how grief should be expressed?
- Am I making judgments about the meaning of loss to this [child]?
- Are unresolved losses in my own life preventing me from relating [caringly] to the child?[3]

Experience shapes response far into adulthood. Minnie Taylor, pregnant at age 50, had fallen down a circular staircase in her

Texas home. Now as she lay in a rural hospital, dying, she wanted to see her 5-year-old daughter, Claudia.

"She looked over at me," Claudia recalled, "and said, 'My poor little girl, her face is dirty.'" Minnie asked for a wet washcloth. Gently she scrubbed her child's face then fell back onto the bed and burst into tears, "Nobody at home to care for you but the Black nurse. Poor child." (Claudia's father ran a country store and worked long hours. He had no time for raising a child.)

Minnie Taylor died soon after her child left the hospital. At least Claudia knew that her mother had died. Minnie's husband chose not to tell his sons, Antonio and Tommy, away at boarding school, for almost a year. Antonio held that against his father for the rest of his life.[4] How could a father not tell a child that his mother had died?

Claudia was significantly impacted by her father's mourning after her mother died. Claudia had not been allowed to attend her mother's funeral. Days later when the minister paid a visit to the father and child, he commented that Minnie Taylor was "better off in heaven than on earth." Pointing at Claudia, Taylor angrily demanded, "Who's going to take care of that little girl!"[5]

Witnessing her father's rage, Claudia made up her mind not to be the burden he feared. "I just felt so sorry for him . . . I had no feelings at all for myself."[6] Indeed, many children can be so busy monitoring the mourning of others in the family—or physically or emotionally taking care of them—that they ignore their own grief.

During cotton picking season Taylor stayed at his general store 24 hours a day (or chose to stay as a defense against his grief). Many nights, he made a pallet for Claudia on the floor near the caskets he sold. One night as she went to sleep, Claudia asked, "What are those long boxes?" Taylor hesitated a moment and answered, "Dry goods, honey, just dry goods."

As a result of her father's insensitivity, the girl learned early on to keep her emotions buried, "symbolically locked in a coffin in her soul."[7] When school was out, Taylor sent Claudia by train to Minnie's family in Alabama. "He dressed her in a nice dress, tied a bonnet around her head, and put a sign around her neck, 'Deliver this child to John Will Pattillo'" (her great-uncle). Today that would constitute child abuse, but this six-year-old perceived the trip as an adventure. "I knew the conductors and porters would take care of me."[8] Unfortunately, because the Pattillo elders in Alabama warned Claudia's cousins not to talk about Minnie's death, she mourned in silence in her mother's extended family. Fortunately for the child—and the nation—that fall the child's aunt, Effie Pattillo, moved to Karmack to look after her.

What went through Lady Bird (Claudia Taylor) Johnson's mind in those early hours following the assassination of John Kennedy in 1963 when she observed and thought about six-year-old Caroline Kennedy? Did Mrs. Johnson remember her grief experience as a child-griever 45 years earlier? Did the loss she experienced then shape her compassion toward Caroline—especially the decision to allow Mrs. Kennedy and her children time to move out of the White House?

A young boy in Texas had not been told that his four-year-old sister could die while undergoing treatment for leukemia in New York City. At school one day he looked out the window and noticed his parents' car enter the parking lot. Good, he thought, they're home—meaning his parents and his sister. He had clearly seen three passengers in the car. Excused by his teacher, he excitedly dashed to the car. After getting in the car he was stunned: the back seat was empty!

"Where's Robin?" he asked.

"She died," his parents answered soberly.

No one had even hinted to this child that his sister could die. Suddenly, this boy had questions. He could not understand why his parents had not told him his sister would die. Weeks later, attending a high school football game with his dad, the boy grumbled that he wished he was with his sister.

"Why would you say that?" said his father, stunned by the comment.

"I bet she can see the game better from up there than we can from here."[9]

That seven-year-old was George W. Bush. Forty-six years after that incident, he reflected, "I am certain I saw her, her small head rising above the backseat of my parents' green Oldsmobile." He added, "Those moments remain the starkest memory of my childhood, a sharp pain in the midst of an otherwise happy blur."[10]

Somewhere, perhaps down the street, across the apartment complex, as you read this, given the 2.4 million deaths annually,[11] children are experiencing "sharp pain." Some childhoods will be forever altered. Not simply by the death of a loved one, but by the lack of attentive, compassionate care focused on the child. And as you read this, some well-meaning soul will contend, "Oh, but children are *so* resilient." Or an adult will invade the child's grief space with a predetermined set of grief inhibitors:

"Your loved one is with Jesus in heaven."

"Your loved one is free of pain."

"Your loved one would want you to be a big boy."

"You have to be a big girl now!"

A child grieves in a culture determined that grievers, regardless of age, "move on" or at least "accept" the death. My colleague, Ron Oliver, head of pastoral care at Norton's Kosair Hospital in Louisville, has seen numbers of children die, and says, "You do not *accept* a death. You accept the terms of a contract or conditions of employment. You do not accept death. It never becomes ac-

ceptable." One parent told Oliver, "I know she is dead. But I go to the window whenever a school bus goes by—just in case."[12]

Dexter King, looking back on his father's murder 40 years earlier, would agree. He admits soberly in his memoirs, "You never recover."[13] As Dexter and so many other children have learned, grief has a way of reannouncing its influence in a spiritual or psychological ambush years after the death.

Aaron Latham has lived with grief for his sister for years in a "get over it!" culture.

"I can tell you with certainty that the loss of a sibling leads to survivor guilt.

"*Why her, not me? Wasn't she better than I am?* And survivor guilt often leads in turn to callings . . . of one kind or another. A religious calling. A literary calling. A political calling. The calling is strong because you are, in a sense, living for two: You *have* to do well!"[14]

Many grievers make promises—and some keep the promises. Latham recalled, "As I was leaving the cemetery after my sister's burial 33 years ago, I promised: I'm going to write a book—something I had never done—and dedicate it to my sister. Within a year, I had done so."[15]

Latham devoured books on sibling loss and talked "endlessly to psychiatrists." Personal experience shaped his research on the continuing impact of Robin Bush's death on her brother George. Latham insists that you repeatedly revisit loss.

> Actually around 40 is when it usually happens. The real bite of survivor guilt clamps down around midlife. Or so I am told. I was 41 when it knocked me head over heels. You ask yourself what your sister would think of the use you have made of your life. The life she never had.[16]

Latham noted that George Bush's "spiritual awakening," took place at age 39. Latham asked Don Evans, the trusted friend of

the former president, "Do you think the loss of his sister had anything to do with Bush's religious awakening?"

"Sure. Certainly that's something he thinks about. Your Lord is who you look to in times of pain and suffering" or in what Latham terms, "ex post facto suffering."[17]

In some families, one surviving child, whatever the age, takes on the belief that he or she must now live out a parent's dreams for the dead child. That mumbled admonition, "You've got to be good . . ." ricochets permanently down the thought paths of the child. You mustn't lead your parents, by your choices, to conclude, "I wish he had been the one who died!"

These questions were developed by grief educator Helen Fitzgerald. Spend some time pondering each question. You might write one question on the top of a page in a notebook and date your response. Then, from time to time, as you read this book, revisit your *experience.*

1. What is the earliest memory you have of a death?
2. How did you learn about this particular death?
3. How did you initially respond to this death?
4. Who protected you from the reality of death?
5. Did you go to the funeral home? visitation? funeral? cemetery at the time of burial? Later?
6. How prepared were you for what you saw or experienced?
7. Who comforted you?
8. Who encouraged or discouraged your expression of emotions and feelings and fears?
9. Did you have to do anything that made you uncomfortable—such as touch or kiss the corpse?
10. How did your religious beliefs shape your experience with death?
11. How have you been impacted by this death?
12. As a child, did you have any superstitions about death?

13. As you look back on the experience, what comes to mind?[18]

Spend some time reviewing other deaths you experienced as a child or adolescent. What have you learned from those losses?

John Kennedy said, just weeks before his death, "We can say with some assurance that, although children may be the victims of fate, they will not be the victims of our neglect."[19] What in your personal experience of grief—or absence of personal experience—led you to compassionate care or to neglect grieving children?