
An Epiphany through the Eyes of Grief

Robert E. Dahl

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth . . . From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace (John 1:14, 16).

In a scene from the movie, *Sleepless in Seattle*, a recent widower suffering from the typical grief reaction of insomnia tries to rest on the couch. We don't know if the widower, played by Tom Hanks, is actually asleep and dreaming or just trying to sleep, but his late wife appears with him on the couch, and they carry on a conversation as if she were alive and well. Only she is not talking from the perspective of this life. She's communing with him "from the other side," so to speak. One thing we know for sure; he is aware of her presence. Then, as instantaneously as she appears, she disappears.

The scene is not unlike an experience I had about a year after my wife died. In my case, I was awake. I was aware of my late wife Doris's presence in the room, although I was not completely sure of her identity until she spoke. She but called my name and disappeared—an ever so brief moment that has affected my life profoundly. It has proven to be an epiphany for me in my bereavement, for with it the light of God's mercy began to shine in the darkness of my grief.

That is not to say, of course, that the epiphany was the only healing event in the aftermath of my wife's death. From the first day, I was surrounded by concern, care, prayer, empathy, and love from friends and relatives. I knew that my family had a history of not dealing well with bereavement, so, within a week of her death, I began therapy that lasted for two years. Also, I joined a twelve-step group. These were all major threads in the fabric of my healing. Still, as I reflect on the history of that healing, I have come to see the epiphany as the turning point, the moment I can actually mark as the one when I knew that I would not just survive but, in fact, thrive. Then, on a more spiritual level, I began to understand that survival wasn't the issue at all, that death and resurrection were the issues, for in some sense in Doris's death I experienced my own. I found myself in the confines of the tomb with darkness surrounding me and permeating my being. The question became, Was there life after death—for Doris in eternity, for me on this side of physical death, for the world?

Encounters with Loved Ones

The reporting of similar phenomena is becoming commonplace. A recent spate of books relate the testimonies of people who, while in near-death

experiences or following the deaths of loved ones, encountered the presence of those deceased loved ones or experienced phenomena related to them. In his book, *Grit and Grace*, the psychologist, philosopher of religion, follower of Christian mysticism, and practicing Buddhist Ken Wilber tells this experience of the moments following his wife Treya's death:

I arranged for Treya's body to remain undisturbed for twenty-four hours. About an hour after her death, we all left the room, mostly to compose ourselves. Because Treya had propped herself up for the last twenty-four hours, her mouth had hung open for almost a day. Consequently, due to incipient rigor, her jaw was locked in an open position. We tried to close her jaw before we left, but it wouldn't shut; it was locked tight. I continued whispering "pith sayings" to her, then we all left the room. About forty-five minutes later, we went back into the room, only to be met with a stunning vision: Treya had closed her mouth, and there appeared instead on her face an extraordinary smile, a smile of utter contentment, peace, fulfillment, release. Nor was it a standard "rigor smile"—the lines were entirely and totally different. She looked exactly like a beautiful Buddha statue, smiling the smile of complete release.¹

During the night following Treya's death as he sat in the room with her, Ken read several of her favorite religious passages both Christian and Buddhist, including the prescribed readings from the Tibetan *Book of the Dead*. He tells what happened during this time:

I may be imagining all this, but I swear that, on the third reading of the essential instructions for recognizing that your soul is one with God, something audibly clicked in the room. I actually ducked. I had the distinct and palpable feeling, at that utterly dark 2:00 A.M., that she directly recognized her own true nature and burned clean. In other words, that she acknowledged, upon hearing, the great liberation or enlightenment that had always been hers I don't know; maybe I'm imagining this. But knowing Treya, maybe I'm not.²

The late Henri Nouwen, Roman Catholic priest, professor, and spiritual director, gives us a deeply personal account of a paranormal experience in *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life*. A couple of years ago, while I was recuperating from a mountain biking accident in which I incurred several bone fractures, a colleague gave me the book as a gift. Nouwen tells of an accident in which, as a pedestrian, he had been struck from behind by the side view mirror of a passing van. Nouwen faced emergency surgery. While in a

wakeful state, just prior to entering surgery, Nouwen was aware of the tangible presence of Jesus. The experience was of intense, unconditional love the likes of which he had never known before:

What I experienced then was something I had never experienced before: pure and unconditional love. Better still, what I experienced was an intensely personal presence, a presence that pushed all my fears aside and said, "Come, don't be afraid. I love you." A very gentle, non-judgmental presence; a presence that simply asked me to trust and trust completely. I hesitate to speak simply about Jesus, because my concern that the Name of Jesus might not evoke the full divine presence that I experienced. It was not a warm light, a rainbow, or a open door that I saw, but a human yet divine presence that I felt, inviting me to come closer and to let go of all fears. . . . I knew very concretely that he was there for me, but that he was embracing the universe. . . . All was well. The words that summarize it all are Life and Love. But these words were incarnate in a real presence Now I felt his presence in a most tangible way. . . . Mary, the Mother of Jesus, was there too, but her presence was much less immediate. It seemed that she wanted to remain in the background. At first I was so taken by the tangible presence of Jesus that Mary scarcely came to my mind. . . . When the nurses rolled me to the operating room and strapped me with outstretched arms on the operating table, I experienced an immense inner peace.³

Following the surgery that Nouwen did not think he would survive, he healed physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The never-to-be-repeated beatific vision would prove to have such a profound impact on him that he would change his understanding of his Christian vocation from preaching to people to simply sharing the "pure and unconditional love" of Jesus with all. To that end he dedicated the remainder of his life.⁴

During my tenure as a hospice chaplain, I heard accounts and observed incidents of dying people, as they drew near to death's door, being aware of the presence of loved ones who had preceded them in death. Invariably, there was for them a visible manifestation of the loved ones, although, of course, these manifestations were visible only to the dying. While the dying could not describe the effect of their experiences, their experiences appeared to give them comfort. As a parish minister, I heard a parishioner's account of that which she described as a visit from a deceased loved one. In the description, the experience happened while she was awake, it occurred only once, and, in her case, it actually occurred before she had any knowledge of her husband's death and as she came to discover, at exactly the same moment of his death. While at first it was very disquieting, her experience did not have a negative impact. Rather, in

time, it proved to be a source of great comfort.

My parishioner was eager and yet a little sheepish about telling her story, and she said that she hardly ever spoke of it with others, including family members, for fear of the negative reaction she might get. Such experiences might be dismissed, much as the experience of the women who returned from the empty tomb was dismissed "as an idle tale" (Luke 24:11). People might think the bereaved are "going crazy" or hallucinating. There is a time in the grief process where the bereaved believe they might indeed be going crazy, and often counselors have to reassure people that their emotional reactions are a normal part of the process. In spite of the growing publishing market for such phenomena, there remains in our rational culture a skepticism about such things, which are viewed as anecdotal and not empirically verifiable. And, to a significant degree, such skepticism may be justifiable, particularly in light of the culture's near obsession with all things "spiritual," including such things as sorcery, séances, Ouija boards, and tarot cards.

A Religious Perspective

Some might dismiss this kind of event as wish fulfillment, the workings of an over-active imagination in a hurting, wounded, and needful psyche. As there could be no empirical verification for the veracity of such an event, at best, it would be granted a psychological explanation—a visualization of one's relational needs—the fear of abandonment being assuaged by the conjured visit.

However, it is possible to move toward a religious perspective on paranormal activity that takes into consideration neurological and psychological occurrences, by considering the notion of trances. Trances and trance-like states have been part of religious experience from time immemorial and have served the function of connection or bridge from the natural to the supernatural. John Dominic Crossan, in his iconoclastic study *Jesus, A Revolutionary Biography*, offers the following explanation based on his understanding of the work of psychological anthropologist Erika Bourguignon related to a cross-cultural study of dissociational states:

There seems to be a normal range for physical or mental activity and for the brain chemistry that mediates between them and blurs their difference. Anything critically above or below that range can create trance, which I shall use as the single term for states variously called ecstasy, dissociation, or altered states of consciousness. Trance, therefore, can be produced by any critical change, be it decrease or increase, in the external stimulation of the senses, internal concentration of the mind, or chemical composition of the brain's neurobiology. It must, therefore, be accepted as a human universal, as another gift of neurobiological evolution, a possibility open, like language, to each and every human being. But, also like language, its

actualization is specified by psychosocial patterning—by cultural training, control, and expectation Trance is susceptible to a natural or a supernatural explanation, but it is also possible to overlay these explanations on top of one another—not just to discard one in favor of the other, but to let them interact with one another on the presumption that they are different interpretations of the same psychosomatic phenomenon.⁵

Whether or not the term “trance” is used, visitations or paranormal experiences such as those described above certainly could qualify as altered states of consciousness brought on by any number of stress conditions pressing upon the individual. Crossan’s explanation certainly helps ease the transition from the “natural” to the “supernatural” and offers a very nice explanation for why the dying, in their cultural training, see relatives; why I, in my cultural training, would visualize Doris; why Ken Wilber’s visualizing would go to the image of the Buddha or why, upon hearing that “audible click,” he would envision Treya’s soul burning clean; and why Henri Nouwen had a “tangible awareness” of Jesus and the Virgin Mary and not of, say, the Buddha or a plethora of Hindu gods.

Not to discard psychological explanations or any possible findings of scientific explorations into what may be neurological connections to such experiences, what about the supernatural perspective? Science addresses the “how” question; faith addresses the “why.” Sharon Begley and Anne Underwood in the feature article, “God and the Brain: How We’re Wired for Spirituality,” in the May 7, 2001 issue of *Newsweek* magazine explore the new field of “neurotheology” and conclude:

For all the tentative successes that scientists are scoring in their search for the biological bases for religious, spiritual and mystical experience, one mystery will surely lie forever beyond their grasp. They may trace a sense of transcendence to *this* bulge in our gray matter. And they may trace a feeling of the divine to *that* one. But it is likely that they will never resolve the greatest question of all—namely, whether our brain wiring creates God, or whether God created our brain wiring. Which you believe is, in the end, a matter of faith.⁶

What, then, about viewing such paranormal phenomena from a Christian faith perspective? Of course, wishing doesn’t mean that there is any reality beyond the wish, but then again, such an experience seen through the eyes of faith might constitute an affirmation of one’s belief in life beyond death and an affirmation of spiritual reality entering the realm of time and space to bring healing and wholeness.

I am not suggesting that a visit to a medium is in order for those who might like to converse with a departed loved one. Such action would lead down the

slippery slope of illusion, where the medium supposedly has the power to evoke a response from the spirit of the dead. The deception is the presumption of control on the part of the medium and on those attending the seance. The lie is that the spirit of the deceased can be conjured at all, let alone at will. The sadness is that the bereaved have their grief arrested and exploited. The living and the dead are locked in some kind of spiritualized time and space warp carved out of the need to hold on to what once was. The process of healing and growth in a fuller experience of resurrection life is stalled. Scriptural prohibitions concerning divination and the like concern the sin of playing God and the consequent harm that does to peoples' relationship with God. Nicholas Peter Harvey in his book, *Chapters on Resurrection and Bereavement*, contrasts the bereavement experiences he explores in his book and what happens at a seance: "The bereavement experiences . . . have in common an awareness of the dead person as more fully alive, more truly and richly himself or herself than ever before. Such awareness is at an opposite pole from the type of communication which occurs at a séance, which holds the bereaved in a frozen posture towards the dead rather than encouraging them to enter on the next stage of their own life's journey freed from the constraints of the past."⁷

Like Harvey's bereavement experiences, my epiphany was a significant step along the path to experiencing divine forgiveness, mercy, and peace. It led to my deepening appreciation of eternal life and a consequent understanding of how that appreciation can empower life here and now. Friend and former hospice nurse Patricia Bement brought to my attention the significance of the choice I made about where to go for help. She pointed out that I didn't go to a psychic in a vain attempt to control the situation and get my loved one back. I went to God in the wrenching realization that I was in control of so little and in need of so much. It was in emptiness and powerlessness that I was guided by the Spirit of Compassion to the source of healing, wholeness, and empowerment.

From a faith-development perspective, such as that of James Fowler, Ken Wilber, Jim Marion, and the rest, what is being described here could be criticized as reflecting a mythic-literal or mythic-consciousness state of faith. Marion, in his book *Putting on the Mind of Christ*, defines this stage in part as ". . . the consciousness of the child's (age seven to adolescence) emerging mind or ego. The child at this level believes that the 'God in the Sky,' much like its parents, can work every sort of miracle to meet the child's needs. . . . Until recently, the mythic level of consciousness has been the dominant level of consciousness in all the world's 'universal' religions, including Christianity."⁸ Further, Marion writes, ". . . (1) all of us went through this level during a period of childhood that we can still remember; (2) parts of most Christian adults' consciousness are usually still stuck at this level, often re-emerging in times of crisis, and (3) a large number of Christian adults, including many Christian leaders, not having heeded St. Paul about putting away the things of the child (1 Cor. 13:11), are still predominantly stuck in the rigidities and separation of mythic consciousness."⁹

While I would like to think that I had not gotten stuck at this level of faith

development but was, in fact, moving nicely through the higher levels, I have had to reflect seriously on my state of mind and spirit under the shock, stress, and duress of sudden loss. People deep in the throes of grief do revert back emotionally to an early childhood, perhaps even infant's, worldview. In the bereaved's fear and vulnerability, the world is no longer perceived to be a safe place. It is hostile, dangerous territory about which to be wary. Chaos once again reigns. In intense grief, when things go bump in the night, there is something to fear. As the infant longs to nestle against mother's breast for comfort and security, the bereaved long for the closeness of the one who is not there, the one whose presence helped give order and meaning to life—the beloved. These circumstances certainly would qualify as Marion's "time of crisis," during which people revert back to the mythic-consciousness stage of faith, and that is perhaps what I did in some measure. However, I didn't pray to the "God in the Sky" who was at my beck and call or scream, for that matter, to perform magic for me on demand; in that case I would have been better off going to a medium. Magic is the medium's forte. Rather, it was to the God revealed through Jesus Christ as "All Compassionate Being" that I cried for help.

Compassionate Revelations

Marcus J. Borg in his book, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, discusses how Jesus reveals compassion (the act of feeling with another) to be the central quality of God.¹⁰ He translates Luke 6:36 as "Be compassionate as God is compassionate." He states that in the Hebrew, the singular of the word for compassion literally means "womb." As an image, then, God is womblike. "As a mother loves the children of her womb and feels for the children of her womb, so God loves us and feels for us, for all [God's] children. In its sense of 'like a womb,' 'compassionate' has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring, perhaps embracing and encompassing. For Jesus, this is what God is like."¹¹ I yearned to hold and be held by Compassion. While I longed for the physical presence of my beloved, I prayed to the Universal Beloved. True, this deity is personified as Parent and, as such, is understood as the Ultimate Reality beyond names and anthropomorphisms. But as Jesus turned in his time of passion to "Abba" and as he completely thrust his being before this Source of Compassion, I knew in my state of powerlessness and God's revelation as compassion that my prayer could not be other than that of Jesus: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

My grief journey toward healing and wholeness has given me a deeper appreciation for the God whose nature it is to reach compassionately into time and space so that we might be freed from the constraints of the past and see the love which transcends the very limitations of time and space. As I continue to heal, I am beginning to hear for myself the words spoken to the women as they encountered the empty tomb: "Why do you seek the living among the dead?" (Luke 24:5). I am beginning to experience freedom to move from what was to what is and what is to be.

Further, I have begun to explore the postresurrection appearances of Jesus to his followers from the perspective of my experience. John Dominic Crossan dismisses the historicity of the postresurrection appearances and theorizes that they are fabrications of the post-crucifixion faith community jockeying for leadership positions.¹² Ironically, Crossan's aforementioned discussion of "trance" lends credence, I find, to considering the appearances as very real phenomena. Nicholas Peter Harvey gives two purposes for the appearances to the followers: "First, to convince them that he had been raised; secondly to prepare them for their new ministry."¹³ I would add a third—the postresurrection appearances reveal God's merciful response to loss. Thus, the appearances would not be just to convince as to convince through healing. Those visits as affirmations of life over death were a starting point, a transition point, or a transformation point from which the healing process having begun, the disciples could then begin the journey to understanding life in the Spirit.

Ken Wilber states that the philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, responding to fellow philosopher Immanuel Kant, wrote that we can't question awareness since the only tool we have is "awareness."¹⁴ I was aware of the presence of my late wife. If awareness was all I had, would not a loving God use that which would address that awareness? Would not a responsive God use a phenomenon perceivable in human awareness to express love? And isn't that exactly what God had done in Jesus—the Word become flesh? The Eternal Reality clothed Self in the temporal, manifested Self in the human Jesus of Nazareth, died, rose from the dead, and appeared as the Christ in various temporal manifestations for a period of forty days before the Ascension and then filled the community of faith with the Holy Spirit.

Harvey contends that the gospels were written from the perspective of grief.¹⁵ Bereavement is not so much a problem to be overcome as a gift to be accepted, for it is through the bereavement process that resurrection life is revealed and embraced. As the disciples and followers began the healing process, they would begin to let go of the need for the physical presence of Jesus, begin to embrace the eternal and the truth of God's victory of life over death in their awareness of the Spirit of Jesus who once they knew only in the flesh. They would begin to understand the redemption of God's created order. Then, being strengthened in the Holy Spirit, they would proclaim the promise of a new heaven and earth as disciples being transformed into apostles.

Scant attention has been paid to the disciples as bereaved. One could conclude from the biblical account that the disciples' grief was resolved quickly with the postresurrection appearances of Jesus. The assumption is that Jesus' followers grieved for fewer than three days. It's a short trip from Good Friday to Easter Sunday. Such a perspective does an injustice to the slow reality of the grief process. It also reaffirms the erroneous assumption that grief is something to be "gotten over" rather than to be worked through for a lifetime. Grief counselors often advise the bereaved to talk about the deceased "until they get the story straight." The time from Jesus' passion through the Ascension was

short; however, the disciples had time to process their grief, to talk it out and get the story straight, so to speak, before the biblical events moved years later from oral tradition to indelible ink. Consider the biblical account as a condensation of what for the disciples was a thirty to forty years' spiritual journey from the Passion to the Ascension.

Consider the postresurrection appearances as gifts of compassion to people in profound grief who needed relief from their pain so the healing process could begin. Their grief and pain opened them to God's resounding, definitive response to death. They were in the devastated condition of having experienced the complete, total death of their loved one. They would never be with him again as they had been. Even given the postresurrection appearances and the gift of the Spirit, the reality was that the disciples had to come to terms, as do all grieving people, with the fact that they no longer had the physical presence of their Beloved with them as they had before his death. Far from the postresurrection appearances wiping out any further need to grieve, they initiated the necessary healing, so that the process could continue toward embracing, affirming, and living resurrected life.

In the postresurrection appearances, we see a God who responds to the particular needs of Jesus' followers. The revelation is of a Jesus who has profoundly changed but who is perceivable in a way the followers could grasp. In the case of Mary Magdalene, God responds to her brokenness and sorrow with the appearance and soft call of Jesus. For her believing heart, this was sufficient. She is advised not to touch or "hold on" to that manifestation of the living Lord. Mary needs to "let go and let God" in order eventually to embrace the Spirit of Christ as it is revealed in her heart and through the Spirit-led community of faith. On the other hand, the gift to the fearful, cowering disciples is a flesh and blood manifestation even locked doors couldn't keep out. Given their "cultural training, control and expectations," what other visions (trances) would they have had?

In one appearance, Jesus tells Thomas to touch his wounds (John 20:24-29). Howard Hageman, commenting on that Johannine passage, offers an interesting perspective on Thomas and his particular need:

John's account of the experience of Thomas has usually been presented as the classic case of skepticism, and "doubting Thomas" has become a common English expression. But we need to do a little thinking as to the reason for Thomas's questioning attitude. The print of the nails and the scar in the side of the risen Lord were for Thomas the key question. Does this not indicate that identity was the crucial matter for the apostle? Some celestial phantom, totally different from the man of Calvary, simply would not do. The risen Lord speaking peace and empowering forgiveness *had* to be the same person who had been lifted up on the cross, or, so far as Thomas was concerned, the whole thing fell apart. If his death is not an

eternal part of the living Lord, then . . . redemption is flawed. Thomas' answering confession, "My Lord and my God" (v. 8), was possible only because he was convinced that the Christ of Calvary and the Christ of Easter were the same.¹⁶

For Thomas, clear identification of the appearance with the Jesus of Thomas's personal history was essential. For Mary, clear identification of the appearance with the Jesus of Mary's personal history was essential. For me, identification of the phenomenon with the Doris of my personal history was essential. To paraphrase Hageman, not any old phantom totally different from the Doris I knew would do. For Thomas, it came through a touch. For Mary it came through a voice. For me, also, it came through a voice. For Nouwen, it came through a feel. For Wilbur it came through a sound. For others it comes through a sight or some other awareness. The disciples got what they needed in the way of confirmation of the one they knew to take them beyond where they were or where they had been to what is and will be.

Of course, St. John as theologian uses such imagery metaphorically. With it he makes affirmations about the Resurrection signaling the redemption of all of God's creation and the sacrificial and communal nature of God's victorious love. But the metaphors grow out of some kind of an awareness of Jesus' presence for the believers. Without the awareness there would be no greater meaning. The healing has implications beyond the particular event, but there would be no meaning without the particular experience, and those experiences were responses appropriate to the needs of the recipients.

Spirit of Consolation

The author of the Gospel of John, from his postresurrection experiences and years of reflecting, looks back on the time of table fellowship just before Jesus' passion and death and reveals Jesus' compassionate response to the disciples' anticipatory grief. Jesus assures and comforts them with these words:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate [or Helper], to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in [or among] you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while, the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live (John 14:16-19).

Raymond Brown, in his benchmark tome, *The Gospel According to John*, comments on the present tense of "abides" in verse seventeen, advising that it be understood as anticipatory or future ". . . since for John the Paraclete can only come when Jesus has gone (xvi 7); during Jesus' ministry there is no Spirit given to men (vii 39)."¹⁷ Jesus goes away; Jesus' spirit—the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit

of Comfort and Compassion—comes to their aid. In Appendix 5, Brown summarizes the multifunctional word, Paraclete, and notes that one of its roles is that of “a *consoler* for the disciples for he takes Jesus’ place among them.”¹⁸ Further, Brown draws a conclusion about the work of the Holy Spirit today: “It is our contention that John presents the Paraclete as the Holy Spirit in a special role, namely, as the personal presence of Jesus in the Christian while Jesus is with the Father.”¹⁹ So then, an aspect of that multifaceted special role of the Spirit in the life of the Christian (or I might add *among* Christians) is to console or comfort in Jesus’ physical absence. Also, if another aspect of the Paraclete’s role is as witness to the truth, then part of the truth to which the Spirit will witness is Jesus’ revelation of compassion as an attribute of God. The Spirit is of Consolation and Compassion—two essential responses to those who feel like abandoned orphans in need of healing for their fear and grief.

The comforting words of Jesus are spoken just after Jesus tells them that the Advocate/Helper (Holy Spirit) will be given to them by the Father. This Comforter is the Spirit of truth that the world cannot receive because “it neither sees him or knows him” (John 14:17). Interestingly, the language is visual. Jesus, anticipating the disciples’ grief, comforts them in their anticipatory grief by telling them that he is coming back to them and they will see him. How? This seeing, which the world doesn’t participate in (presumably because the world does not love Jesus and, therefore, will not grieve his absence), is connected to the work of the Spirit as Advocate/Helper. The world is not in anticipatory grief over the immanent departure of Jesus. The disciples are, and it is the reflective testimony by John, one who indeed did see, that the disciples are gifted with this particular manifestation of the Spirit. After the Ascension, Jesus’ presence was not experienced in the same manner. Seemingly, the need for postresurrection appearances was satisfied. The unique nature of the appearances was manifested only among the grieving; having accomplished its purpose, that form of revelation was no longer needed, but the need for the presence of the Advocate/Helper continued.

Think of the postresurrection appearances in terms of trance as defined earlier. The critical change necessary in the brain chemistry that mediates between the physical and the mental to enter into the trance state has been addressed, satisfied, and brought back into the normal range. Normalcy was restored for functioning. Might it be said that healing took place as a result of the trance? The trauma is over; the trance is over. And yet, could it not also be said that in the aftermath of the trance, the person would never be the same again? St. Paul didn’t keep having Damascus Road experiences over and over. In that sense he returned to normalcy. He could function physically and mentally and emotionally, but having had the experience, he would never be the same again—spiritually. Fourteen years later (in what may be a reference to the Damascus Road experience) he recounts that he had been “caught up to the third heaven” (2 Cor. 12:2). He wasn’t still there, but having been there changed his worldview and turned his life’s direction one hundred and eighty degrees. The disciples

were restored to normal functioning but would never be the same again. Having had those healing revelations, the grieving disciples were ready for the next step in understanding the work of the Spirit—the meaning of life in community and how it is to be lived. They were prepared through the totality of their experiences, not excluding the post resurrection experiences. Such personal, intimate responses from God can be seen as reflections of God's compassion. In that mirror, the disciples gained self-understanding and understanding of what it means to live compassionately in community.

At Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ was poured out upon all believers, confirming the eternal truth about the ubiquitous, or in classic Christian terminology, omnipresent, nature of the Trinitarian God. Seeing is superseded by believing without having seen—"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). Jesus' words to Thomas are not so much a judgment on Thomas's inadequate faith as they constitute an anticipatory affirmation of the future work of the Spirit in community. God is transcendent and God is immanent; God is "beyond" and God is "within" and with the granting of the Spirit, God is affirmed as "among." Jesus Christ went away so that his presence could be experienced universally in the Holy Spirit. Jesus sits at the right hand of his Heavenly Father and also holds a place in our hearts leading us to embrace the loving community wherein we affirm the presence of the living Lord. God is "Father in Heaven" beyond; God is Son, within; God is Spirit, among.

Our Need and God's Response

For the bereaved, does the response to need only well up from within and project outwardly, does the response to need come solely from an external reality, or could it be both? Couldn't that which is described as psychological projection or neurological occurrences be understood as God within clarifying our need and formulating the response? Did not Jesus say the kingdom or realm was both within and among us (Luke 17: 21), and didn't St. Paul exclaim, "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20)? Yet, we also affirm that God is a reality beyond or outside of ourselves. We meditate and pray both inwardly and outwardly.

In the Spirit of Christ we come to experience and affirm the God of Compassion who is within, beyond, and among and we begin to understand the permeating nature of resurrection life. God within experiences with us our need, and this same God, as the God beyond, responds in a way that addresses our awareness. God's use of phenomena to enter human awareness points to reality beyond the experience, to God's loving action. Let us accept the reality of the grieving person's need. Then, in faith, let us assume the spiritual reality of life after death and the eternal existence of the dead in Christ beyond time and space. Rather than the experience being described as merely a psychological projection of one's needs, it could be affirmed as a caring, personal response from God in the form of a loved one's living presence, perceivable to our senses but coming

from a source beyond sensory perception.

Philip Yancy, in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, writes:

Ancient religions, such as the Roman paganism of Jesus' day, believed that the actions of gods in the heavens above affected the earth below. If Zeus got angry, thunderbolts shot out. Like kids dropping rocks off highway bridges onto the cars below, the gods rained cataclysm onto the earth. "As above, so below," went the ancient formula. Jesus, though, inverted that formula: "As below, so above." . . . A believer prays and heaven responds What we humans do here decisively affects the cosmos.²⁰

"What we do here decisively affects the cosmos." What a wonderful affirmation! That's prayer. We matter; we're not victims tossed to and fro by the whims of capricious gods off somewhere in the heavens. We are not pawns in a cosmic chess game. The God who is within, beyond, and among listens, communes with our spirit, and responds to our need in love. God responded decisively in Jesus the Christ to the world's need for salvation and God continues to confirm that loving response.

Karen S. Peterson writes poignantly of the effort for peace Amber Amundson is making in the aftermath of her late husband Craig's death at the Pentagon in the September 11, 2001, tragedy. Amundson, victim of the sudden, tragic death of her twenty-eight-year-old husband, describes events of a fall day, not long after September 11, as she joined an organized walk for peace:

I found myself in the middle of a cemetery, begging for the presence of Craig, or of God. And then it was like I heard Craig whisper, "I am around you. I am with you." . . . and I saw this tree. I looked at how powerful the trunk and the limbs seemed. And I thought of how powerful is the presence of God. There is something out there that protects us. I thought about purity, how everything around me was part of this greater force, this great spirit. And for the first time, I really felt I had such a powerful connection to the presence of God. And I had Craig's spirit with me. I realized that death—that is so final for us when we are grieving and deeply saddened and wanting Craig back here so badly—on that day, I understood that he is still with us. There is more to our existence than our physical world.²¹

For some, this discussion might beg the question: Why don't all grieving people have the kind of experience that I had or that Amber Amundson had? We can consider both the natural and supernatural perspectives. Each of us is uniquely psychosocially conditioned and will draw on those experiences in fashioning a healing response unique to our needs. From a faith perspective, we

need only look again to the dynamic, personal nature of God's relationship with us. God knows our needs even before we ask (Matt. 6:8) and the Spirit intercedes on our behalf with sighs too deep for words, even when we don't know how to ask for ourselves (Romans 8: 26). God cares and responds to our particular needs. A response from God relates to a personal circumstance. Not all are healed in the same way, but the promise of healing is for all.

In my case I was suffering under an enormous burden of guilt for not, from my perspective, having been a better husband. Doris had died suddenly and unexpectedly. There had been no time for the necessary affirmations of love and work of reconciliation. She was just gone. If it were entirely up to me, I certainly would not have conjured a visit such as I received. In my dreams, she was always going away from me, turning her back to me, escaping my presence. My nightmares were confirmation of my own self-critical nature. Any vision of my own making would have been scripted much differently from the one I received and only would have compounded the pain and self-condemnation. But in addition to being quite self-critical spiritually, I have also been immersed in the culture of compassion. That has been a significant spiritual/psychological/social environment preparing me to see what I did. What I did receive without my even asking was a vision of "grace upon grace" and an epiphany that pointed beyond itself to the source of all life. As Harvey stated, "Those people, dying or dead, who are perceived by us, however intermittently, as 'in the Spirit' become for us radiations of God's love, of his grace, of his life for us and in us. Such people are rays of light converging on a single source, the unity and purpose of all things. This influence properly understood draws us towards that source, draws us into the life of the Holy Trinity. They are at one with the source, but are not themselves the source."²²

Doris Moreland Jones, in her book, *And Not One Bird Stopped Singing*, makes an affirmation of her late husband's presence in her life this way:

Even though it has been five years since my husband died, I continue to miss him. . . . But Harry will always be with me. He is in our children and grandchildren in their mannerisms, their senses of humor, their values, and their interests. He is present when our adult children or friends quote him or retell one of his stories. The yellow roses sent by friends on anniversaries are a nice reminder. Harry is with me in memory and in prayer, for the love between us is a spiritual bond that death did not sever. . . . I still have no idea what heaven is like. It remains a mystery, and that is all right as I have learned to live knowing there is much I will never understand this side of death. I am content knowing that God is love, and it is in that love where heaven exists.²³

Jones's testimony reflects God's gift of life among us—in community. God responded to her need; she has seen and heard the living presence of her loved

one incarnated through children and friends, and she makes a beautiful affirmation of faith and healing. We both can make an affirmation of faith in a loving, responsive God and give thanks for the healing. Different needs and different experiences evoked different manifestations for each of us, and this is testimony to the personal nature of God's loving response.

I sometimes think of my experience as being akin to Mary's experience of Jesus' presence outside the tomb. God's Spirit groaned with her grieving, broken spirit, preparing her to hear the living Jesus' voice, to see his countenance, and to begin the process of healing. Weeping, she went to be near to the one she had come to love so deeply. She returned proclaiming, "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:11-18). I did not ask for a vision or a dream or a visitation; I did not ask to have a conversation with my late wife. I did want to be close to her and I did beg God for relief from the relentless, excruciating pain. Indignant shouts to the heavens against the injustice of it all and a raised fist flailing in face of God became whimpering bent-knee pleas for mercy. My need was for absolution.

About a year after Doris's death, the answer came and I saw and heard it. As God's Spirit communed with mine, I believe that God within, who had experienced everything that I could experience, the one known in the flesh as the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, embraced all my hurt, vulnerability, guilt, anger, fear of abandonment, and brokenness. I then received a gift of God's grace in the presence and voice of my loved one when she appeared and simply, lovingly called my name as Jesus had once called the name of Mary. I believe that, as with Jesus Christ, our loved ones continue to live within our hearts and beyond us in the eternity community. In this light, memories are not made of the stuff that fades. Rather, from a sacramental perspective, the memories take on a new dimension. Seen in the light of the Christ event, our memories of loved ones become anamnesis (memory); in our memories we have the gift of the living presence, a presence which points to God.

I trust that without the epiphany, I would have continued to heal, as has Jones. However, I give thanks for what I did receive, because it was in light of that particular gift of unconditional love that my healing began in earnest and my faith took on new dimensions. It has been nine years now since my wife's death. As does Jones, I miss my late spouse and, of course, I see her in my children's faces. She is present in their laughter and tears, and, yes, to be perfectly honest, in some of their idiosyncratic behavior. I continue to talk with her, usually about parental concerns, even though my children Matthew and Rachel are well into adulthood. I solicit her advice, imagining how she would have handled this situation or that. I remain particularly sad that they don't have their mother's physical presence with them for the ordinary times but especially for the major moments—graduations, weddings, births. Often my conversations with her are when I am alone in the car, having been prompted by the sadness that comes from hearing a familiar song being played on the radio. Occasionally, I'll have a few words to say to her while standing on the back deck of my home looking up

at the starry, starry sky.

A couple signs indicate that I am moving beyond the need for her physical presence. For one, I can read or think about the University of Miami's report to the family detailing how most of her organs went to keep so many others alive. I don't break down in sobs, wishing only that her organs were back in her body and she with me. Now, I am filled more with gratitude for her life-giving generosity, for the Christ-like compassion she had for others. Also, healing is evidenced by this very article. Doris was a free-lance artist. It was as if our creative energies were intertwined. When she stopped painting, I stopped writing. The juices just dried up and blew away. I didn't know if they would ever come back, and for a long time I didn't care. The exhaustion that saturated and weighed down every cell of my being consumed what little energy I had.

But things have changed. I have married a wonderful and beautiful woman who also was widowed. My spouse, Chris, walks and talks with her late husband Mike and sees so much of him in her son, Jim. Our love for each other grows each day, and even as we learn more about each other's flaws, by grace we are becoming soul mates. I trust that, in the wake of the spiritual death and resurrection I experienced through grief, I have learned and now practice some things about being a better partner. Our healing as well as that of our children is still "in process." We are taking it one day at a time, we're learning to "let go and let God," and our prayer is "to see Thee more clearly, to love Thee more dearly, to follow Thee more nearly, day by day."

Ultimately, of course, as Jones stated, these things remain a mystery. God transcends all categorizing, anthropomorphizing, and defining. Words fail us and we take the Word which "will never pass away" on faith. "For now we see in a mirror, dimly but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:12-13). Huston Smith, in an essay in the book, *Jesus at 2000*, writes, "Everything centers in Absolute, Infinite Being, which is perfect for exemplifying every virtue we know—truth, beauty, goodness; being, awareness [as above on awareness], and bliss; tenderness, love, and compassion [as above on compassion as the central attribute of God]—to an unimaginably superlative degree while fusing them, causing each to absorb the virtues of the others. God knows lovingly and loves knowingly and *pari passu* with the other virtues. . . . (B)eing theomorphic creatures created in God's image, we can know because God knows, though our knowledge is approximate."²⁴

While our anthropomorphizing of God is our way of conceptualizing God and as such contains its own inherent limitations, God's theomorphizing of humanity (Gen. 1:26) provides the way to the experience of God's virtues, however approximate. Being made in God's image and having been restored to that reality by the revelation of Jesus Christ, I have come to know (however approximately over however long a period of time the grief process takes) compassionate healing for grief, in part through the God-granted gift of an

awareness of the grace-filled presence of my loved one. Being a recipient of God's compassionate love, I have come to understand more clearly, with Henri Nouwen, that being "in God's image" means living that compassion with myself and in community. In addition, if Huston Smith is correct, then I have received an experience of the fullness of God's virtues. Perhaps that's another way of expressing the scriptural affirmation of praise, "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:20-21). The generosity of God is such that a divine response to need carries with it abundance unforeseen. To that I can only add my own Amen!

Compassion in the Body of Christ

Finally, I would suggest some implications for the pastoral care life and worship life of congregations, given this understanding of revelation in relation to grief. How does the Body of Christ live compassionately with the grieving? If the gospels were written from the perspective of grief in the process of being healed, wouldn't that give those grieving in the community of faith a sense of comfort, knowing that the disciples experienced what they experience? Wouldn't that be grace upon grace for those in grief? And, further, who are the grieving? The gospel is universal and universally we experience loss. Loss is a constant. At each and every moment, we are grieving to one degree or another the loss of something in life. Does not the very creation groan?

Perhaps the loss is so large that it is acknowledged readily if inadequately in our society—e.g., the death of a spouse or child, the horrific consequences of war. Perhaps it is a loss that is not given as much deference, yet is significant for the person experiencing the loss. Because of its frequency in society, divorce suffers less moral judgment but also is given less attention as loss. Then there are such things as the loss of a job, the loss of the nearness of friends in a move, the loss of one's youth, of physical prowess, or of a part of one's body through illness or accident. Perhaps it's the loss of a child in a stillbirth or miscarriage. Some of these losses and others might even be considered disenfranchised grief—grief that society doesn't acknowledge at all. Such grief is compounded by double abandonment—first the loss and then the absence of recognition of that loss. People must suffer alone and without support or even the knowledge of that grief by others, even their closest friends and relatives. Perhaps it is material poverty or "isms"—racism, sexism, ageism. Grief is not just experienced by individuals; it is part of life in community. It is ethnic, racial, tribal, national, gender based, sexual orientation based, globally and environmentally based, faith based. It may take the form of a loss of self esteem or integrity or faith or hope and lead to despair.

Is there not a balm in Gilead? Isn't it good news, the Good News, that we need not despair, we need not grieve as those who are without hope? The disciples' grief wasn't resolved in three days, but because of God's gift of the

postresurrection appearances and the gift of the Holy Spirit, the disciples grew in faith, hope, and love as they processed their grief. This gives the grieving individual and grieving community the encouragement needed to experience those same things as they move toward healing. God's response to need is personal, so a compassionate response from within the community of faith should be addressed personally and specifically to that need.

How can that happen? In the community's pastoral care life (and I don't mean primarily the counseling the pastoral staff does, but rather the care that takes place within community), it can happen by listening, being informed/trained, getting to know and responding intentionally and appropriately. It means being informed about death and having the courage to "bring death out of the closet" in a society living in chronic denial and living out that denial, suppressed grief, and repressed memories in bizarre and harmful ways (e.g., on a societal level, our attraction to gratuitous violence and violent forms of death depicted in the cinema).

In a congregation's formal liturgical life, it can happen by exploring ways to observe and celebrate the sacraments as vehicles of grace-filled healing to the individual and the community. One might be incorporating denominationally sanctioned liturgies of healing into the worship life of the congregation. In a congregation that I served as a specialized interim minister we observed, with help from the local hospice and the parish nursing staff of a local hospital, what was called "Compassion Sabbath." The entire service, which our congregation observed in conjunction with the beginning of Passion Week, was focused on the theme of death. The next week, one of the choir members told me that her thirty-four-year-old son, who has terminal cancer but who has kept it to himself, was in attendance during Compassion Sabbath and for the first time really *began* to talk about what is happening to him.

I believe it can be a source of hope for the body of Christ to think of the disciples and to model their working through denial, guilt, anger, and fear. We can move as they moved toward the place where we are strengthened sufficiently in the Word and in the sacraments to reach out in love, compassion, and justice toward others. We will be apostles who, like Nouwen's "wounded healers," embody life beyond death, helping others move from loss, brokenness, and grief to wholeness and an affirmation of life abundant.

ENDNOTES

¹ Ken Wilber, *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1991), 406-407.

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³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Beyond the Mirror: Reflections on Death and Life* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990), 35-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*

- ⁵ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 87-88.
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- ⁷ Nicholas Peter Harvey, *Death's Gift: Chapters on Resurrection and Bereavement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 11.
- ⁸ Jim Marion, *Putting on the Mind of Christ: The Inner Work of Christian Spirituality* (Charlottesville, Vir.: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2000), 41.
- ⁹ *Ibid.*, 45-46.
- ¹⁰ Marcus J. Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 1994), 48.
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- ¹⁴ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 97.
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- ¹⁶ Howard G. Hageman and J. C. Baker, *Proclamation: Aids for Interpreting the Lessons of the Church Year*, Series C, Easter (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 19.
- ¹⁷ Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John (xii-xxi)*, Anchor Bible, vol. 29A (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), 640.
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- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 1139.
- ²⁰ Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 229-30.
- ²¹ Karen S. Peterson, "Work for Peace Gives Young Widow Courage," *USA Today*, January 21, 2002, Section D, 6.
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- ²³ Doris Moreland Jones, *And Not One Bird Stopped Singing: Coping with Transition and Loss in Aging* (Nashville: Upper Room, 1997), 110.
- ²⁴ Huston Smith, "Jesus and the World's Religions," in Marcus Borg, ed., *Jesus at 2000* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998), 113.

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