

**Editors Note:** *The clarion call for Catholic cemeterians to address the question of bereavement ministry came in 1979 at the Milwaukee Convention where the following address was delivered. At that time Mr. Sankovich was the Superintendent of Mt. Kelly Cemetery in Dearborn, MI, and a member of the NCCC Parish Cemetery Committee*

## ***Cemeteries Ministering to the Bereaved***

*Joseph B. Sankovich*

***A child near death I saw today,  
His smile too slow, his face too gray  
His gaze not here but far away  
And I wondered, tomorrow mine this way?***

***I hold my own and give him a kiss  
His grinning return leaves a feeling of bliss  
So I almost believe there is nothing amiss.  
Please, let him always stay just like this.***

***He's warm and alive, eager to smile  
Jumping and hopping and running a mile  
An innocent babe without cunning or guile  
All I ask is to keep him just for a while.***

***Who is to stay and who is to go?  
Until the last moment who is to know?  
There is no rhyme or reason but this must be so  
But I'm screaming inside, never mine, never no!***

The poem, along with a number of others which I will share with you during the course of my remarks, comes from a book of poems written by the mother of a child dying of cancer. She wrote the poems during the time of her son Jeff's illness; Jeff died when he was 9½. The poems were a gift to Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and she was generous enough to share them with participants in a Life, Death and Transition workshop two summers ago in Escondido, California.

Several weeks ago, I had the opportunity to share lunch with Elisabeth at Mission San Luis Rey in Ocean-side, California. In the course of that meal we talked about the recent experience of a metropolitan Detroit young man about whom the same poem could just as easily have been written. I would like to tell you about Marty, because the way in which he lived, faced and claimed his cancer, and died serves as an important testament to the work which is being done first in the medical profession, now in the pastoral and death-related professions.

As a senior in high school, last Christmas, Marty was diagnosed with cancer of the liver. His first surgery was thought to be quite successful, but around Easter he experienced a relapse and another surgery disclosed that his time with us would not be long. At this point, the

wisdom of this seventeen year old becomes very apparent. After a private consultation with his surgeon during which his list of questions was honestly faced, Marty elected to repeat that meeting, this time including his parents and announced the conclusions he had reached based on the information shared.

In the presence of his parents and doctor, with the support of his priest-friend and high school chaplain he indicated the following, 1) no desire for further chemotherapy as its use could extend his life only minimally and the side effects were too high a price to pay; 2) a desire to be as alert and pain-free as possible; 3) a desire to die at home where he could be surrounded and supported by his family and close friends. Marty received the support, encouragement and approval of his doctor and parents in his decisions. Each of his hopes was satisfied. While he had a couple of sleepless nights in the final week of his life, some slight discomfort, he had no strong pain, he remained alert and in his own bed slept peacefully into the waiting arms of a loving and compassionate Christ. The family doctor came that night as did his priest-friend and another parish priest. Together with the members of his family, his doctor orchestrated a healing farewell, allowing each member of the family and those close friends who had been called to each say their

own private good-bye. Once the funeral director had been summoned, the doctor facilitated the inclusion of Marty's brothers and classmates in the preparation and removal of his body to the funeral home. There were tears, anger and much pain that a life was over so quickly. But as the funeral liturgy would testify, Marty died as he had lived. His funeral was truly *celebrated*, a real song of joy, with Marty's message to all gathered, "Know that I love all of you very much, that I realize now how much you have loved me, and that I am in a much better place now."

Marty's experience was as positive for himself and his family because a group of people stepped out of their traditional roles into an experiment and took tremendous risks to facilitate this reality. The surgeon, called upon to heal, did not abandon a terminal patient and his family, but recognized and called forth their anger, fear, frustration, coupled it with an honest sharing of his own sorrow and stayed with them through his death and into the difficulties of the tomorrows. The priest, chaplain of a metropolitan high school, who has seen parents of students die each year as well as a number of students, took upon himself an additional burden and experimented in the formation of a peer support group for high school bereaved students. The parish cemetery director, seeing anger and hostility, suffering, grief and death sometimes expressed, sometimes muted, who took the risk of facing his own grief situations, and having been freed from some of them and still working on others, took the risk of also stepping out of a traditional role and offering his experience as a resource to his High School Bereavement Group. Out of this and other experiences just like it, I have come to believe that our parish cemeteries are not just a place for the burial of the dead, but that we have an obligation that goes far beyond that. We must reach out in a ministerial fashion for the living, the survivors.

Our convention theme this year has been "The Catholic Cemetery—A Vital Dimension of Christ's Work in the Parish." Within the context of cemeteries minis-



*Joseph B. Sankovich, CCE, CPC, President of Joseph B. Sankovich & Associates, Edmonds, WA*

tering to the bereaved, I would like to share with you perhaps more of a challenge than a blueprint, a "how to do it formula." In the past several years during which we have included a ministerial dimension of bereavement in our parish cemetery program, we certainly have not exhausted all of the possible approaches to facilitating the resolution of grief. This work has been done on a local, parish cemetery basis and not on a full-scale diocesan level; that of course is another challenge. My goal with you is merely to manifest the need in more personal terms, place the need within a gospel and thus ministerial context, offer some concrete examples of how we have attempted to meet the need on a local basis and speak on availability to anyone who might wish to implement a program along the same lines.

I firmly believe that the Scriptures are dynamic, that they hold truths applicable to each age and time. It is for this reason that I read from the Gospel of John, the 20th Chapter, wherein the grieving Mary Magdalene returns to the tomb, the grave of Jesus.

Meanwhile, Mary stood weeping beside the tomb. Even as she wept, she stooped to peer inside, and there she saw two angels in dazzling robes. One was seated at the head and the other at the foot of the place where Jesus' body had lain. "Woman," they asked her, "why are you weeping?" She answered them, "Because the Lord has been taken away and I do not know where they have put Him." She had no sooner said this than she turned around and caught sight of Jesus standing there. But she did not know him. "Woman," he asked her, "Why are you weeping? Who is it you are looking for?" She supposed he was the gardener, so she said, "Sir, if you are the one who carried him off, tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away." Jesus said to her, "Mary!" She returned to him and said in Hebrew, "*Rabbouni!*" (meaning "Teacher").

Here we find something with which we are all quite familiar, a family returning to the grave after burial. Mary and her companions had come to anoint the body of Jesus, prepare it properly for burial. In a concrete fashion, they were acting out of their grief, taking steps to resolve it by doing something concrete, a task remaining because of the hasty burial of Jesus necessitated by the approach of the Sabbath. Interestingly enough, it is within the burial place, the cemetery, that the core message of our Faith is revealed, that this Jesus who lived and died, has been raised to a new life which we shall all one day share. How interesting it is for us that Jesus was mistaken for a cemeterian! And in taking his place within that setting, how often have we heard something of the same anxiety which Mary voiced at the grave, "Why is the grave marker not properly placed? Why isn't the grass planted? Where are the flowers we put there last week?" Sensitive to her condition, isn't it a lesson for us in how Jesus responds to her, just one word, "Mary," and a peace, a comfort is restored. Her need is recognized for what it is; it is met and the resolution of grief takes on a new dimension in the promise of reunion in life eternal.

As we begin to face the question of how we can practically become further involved in the ministerial aspect of the resolution of grief in the bereavement situation, it may be well to define some terms and look closely at the dynamics of the grief situation. We all grieve; it is important to recognize this at the outset. We grieve when we face old age, when we recognize that we have reached the high point of our career, when we lose our hair, when we move from a familiar neighborhood or parish, when we experience a divorce, when a child grows up and leaves home, when we change jobs, when a loved one dies. Those of us who work among high school students recognize grief when we think about the many tears that are shed at a graduation. While we may be culled into thinking of them as tears of joy, they are certainly mixed with loss, a recognition that there is no turning back, that the close associations during high school will no longer have the same form and frequency. Life is filled with these griefs, and so I am comfortable with this working definition: "Grief is the response to any loss or separation, real or imagined, actual or symbolic, of any emotionally significant person, object or situation which is perceived to be of an irredeemable or permanent nature." Bereavement, then flowing out of grief, may be defined as "a period in one's life following the death of a significant other. It says nothing of the quality or duration of emotion, but only signifies a date within a personal history."

Kubler-Ross, in her book *On Death and Dying*, spoke of five psychological stages of dying, those being *denial*, *hostility*, *bargaining*, *depression*, *acceptance*. In working with the terminal patient, these are important stages to understand, but certainly not to be locked into, expecting each patient to pass through them successively and in quantified and predictable moments. We can look at the grieving situation in much the same way. Grief needs to be ventilated; it cannot be allowed to turn inward to fester. Oftentimes, however, we experience a person in this situation and are completely baffled at how to facilitate a release of this pent-up emotion.

Just as Elisabeth spoke of the psychological steps of dying, there are also progressive steps to the resolution of grief. Those begin with the actual *separation*, move through a *confrontation*, an *expression*, a *reorganization* and finally *resolution*.

In an unhealthy situation, the movement will either not begin at all, or once the actual separation takes place, the movement is toward *denial*, *repression*, *diffusion*, *depression* and/or *aggression*.

In the helpful expression of grief, let me further comment on the natural stages through which we pass. Once we are confronted with the reality of a permanent, lasting separation, we begin to face the implications of that separation, the love object no longer being present as we knew him or her. Little realizations like absence from a favorite chair in the den come and go; we gradually accumulate them into a full-blown realization of absence/separation. Having accumulated this information, we begin to examine the implications of that separation and confront, recognized that this presence, this affection will no longer exist in a familiar and recognized pattern. At this point we can begin to confront and

express our feelings. These feelings can be anger, sadness, abandonment, frustration, hostility, desertion. It is important here to recognize that it is healthy and important that these feelings surface and be ventilated. Buried or held within they are only going to fester and erupt in some other way, oftentimes in hostility toward someone other than the love object. Perhaps each of you has been the object of such undeserved anger and hostility.

By way of a concrete example, having begun to confront the realization that a husband will no longer be around to change the oil in the car and do the tune-up in the garage, making a mess with the oil on the floor and on the clothes, recognizing that there are other people who are available to do this task, even if they have to be paid, the bereaved is taking the next healthy step of reorganization, making an adjustment that is necessary to accomplish the task at hand. It is then possible to move onto a resolution that may take the form of remembering the happy moments of knowing that the spouse was in the garage, under the car, hearing the familiar tinkering sounds, recognizing that the oil on the clothes was not so important as the fuss once made, and just enjoying the happiness of the memory. Taken in the opposite direction, where the widow does not follow such a pattern, but rather in the absence of the deceased, then not having followed a car maintenance schedule, the bereaved widow experiences car problems. Having diffused her attention from the reality of the car needing regular attention, she experiences a problem and takes

## Tribute Design Systems

An architectural firm founded  
to meet the design/planning needs of  
cemeteries, churches and funeral homes

### We offer you:

- On site evaluations
- Conceptual design services
- Construction analysis
- Feasibility studies

Providing a full range of architectural services that  
meet the diverse needs of cemeteries at an  
affordable price.



Setting the standards for the 90's...and beyond

383 Williamstowne Delafield, WI 53018 414-646-3367

one of two courses, namely depression or aggression. The depressed person may just withdraw, stay at home and punish herself because the car will not work. The aggressive personality may have the car removed to a garage where some innocent mechanic becomes the brunt of an emotional explosion of hostility and anger. Would it not be far better in this instance, as well as many others, to be in the condition of having faced and resolved the grief, allowed ourselves the time it takes to mourn through our loss, and then reorganize our lives and go on living?

In the work we do as professional cemeterians, it is important to face the question of how we administratively isolate ourselves and thus contribute to the denial/depression/aggression syndrome rather than the confrontation/expression/reorganization and resolution sequence. On one level, our cemeteries and our profession as cemeterians, much like funeral directors, elicits an uneducated, emotional rejection from the man on the street. Our self-image and the image of our workplace is at question here. I think another of the poems of Jeffie's mother illustrates this point quite well:

***Come to the playroom and look inside  
See all the toys of the children who died  
There is Beth Ann's doll and the book  
from Mary  
A bat and a ball, and a mitt from Larry.***

***Kenny's crayons are used each day  
And the coloring books belong to Kay.  
Boxes of toys and boxes of joys  
That's all that's left of the dead girls and  
boys.***

***I wonder what of Jeffie's we'll give  
To this graveyard that says these children  
lived.***

***His fire engine or the red old trike  
A puzzle, a book, or his shiny new bike.***

***It's suppose to be fun to come here and  
play  
With a sick little child made happy today.  
But my eyes and my heart form this place  
want to go  
It's filled with the ghosts of the children  
we know.***

Individually, our first step is to face the question within of unresolved grief. What do we have lingering which prevents us from freely ministering to the needs of the mourning other? What holds us back from reaching out? "I cannot stand to see another person cry" often translates into "I cannot cry myself over a loss that has profoundly affected my life and so I deliberately pass or become unapproachably unresponsive to another's need when I could with a word or touch perform a healing ministry." We need to ask whether our administrative responsibilities are used as a convenient wall to isolate us from the people we serve; in the same breath we must ask whether we perpetuate an image of cemetery that accomplishes the same end.

I am reminded of a personal, family experience last Christmas, using a picture-drawing technique of Dr. Susan Bach, a London analyst who studied in Zurich, Switzerland under Dr. Carl Jung, to touch the unconscious or inner voice which can tell us so much about our hidden selves. In this particular instance, with a cancer patient, after talking about the crayon-drawn picture and the evidence of a tremendous amount of hostility, what surprisingly comes forth is that this woman, after some thirty-five years, still carried the guilt and torture of not having been present when her father died and not being able to shed a tear either at his funeral or afterward. What a tremendous flow of tears and guilt burst forth in that experience, what freedom and liberation after all those years happened in this brief experience, a recognition of a loss that had never been grieved, but had, with much fear, been guarded and suppressed. It is that same sort of healing opportunity that each of us has daily, an opportunity to reach out and touch, to allow that release to happen well before it takes on the weeks and years of the one about which I just spoke. In this connection, for anyone who works in death and dying situations, I would highly recommend Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's Life, Death, Transition workshops which she conducts all over the world.

From my perspective in a parish cemetery, these are my rules: 1) In a positive fashion I take every opportunity to foster a healthy image of the cemetery as a place where healing can take place, where happy memories can

## Tribute Precast Systems

Supplying a complete line of quality  
burial vaults, mausoleums, lawn crypts and  
niches to cemeteries and funeral homes

- Project design and installation
- Customized presentation materials
- Competitive pricing
- Flexible payment arrangements

When comparing precast suppliers, our product quality and prompt, dependable service distinguish us from all the others.



Setting the standards for the 90's...and beyond

383 Williamstowne Delafield, WI 53018 414-646-3367

be recalled, where the core method of Faith in life after death is ratified; 2) I am available at each funeral, making a point of being known and recognized by the members of the immediate family; 3) My cemetery responsibilities are viewed as more than a job; I see myself in a ministerial capacity and work hard to maintain that disposition in whatever phase of cemetery operation in which I am involved; 4) Patience is a key word for me, a 'buzzword' for those who work on the cemetery grounds. No matter the confrontation, the question, the misunderstanding, we work from a recognition of the presence of grief. Rather than wait for a confrontation, when I am in the cemetery and there are visitors, I make it a point to go up to the person present and introduce myself, asking if everything is all right, if he or she might have questions, if there is something we might be able to do. When I see the beginning of a rule infraction, such as a glass container for flowers, I will take the time to explain why these are not permitted and offer the alternative vases which are already present and available in the cemetery. Sure, it takes a little more time and effort, but with the ability to perform such personal services I make a strong case for the inclusion of a manageable size cemetery with each parish plant.

At the same time, because of our size, I am able to recognize certain signs that bereavement is not going along too well and am either able to personally respond or pass this information on to another member of the parish staff. Such recognizable signs are: a daily presence over a long period at the grave, a total absence from the grave, perhaps a fanaticism with lawn care. I recall in particular a couple of quite healthy situations from our parish cemetery, one of a widow who came perhaps twice each week to visit at the grave of her newly deceased husband during one Summer. It was not uncommon to see her sitting at the grave seemingly lost in her own thoughts and memories. During the course of those months we spoke often, but never at length. She in the subsequent years has visited the grave on special occasions which would include his birthday, anniversary of death, Memorial Day and close to Christmas. She has her happy memories, and she has a place where she can come, with flowers, green grass, ornamental trees and connect with these memories. She is as much at peace in that cemetery as is her husband whose body lies beneath its ground, entrusted to our care.

In the same section, however, lies another man whose widow I have spoken to on occasion. She has not set foot in the cemetery since his funeral several years ago, not just yet ready to confront her guilt about having been the cause of his death; she remains isolated, depressed, alone.

In close proximity, just about once a week I see the young children of a middle-aged man who died too suddenly. They come, they sit and talk with each other, sometimes with me, bring flowers and recall the happy and the sad moments of their lives as they interacted with their father. Their grief is being surfaced, expressed, allow to ventilate and they will be much better adults for the experience, much more appreciative of the delicacy of human life and time. We do nothing to discourage them; we do everything in our power, including the

twice-yearly mailing of a newsletter to encourage their presence, their visitation, their remembering. Administratively, we hope we are keyed into their needs. At the same time, whatever we do also testifies to our firm belief in and commitment to the afterlife of Resurrection about which Jesus testified to Mary Magdalene.

For myself, motivated also by E. F. Schumacher's *Small is Beautiful*, I stand firmly committed to the concept of the parish cemetery. I think we have a lot of work to do to overcome the administrative problems currently present in many of these cemeteries so that we can begin in earnest to focus on and implement the many ministerial opportunities that flow out of a parish cemetery. The Church has a long history of cemetery involvement, and as we begin to think of our current energy situation and its economic implications, we may once again recognize for perhaps more practical reasons the value of the parish cemetery.

Beyond those considerations, however, what is of concern to me is that in times past, our ancestors had a way in which to surface and work out their anger, frustration, grief. It was the family's responsibility to wash and dress the body, preparing it for burial. The men in the family could build a casket, dig the grave, even prepare a suitable marker for the grave. These were concrete opportunities which we no longer have. Not long ago we all shared through the media the death of Thurman Munson, the Yankee catcher. That evening, after having delivered a tearful eulogy, Bobby Murcer not only hit a

## Tribute Cemetery Systems

**Providing progressive marketing and responsible sales programs individually designed to meet client needs.**

- Pre-need and family service sales
- Project financing
- Administrative support
- Market evaluation
- Financial forecasting

When your requirements call for the involvement of one, two or all three of our divisions, commitment to your satisfaction is our primary objective.



Setting the standards for the 90's...and beyond

383 Williamstowne Delafield, WI 53018 414-646-3367

three run homer, but also lashed a two run single in the bottom of the ninth inning to win the game five to four over Baltimore. Do you for a moment not believe that there was anger and frustration in that bat that night? At least he had a ball on which to exercise that bat. Some say that we live in a violent time, that we are a violence-prone society. My thought is that we have so many griefs which continue to be suppressed within that violence is the only way we know of expressing our hurt. I am convinced that we have a responsibility and a healing ministry with our cemeteries to do something to contribute to the resolution of such pain and torment.

The parish cemetery is ideal because it is close to the neighborhood and we can encourage familiarity and frequent visitation. We are small enough to allow for participatory resolution of grief in any number of ways in which family members feel comfortable. Because we are the location which attaches itself most concretely with the memory of the deceased, presence in the cemetery and activity in that location can be extremely therapeutic. At Mount Kelly, our parish cemetery, volunteers take the responsibility for trimming all ornamental trees, weed the flowerbeds, hand-trim around the grave markers, come forward in the Spring to plant new flowerbeds, rake leaves in the Fall. These are all tasks which could be accomplished by a paid staff, but I am sure that they would neither be done as well, with so much love and benefit to the person performing the task. Working side by side with these individuals, we have the opportunity to interact, to be present at that brief ministerial moment when a question might be asked, a thought expressed, a need verbalized, a grief resolved.

The last of the poems of Jeffie's mother seems appropriate to summarize the good which we have the potential to accomplish:

***I saw a boy on a bike go by  
He was ten years old and blue of eye  
Slender like you, with straight blond hair  
But hard as I looked, you were not there.***

***A group of children playing ball  
Boys and girls both big and small  
I was restless inside and the panic grew  
Because, try as I might, I could not see you.***

***You're not really of them, my little son  
You'll always be a special one  
Here a short while and then gone somewhere  
I could rest inside if I just knew where.***

***I glanced up at the clouds as they billowed  
by  
Floating free in a peaceful sky  
Lovely and light they had not a care  
And finally my son, I found you there.***

It has been my hope, in sharing these thoughts to affirm our vocation as not just a ministry of the burial of the dead, but a healing ministry to the living as well. I believe that in reaching out in any way to the bereaved, as Jesus did with Magdalene, will enhance the joy that we one day will all share, when every tear will be wiped away, and in those billowing clouds, united with our

Christ, we will look no longer among the dead for our loved ones who live and with whom we will be united to share the joys of life eternal. ■

*Poems reprinted with permission of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D., and Shanti Nilaya.*

## *Remember Me*

To the living, I am gone.  
To the sorrowful, I will never return.  
To the angry, I was cheated.  
But to the happy, I am at peace.  
And to the faithful, I have never left.  
I cannot speak, but I can listen.  
I cannot be seen, but I can be heard.  
So as you stand upon a shore,  
Gazing at a beautiful Sea, **Remember Me.**

As you look upon a flower and admire its simplicity,  
**Remember Me.**

**Remember Me** in your hearts, your thoughts and your memories of the times we loved, the times we cried, the times we fought, the times we laughed. For if you always think of me, I will never have gone.



**... your Conference works for you!**

Got a mailing going? All the cemeteries in any given diocese or archdiocese have been programmed into NCCC's computer. Let the National Office help you out. Write today telling us your needs.

**NATIONAL CATHOLIC CEMETERY CONFERENCE**  
710 NORTH RIVER ROAD  
DES PLAINES, ILLINOIS 60016