

Good Grief

By Amitai Etzioni

WASHINGTON

SOON after my wife died — her car slid off an icy road in 1985 — a school psychologist warned me that my children and I were not mourning in the right way. We felt angry; the proper first stage, he said, is denial.

In late August this year, my 38-year-old son, Michael, died suddenly in his sleep, leaving behind a 2-year-

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old son and a wife expecting their next child. When, at Michael's funeral in Los Angeles, I was about to say a few words to the people assembled, the rabbi whispered that I need not fear speaking publicly — "Just go with the flow," she urged.

On both occasions, I had a hard time not telling the free advice givers to get lost, or something less printable along the same lines. There is no set form for grief, and no "right" way to express it.

In my eulogy I divulged that I believe in a God who brings meaning to the world, but that my belief has been severely tested. I missed seeing God in the killing fields of Cambodia, and he seems too busy to show up in Darfur, or to shine his face on either the Sunnis or the Shiites in Iraq. With a rising voice, I asked: How could God allow a son to be taken from his aging, ailing father? A devoted husband to be torn from the arms of his loving wife in the middle of the night? How could he allow a 2-year-old to be left searching for his father in vain, or deny an infant the chance to see the father even once?

After I shared a copy of my eulogy with a philosopher friend in Washington, he took me for a walk in the

woods. "You must know," he lectured, "that God is not a micromanager. He does not dish out specific goods or condone specific evils. He leaves these acts — and the choices involved — to us. If the good and bad were given to us, we would not be choosing, moral creatures."

This was all too intellectual for me.

There is no 'right' way to mourn a loved one's death.

I did not choose for anyone to lay a glove on those I loved most, let alone send them on their last journey long before it was due. There might be an explanation for why God-awful things happen to very good people, but my colleague did not bring me an inch closer to accepting my ill fate.

There seems to be an expectation that, after a great loss, we will progress systematically through the well-known stages of grief. It is wrong, we are told, to jump to anger

— or to wallow too long in this stage before moving toward acceptance.

But I was, and am, angry. To make parents bury their children is wrong; to have both my wife and son taken from me, for forever and a day, is cruel beyond words.

A relative from Jerusalem who is a psychiatrist brought some solace by citing the maxim: "We are not to ask why, but what." The "what" is that which survivors in grief are bound to do for one another. Following that advice, my family, close friends and I keep busy, calling each other and giving long answers to simple questions like, "How did your day go today?" We try to avoid thinking about either the immediate past or the bereft future. We take turns playing with Max, Michael's 2-year-old son. Friends spend nights with the young widow, and will be among those holding her hand when the baby is born.

I presume that many a psychiatrist and New Age minister would point out that by keeping busy we avoid "healthy" grieving. To hell with that; the void left by our loss is just too deep. For now, focusing on what we do for one another is the only consolation we can find. □