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Narrative Themes of Loss, Violence, and Coping

Our lives are a pilgrimage, a journey towards an unknown destination. Along our way, we experience love, joy, hope, sadness, fear, helplessness, despair, and everything in between. Most of us have experience and familiarity with loss and grief, and we know the suffering a profound loss brings. The process of grief can be emotionally and physically agonizing. The emotional process can affect our physiology, our sense of self, our relationship with others, and our understanding of the world and God. Certain losses can lead us to question the existence of God and goodness in the world.

In this paper, I will aim to define and expand on the experience of traumatic loss and to identify the role that pastoral caregivers play in supporting survivors of traumatic loss. It is important to note that loss does not always mean loss through death. Loss can relate to a lot of different life experiences. Any major change in life, such as a move to a new city, a job change, a marriage, or a divorce is a loss. Loss can also relate to losing a significant object or a loss of functioning in a part of the body. All these things can affect the human suffering. Carrie Doehring says in her book, "Loss is often a source of human suffering. I think the more the survivors are connected and attached to what is lost, the greater the suffering.

Carrie says, "Grief-related emotions become disenfranchised when they cannot be openly expressed." Certain relationships are more complex than others, making the grief process a complicated sorting of emotions. The grief process is influenced by many factors. Some factors are easier to identify than others. For example, Unannounced death differs from expected death, violent death is different from a more peaceful death, and long and painful deaths differ from quick progression toward the end of life. Regardless, as Carrie says in her book, "The ongoing losses of being disadvantaged are often disenfranchised."

Grief can be intensely lonely, and survivors of traumatic loss may feel disconnected because others do not understand their pain. As pastoral caregivers, we must acknowledge and validate the psychological and emotional effects of trauma that the survivors experience. We are to provide meaningful support and guidance in companioning one another in the darkness of grief. We can be present to others' pain, witness it, and bear it along with them. C. S. Lewis said, "If God's goodness is inconsistent with hurting us, then either God is not good or there is no God: for in the only life, we know He hurts us beyond our worst fears and beyond all we can imagine."

Our families are torn by violence. Our communities are destroyed by violence. Our faith is tested by violence. We must respond. Violence in our homes, our schools, and streets, our nation and world are destroying the lives, dignity, and hopes of millions of our sisters and brothers. Fear of violence is paralyzing and polarizing our communities. Beyond the violence in our streets is the violence in our hearts. Hostility, hatred, despair, and indifference are at the heart of a growing culture of violence.

Our society seems to be growing numb to human loss, and suffering. A nation born with a commitment to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" is haunted by death. We can turn away from violence; we can build communities of greater peace. It begins with a clear conviction and respect for life. Respect for life is not just a slogan, it is a moral principle from teaches the dignity of the human person. It is an approach to life that values people over things. Respect for life must guide the choices we make as individuals and as a society. Respect for human life is the starting point for confronting a culture of violence.

Domestic violence has been a social problem for generations. Research studies show that families in the church struggle with domestic violence. Some pastors, church leaders, and caregivers fail to provide the pastoral care that victims desperately need. The trauma of domestic violence can lead to many physical conditions. The mental health effects include depression, anxiety post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal behavior. I grieve because even one case of domestic violence within our midst is one too many.

Carrie says in her book, "If people have no healthy ways of coping with escalating tension and conflict, then they may respond to a trigger event by acting in violent ways." What do we do when the world in which we live is torn apart by all kinds of violence? Also called: hatred, abuse, crime, rape, terrorism, and the list go on. I think Carrie, said it best, "Caregivers need to assess relational patterns in which violence is used as a habitual way of dealing with conflict." I think it is essential for us as pastoral caregivers, to listen to the care seekers' stories and for narrative themes from them, such as loss, grief, and trauma and how the person is coping. This would be a great place to start. Also assessing the care seeker's stories, social location, and social system relative to religious or spiritual themes and impact. Also, I think assessing immediate and longer-term risks and needs and establishing and engaging in ongoing plans of care.

In closing, emotional distress can happen before and after a disaster. There's no right or wrong way to feel. It is important as pastoral caregivers to pay attention to what's going on with someone, we are providing spiritual pastoral care to. One can be traumatized when he/she directly experiences a crisis event such as a serious injury of sexual assault, death, or a serious injury family member, loved one, or close friend. Carrie, says, "Caregivers need to be able to respect the limited theological abilities of the people they care for." Doehring urges us to be aware and respectful of the "moral stress generated by life-limiting lived theologies personal, familial, communal, and cultural."