

# **RESTORATION FROM GRIEF AND LOSS AMONG THOSE ABUSED BY CLERGY: ESPECIALLY IN THE MISSION SETTING**

**Jim Thorp<sup>1</sup>**

## **ABSTRACT**

This article presents an application of grief counseling theory for people who have suffered abuse, in particular at the hands of those who have religious authority over the victim. Religious abuse is even more severe because it uses the religious beliefs (both of the perpetrator and the victim) to perpetrate the abuse. The biblical foundation, the impact of the abuse and the true nature of forgiveness are an integral part of the process to develop a theory of counseling to help the person reconstruct a new reality (through acknowledgment of the damage that was done) and to envision a new reality that fits with the new story that God is writing in the life of the victim.

**KEY WORDS:** Grief counseling theory, abuse, forgiveness, reconstruction, new reality.

## **RESUMO**

Este artigo apresenta uma aplicação de uma teoria de aconselhamento de luto para pessoas que sofreram abuso, em particular nas mãos de

---

<sup>1</sup> Bacharel em Missões pela Universidade de Corban em Salem, Oregon, USA; Mestrado em Teologia Pastoral pelo Seminário Western em Portland, Oregon USA; Doutorando em Ministério na área de Cuidado Pastoral pela Universidade de Columbia em South Carolina, USA. Email: [j.thorp@worldventure.com](mailto:j.thorp@worldventure.com)

uma pessoa com autoridade espiritual sobre a vítima. O abuso religioso pode ser ainda mais severo por usar as crenças religiosas da pessoa (tanto do perpetrador quanto da vítima) para perpetrar o abuso. O fundamento bíblico, o impacto do abuso e a verdadeira natureza do perdão faz parte integral do processo para desenvolver uma teoria de aconselhamento para ajudar a pessoa a reconstruir uma nova realidade (através do reconhecimento do dano que foi feito) e vislumbrar uma nova realidade que encaixa com a nova história que Deus está escrevendo na vida da vítima.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVES:** Teoria de aconselhamento de luto, abuso, perdão, reconstrução, nova realidade

## **INTRODUCTION**

Recent reports surfaced concerning the abuse case of Donn Ketcham, an ABWE doctor working in Bangladesh who used his position as a doctor to abuse girls in his examination room.<sup>2</sup> While many statistics are available on abuse, it is hard to find statistics for the abuse that happens in mission settings. The above incident is only one of the known cases of abuse by missionary personnel on the field, often in a missionary school setting. The CM &A and New Tribes mission organizations have faced major scandals in MK schools. The Catholic Church has been the subject of a large number of accusations concerning abuse by their priest in many parts of the world. A number

---

<sup>2</sup> ZYLSTRA, Christianity Today Library, 2016.

of organizations exist to investigate abuse cases and when you look at the number of cases these organizations are investigating, it is clear that this is a significant problem.

The most heart-wrenching consequences of these abuses is the damage that innocent children suffer because adults, who should know better, have used them for their own personal pleasure. Dianne Langberg remarks, “The sexual abuse of children shatters and violates every aspect of their being—their world, their self, their faith, and their future. To be small, vulnerable, and dependent in a world of big people who are meant to give protection and care, and then to find oneself violated in body, mind, and soul is to undergo an unspeakable trauma. To experience repeated trauma while in the process of developing is to be shaped, imprinted, by terror and fear rather than by love and safety. Needless to say, the scars run deep”.<sup>3</sup>

A victim of abuse must learn to deal with many losses. Langberg remarks, “She lost the opportunity to be a child, the knowledge that her parents loved her no matter what, a sense of safety in her own body, a sense of competence, a sense of moral integrity”.<sup>4</sup> Another loss is the broken relationship of the family. It may be that one parent participated in the abuse or allowed the abuse to continue, or the child feels that the parents did not do enough to protect them from the abuse.

---

<sup>3</sup> LANGBERG, 1997, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> LANGBERG, 1997, p. 164.

Often this happens because the parents do not believe the child's story at first.

In one article, author Victor Vieth comments on the why this situation is so complicated. "When the perpetrator is a member of the clergy, the impact on the victim's spirituality may be even more pronounced. Clergy abusers often use their religion to justify or excuse their sexual abuse of children...The religious cover used by clergy abusers is often communicated to the victims in a manner that irreparably damages their spirituality."<sup>5</sup> Father Lawrence Murphy who abused over 200 boys used such language as "sacrament of confession," "fear of retribution," and "punishment in hell" to keep his victims from speaking out. "There will be Africans in hell because of you if you tell".<sup>6</sup> Missionaries told Wes Stafford that this would be the consequence if he revealed the abuse that he suffered as a child in Africa. This shows the slippery slope of improper theology that makes dealing with abuse so difficult. MKs do not feel adequate to argue with adult missionaries about the Bible and theology. They may accept this as truth without being able to refute the error adequately.

---

<sup>5</sup> VIETH, 2015.

<sup>6</sup> NEWS, 2015.

## **1 Biblical and Theoretical underpinnings**

Evil exists in the world and we need help from the Lord to be able to stand against this evil. Paul asked the church in Thessalonica to pray that he would be “delivered from wicked and evil men for not everyone has faith” (2 Thess. 3:2). We live in a world where people do terrible things to other people. Churches and mission settings are too often a place where out-of-control people heap abuse on those who should be under their protection. From the beginning of the church, some who professed faith have not faithfully practiced the teachings of Jesus and the apostles. Some used their position in the church to commit sinful acts that have damaged other believers.

Sin has three effects on a person’s life, producing guilt, shame and fear. However, in the case of abuse by religious leaders, the victims are the ones living out the consequences of the sin committed against them and therefore they suffer the guilt, shame and fear. It is sad that adults would seek to use religious words and even the Bible to push the impact of sin on the children rather than accept responsibility for their actions. Abuse is one sin that continues to destroy long after the act, often for generations. Satan has come up with a strategy to inflict the maximum of damage for the maximum amount of time--abuse. This is one of Satan’s most effective strategies because he knows that abuse will disrupt normal relationships for multiple generations unless the cycle is broken.

Consequently, truth telling should be a foundation for the theological considerations as it is an important part of the process of grief for those who have been living in the shadow of lies by the abuser. This aspect of abuse is particularly damaging because it happened at the hands of those who profess themselves representatives of the truth. God hates the sin that religious leaders perpetrate against children and will punish those who inflict this pain. God also loves the child and longs to help him/her live lives transformed by his love and grace rather than live in the ugliness of the past. The counselor should seek to present this truth to the victim to help them find God's restoration.

Jesus simple yet profound words spoken almost off the cuff to his disciples when they were refusing to let children approach Jesus are applicable to this subject. "Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these'" (Mat 19:14). Later Jesus says, "See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that their angels in heaven always see the face of my Father in heaven" (Mat 18:10). These verses bring to light the seriousness of any offense, how much more the offence of abuse. Children have an important place in the heart and plan of the heavenly Father and he does not take lightly when anyone takes advantage of these precious lives, whether an individual or an organization.

Kelly shares an important insight concerning the presence of God in light of the evil that we see around us. “But how can God's love and grace be so present when we are suffering so painfully? This is both paradox and mystery. We will never understand fully. The best we can do is to somehow hold in tension both the suffering and the grace of grief”.<sup>7</sup> It is painful to consider the abuse that MKs have experienced in the history of the mission movement. It makes little sense that those called to share the good news of grace would be capable of stealing that grace from the children of our missionaries. We cannot always resolve the tension that this creates and sometimes we can only work to help the person accept this tension and learn to move forward holding on to God’s truth.

## **2 Implications for grief counseling**

The impact of that abuse is greater than any man on earth would be able to count and only God knows the damage to the souls of those who have suffered this abuse. This has serious consequences later on in life and the impact continues through adulthood and often is never resolved. The normal defense mechanisms that God created to protect us from drama can exaggerate the response to the point of rendering the person unable to live a normal life. Humans possess a natural

---

<sup>7</sup> KELLY, 2010, loc 1619.

defense mechanism that can be helpful in living with difficult situations--it is disassociation. Even children in normal situations may be able to disassociate themselves from certain difficult situations. Under normal circumstances, this temporary response does not last long. Often, the child will grow out of the practice when the need is no longer present. Problems can arise when the disassociation continues for an extended amount of time. If the disassociated behavior persists, it can lead to dissociative disorders that can cause the person to act out in ways that are detrimental to their wellbeing. This can also make it difficult for the person to accept the help needed to work through their problems and live with healthy relationships.

Some of the common disorders that come from abuse are PTSD and depression. Another common response is numbing which many describe as a kind of “zoning out”. In addition, some experience sleep problems, concentration problems or eating disorders. A victim may suffer from one of the disorders that make life difficult but they will deeply feel the losses of normalcy that may cause the victim to grieve for a long time.

Abused children may experience other types of loss in their lives, especially later on. They may have a hard time trusting adults or other authority figures, especially religious leaders. The victim may not be able to tell people what they are going through and must live a secret life to protect themselves and others. They may also suffer the



loss of relationship later in life because of the damage of the abuse, as seen in difficulties to maintain a marriage. Vieth writes about the work of Dr. Roland Summit from UCLA, “According to Summit (1983), sexual abuse cases are engulfed in secrecy, helplessness, entrapment and accommodation, delayed, conflicting and unconvincing disclosure, and retraction. Clergy and laity who take the time to understand these and other dynamics will increase the chance of responding sensitively to the spiritual needs of maltreated children”.<sup>8</sup>

People who have suffered this type of abuse do not feel safe. For this reason, a counselor must develop a safe place for that person to share the ugly things that they have experienced. Langberg suggests that for a counselor to provide a safe environment for their clients they must be safe people and do safe things.<sup>9</sup>

Normalizing the grief and pain that they experience through the loss is important. Many victims do not realize that others have gone through the same experience and have often acted out in similar ways. It is helpful for the victim to know that they are not unique in how they have responded to their particular abuse. It is important to show the victim that many victims of abuse have learned to deal with their past and live productive lives. They have been able to construct a new reality out of their painful past.

---

<sup>8</sup> VIETH, 2015.

<sup>9</sup> LANGBERG, 1997, p. 109.

Robert Neimeyer and others developed the concept of constructing a new reality to deal with grief. “Considering these trends, I have been working on a new paradigm of grief that views meaning reconstruction as the principal task in coping with a loss...”.<sup>10</sup> He continues, “...the grieving individual is forced to author a new life story, and see an audience for the new sense of self that emerges”.<sup>11</sup> According to Neimeyer, there are two ways that a person can try to “resolve the incongruence” of grief and loss. They can try to assimilate their loss into their pre-loss beliefs to maintain consistency with who they were or they “...can attempt to accommodate to the loss by reorganizing, deepening, or expanding their beliefs and self-narrative to embrace the reality of the loss,<sup>12</sup> often seeking validation for a changed identity in connection with a new field of social relationships”.<sup>13</sup>

This view of grieving correlates well with some of the suggestions that Gerald Sittser provides in his book, *A Grace Revealed*. It is important to see your whole life story as God’s story of redemption. There may be incidents in life that seem to contradict the idea that God is writing a story that could display his redemption, but just because we cannot see this truth at a given time in our life does

---

<sup>10</sup> NEIMEYER, 2006.

<sup>11</sup> NEIMEYER, 2006.

<sup>12</sup> JANOFF-BULMAN, 1992.

<sup>13</sup> NEIMEYER, 2006.

not mean it is not true. Sittser writes, “I was a character in search of a story, as all of us are, longing to discover how our lives fit into some larger narrative that has meaning and purpose”.<sup>14</sup>

Everyone struggles with the purpose of pain because we experience it many times during our lives and there does not seem to be any purpose to it. Something is definitely wrong in the world and it seems almost impossible to make sense of our pain. We just want to be happy, but it seems that our problems get in the way of our happiness. God is not just writing a story with our lives, he makes it a part of his overall story of redemption for each of us and all people in the world. Sittser continues, “...redemption is...about God using both the “best” and the “worst” events to work out his redemptive plan”.<sup>15</sup> This is the goal in counseling to help people construct a new reality from the loss, one founded on God’s purpose for redemption.

This can be hard because recurring thoughts often plagued victims of abuse stemming from the terrible experience. Wright gives a helpful activity to help people with unpleasant scenes. “How do you do this? By doing some editing as if it were a movie”.<sup>16</sup> The idea of editing thoughts, as if they were a movie, is helpful because it is a concept that many people would understand and it gives them a way

---

<sup>14</sup> SITTSER, 2012, loc 207.

<sup>15</sup> SITTSER, 2012, loc 760.

<sup>16</sup> WRIGHT, loc 1012.

to be proactive in remembering the experience. It is also a way to recreate a healthy way of interacting in the world in spite of the abuse.

Another helpful concept is how the past affects present choices. It is easier to live in the past or future than in the present. Sittser reminds us that we can spend too much time trying to change the past when in fact, the “...best we can do—in fact, the only thing we can do—is remember the past and respond to it”.<sup>17</sup> When we focus on the past, we can idealize it so much that we want to return to it or we can demonize it wanting nothing more than to reverse it. We should instead look at the past with “redemptive memory” and allow God to do his work of redemption. This is in keeping with Neimeyer’s ideas about creating a new vision of what life could be.

One way that victims can do this is entering the process of forgiveness so that the past will not have a hold over that person in the present. Steve Tracy talks about three types of forgiveness that we often confuse. Consequently, it may create a situation where it is hard for a person to forgive. First, he talks about “judicial forgiveness” which is God’s pardon of our sin and therefore cannot be offered by humans. Second is “psychological forgiveness” which has to do with our letting go of the desire for revenge that stems from our hatred and then being able to extend forgiveness to those who have done harm to

---

<sup>17</sup> SITTSER, 2012, loc 1544.

us. Third is the “relational forgiveness” which takes the process in the direction of restoring the relationship or to the point of reconciliation with the one who wronged us. Often abuse victims are afraid to offer psychological forgiveness because they reason that because God forgives (judicially) and can overlook the sin, they are also required to act as if the abuse did not take place. Often the perpetrator, or others, tells the victim that it is their responsibility to forgive in this way and act as if it never happened. The victim needs to understand that he/she is not required to offer God’s forgiveness because it is impossible for humans to forget such pain. Further, they may believe that forgiveness suggests that they must resolve the whole process of restoration and reconciliation at the same time. It is important for the victims to learn that they can offer forgiveness and experience release from their desire to seek revenge, while at the same time realizing that the abuser will need to work out their own forgiveness with God. When they understand that this does not mean that restoration or reconciliation automatically takes place at the same time, they are more likely to be able to do the part that will be most helpful to them: letting go of the pain that they have held for so long because they were not able to forgive. Heather Gingrich makes a good observation about

forgiveness. “I see forgiveness as a process rather than as an event at a particular point in time, a process that begins early in counseling”.<sup>18</sup>

As mentioned above, guilt and shame are products of the abuse that the victim carries in his/her life for a long time. The counselor needs to help an abused person to deal with these feelings in order to create new meaning in their life. Some institutions contribute to the shame in ways that are unacceptable and unbelievable. ABWE interrogated the 12-year-old girl abused by Dr. Ketcham and required her to sign a confession (without the consent of her parents). She would already have been struggling with the guilt of the abuse and wonder if somehow she were responsible for the abuse.

Family grief would be another challenge. The family may have permitted a sinful situation to continue that led to the abuse. Past offenses may not have been resolved, the mother may not have been proactive to protect the child or members of the family may have overlooked certain actions. The victim’s fear of disruption in the family is very real. “In other words, the perpetrator’s claim the child would be isolated, not believed, be removed from the home, bullied at school or any number of other horrors do, in fact, occur. As a result, the child concludes that living with the lie is easier than telling the truth and chooses to recant her allegation of sexual abuse. A number

---

<sup>18</sup> GRINGRICH, 2013, loc 2613.

of studies of sexual abuse victims have found that recantation is not unusual”.<sup>19</sup>

Vieth suggests a number of helpful steps in counseling victims of abuse. First, avoid the temptation to focus on the victim’s sins. Second, assure the victim of Christ’s empathy. Third, apply the Gospel compassionately. Fourth, assist the victim in accessing appropriate medical and mental health care. Fifth, refrain from platitudes. Finally, sixth, do not make forgiveness into a law but a change of heart rooted in the gospel.<sup>20</sup> Wright provides a great description of a survivor that could help the abused victims to consider the goal of becoming a better person in spite of the experience. “A survivor is a person who, when knocked down, somehow knows to stay down until the count of nine and then to get up differently”.<sup>21</sup>

Anger is another product of abuse that a counselor must deal with. Wright tells the story of one victim who came up with a ninety-day plan where she would allow herself to keep ten percent of her anger (since she was aware of her own humanity) and then give away one percent of her anger each day for ninety days. The goal itself helped her as she identified some person or thing that she wanted to avenge and then to releasing it to God by offering forgiveness. This

---

<sup>19</sup> VIETH, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> VIETH, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> WRIGHT, 2006.

seems to be a realistic plan because it does recognize that we all have anger and it is impossible to be perfect, but having a goal with small steps is much more manageable.<sup>22</sup>

Part of the process of grief over loss is to come to grips with the new reality. We cannot go back and make that particular event change. We also cannot go back to the way we were before the event took place. Our experiences change us and we need to find a way to adapt and move forward in light of those events. Kelly writes about this process, “In contrast to this aspect of the standard model, the emerging psychoanalytic perspective suggests that ‘mourning is not something that can be finished’.<sup>23</sup> For many people, there may never be a definitive “end point” to their grief. Rather, people learn to live with their grief”.<sup>24</sup> She compares this to the standard model, which suggests that a person can somehow return to a pre-loss status or functioning by somehow returning to a normal condition, similar to the way things were before the loss. New research shows that significant loss can change or transform us and therefore one cannot return to the way things were before suffering the loss. She concludes, “For now, we can say that meaning may suggest, in part, the sense we make of a loss,

---

<sup>22</sup> WRIGHT, Loc.2722.

<sup>23</sup> GAINES, 1997, p. 568.

<sup>24</sup> KELLY, 2010, loc 445.



how we fit the loss into our overarching worldview and system of beliefs, how we form coherence in our life narrative given the loss”.<sup>25</sup>

One aspect of the reconstruction of meaning is to recognize that grief is an active process. The person experiencing the loss, especially those who suffered abuse as children, feels helpless to take charge of his/her life, much less his/her grief for the loss they have suffered. Worden’s description of the “task” of grief rather than “stages” is helpful because tasks focus more on what we have to do to get through the loss and allows us to be active in the process. The process of rebuilding your life after loss is comparable to Worden’s concept of adjusting to a new environment (or reality) in which the deceased (what was lost) is no longer present.

Kelly comments on reconstruction of meaning found in the research of Neimeyer, Prigerson and Davies, that an important part of the process is to incorporate the loss into our own developing story. “According to this perspective, the central process of grieving is integrating the loss into one’s story and sorting out what it all means”.<sup>26</sup> Sittser also develops this theme in his book where he discusses the story that God is writing in our lives and how we can transform our experiences of grief and loss into opportunities for growth and praise to God. Kelly suggest that this can happen in three ways: by bringing

---

<sup>25</sup> KELLY, 2010, loc 490.

<sup>26</sup> KELLY, 2010, loc 981.

more “plot for one’s narrative”, by bringing “new or altered interpretations to the loss event”, and by recognizing the inherent “relational dimension”.<sup>27</sup> She then ties the search for meaning from loss to a theological framework in three ways. “First, everyone has a story, and concepts of God may shape each person's story in profound ways...[second] different God concepts lead to different meanings, and theologically speaking, all meanings are not created equal [and] . Mystery is a constant character in the drama of grief and loss”.<sup>28</sup>

The following are some suggestions for how this might take place. Talking to Jesus in an empty chair would be a good exercise. Journaling is very helpful and maybe they need to write a letter to the abuser or the organization that allowed this to happen. Neimeyer suggests “...writing about the self as if from the standpoint of an intimate and sympathetic friend”.<sup>29</sup> This can fit well in Sittser’s idea of seeing your loss as a part of the greater story of what God is doing in your life, a story that God is writing. Neimeyer also suggests the development of metaphors to describe your grief experience. It is important for the counselor to pay attention to the metaphors that the client might suggest and then to help them develop those metaphors in a way that helps the client find meaning from the comparison.

---

<sup>27</sup> KELLY, loc. 1001-2012.

<sup>28</sup> KELLY, 2010, loc 1036-1052.

<sup>29</sup> NEIMEYER, 2006.

A couple other concerns are important when an abused person deals with their grief and loss. First, a counselor should take care to help the victim with their grief while not bringing an unnecessary burden on them by reminding them of the events that caused their grief. A second concern is how to help the person deal with the grief of meeting with the mission organization that is questioning them because of something that someone else did to them. Finally, it is important to stress that the individual that suffered the abuse was a victim and not in any way responsible for the act.

## **CONCLUSION**

It may not be possible to eliminate abuse on the mission field because Christians, even ministers, will continue to act out in sinful ways. While mission agencies should focus on vetting their workers to avoid this type of behavior and to protect children of missionaries, they must make efforts to investigate all such behavior. Further, they need to make counseling available to those who were victims. Counseling for those who suffered abuse at the hands of mission personnel is complicated because the abuse turned their lives upside-down. This violation affects their body, soul and mind and they need the opportunity to find restoration and renewal. One role of the counselor is to help them grieve the losses that they have experienced in a healthy

way. Then the counselor can help them rebuild their lives and move on to live in healthy relationship with others.

## REFERENCE

- GRINGRICH, Heather Davediuk. *Restoring the Shattered Self*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013.
- KEESEE, Robert A. Neimeyer and Nancy J. "Dimensions of Diversity in the Reconstruction of Meaning." In *Living with Grief*. By Kenneth J. Doka and Joyce D. Davidson, 223-237. Washington: Hospice Foundation of America, 1998.
- KELLY, Melissa M. *Grief: Contemporary Theory and the Practice of Ministry*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010.
- LANGBERG, Diane Mandt. *Counseling Survivors of Sexual Abuse*. Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, 1997.
- NEIMEYER, Robert A. "Bereavement and the Quest for Meaning: Rewriting Stories of Loss and Grief". Hellenic Journal of Psychology, 2006. <http://www.pseve.org/journal/upload/neimeyer3c.pdf>.
- News, CBN. "Missionary Kids Silent no Longer about Abuse". Netgrace.org. Feb 12, 2015. <http://www.netgrace.org/resources/2015/2/12/missionary-kids-silent-no-more-about-abuse>.
- Robert A Neimeyer, Laurie A. Burke, Michael M. Mackay and Jessica G van Dyke Stringer. "Grief Therapy and the Reconstruction of Meaning: From Principles to Practice". Trauma-ptds.com. 2009. [http://www.trauma-ptsd.com/uploads/library/gt\\_practice\\_j\\_contemp\\_psyg.pdf](http://www.trauma-ptsd.com/uploads/library/gt_practice_j_contemp_psyg.pdf).
- SITTSER, Jerry. *A Grace Revealed*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012.
- VIETH, Victor I. "What Would Walther Do?" Netgrace.org. June 23, 2015. [http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54596334e4b0780b44555981/t/5589a4c4e4b0712f5be39607/1435083972289/What-Would-Walther-Do .pdf](http://static1.squarespace.com/static/54596334e4b0780b44555981/t/5589a4c4e4b0712f5be39607/1435083972289/What-Would-Walther-Do.pdf).
- "Walls of Silence: Protecting the Institution over the Individual". Netgrace.org. May 9, 2012. <http://www.netgrace.org/resources/2015/4/9/walls-of-silence-protecting-the-institution-over-the-individual>.
- WORDEN, J. William. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*. New York: Springer Publishing Company, LLC, 2009.
- WRIGHT, H. Norman. *Recovering from Losses in Life*. Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 2006.
- ZYLSTRA, Sarah Eekhoff. "Christianity Today Library". Christianity Today. May 10, 2016. <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ct/2016/may-web-only/missionary-donn-ketcham-abuse-bangladesh-mks-abwe-report.html>.