**Living with Grief: Walking the spiral**

Bairbre Cahill

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A lump appeared in my throat and tears in my eyes as I read the first chapter of Bairbre Cahill’s latest book, *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral*. It was not so much because she had lost her mother and brother as the fact that, having lost my own father and brother, I could empathise with her sense of loneliness, longing and wanting to make sense of their deaths. The death of someone who is dearly loved creates a pain which never entirely disappears, which changes, for ever, the lives of those who are left behind. There will always be those moments filled with yearning to see, hear and touch – even if only for one fleeting minute – the one who is now living beyond pain and anxiety with the God whose love is infinitely beyond anything which we can ever imagine.

Coming to terms with grief and bereavement is a uniquely personal journey, one which takes time and can never be rushed. Neither can it be reduced to the “So-and-so should be over it by now”. It just does not happen in that way.

There are also many different types of bereavement. Not only is the loss of my father very different from the passing of Bairbre’s mother, but there is also a massive contrast between, say, the deaths of an elderly person who is treasured by their family, a suicide, a miscarriage and a child. The uniqueness of each death means that there is no “one-size-fits-all” approach in dealing with loss and bereavement. Just as each person is a “one-off” event in the entire history of the human race, so is the process of coming to terms with the expected or unexpected death of someone who was irreplaceable in the eyes and heart of their loved ones.

That is why *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* offers, not prescriptions, but personal stories from people who discovered that, on some days, it felt as though they are taking one step forward and two steps backwards. On other occasions, they gradually realised that the heart-stopping pain was fitting into a perspective which allowed some form of normality to reassert itself. In using real stories from real people, the book offers the reader the opportunity to sense that their unique sense of loss is shared by others: they are not alone and that there is light at the end of the dark tunnel of grief.

Bereavement is a time when everyone asks questions of God, themselves and of life in general. It is a process, not the end of the world. *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* attempts to show that, because grieving is a universal experience, there are some things which are more helpful than others in facing up to death. It is perfectly acceptable to feel angry, resentful, questioning and resigned after the death of a loved one: it is all part of a perfectly normal process.

Bereavement as a result of miscarriage or stillbirth is doubly unique: there are no shared memories of togetherness in the same way as when death comes later in someone’s life. Yet the loss as a result of miscarriage or stillbirth is very real and intensely painful. That is why, amongst the personal testimonies included in this book, it is important that Bairbre Cahill has included that of a couple who lost a twin.

Children are affected by death and it can be very difficult for a family to know how best to address the grief of one or more of its youngsters. *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* addresses this very important need with as much seriousness as it reaches out to those who are better equipped to come to terms with all that has happened.

Faith makes a difference. Having a sense that death is a journey towards Someone who is Somewhere helps in dealing with the many aspects of bereavement. Death is not the end, but a beginning. So it is that, in the grieving process, it is easier if there is also the sense of God’s presence. *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* ends each of its twelve short chapters with a quotation from a psalm and a couple of reflective questions which just seem to “touch the spot”.

The language of *Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* has nothing of the academic about it although the book is undoubtedly well researched. Instead, it is intensely personal and conversational in style. Throughout the book, Bairbre Cahill is talking to and accompanying the reader along a path which she herself has walked. In fact she herself commented that, although she had lost her mother and brother, it was, in fact, the death of her mother-in-law which inspired the book. She wrote, “The reality is that the experience of grief can wound our ability to live. We can end up existing in the shadow of death. The choice before me was either I could continue to bury the loss and grief I felt and live a half-life or else I could confront my grief and have courage to own the depth of my love and the depth of my loss. It was not an easy choice to make, to open up memories and uncover wounds.”

*Living with Grief: Walking the spiral* is an important book for anybody who is facing the pain of loss. Perhaps the best explanation for its publication comes from Bairbre herself: “I believe that God understands our pain from the inside and stands with us in our grief. I have used the psalms as a means of prayer and reflection throughout the book because in the psalms we find such a rawness and honesty of human emotion. And ultimately I have written this book because I believe that life and love are stronger than death and that, because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, nothing can separate us from the love of God – and each other.”