

Living with Loss - healing with hope

By Sarah Murray

"Shalom" is the Hebrew word for both "hello" and "goodbye." Why the ambiguity? Why would a language determine one word to mean two such opposite things? Perhaps because we, as creatures who are prone to attachment, find it easy and enjoyable to greet those whom we know and love, but difficult and painful to let go. Therefore the word's strength and bitterness are tempered with ambiguity. Columnist and author Rabbi Earl Grollman, a pioneer in the field of crisis intervention, chose this idea to begin a discussion on "The Circle of Life- Living with Loss, Healing with Hope," Thursday, January 19 at the Spring Hill Presbyterian Church. The event was sponsored by the Mobile Area Jewish Christian Dialogue, which is in its eighteenth year.

Grollman spoke at length about pain as one identifiable bond of people of all religions. "Each religion finds God in different ways, but no one can deny in the long run that we are all united in one God." Expressing pain unites us all — we all experience pain, no matter what we believe in terms of religion. Grollman spoke specifically to the group in attendance, which included members of the "Compassionate Friends," a support group for parents who are recovering from the death of a child, when he said, "Whatever we believe in terms of the next world, each of us is hurting here tonight."

"Grief is an emotion, not a disease. It is as natural as eating when you are hungry. It helps us to heal a broken heart." Despite the seeming obviousness in this statement, Grollman claims that most people do treat grief as a disease. Grieving people are avoided and abandoned often in the time they need support most. Often people become impatient with a grieving person when they aren't recovered in a few weeks.

In reality, grief often does not even begin until about a month after the death of a loved one. Once a person begins to return to everyday life and to really miss the departed, grief can last well beyond the first year. In fact, the

empty space one feels when a loved one dies can remain a part of the personality for ever. According to Grollman, the death of a child represents the death of the future to his parents; the death of a parent represents the death of the past to his children; and the death of a spouse represents the death of the present to the remaining partner. One cannot be expected to feel like oneself after such a traumatic experience for up to two years.

Another problem in learning to deal with grief is the difference between the roles of the sexes in the grieving process. From the manner in which they are treated by others to the way they express grief themselves, men and women seem to grieve in different worlds. For example, according to Grollman one out of 17 males has a person with whom he can share his innermost feelings, while virtually every woman has at least one person in which she can confide. At a funeral, men are often approached and asked, "How is your wife?" not, "How are you?" Most support groups, with the exception of Alcoholics Anonymous, are less than 10% male. Grollman feels that when men become more able to get in touch with their feelings, there will be a kind of liberation. At this time, divorce rates after the death of a child continue to rise because the differences in grieving cause a schism in a couple's relationship.

When they are not able to share their grief with one another, the couple may become lonely and resentful toward one another, retreating into worlds of their own and eventually growing too far apart to remain married.

Another problem in the grieving process is anger. People feel guilty for being angry at the death of a loved one, but Grollman insists that we have a right to be angry, even at God. He can take it. Angry thoughts do not make bad people. But if we do not allow ourselves angry thoughts, we are likely to let the emotion build until we act on those thoughts and hurt others.

Grollman gave some advice to those struggling to comfort a grieving person. No one, he contends, has the right to say death was "God's will." A person in this situation needs comfort and company, not rationalization. A person's grief is a necessary and healthy part of recovering from the loss of a loved one, and Grollman quotes, "Don't take away my grief" — a time of mourning is comforting and should be suffered through, not avoided. The importance of attending a funeral to comfort a friend is astronomical. Grollman quoted Margaret Meade in saying, "If you have to ask the question, 'Should I go to the funeral?' you have already answered it." When we give of ourselves to help others, Grollman said, that is where God is.



Rabbi Earl Grollman (center) and Mary Filben (right) speak with one of the members of Compassionate Friends at the reception.