

name, or we recall a memory, or we have another dream, or we see a house that looks like the one we left, or an old wound of the spirit flares up in our consciousness, and the pain is suddenly very real again.

Every goodbye has some suffering in it, and the greater the parting, the deeper the pain; the greater the loss, the more severe is the empty place that accompanies it. Some of us feel the hurt more than others. So much depends on our personality, our personal history, our God relationship, and our own philosophy of life. People who are deep feeling will usually ache over goodbyes a great deal more than those who approach life on a more intellectual, analytical level. People whose families brush the hurt of loss aside or cover it up with silence, busyness or other ways of avoidance will probably find themselves doing the same thing, not realizing how intense the loss actually is. No matter how we stuff it away or avoid it, however, the pain of goodbyes will show itself in our lives at some time.

I listen to the story of one who has lost a dearly beloved spouse and I wonder if there can be any goodbye so deep as that death in a person's life. I hear the agony of one who has recently been divorced, who has experienced the death of love itself. "Surely," I say to myself, "this goodbye is one of the deepest wounds of all." Then a young man comes into my life, talented and promising, and he suffers a broken neck in a swimming accident, paralyzed for life, forced to say goodbye to many of his dreams for the future. I realize how intense his inner pain is. I meet a man who has been in deep depression because of a forced early retirement. He tells me with tears in his eyes how his whole identity has been that of his work world. He has spent a year struggling with questions about the value of his life and its purpose. It has been a year full of suffering.

The stories go on and on and so does the hurt inherent in them. No two people say goodbye in exactly the same way and no two people suffer their farewells in the same way, but suffer they do. That is why the mystery of suffering must be considered when one is reflecting on the losses in life.

*William S.*

## KNOW HOW THE FLOWERS FELT

THE RAIN TO THE WIND SAID,  
"YOU PUSH AND I'LL PELT."  
THEY SO SMOTE THE GARDEN BED  
THAT THE FLOWERS ACTUALLY KNELT.  
AND LAY LODGED—THOUGH NOT DEAD.  
I KNOW HOW THE FLOWERS FELT.

—ROBERT FROST<sup>2</sup>

If you have ever said a deeply significant goodbye, you know how the flowers felt," you know what it is like to have life pelt you with sorrow, to be overwhelmed with emptiness, loneliness, confusion and sadness. At these times we are bent over, crushed, like the flowers that "lay lodged—though not dead." The pain is overwhelming, often too deep for tears. The sorrow of it can pervade one's whole self and hurt in every part of one's being. No medicine, no bandage, no diversion, no luxury, no words can assuage the hurt and give it the freedom to desist and cease its painful bending, almost breaking, of the heart. Time and the strength of God's presence can lessen the pain, but even these gifts cannot take the pain away or cure it completely. Just when we think that the last bit of goodbye is out of our heart, we hear someone's

The painful feelings that accompany any grieving process or time of loss are on all levels of our being: physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. When we grieve, we leave behind someone or something very precious to us. We can expect to have any or all of the following feelings: shock, sadness, depression, denial. There may be volatile emotions of hostility or intense yearnings, tearfulness, restlessness, fears and anxieties of all kinds. We may feel that there is no one who can understand our grief. We may not be able to concentrate on our work or our responsibilities, and we may even think that we are losing our minds because we feel so disoriented and fragmented inside. We will probably be angry and feel guilty over something unsaid or undone. We might have resentment and self-pity for a time. There is often a sense of being lost. We may feel that no one cares, not even God who has always been there for us. There may also be pain in our body where there was never pain before: headaches, backaches, stomach aches, or other symptoms. During our darkest and loneliest of times, we are sometimes frightened by our loss of enthusiasm, our thoughts of "Why go on?" or of "Why even bother to get out of bed today?" We often feel drained of the desire to do anything that requires our investment and our energy. It is hard to go on believing and trying to live during times of great loss.<sup>3</sup>

The suffering and the sensation of hurting deep within our personal system gradually diminishes with time. At the moment we are experiencing the anguish of the goodbye, however, it seems as though it will never go away. We feel like the flowers, crushed and overwhelmed by the inner storm.

These painful feelings come in varying degrees with the many forms of goodbye that are a part of life. They also come when we deliberately make certain choices. We say farewell to other options when we accept the decisions we have made. Suffering is especially sharp when the choices are between options that both look beneficial: Do I go on that trip with my spouse who so much needs my presence now in his mid-life struggle, or do I stay home with our children who are at such a crucial adolescent age? Do I continue with chemotherapy which makes me so ill but prolongs my

life, or do I discontinue it and enjoy the quality of life I now have? Do I place my mother in a nursing home where health care is so much better, or do I continue to support her in the situation of living alone where she feels so much more secure and at peace but is also much more prone to accidents? Do I file for divorce because it is so obvious that my marriage has died and is death-dealing to both my spouse and to myself, or do I go on choosing to remain in the situation because the children need the two of us to be there for them? Oftentimes it is very hard to live peacefully with the choices that one has to make.

### LIFE IS UNFAIR

Much of how we learn to live and grow through the suffering of our goodbyes has to do with how we look at the cause of that suffering. When people are in the middle of hard moments, when they are trying to account for "life accidents" (those unplanned for, unpredictable parts of life), they often try to find someone or something to explain their cause.<sup>4</sup> People who are suffering often conclude that life is unfair. But what they may actually mean is: Why isn't God fair? The expectation is that good should come to the good and bad to the bad. If we have been good we should not have the hard, ugly blows of life. Isn't that how God ought to operate? Why isn't God fair? Isn't God the one who is ultimately to blame for this pain? Couldn't this God, who can do all things, have stopped it in an instant?

How often this attitude toward suffering is voiced by those who have been hurt because of goodbyes. Parents who have taken so much time with their children and have done their best to share good values with them are wounded by their children's choices of lifestyles and substance abuse. Their inner voices are a mixture of guilt and anger at life's unfairness: "Where did we go wrong? Why has life dealt us this humiliating blow? Why has God let this happen?" The woman who battles depression all her life wonders the same thing. Something in her keeps pulling at her self-esteem and dragging away her joy as she goes on saying goodbye to her inner energy and enthusiasm. She looks at others who have never