

CONSTRUCTING  
A NEW NORMAL



Dealing Effectively with Losses  
Throughout Life

Helen Reichert Lambin

Foreword by Carl Dehne, SJ

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PUBLICATIONS

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# FOREWORD

We know that all human beings, in the course of our lives, have to deal with days and seasons that are incredibly painful. These painful realities can be appropriately listed under the heading “loss.” We lose loved ones in death—our parents, perhaps spouses and partners, siblings and friends, and—worst of all—sometimes even our own children. We outlive our animal companions. Deep and important relationships end—marriage, dear friendships, business and professional relationships. We change in relation to others, who are simultaneously changing in relation to us. We know failure and are forced to forego many of our hopes. Our careers can falter and die. We lose our looks, and our powers diminish. We can lose our health.

In all these painful passages, nothing is more comforting and healing to us than knowing a human being who has herself faced and successfully dealt with the painful losses that go with human life. Such a person may be full of useful hints and sparkling anecdotes, but what really counts is the available presence of someone who from her own experience knows what we are going through and simply by her healthy existence leads us to realize that we too can confront the worst and survive. And—more than that—prosper. Helen Lambin is such a dependable companion on the way, and we get to know her through her words in this book.

At the beginning, our favorite way of dealing with the losses that life entails is to pretend that after a time everything will be just the same as it was before—back to normal, as good as new. But as we live we learn,

slowly and painfully, that our losses remain lost. We do not forget about them, we do not get over them, we cannot simply move on.

Helen Lambin teaches us that the way to deal with the pain of our losses is not some form of resignation. Rather, our task is to construct a new normal—new and in her case wonderfully unpredictable. Her nostalgia is not for a rich past in which she was wise enough to prevail over pain, but for a future she is busy creating. Her metaphor is pilgrimage, and her life story is an account of the journey of a convinced Christian seeking to live her faith in an honest and active way along unexpected paths. We have every reason to thank her for her witness in this book, and to thank the Lord for giving her to us.

Carl Dehne, SJ  
Jesuit Community at Saint Louis University

# 1 SOONER OR LATER

## Facing Losses Throughout Life

**It is worth remembering that the time of greatest gain in terms of wisdom and inner strength is often the time of greatest difficulty.**

— Dalai Lama

The words above are ones to wear like a favorite sweater or shawl. The insights of the Dalai Lama have illuminated universal truths and inspired people of many faiths, including Christianity, my own faith tradition. His words in this quote do not diminish or dismiss the effect of loss and painful transition in our lives. Loss is loss. Sorrow is sorrow. Pain is pain. But in helping us look at loss in a new way, he imbues our experience with a different meaning and a sense of hope.

You may be familiar with this popular saying: “If we all threw our problems in a pile and saw everyone else’s, we’d grab ours back.” I agree and disagree. Not all problems are created equal. I can’t imagine applying this theory to a starving refugee driven from home by war and fearing still more violence. And I question applying it to someone like physicist Stephen Hawking, whose brilliant mind is trapped in a body devastated by Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis. At the same time, these words help us to see that, whatever our perspective, problems—including loss and transition—are part of life.

Sooner or later, if we live long enough, we are going to face some form of loss and transition. In fact, the longer we live, the more likely we will encounter these realities—major, minor, and in-between. Even young people are not immune. Even the much-too-young have faced loss

and transition with resourcefulness and courage. And some of us may believe that older people can't cope with change. I disagree. Of course, they (I should say *we*) can cope, having experienced change over our entire lifetime.

The question for people of all ages is: *How* do we cope?

Most of the chapters in this book are about loss and more-or-less painful transition. (It's almost impossible to separate the two). Some chapters are about other things—incarnation, islands, love, and tattoos. And yes, some are about hope. Most of the losses and transitions I describe are from my own experiences and from those of close friends and family members.



Over the years, I have written about various subjects, including travel (occasionally) and baseball (once). When people have asked me what I write about, I usually respond, after some thought, that I write primarily about loss and transition. But on reflection, I have come to realize I am writing resurrection theology. I don't know if a theologian would call it that, but I do. Resurrection underlies the way I write about loss and transition and, perhaps still more fundamentally, the way I have survived the challenges in my own life. This is what I hope to share.

Again, the question for all of us is: *How* do we cope?

Sometimes we cry out: "Lord, how can you allow this to happen to them, to us, to me?" That's a natural response. A human response. Don't worry. God can take it, just as he or she did with the cries of the psalmists almost three millennia ago.

Before I began writing this book, I wrote a prayer or reflection, thinking it might be a good fit. It goes like this:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God. How could this have happened to you? This terrible suffering and this brutal, humiliating, lonely death. Abandoned by your most of your friends, at least for a time, that terrible time. Regarded by many as a failure. Some say you offered yourself as a sacrifice for us sinners, a sacrificial lamb, the Lamb of God. But you are the Son of God! You share not only God's divinity but our humanity. Wouldn't a drop or two of your blood have sufficed? Wouldn't the ordinary cares of daily living have been enough? Or, did you suffer so that when we come to you in pain and suffering, for ourselves or for others, that we know you fully understand? You suffered so that we cannot say to you: "But you don't understand. How *could* you? You are the Son of God." So that we *can* say, *must* say instead: "God who suffered, be with me, be with us at this time. And help me to be with and for others in their time."

And, oh yes, remember what came after Christ's suffering and death—Act II, so to speak. Unimaginable but wholly imaginative. Incredible and credible. So startling that we are still talking about it 2,000 years later. Hope. Joy. Wonder. Confusion. Surprise. What happened was totally unexpected. It was *much better* than expected. It was The Resurrection, with a capital "T."

Meanwhile, back to Act I.



## 2 LOSS AND TRANSITION

### Remembering and Response

Some problems are so complex that you have to be highly intelligent and well-informed just to be undecided about them.

— Laurence J. Peter

*“Get over it.”*

Spoken or unspoken, this is too often one reaction to our expression of lingering grief or pain—at least that which lingers longer than others *think* it should. This grief or pain could be related to the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, serious health problems, a broken relationship, the myriad sorrows that can come along in life. Regardless of the reason, grief doesn’t follow a schedule.

I believe in a free society and generally don’t believe in banning books, but there are two phrases I’d like to restrict, if not ban. The first is, “Get over it.” If each of us were allowed to use these words only three times in a lifetime, we’d have to give some serious consideration to the time, place, and circumstances. (The other phrase I’d restrict is the dismissive, “I’ve moved beyond that in my thinking.”)

Many of us do not do well with loss and painful transitions. We are, for the most part, optimistic people. That is a good outlook, but we expect every difficulty to have a silver lining—immediately. That, of course, is not the way life works. Dealing with suffering, rejection, pain, and loss are necessary steps in the transition to joy, healing, and acceptance. That was true for Jesus in his transition through suffering to the ultimate joy of Easter.

It’s almost impossible to separate loss and transition. All profound

loss involves some kind of transition, but not all transition involves profound loss.

Generally speaking, I like the word *transition*. Life is not static, but dynamic. That is, it involves change and growth. What would life be without the possibility of change?

Some transitions are positive: we work for them, plan for them, and look forward to them. Think, for example, of graduation, marriage, voluntary retirement, moving to a place of our choosing, a first apartment, the birth of a child, a new relationship, freedom from a painful relationship, a long-awaited vacation or journey, a new pet, or the simple pleasure of awakening to a new day.

But planning, anticipation, and hopeful waiting do *not* apply to painful transitions—the loss of a job, the relocation of a friend or relative, the breaking-up of a cherished relationship. And it certainly does *not* apply to the death of a loved one.

Our difficulty in dealing with loss and transition—or helping others to do so—has consequences for individuals and society as a whole. As members of a society, we can find our compassion and will to help others diminished. As individuals, we can become cynical, burned out, depressed, or resigned.

We are all going to face some kind of loss sooner or later. Some of us will face more than others, surely, but no one is immune. Rather than allowing or encouraging ourselves—or others—to become paralyzed by loss or painful transition, we need to find a way to move through it and beyond. We may want simply to get back to normal, but we can't go back. We have to construct to a *new* normal, a normal that often is built brick by brick.

Scripture teaches us that for all things there is a season. And yes, that includes a season to mourn. And yes, our faith tells us that even in darkness God is with us.

Think of God's words at the beginning of Isaiah 43. God does not say: "Get over it." Instead, God tells us: "Don't be afraid, I've redeemed you. I've called you by name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down." Or take to heart Jesus' words in Matthew 11:28: "Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest."

When I say that I am writing from a faith perspective, I don't mean that I am going to speak of God constantly. I'm not. It's not that I have never had doubts—I do—but, for me, faith is like the oxygen. Without it I'd find myself gasping for breath as if I were at a very high altitude, like Pike's peak.



A disclaimer. I have written about loss, transition, and prayer for some twenty years. I am not a psychologist or theologian, but I hope the experiences and insights I share in this book will help you move through loss and painful transition or offer support to someone who is sad or lost. After all, like it or not, we're all in this together.

I have experienced profound joy and profound loss for over seven decades. Transitions expected and unexpected, welcome and most unwelcome. I am or have been wife, widow, mother, grandmother, writer, mistake-maker, and adult learner. As I discover daily, I still have a lot to learn. In another society at this age I could be considered a crone and a wisdom figure. I probably can qualify as a crone but, as much as I would like to qualify as a wisdom figure, I know better.

I have moved beyond that in my thinking.