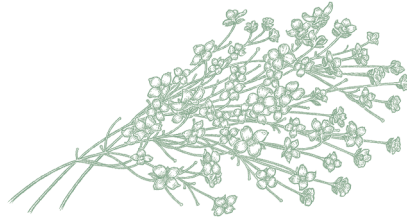


A HEALING YEAR



DAILY MEDITATIONS
FOR LIVING WITH LOSS

Alaric Lewis

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PUBLICATIONS

My mother died when I was seven years old. At a time when most children were concerned with nothing more than their play, I was facing questions that I would rather not have faced: What happens when people die? Will I ever feel happy again? What can I do for my family to help them with all of this? Did I do something to bring this about? Why, God, why?

My grandmother died when I was twenty-two. Surely now the questions would be easier to face, I thought. But they were not. Because not only did I have to deal with loss all over again, this loss touched something within me that was still very connected to the loss of my mother, which was connected to other losses, which were somehow connected to God.

My grandfather died when I was twenty-eight. I was, at this point, a priest serving in an active parish, and had been with countless families, offering comfort and solace to those who mourned. Surely I would have more answers this time, I thought. Again, this loss was connected to the losses of my mother and grandmother, which were connected to other losses, which were somehow connected to God.

They're all very complicated, these issues of grief and loss which we must face. Just when we think we have moved on to a new place, something will come up within us that touches it all off again. And, though we thought that all our tears had been shed, though we thought that the aching in our hearts had vanished, the tears and the ache can and do return. And with them come the questions: What happens when people die? Will I ever feel happy again? What can I do for my family to help them with all of this? Did I do something to bring this about? Why, God, why?

Although I don't purport to know all the answers, I have begun to discern a very fundamental truth weaving through it all: The best way to understand loss and the grief that comes from it, the best way to begin to comprehend the toll that death can take on the living, is to be aware of the presence of God in our daily lives. If we look for answers elsewhere, our pursuits are worthless.

A HEALING YEAR

This book, then, offers reflections for each day of the year. It is my attempt to point out the amazing presence of God in this world and to offer—if not the answers—at least my attempts to search for them. Some of the experiences I relate are unique to me, but the truths these experiences relate are as common as humankind. I am absolutely convinced that God is active in our lives in so many ways, and that if we begin to listen for His presence, to see Him in others, to feel Him in our hearts, then the sheer suffering and pain of loss can be transformed in our hearts. With God's abundant help, we can begin to truly heal: one day at a time.



JANUARY

❧ 1 ❧

Begin at the beginning...and go on till you come
to the end: then stop.

LEWIS CARROLL

I resolve to quit smoking. I resolve to lose weight. I resolve to exercise more. I resolve to eat right. I resolve to relax more. Each year we draw up our list of New Year's resolutions as if the fact that another calendar year has begun is going to make sure we are spurred onto action, into growth. And often the list can be laid aside or even forgotten.

There is nothing magical about the first day of January however, and it is important for us to realize that life itself is a series of unending patterns of beginnings and endings, beginnings and endings. And somewhere, in between all of these beginnings and endings, we live. And in living we find grace. And in finding grace we find the courage and strength to begin again.

❧ 2 ❧

Little children, let us love not in word or speech,
but in truth and action.

I JOHN 3:18

There comes a time when we have to put our money where our mouth is. There comes a time when we move from *talking* about love—what it means, how it touches us, how wonderful it is—to *doing* something to make love more present, more real. And harsh as it may sound, if we expect others to show us love, to help us through rough times, then we need to show that same love to others, even when we feel there is very little we can give or very little we can do. How will the people in our lives know how to love us—to show us love—if we do not show them?

❧ 3 ❧

Keep thou my feet: I do not ask to see
The distant scene; one step enough for me.

JOHN HENRY CARDINAL NEWMAN

If only we could see the future, we might think, how much easier life would be. When we wonder how we are going to get through something, it would be a comfort to know just how we will get through it—and when. When we wonder if things will ever be better, it would be nice to know that they will.

Of course, we cannot know. Only God knows. And God doesn't ordinarily let us know what will happen in the future. But He does promise to guide our steps. If we concentrate on those steps, and where they are leading us now, then we can be sure that we will not be led into anything that is beyond our ability to handle.

❧ 4 ❧

Do what you can, with what you have, where you are.

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

My sister Kathy and I, extroverts, like to talk about our mother as much as we can. We want to talk about everything—what she was like, whether she could sing, how she struggled when she was in pain, what really made her angry, what music she liked—everything. My brother David, more of an introvert, seems to prefer to keep his memories in his own heart where he can deal with them in his own way. To expect my sister or me to pipe down, or my brother to start launching into soliloquies, is to turn a blind eye to the fact that we all need to work through not just grief but life itself, with the personality and quirks and interesting attributes we've been given.

❧ 5 ❧

The saying is sure:
If we have died with him, we will also live with him;
If we endure, we will also reign with him.

2 TIMOTHY 2:11-12

If only dying with Him and holding out to the end was easier, this business of reigning with Him might appear more attractive than it does at first glance. But we know death—either the dying to self that Christians undergo or the real physical death that our loved ones experience—is far from easy. It makes stringent demands on us, causes us to suffer and to question. And what about “holding out,” or endurance? How difficult it is to endure, when at our lowest times it all can seem like folly..like waste.

❧ 6 ❧

Of all the things that wisdom provides to make life entirely happy,
much the greatest is the possession of friendship.

EPICURUS

The phone call came, telling me of my grandfather’s death. I slumped by the side of the bed, anguished and frightened. I did not want to—indeed I could not—imagine a world in which Gramps didn’t tell me stories and fix things for me and make me feel part of his life. I immediately reached for that same phone and called my friend Godfrey, because I knew that things could look different in the light of friendship. And I made a resolution to never block out that light from my life.

7

The art of living is more like wrestling than dancing.

MARCUS AURELIUS

When we are young we think that life should be one joy after another and that we should glide through it blissfully, turning and twirling with delight at the sheer wonder and adventure of it all. As we grow older, cynicism takes over, and we might think of life more in terms of a battle with constant skirmishes that require our utmost strength and daily attention.

It seems to me the healthiest stance is somewhere in between. Because there are indeed battles in life that can drain us of our energy and wound us. But once the battle is over, perhaps the best thing to do is cast off our armor and dance for joy that the battle didn't kill us—and that it was somehow worth the fight.

8

There is nothing so strong as gentleness,
and nothing so gentle as real strength.

SAINT FRANCIS DE SALES

Once when I was a very young boy, my Gramps gave into my whining and agreed to let me hammer a nail into a board he was working on. Wanting to impress him with the sheer power of my six-year-old muscles, I swung the hammer with all my might: and missed the nail. I swung again and again. And I missed again and again. Gramps finally took the hammer out of my hand and tapped the nail securely in place. An important lesson for a young boy to learn: Sometimes the small, quiet way of dealing with a situation is exactly the way to ensure something gets done.

You cause the grass to grow for the cattle
and the plants for people to use.

PSALM 104

When I was a young boy, I was fascinated by gardens. A garden was a magical, wondrous place. After my mother died, nothing in my world seemed to be normal or uniform except gardens that offered their testimony to order in the world. Seeds were laid precisely in a row; each thing had its place where loving hands tucked the seeds into a bed of the earth, just like a mother. And as I saw new life make its way to the top of the soil, I thought how amazing that something as frail as a plant could have the strength to push aside so much soil. How wondrous it was when the plants grew to full size. I could stand among the corn and be completely hidden from the world whenever it began to confuse me.



*How amazing that something
as frail as a plant
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