

Exploring the Sacred in Death and Dying

Study Guide

Introduction

“Death is a fact of life.” That’s easy to say but not so easy to deal with, especially when the death is that of a loved one. We even sometimes find it difficult to relate to those whose loved ones are dying, because we feel we don’t know what to say or how to help. Some say it’s not death but dying that frightens them, and in a sense that may be true for all of us, making it hard to relate helpfully to those who are dying and to their families and friends.

What the DVDs Are About

This series is for anyone who will ever have to deal with the death of a loved one or relate to someone whose loved one is dying—in other words for any of us. It’s for those who, in a volunteer or professional capacity, have taken on the responsibility to be there for persons who are dying, their families, loved ones and friends.

How the Series Was Made

The videos were shot primarily in Birmingham, Alabama, where Ron DelBene, the on-camera leader, lives and works and where many of his friends and colleagues could take part. They include professional and volunteer caregivers with whom Ron has worked, and friends who have experienced the death of family members and other loved ones. They tell their stories and reflect on what they have learned, while Ron helps viewers focus on insights and learnings that can be applied in other situations.

How the Programs Are Organized

Each of the first five programs deals with two topics. These topics are what Ron believes to be the 10 most important things people should know about exploring the sacred in death and dying. At the end of each topic, Ron suggests a question for reflection or discussion. Viewers can decide to stop the DVD after the first part for reflection and discussion or they can view the whole program and then discuss both parts.

The sixth program is about the DelBene family and their experience in caring for Ron’s father who is dying. We see the perspective of various family members as they face the milestones of the dying process. We see also how they explore the sacred. This family’s experience raises many of the issues families have to deal with and should be helpful to other families when one of their members is dying. It should also be helpful to caregivers, volunteer or professional, who work with families experiencing the dying of a family member. *NOTE: In this program, Ron refers to his father’s being “on Hospice again.” Hospice offers an alternative to full hospital care for terminally ill patients and their families. When the patient’s doctor determines he or she is terminal, the patient becomes eligible for hospice services. If the patient improves so that his or her condition is no longer terminal, the patient “graduates,” and is no longer eligible for hospice care until the doctor determines that hospice care is again advisable.*

About Using the DVDs

The DVDs can be used by groups or by individuals. If you are using the series with a group, the following suggestions may help.

1. Preview each program before showing.
2. Try out the TV/DVD equipment to be sure it's in good working order and cue up the program to be viewed.

The Leader

Ron DelBene has been teaching people to pray and working with individuals and groups in spiritual formation since 1963. He is especially concerned with helping people be aware of and responsive to the presence of God in all aspects of life. He has worked extensively with professional and volunteer caregivers in churches, synagogues and hospitals as well as with hospice workers, to help them become more skilled in meeting the needs of dying patients and their families.

An Episcopal priest, Ron is the author of two pastoral care programs and five books and is the featured presenter in another DVD series, *Praying in the Midst of Life*, also available from EcuFilm (1-888-346-3862, www.ecufilm.org). Ron and his wife, Dr. Eleanor McKenzie DelBene, direct the Hermitage, a nonprofit corporation devoted to providing spiritual growth and pastoral care. Ron and Eleanor live in Trussville, Alabama (a Birmingham suburb), as of the spring when this series was made, with their daughter, Anne, and Ron's parents, Don and Virginia. For further information about Ron DelBene and other related books and programs, see www.delbene.org.

The Study Guide

The purpose of this guide is to make it easy to facilitate discussion and help viewers identify for themselves the learnings that are important to them. Page 3 features a quick overview of all six programs and suggested scriptures. You may want to copy and distribute this page at the beginning of the series.

Pages 4-9 provide outlines for each program using the following format:

- Names of speakers and key words
- Ron's question to viewers at the end of part 1
- Names of speakers and key words
- Ron's question to viewers at the end of part 2
- Additional questions for viewers

These outlines may be copied and handed out to help viewers recall what points were made and by whom as they talk about each program.

Overviews of Exploring the Sacred in Death & Dying

I. Saying Goodbye

Scripture: Isaiah 40: 6-8

Saying goodbye is not generally an easy thing to do in our culture. It's even more difficult when someone we love is dying. This program shows a number of ways people have said goodbye and explores some rituals that have been helpful in the closure process.

II. Living Through Grief

Scripture: Romans 8:38-39

Grief is a natural reaction to loss. It is the acknowledgement that we have lost something of great importance. The loss leaves us with a broken heart and it is through grieving that our spirit mends and our heart is healed. This program emphasizes the importance of accepting our feelings.

III. Telling the Stories

Scripture: Psalms 16: 1-11

Every death has a story that needs to be told in order for the healing process to begin. In this program, people tell their stories and we experience some of the many faces of death. We also hear stories about what one person describes as the porous nature of the curtain between life and death.

IV. Recognizing the Sacred

Scripture: John 14: 1-6

There are moments that lead us to a deeper level of experiencing life and death. We learn that being present and attentive to the person we are with provides a greater opportunity to recognize these holy moments. We also learn about the importance of recognizing and trusting our instincts.

V. Communicating

Scripture: John 11: 25-26

Communication during the process of death is not always easy. However a family has communicated or failed to, the stress of illness and death make communication both more difficult and more necessary. This program explores ways to open up or improve meaningful communication in families and with friends.

VI. One Family's Story

Scripture: I Corinthians 15: 1-26

In a family there are several persons' stories, all revolving around the same events but experienced differently. We become aware of the diversity of thoughts and feelings of the members of one family. We also learn more about recognizing and embracing the sacred moments.

Program Outlines

I. Saying Goodbye

Many Ways

Ron: Because the act of closure is so influenced by our personal, family and cultural background, it's important to say goodbye in our own way.

Allison: that's as close as my father and I came to saying "Goodbye"

Rob: Mom, this is what I want to do

Paul: what was hard was being attentive

Ron: sometimes able to say things we've never said before

Peggy: When I realized he was dying, I told him I loved him

Patrick: talk to Lee

Ron: importance of talking to persons in coma

John: your spirit is alive and well

Ron: suggestions about people in comas; transition to sudden death

Joy: in some mysterious way we are still in communion with those people

Margaret: during Eucharist I'd be totally overwhelmed by his presence

Stewart: this is the tree for Steve

Ron: the "if only" question

Ron's question: In what ways do you say goodbye to your family and people whom you love?

Rituals for Passage

Ron: Our religious heritage may provide more formal ways of saying goodbye that we call rituals...they can help in the closure process.

Drew: drawing curtain around family taking child off life support...holy of holies

Ron: so sacred I felt I didn't belong there

Peggy: family member not ready to let go

Ron: Jake...couldn't go until he was upstairs

Jane: some people say the Sh'ma

Alison: Mr. White had died

Ron: Lord's Prayer in German

Patrick: Lee...ritual for each friend

Ron: rituals may be created or come from tradition

Jane: dirt on the coffin

Ron's question: What rituals do you or your family or your religious tradition use in saying goodbye?

Additional questions: What is the most practical, helpful thing for you in this program? What touched you most deeply? Have you tried to avoid situations that seemed so sacred you wondered if you should even be there? Would you still try to avoid them?

II. Living Through Grief

Accepting the Feelings

Ron: It's important to accept our emotions, even though they are painful, instead of fighting them or denying them.

Drew: death of baby...Where is God?

Ron: know God is present ...on the other hand, God seems absent

Maggie: decided to argue with the Lord (about death of her twin, Libby)

Eleanor: What kind of God are you?

Ron: appropriate to bring before God all our feelings

Patrick: Grandmother's death...couldn't pray

Ron: important to accept our feelings

Ron's question: What feelings of grief have you experienced in your life and do you accept them?

Moving Through the Hurt

Ron: Grief may take you so far into the depths that you fear you may never come back...but as you work your way through the crying, the loneliness, the anger, you will find there is life beyond the hurting...Grandma, Gladys and Gus

Margaret: he's not there

Rob: "home-grown tomatoes"

Drew: father's ashes in the Little Red

Ron: hot fudge sundae

Rob: the fix-it guy..."nobody to call"

Brook: I'll never get over this

Ron: "It's not the big things"...moving through grief takes time

Joy: Christmas tree

Ron's question: What memories have been important to you in your process of moving through grief?

Additional questions: What have you learned that might help you as you relate to others who are grieving? What in this program has been most helpful to you? What might you be most likely to share with others?

III. Telling the Stories

Many Faces of Death

Ron: "I wasn't there when my husband died." Every death has a story that needs to be told

Patrick: the death of his friend Lee

Ron: each story becomes a sacred piece of a person's life

Brooke: Alex's death

Ron: transition to those who can't be present; Tom, who said goodbye to father for the other children

Eleanor: mother's death...born again somehow

Ron: some stories painful, but need to be told

Brooke: need to keep going through the hurt...you run out of ears

Ron: Dorothy and Bill; we need to tell our stories

Ron's question: What stories about death have you been able to tell or do you still have untold stories?

Thin Curtain Between

Ron: It's important to talk about the experiences people have that are outside our normal realm...going with Uncle Floyd

Alison: curtain between living and dying more porous than I realized

Ron: introduces Anne's story

Anne: her near-death experience

Ron: our task is to be present to those who are grieving

Brooke: felt Alex's father was meeting him...great comfort

Ron: intro to Maggie

Maggie: talking with Libby (twin sister) about her death

Ron: power of remembrance

Jane: the Kaddish

Ron's question: Have you had an experience of the thin curtain between worlds or do you know someone who has?

Additional questions: Brooke senses that she has to relive the hurt in order to get through it.

Have you had this experience? Have you helped others tell their stories?

IV. Recognizing the Sacred

Being Present

Ron: Being present and attentive to the person with whom we find ourselves provides a greater opportunity to recognize holy moments as they occur.

Drew: sculpture—unfelt presence of God

Ron: transition to Maggie

Maggie: prayer with Libby her twin was talking together

Patrick: laughing with Lee

Ron: black velvet...called to be attentive to holy moments

Peggy: don't want to take it home

Drew: calls up anger and fear

Ron: it is not easy, but our call is to be as present as we can be

Ron's question: How can you be more present to others in your life and work?

Listening to the Inner Voice

Ron: Another way of recognizing the sacred is listening to our inner voice.

Carlton: Am I going to do what "feels" right or what I "think" is right

Ron: difficult to identify our own inner voice

Carlton: nobody's going to know

Ron: not uncommon to have questions...am I doing it right?

Carlton: I'll miss you

Ron: caught between our old behavior and our new behavior

Carlton: needed to be with her where she was

Ron: accepting a compliment honors person that gives it

Carlton: Loving God, receive your daughter

Ron: he listened to Mary, stayed present, trusted new responses

Ron's question: When are times when you listened to your inner voice?

Additional questions: Have you hesitated to visit one who is sick and dying because you're not sure you'll do it right? What in this program has helped? What might you do or say that you wouldn't have thought of before?

V. Communicating

In the Family

Ron: in times of stress or trauma communication can become strained or even break down.

Eleanor: “a heck of a lot of nerve”

Ron: reflections on family dynamics that influence communication

Rob: close-knit family even though we’re scattered over the country

Maggie: being away was hard

Ron: What happens when information is withheld?

Peggy: when it’s personal it’s different

Ron: poor communication between dying and bereaved sometimes requires intervention:

Barbara’s risk

John: daughter yearned to share sacred moment

John: “like planning a fishing trip”

Ron’s question: What are the dynamics of communication in your family?

A Wider Circle

Ron: family not the only support system there is...also a wider circle...introduction to breath prayer

Eleanor: Cathy’s breath prayer

Ron: communication in extended families; transition to people bound together by pain

Jane: Jews bound together by history

Ron: transition to those bound in friendship; Taylor’s funeral

Patrick: important to allow friends to take part

Ron: Dale’s gift of clothes

Rob: tools

Ron: great comfort in being connected

Maggie: don’t be afraid to love and be honest with the person who is dying

Ron’s question: What can you do to improve communication with your family and your friends?

Additional question: How many of the communication problems mentioned in this program do you think might have resulted from fear?

VI. One Family's Story

Ron: summary of major points in series; introduction to the family

Don: got rid of pneumonia; hospital got rid of me

Virginia: I hit bottom

Ron: crisis, struggle, decision

Paul: out of the decision-making process

Eleanor: I wanted more open relationships

Anne: if they move...they'll BE here

Eleanor: I would find a way to connect

Ron: hard to describe my emotions

Anne: for him, it was a journey into death

Don: when we finally arrived I cried

Virginia: we pray and he'll cry and I'll cry

Eleanor: glad to see feelings expressed openly

Ron: didn't expect Dad to live; called Paul

Don: Surprise! I didn't go

Paul: Grandpa so weak; we said goodbye

Anne: we had communion, did anointing

Ron: roller coaster ride

Don: frustrating for someone who's been active

Virginia: he's worried that he's trouble

Ron: communication or struggle

Eleanor: don't know what will happen; agreed to talk about it as it happens

Paul: I get a veiled view

Ron: exploring the sacred can be scary

Virginia: scariest part is whether I can pick myself up

Anne: where do you think heaven is?

Don: When I'm dead, I can't hear you, so be careful what you say

Ron: not the story I thought I'd be living

Ron's question: How do the responses of these family members relate to your experience?

Additional questions: What might your family learn from their experience? What might you adapt? What would be hard for you?

For further information about Ron DelBene and related books and programs see www.delbene.org.