



REFLECTIONS ON SPIRITUAL PROBLEMS IN SUDDEN LOSS

by Rabbi Earl A. Grollman

As a clergy-person, I counsel families who endure such tragedies as explosions, plane and car crashes, murders, suicides, earthquakes, tornadoes and other catastrophes where there are no forewarnings.

Death is almost always a trauma; a shock to survivors. Sudden death ranks among the most severe traumas. One moment our life seems secure; the next, the world crumbles before our very eyes. The assault on our emotions makes it difficult to believe and accept. For life is taken so suddenly with a bewildering sense of unreality and powerlessness. Our plans, our dreams, and our role in life abruptly and devastatingly are altered.

More than any life cycle event, sudden death raises profound issues about good and evil and reward and punishment. We may feel like we have been physically kicked in the stomach and spiritually violated with gnawing unresolved questions gripping our soul.

When unexpected crises shatter lives, people of all faiths often ask the same questions: "Is it God's will?" "Did God make it happen?" "Was God angry at my loved one?" or "Is God trying to punish me?" "Don't you get what you deserve?" "Is God testing my faith?" "If God's will is for life, why did this terrible death occur?"

People may call God's justice and mercy into question: "What kind of God would allow this to happen?" "Why didn't God intervene with just a tiny miracle?" "Or at least warn him or her?" "Shouldn't good people be rewarded for the wonderful things they do and evil people punished?"

We may even question our own sense of worth and wish we had died instead because we "deserved" death more than our loved one.

Did you know that some of the greatest spiritual leaders have asked the exact questions when feeling abandoned, forsaken, cheated by God? When unexpected sorrows shatter lives, faith may flicker low as we struggle with doubts about God's love. But if we never had to struggle, our faith would not be challenged and enlarged. Questioning is a normal expression of anguish and consistent with later spiritual growth.

Mysteries will remain. Tragedy does not produce goodness but may reveal it with acts of kindness and generosity of the spirit from the faith community. We may find consolation in our Holy Scriptures and rituals. Our existence has been shaken but we may yet find in our journey of faith the ability to still affirm a meaningful life with a God who gives us life and is with us in death.

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