



A Senior High Parish Religion Program

L e v e l T h r e e

Minicourse

**Death,
Grief,
and
Christian
Hope**

Nancy Marrocco

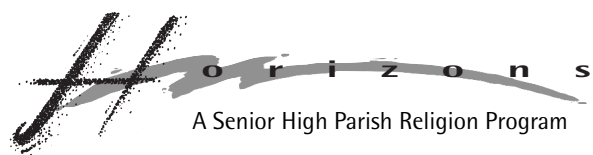
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Marilyn Kielbasa, Editor
Thomas Zanzig, General Editor

*Death, Grief,
and Christian Hope*





Death, Grief, and Christian Hope



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To Mother and Dad for their constant and unending
inspiration, encouragement, and support



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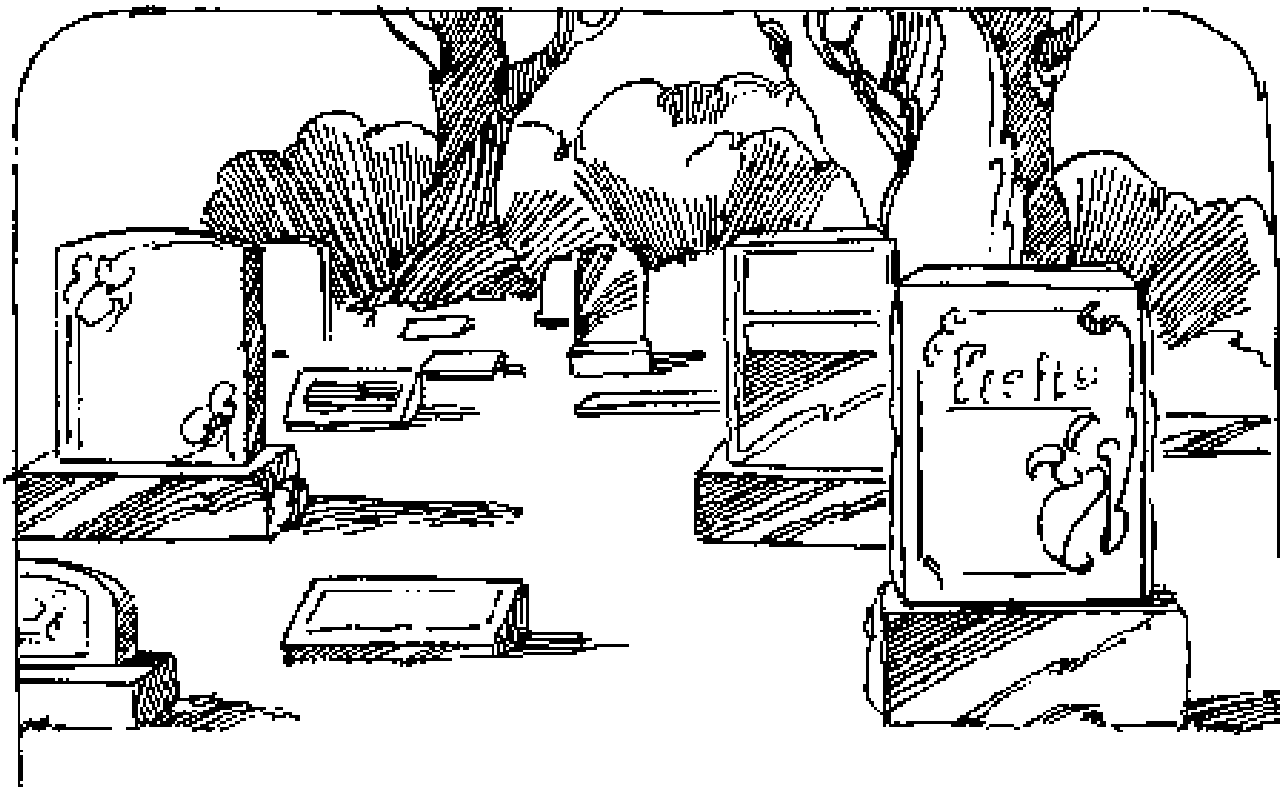
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Introduction



An Overview of This Course

Death finds each of us, every single day of our life and on the final day of our life. Deep down, young people already know this. Some have experienced the death of a family member or a friend their own age. Many know how it feels to watch the love between their own parents slowly erode and die, ending in divorce and the upheaval of home life. All of us, even the youngest of us, have experienced loss of some kind.

Death is about loss. To experience loss is to taste death. Loss happens to us every day, sometimes in little ways like spats between friends, sometimes in big ways like broken homes and broken dreams. And,

once in a while, the most radical of all losses happens: someone dies.

Death is a topic unlike any other because death is about everything that matters most—relationships, suffering, love, identity, God, meaning, purpose, destiny. Despite our best defenses, death touches our deepest fears, sins, doubts, and hurts—as well as our God-given capacities for love, forgiveness, transcendence, personal transfiguration, resurrection, and hope. Death raises up our most intense emotions and our least answerable questions. Death engages us in the very mystery of our own selves.

This course is about helping young people to turn gently toward the truth and to find real hope. It can help teach them to enter into mystery with confidence, to treasure and ponder their least answerable



questions, and to trust the God who created them with a capacity both for love and for suffering.

We live in a world tinged with a sense of futility, a world increasingly conditioned by foreboding, isolation, and confusion. Our young people need help dealing with life's constant and inevitable losses.

The young people in this course are led to encounter Jesus as someone who lived as passionately as they do, who suffered loss as intensely as they do, who faced death—and changed it. Love was his driving force. Love was the one thing he would not give up on. Many young people's lives are already touched by death, but they are also touched by love. Despite broken homes and troubled times, young people feel the deep craving to be loved and the profound desire to be persons of love.

In the paschal mystery, love and death meet. And love triumphs. *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* brings the young people—with their own real lived experience—into the heart of that triumph.

This minicourse is intended to be taught as three 2-hour sessions presented in consecutive weeks. The activities are designed for a group of about ten students. The first session, "Stirring the Depths," helps the young people name and explore their emotions, questions, and experiences related to death, loss, and grief. The question, What is death? becomes the focus of the session, as do our society's denial of death and the effect of that denial on our life. The first session culminates with a glimpse into Gethsemane: We meet Jesus as one who agonized with the same questions and fears that we do. Jesus willingly entered into the struggle, placing all his trust in the God of love.

The second session, "Hoping in the Face of Death," takes the question, What is death? a step further. The focus shifts from cultural death denial to Christian conceptions of afterlife and of personal transformation. The young people's own experience of love and loss becomes focused in their personal symbols—mementos of a relationship involving loss, which the young people bring to the session. With the symbols, the young people are led into the Crucifixion story—which tells of the greatest challenge of all: to go on loving in the face of rejection, loss, and death.

The third session, "Coping with Death and Grief," is designed to equip the young people with some basic skills for grieving in healthy ways and for understanding grief as a gradual process of healing and personal change. It culminates in prayer based on the amazing encounter of a much-loved person returning from the dead: the Resurrection

appearance of Jesus (John 21). The Risen Jesus, filled with love, comes back to his friends in the midst of their grief and despair; there, he draws them into newfound hope. This final prayer experience is designed to lead the young people into their own personal encounter with him who has risen.

Overall, though this course deals directly with death and loss, it is about healing, hope, and empowerment. In spite of the sorrows that will inevitably be raised, this course should not be morose, depressing, or heavy, but brimming with hope: Good Friday has already passed, and Easter has already begun. We are not promising the young people that a Savior will come to help them with all their troubles. We are helping the young people move into the tender embrace of a Savior who has already come, who is already here. This is a Savior steadfastly reaching out to show us how to transform grief for the purposes of love.

Background for This Course

The Adolescent and This Course

Expect the young people to come into this course with a degree of enthusiasm. After all, death is not a usual topic of conversation or study. With no work on the part of the teacher, the subject matter of *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* is already directly and personally relevant to each participant. Whether or not the young people recognize it, death involves us in mystery, and mystery is enticing.

Under this surface of interested enthusiasm and curiosity, however, these young people will be as steeped in death denial as are most adults. And there is a good reason for death denial: loss hurts. All the participants in your group will already have wounds they need to protect; concerns they fear raising; issues that frustrate, anger, and confuse them; hopes and dreams they find all too fragile; questions they cannot answer.

Because of the young people's natural interest in this course and because of their need to guard their vulnerability, they will probably be talkative. They will likely use their chatter and laughter to keep things from feeling too serious, heavy, or threatening. Such natural defense systems are good and healthy. Try to keep a balance between lighthearted, distracting chatter and silence. Some silence is essential. Silence—in small amounts and when the young

people are ready for it—assists the mysterious movement of the Spirit.

You can also expect the young people to hold rather literal views of afterlife. They may be unenthused about heaven because they think they will be bored there! They may show some preoccupation with the concept of hell: though they may not voice it directly, young people with low self-confidence and perfectionist tendencies may fear or expect that no matter how hard they try, they will end up in hell. In fact, such fears can persist into adulthood. This kind of preoccupation can make death seem unbearable.

Take whatever opportunities you can to reassure the young people of God's love, of God's understanding that we simply cannot be perfect. Be sure, too, that they understand the Catholic view of hell to be *a possibility* based on human free will. The young people need to know that Catholicism does not teach that any particular persons are in hell or ever will be. The young people need to know that God's love for us never ends—not at death and not beyond death.

What is exciting about teaching this course is the possibility of gently awakening adolescents to their own personal resources, of helping them to treasure questions and value emotions—even emotions such as guilt, anger, and fear. Because adolescents are not yet set in their ways, not yet too deeply ingrained in their own denial systems, this course is an opportunity to help them learn to deal with real life in creative, hope-filled ways.

Culture Connections

The overriding cultural connection of concern in teaching this course is our collective societal tendency to avoid the subject of death. In our culture we act as though death does not exist and will not happen. This denial of death can be seen in all our media—television, radio, newspapers, magazines, even music. Ads help to create an illusion of immortality by glamorizing youth and by insisting that we hide our physical imperfections. They keep us focused on pleasure seeking and the promise of instant—or even permanent—gratification. A preoccupation with securing earthly wealth contributes to a widespread illusion that money can prevent our being touched by hardship or loss. But such is not the case!

In our culture we tend to keep people who are sick, disabled, and older out of sight. We learn to

mask, avoid, or escape anything that causes us suffering. And we speak of death in euphemisms: we say, “She’s pushing up daisies” or “She passed away,” rather than using plain language: “She died.” Hiding our limits gives us the illusion that we have no limits.

Our culture, by teaching us that we can control all things, keeps us from the awareness that we actually control very few things. Most important, we cannot prevent our own dying.

All these things make it more difficult for us to accept our own fragility, to share our real fears with one another, to be seen as vulnerable or in need. Above all, cultural death denial makes it harder for us to trust an unseen, mysterious God—a God with far more power than we have. In short, these cultural preoccupations keep us from dealing with the truth about ourselves and our life. The result is that death may come as a greater shock than it otherwise might, leaving us shattered, alone, and in despair—unequipped to grieve in healthy ways. The more we reject that we are vulnerable creatures caught up in a mystery we can neither control nor solve, the more we try to bypass yearning, searching, waiting, and suffering, the harder it will be for us to grieve and to die, as we surely will.

It is important to realize how these rather negative cultural conditions affect us. However, it is far more important to realize that such things need not dominate us.

The Theology of This Course

The Scriptures are filled with stories of love and death and loss. One of their predominant themes is transformation through faith, hope, and love. The paschal mystery—Jesus' own life, death, and Resurrection—is the heart and source of Catholic theology on death. Catholic teaching on death can be summarized with the following points:

- All that God created was created good; therefore, human existence—even with its mortal nature and its capacity for suffering—is good.
- Death is not the end. Death is a necessary part of the process by which we are gradually transformed and fulfilled. Our inborn hungering for “more” leads us to yearn for that which lies beyond death, for that which is beyond the limitations of earthly existence (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1007). Death is a definitive moment with which earthly life culminates; a moment in which all of one's daily choices are



taken up into one final choice for or against God, for or against love. In death, we are said to meet God face-to-face: in that moment, we see God as God is, and we see ourselves as we are.

- Love is our primary call and the source of our greatest hope. God's love for us is abiding and never ending; our God-given capacity for love makes it possible for wounds to be healed, limits to be transcended, the impossible to become possible.
- Life, beginning with conception, ending with death, and moving into afterlife, is a dynamic continuum, an ongoing process of evolution in love toward God (*Catechism*, no. 1013). Heaven, hell, and purgatory are not contrived places but states of being that reflect each person's stage in the process of coming to full and total love—of God, self, and others.
- Death is a community event. We are all interconnected. No person is untouched by the life of others; therefore, no person is untouched by the death of others (*Catechism*, no. 1687). The Roman Catholic funeral is a vital expression of communion in the Risen Savior, an outward proclamation that we are intimately joined to one another both in life and in death, that love stands triumphant over the grave.

This Course and Evangelization

In *The Challenge of Catholic Youth Evangelization*, evangelization is described as “the initial effort by the faith community as a whole to proclaim through word and witness the Good News of the Gospel to those who have not yet heard or seen it, and then to invite those persons into a relationship with Jesus Christ and the community of believers” (National Federation for Catholic Youth Ministry, p. 3). Evangelization is also the ongoing witness of the community of believers and, as such, the basis and energizing core of all the ministries in the church.

The Horizons Program is grounded in a commitment to evangelize young people effectively. Each course reflects that commitment in both content and methodology. All the courses, even those on topics that do not appear overtly “religious,” explore the connection between the lived experience of the young person and Jesus' proclamation of the Good News. All the courses employ strategies that actively engage the whole person, demonstrating that religious education can be not only informative but life-giving and even fun! In other words the

Horizons Program tries to be “good news” not just proclaim the Good News.

This Good News is especially important when it comes to the issue of death. Perhaps nothing stands as a greater challenge to belief in a loving God than the inevitability of suffering and death. This difficulty is already quite real for most young people. The minicourse *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* teaches young persons to address the issue of death head-on and with abiding confidence in God's utter trustworthiness. In so doing, the course approach itself demonstrates a belief that nothing is greater than God's love. For young people to be able to turn toward the issues of suffering and death with confidence that their faith need not be destroyed by those issues is for them to touch upon God's unfathomable love—and the strength of their own growing faith. To deal with the issues of suffering and death while recognizing God's loving presence and drawing on the strength that faith provides is to grow by leaps and bounds.

Teaching This Course

A Video Resource for Teachers

The information presented in this section identifies the elements requiring special consideration when leading *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope*. The creators of Horizons developed an informative video to prepare teachers to lead any of the courses in the program. The video is accompanied by a guide that summarizes the content of the tape, offers additional tips for teaching adolescents, and invites the teacher to track her or his experience with the program.

Both the video for teachers and its companion guide are included in the resources developed for coordinators of the Horizons Program. Contact the program coordinator in your parish for further information.

This course must be understood as a shared journey in faith, not as a forum for psychotherapy or grief support. There are several reasons for this:

- The course is only 6 hours long. In this brief time, it is impossible to respond fully and adequately to the emotional and psychological grief-related needs of all the young people present.
- Human suffering and death involve us in mystery. Only faith and prayer are open-ended enough to accommodate mystery. This course will surely touch deep wounds and strong emotions. It will

be most helpful and effective if these deep-seated personal experiences can be taken into prayer. In prayer, the Spirit tends to our wounds, calms our fears, and feeds our hungers. In prayer, mystery is less a problem to be analyzed than an experience to be lived and pondered.

If this course is to be a journey in faith, you—as a teacher—become fellow journeyer. This means that you must understand from the outset that your own griefs, doubts, wounds, and concerns will be touched as much as will those of the young people in your care. To lead your group into encounter with the spirit of God, you must open your own self to encounter with the spirit of God.

In a course such as this, profound questions will be raised. You may rest assured that you need not be a “dispenser of answers.” Young people are wise enough to know that there are no simple or pat answers to the questions of the heart. You are asked not so much to answer questions as to help the young people discover and value their questions, especially those that are least answerable. You are to be a guide along healing pathways set out by God.

Painful emotions will also be raised. In your compassion, your first response may be a desire to make the suffering stop. But emotions—even painful ones—are gifts from God. Emotions are a kind of teacher; they help us to look more deeply into ourselves, to sort out our concerns, to learn new ways of living. Painful emotions do not need to be suppressed; they need to be named, accepted, and brought to God in the context of prayer. Therefore, you, as teacher, do not need to be a fix-it person.

Nor is it your role to probe too deeply, try to draw out emotions, or force the participants to face anything they may not be ready to face. You can help the young people take small steps in the direction of embracing truth, but do not try to suddenly shatter all their defenses and break down all their barriers. Trust that the Spirit will raise what needs to be raised. Let your approach be gentle, accepting, and respectful.

One key to such an approach is the pass option. Throughout the course tell the young people that they may disclose as much or as little of their personal stories as they choose. If, at any time, a participant prefers not to do an exercise or answer a question, he or she may simply say, “I pass.” No questions need be asked, nor comments made. The pass option demonstrates abiding respect for each person’s privacy and for the sacred nature of each person’s experience. It underlines personal freedom and the taking of responsibility for oneself.

Handling Tough Topics

Someone in your group may have attempted suicide. Someone in your group may know someone who has completed suicide. The subject of suicide will naturally come up here and there in the three sessions of this course. When it does, allow the young people to talk about their feelings openly. Help them to understand that our response is to be one of compassion. Emphasize that those who attempt suicide are usually not people who are mentally ill, but rather people who can no longer bear the suffering of their own life. And we trust that God’s response will be the utmost in compassion.

If you notice that someone in your group is struggling with suicidal thoughts or another sensitive situation, it might be wise to speak with him or her personally. Ask whether he or she has spoken with a teacher or another professional or adult about the problem. You may need to suggest professional help for the young person and the family, and even connect them with the proper resources. In all such cases, consult your program coordinator or pastoral staff for guidance and suggestions.

If, during the time of this minicourse, the local community is dealing with a particular tragedy or death, gently and respectfully integrate it into the sessions. The teacher presentations, personal symbols, and prayers easily lend themselves to this purpose. You might also discuss possible ways of reaching out to those in need.

Preparing Yourself

As you prepare to teach this course, read the following citations from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: numbers 1005 to 1019, 1020 to 1037, and 1680 to 1690. You can also prepare for this course, particularly session 1, by taking note of death-denial trends on television and radio, in newspapers, and so on.

In addition to a teacher prayer that begins each session, this minicourse includes the following personal reflection for your use before starting the course. This reflection provides an opportunity for you to reflect on the loves and griefs of your own life. Its purpose is to heighten self-awareness and to help you feel more relaxed. The opening teacher prayer in session 1 offers a natural follow-up for this reflection. Remember, prayer of any kind is your best preparation tool and your best source of wisdom,



hope, and compassion throughout your experience with this course.

Personal reflection. Set aside a half hour or so for silent reflection. You might like to set out a vessel of holy water, a cloth, and a Bible as a prayer focus. Also have on hand a pen or pencil and paper or a journal in case you feel moved to write your reflections. Become as relaxed as you can, breathe deeply, and allow distracting thoughts to fade peacefully away. Then reflect on the following issues:

My life

- I recall one experience of love, when
- I recall one brush with death, when
- I recall a time when I encountered God, and

My faith

(Note any of the following questions with which you have wrestled and add others to the list if you wish to.)

- Does God really love me?
- Why do I have to suffer?
- Why was I created?
- Why is love so wonderful and yet so painful?
- Does God hear me?
- Why does God make everything such a mystery?

My death

- What, if anything, causes me to fear my own death?
- What, if anything, gives me peace about my own death?

The deaths of those I love

- What has death taught me?
- What has love taught me?
- Where do I find hope?

Prayer

- In what ways is prayer life-giving for me?

Teaching

- If this minicourse turns out to be everything I hope it can be, both for me and for the young people, this is what it will be like:
- As I move into teaching this course, what personal strengths will I call upon?
- What areas of personal vulnerability might need protection?
- How might teaching this minicourse be just what I need?

As you prepare for and teach this course, consider asking a trusted friend to act as a supportive listener for you. Simply ask this person to let you talk about how the course is going and how you are feeling as you move through it.

Know that the Spirit of the One Who Conquered Death is with you—and with each young person in your group. This minicourse is one small step in a lifelong journey of dealing with death, grief, love, and life. Do not expect quick results—there may not be much outward evidence of inner healing or transformation. Understand that years of death denial will not be undone in a moment. Entrust yourself and your young people into God's loving hands. Find reassurance in what you *can* help them with:

- confidence that God is good, that life—even though involved with death—is good; that they have their own personal resources from which to draw
- experiences of prayer as moments of healing, wisdom, courage, hope, and solidarity
- a few basic strategies for moving through grief in life-giving ways
- opportunities for voicing that which otherwise remains hidden in one's depths—and the discovery that one can befriend one's own emotions and questions

Pray your way through the program and be vigilant in attentiveness: really listen to what your young people say—and to what they do not say. Notice body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. Ask God's help in being sensitive to the young people's needs as you move through the activities. (And do the same for yourself!)

Sharing Your Own Story

Every course in Horizons connects elements of the Christian faith with the life experiences of young people. As an adult you have much to share from your own life that will be of value to the young people. Your willingness to share your experiences will enrich this course. It will also send the message that telling one's personal story in the group is okay. When you share your experiences with the young people, you show that you trust them enough to speak from your heart. And without saying it you also invite them to do the same.

Some commonsense guidelines can help you share your story in a way that adds to the understanding of the participants but does not distract them from their own life story:



- Be brief and to the point. Remember, the young people are there to reflect on their own life story, not yours.
- Talk about your experiences as a teenager without preaching or moving into the fatal “When I was your age . . .” mode.
- Share only the things that adolescents are emotionally prepared to handle.
- Be realistic. Talk about your struggles, triumphs, and growth over the years. This will let the participants know that self-knowledge is indeed a process. Do not mislead them into thinking that adults have all the answers. It is also unfair to suggest or imply that adolescents have no answers.
- Be honest and sincere. The young people will see through you if you are not, and your effectiveness as a teacher will be diminished.

Preparing the Learning Environment

The effectiveness of a course such as *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* depends, in part, on the physical surroundings and the community environment among the members of the group. High school students are likely to share their thoughts more readily and respond more positively if the space is comfortable and different from a typical school setting and the atmosphere is conducive to introspection and to sharing. Here are two suggestions for developing that type of environment:

Create a good physical atmosphere. You will need a physically comfortable space with sufficient room for the participants to move around. Some sessions require the participants to spend reflection time alone. It will be easier for them to resist the temptation to visit with other participants if they have enough room to separate from one another. Comfortable furniture and living-room lighting will help create a homey feeling. A flip chart or an easel with a pad of newsprint will be helpful for many of the activities. The traditional classroom is the least desirable situation. If such a room is your only option, try using music, candles, icons, or other sensory devices to create a more inviting environment.

In this course, especially in the first session, the room is decorated with interesting quotations, news clippings, and so on. Because of the apprehension with which young people might enter into the course, it is helpful to focus their attention with displays of pertinent materials. Such displays give the young people something to look at and talk about.

They also act as a useful springboard into some of the course activities.

Set up the prayer space with care, as directed in each session. The various symbols underlying the minicourse appear in cumulative fashion in the prayer space. Everything in the prayer space should be treated with the utmost reverence.

Clarify expectations. At the beginning of the course, establish among the participants an atmosphere of mutual respect. Stress the importance of listening to one another and of refraining from hurtful remarks or put-downs. Mention the value of maintaining silence when it is appropriate and of honoring other people’s need for quiet during reflection periods. When necessary remind the participants of these rules and any others that you establish.

Incorporating Personal Symbols

At the end of the first session, the young people are introduced to one of the minicourse’s most important resources: the personal symbol. Each participant is to bring to session 2 a personal symbol. This symbol should be an object from among the participant’s personal belongings that acts as a reminder of a much loved person now separated from the participant—by death, by illness, by geographic distance, or by the breakdown of a relationship. For example, a young person might choose as a personal symbol a friendship ring given to him or her by a schoolmate who was later killed in a car accident. Give the participants a clear understanding of what the personal symbols are to be, because they become the basis for sessions 2 and 3. Also explain to the young people that though some of them may have experienced the death of a pet, the personal symbol should represent a relationship with a person. Remember as well to bring a personal symbol of your own.

Preparing Readings

At several points in the minicourse, oral readings are used. Where possible, it is helpful to involve participants in doing such readings. However, young people are oftentimes not experienced in reading aloud. The way a passage or story is read can make all the difference between its being effective and its being ineffective. Therefore, whenever you ask volunteers to do readings as part of the sessions, take a moment to ask them to practice and understand their readings.



Preparing the Material

Before each session read through the session plan and try to picture the processes happening in your group. You may need to make some adjustments based on your knowledge of the participants and the physical setting. Some of the activities require preparation. This could range from copying a simple list onto newsprint to gathering several items for a prayer service.

As some of the materials needed in the three sessions may take time to locate and gather, you might like to begin early. For example, the obituaries, the sympathy card collection, and the news clippings of deaths in your community—all of which are used in all three sessions—and the magazine collection used in session 1 might require several days to find.

In terms of prayer, because the white cloth and the chalice are such important symbols in the prayer space, you might want to take the time to search out just the right ones. The best kind of cloth would be very white, perhaps with gold or silver threads in it. The cloth should suggest newness, holiness, beauty. The best chalice would be one from the parish that is not presently in use. But a cup that resembles a chalice would be servicable.

Incorporating Optional Exercises

To provide for the needs of the young people who are ready and able to delve more deeply into the meaning of death and the experience of grief, this course offers suggestions for optional exercises to do between sessions. If you decide to use these exercises, assure the young people that they are not required to complete them, while encouraging the participants who feel inclined to do them. You need not focus attention on who has done what, but feedback arising naturally in the various activities could be illuminating and insightful for all.

Using Music

Some of the activities in *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* suggest using music. No activities in this course require music or suggest specific pieces of music, because cultural preferences and individual tastes differ and specific tapes, CDs, or needed equipment may not be available. But music is a central part of the world of most adolescents, and you are thus encouraged to use it in the suggested places as well as in other activities where you think that it might be

appropriate. Circumstances in which music can be used effectively include the following:

Popular music for prayer. Depending on the character of the group, the community environment, or even the area of the country, different types of music will be popular among young people. If you are not certain about what might work in activities for your group, ask a few young people for their advice; ask them well in advance of the session, so that they can listen for songs that will be useful. Besides helping you, this experience can be affirming for young people, who are usually thought of as learners and are not usually consulted for their expertise.

You might even consider forming a music advisory group of participants, whose job is to listen to popular music and point out some things that pertain to the topic of loss and death. Each week this group of young people can suggest to the rest of the participants selections that can be used for prayer—and also for reflection or as a starting point for journal writing.

Background music for reflection. Some groups are easily distracted by the sounds around them. If your group has a hard time concentrating in silence, consider using background music to help the participants focus. Even for those who do not have trouble concentrating, music can alter the mood and contribute to a sense of peace and inner silence. For background music use slow, soothing instrumental selections, preferably something that is unrecognizable to the group. Labels such as Windham Hill and Narada, which are known for their alternative adult-contemporary recordings, are particularly useful for this purpose. Some classical music can also help to create the type of environment you need. Or use recordings of natural sounds, such as those produced by ocean surf, rain forests, or running streams.

Contemporary Christian music for discussion starter or prayer. Contemporary Christian music is produced by Christian artists and comes in styles for all tastes: rock, hard rock, country, alternative, rap, and easy listening. By using contemporary Christian music, you expose young people to an inspirational spiritual message in a form to which they may easily relate.

If you are familiar with contemporary Christian music, you probably can think of songs to introduce a discussion or to enhance a prayer service. If you

are not familiar with contemporary Christian music, ask the young people in your group to help choose appropriate songs. Or visit a Christian bookstore. Many of them have an extensive music collection and a previewing area. Often their sales staff can point you in the right direction if you tell them what you are looking for.

Using This Course as a Retreat

It is not recommended that this minicourse be used as a retreat. The subject material is both profound and intense. A three-session course taught over a three-week period allows breaks from the intensity. By separating the sessions with the balance and perspective that come from carrying on with the daily routine and having contact with family and friends, the young people are given time to digest. Trying to do too much in too little time, that is, putting all this material into a retreat, could be damaging.

This Course and Total Youth Ministry

Additional Youth Ministry Program Suggestions

The Horizons Program includes a manual entitled *Youth Ministry Strategies: Creative Activities to Complement the Horizons Curriculum*. It contains a variety of activities and strategies organized into thematic categories and cross-referenced according to the courses in the curriculum. It includes suggestions for shortened and extended programs, off-site events, intergenerational gatherings, parish involvement, and prayer and liturgical celebrations.

This valuable resource can enhance the young people's experience of the Horizons Program and help your parish fulfill a commitment to total youth ministry. Contact your program coordinator about the availability of the manual.

Parish Program Connections

A religious education curriculum is, ideally, just one component of a total parish program in which all those responsible for the formation of young people work together with the entire parish to meet the ho-

listic needs of youth. *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* can be a springboard for connections with other youth ministry experiences. You might develop these connections by doing the following:

- Make arrangements with local pastoral workers to have young people visit sick, older, or dying people.
- Invite the young people to take part in parish preparation programs for baptism. Such involvement could help the young people to recall and better appreciate the meaning of baptism as entry into the death and Resurrection of Jesus.
- Ask the young people who enjoy writing to contribute poetry or prose to be printed in the parish bulletin. Such written pieces might be offered as prayers for families of those who have died, or for the dead. Or they might be general expressions of hope in the midst of suffering.
- Because Lent, Easter, and Pentecost are so rich with death and Resurrection symbolism and stories, at these times ask the young people to create or help out with special liturgies and prayer services for the parish. Ash Wednesday and Holy Week would be particularly good occasions for such involvement.

Family Connections

Death—and talk of death—leaves no one neutral. During this minicourse a young person who chooses to relive old memories of a relative's death or to raise the subject of wills, funerals, or family plots may stir emotions and questions in other family members. Therefore, it is important that family members have some understanding of the minicourse and some sense of what to expect.

Furthermore, a young person dealing with his or her own feelings about death may benefit greatly from a compassionate, listening ear at home. In fact, the young people should be encouraged to talk with trusted family members about their experiences in the minicourse. Consider sending a letter to family members before the course begins. Include in this letter statements along the following lines:

- The focus and purpose of *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* is, more than anything else, about Christian hope. The program is faith-based; it does not attempt to provide a therapy group forum of any kind.
- Talking about death and dying does not cause grief; rather, it expresses grief that is already present.



- No one is expected to disclose anything she or he prefers to keep confidential. An approach called the pass option helps the young people to establish and maintain healthy boundaries, allowing them to be personally involved in activities only to the extent they feel comfortable. All the activities in this minicourse are designed with the utmost respect and sensitivity to the needs and concerns of the young people.
- Because the course stirs the depths, young people may benefit greatly by talking about their experiences of the course. The best way for family members to be of help during the program is to be attentive to the young person, to really listen to what she or he has to say—or to what is left unsaid. Also be sensitive to mood changes or unusual lines of conversation. Offer support, encouragement, and affirmation. And be as honest as you can about your own concerns and feelings about death.
- Know that this course is but one small step in a lifelong process of learning to deal with grief and death. Remain attentive to the young person's emotions, questions, and needs in the weeks following the last session.

Also include a thumbnail sketch of some of the activities in the minicourse *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope*. And conclude your letter with one or more scriptural passages, prayers, or poems from this minicourse that family members might find consoling, reassuring, and hope-filled.

Goals and Objectives in This Course

Why Use Goals and Objectives?

Curriculums take on greater clarity, direction, and purpose if they are described in terms of their goals and objectives. This observation is based on a commonsense principle: We have a difficult time getting somewhere if we do not know where we are

going. Educators who design learning experiences must identify their destination as a first step in determining how to get there. The statement of goals and objectives is a practical way to identify the desired outcomes for a program.

In the Horizons Program, goals and objectives are used in the following ways:

Goals. Goals are broad statements of what we wish to accomplish—learning outcomes we hope to achieve. The coordinator's manual for the Horizons Program provides the goals for the entire curriculum. Each course within the total program also includes a statement of its goals. The goals often have an idealistic quality, inviting the teacher to reflect on how the course relates to the personal and faith development of the young people. At the same time, the course goals are realistic, measurable, and attainable. As a teacher, at the end of the course, you should be able to look back and determine if you have in fact achieved the course goals.

Objectives. Objectives are statements that define how to get to the goals. They name the specific tasks that must be accomplished if the goals are to be achieved. Each course supplies a clear statement of objectives for each session in the course.

The Goals and Objectives of *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope*

Goals

This course has two goals:

- That the young people find that meeting the truth about human mortality with faith is more freeing and more life-giving than the short-lived and superficial comforts of death denial
- That they understand grief as a healthy and necessary healing process based on the mystery of love and suffering

Objectives

Each session has its own objectives, which will help realize the two course goals:

Session 1: "Stirring the Depths"

- To help the young people get in touch with their own experiences of grief, death, and dying by encouraging them to express their personal stories, feelings, questions, and memories
- To lead them to explore the question, What is death? and to help them understand that the cultural response to that question is essentially one of denial
- To identify the question, What is death? as a universal human question that brings us into the realm of mystery and connects us with Jesus
- To treat each person's experience as sacred, and the ground of this entire exploration as holy

Session 2: "Hoping in the Face of Death"

- To help the young people explore various images of afterlife
- To present to them the Christian faith response to the questions, What is death? and What is afterlife?
- To help them find hope by relating their own stories of suffering and loss to Jesus' story of death and Resurrection

Session 3: "Coping with Death and Grief"

- To help the young people identify and explore some basic skills for coping with grief
- To help them appreciate grief work as a gradual, ongoing process of progressive stages through which people move in their own unique ways
- To show that one dimension of the Roman Catholic funeral is to help people move through the early stages of grief work in shared hope based on the Resurrection
- To help the young people finish this course on a hopeful note—more aware of their own resources and of God's steadfast love

Suggested Resources

The following resources may provide helpful background and teaching materials.

For Adults

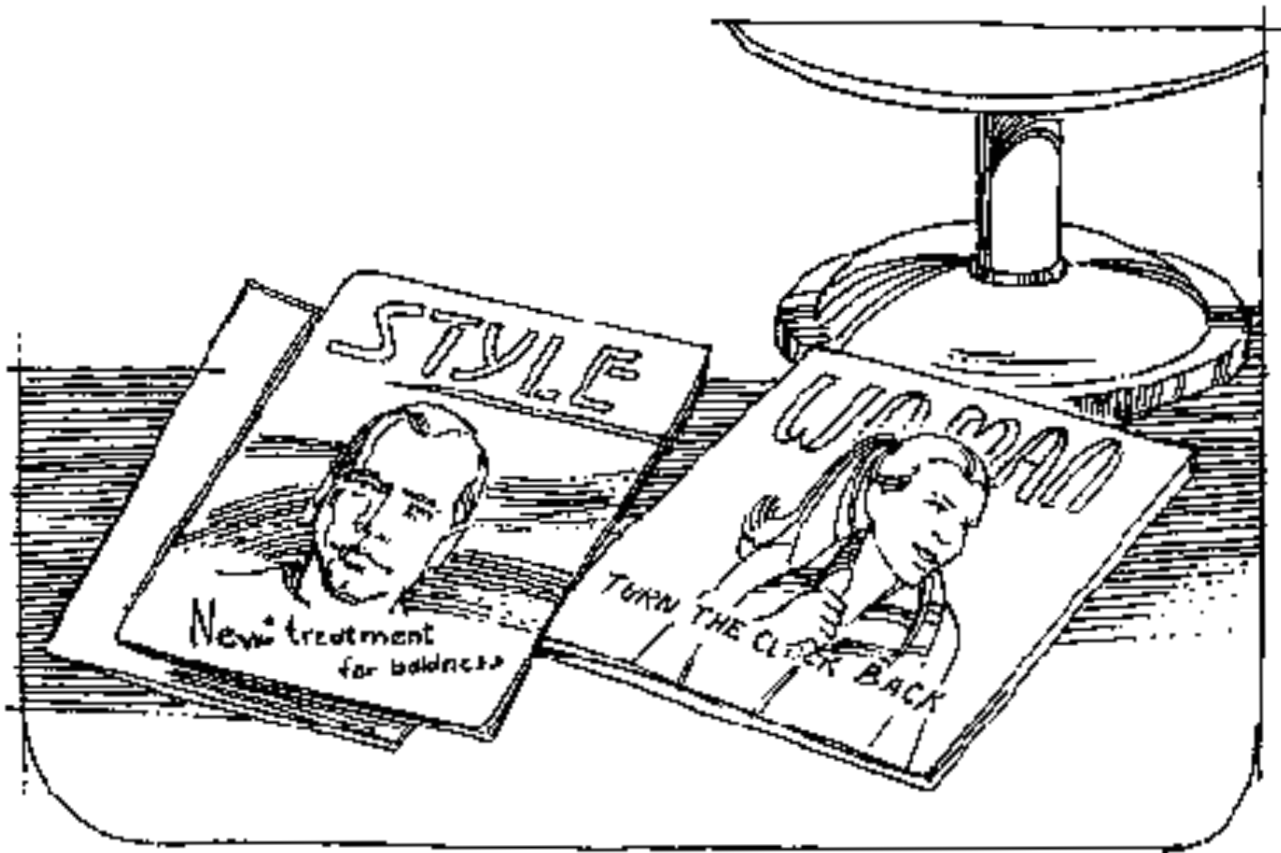
- Cassini, Kathleen Kidder, and Jacqueline L. Rogers. *Death and the Classroom: A Teacher's Guide to Assist Grieving Students*. Cincinnati: Griefwork of Cincinnati, n.d.
- Guntzelman, Joan. *Blessed Grieving: Reflections on Life's Losses*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1994.
- International Commission on English in the Liturgy. *Order of Christian Funerals*. Study ed. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1989.
- Kübler-Ross, Elisabeth. *On Death and Dying*. New York: Macmillan, 1969.
- Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. London: Faber, 1961.
- Libreria Editrice Vaticana. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Trans. United States Catholic Conference (USCC). Washington, DC: USCC, 1994.
- Nouwen, Henri J. M. *In Memoriam*. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria, 1980.
- Rupp, Joyce. *Praying Our Goodbyes*. New York: Ivy Books, 1988.
- Simsic, Wayne. *Cries of the Heart: Praying Our Losses*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1994.
- Westberg, Granger E. *Good Grief: A Constructive Approach to the Problem of Loss*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962, 1971.

For Young People

- Colgrove, Melba, Harold H. Bloomfield, and Peter McWilliams. *How to Survive the Loss of a Love: Fifty-eight Things to Do When There Is Nothing to Be Done*. New York: Bantam Books, 1976.
- Gootman, Marilyn E. *When a Friend Dies: A Book for Teens About Grieving and Healing*. Minneapolis: Free Spirit Publishing, 1994.
- Marrocco, Nancy. *A Promise in the Storm: Grieving and Dying with Hope*. Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 1997.
- Rofes, Eric E., ed. *The Kids' Book About Death and Dying: By and for Kids*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985.

SESSION 1

Stirring the Depths



Objectives

- To help the young people get in touch with their own experiences of grief, death, and dying by encouraging them to express their personal stories, feelings, questions, and memories
- To lead them to explore the question, What is death? and to help them understand that the cultural response to that question is essentially one of denial
- To identify the question, What is death? as a universal human question that brings us into the realm of mystery and connects us with Jesus
- To treat each person's experience as sacred, and the ground of this entire exploration as holy

Session Steps

- A. a welcome, introductions, and an opening prayer (20 minutes)
- B. an activity on personal attitudes toward death (10 minutes)
- C. an exploration of cultural death denial (20 minutes)
- D. a break (10 minutes)
- E. a card game to stir personal feelings about death (20 minutes)
- F. a story-sharing exercise (10 minutes)
- G. a reflection exercise to help the participants discern their own least answerable questions (5 minutes)
- H. a closing prayer (15 minutes)
- I. closing tasks and announcements (10 minutes)

Background for the Teacher

It is likely that the young people coming to the first session of *Death, Grief, and Christian Hope* bring with them a mixture of curiosity and apprehension. Therefore, you must try to create a safe, homelike, and nonthreatening environment. At the same time, it should be interesting, stimulating, and thought provoking. (The Procedure section offers ideas on how to prepare the room.)

Expect that there will be a lot of laughter and chitchat at the beginning of this session, and at various points throughout. This is healthy. Young people talk and laugh to keep things from getting too serious, too hard to manage.

After a few introductory comments and a get-acquainted activity, the young people are invited to prayer. The opening prayer is an opportunity to name and experience this safe environment as holy ground. Simply walking into this carefully prepared environment may already have begun to tap deep questions and intense emotions in the young people. Prayer becomes the place of hope into which all this can freely flow. Only prayer can fully accommodate mystery and provide the kind of answers the heart needs most.

Next, the session moves into the activity Talking Hands, which is a fun energizer that can also quickly raise feelings, attitudes, and questions about death.

A magazine search follows, in which the young people find examples of cultural death denial. A magazine provides something that is familiar and, therefore, unthreatening in itself; the focus on denial can help the young people discover something new in its midst.

After a break, a card game is used to help the participants' personal stories to emerge spontaneously. It is played in small groups to allow a greater opportunity for individuals to express themselves.

The Death and Me exercise that follows the game can help the participants go deeper into what was raised by the card game. It asks each person to focus on an object—something “out there”—in a way that can make it safer and easier to get in touch with her or his inner world. During both this exercise and the card game, listen and observe carefully—notice both what is said and what is left unsaid. This can help you to be more sensitive to the ongoing needs of your group.

A reflection exercise on least answerable questions marks a shift from the small group to the individual. Finally, the session culminates in prayer,

reinforcing the idea of holy ground. The prayer acknowledges that Jesus struggled with questions of his own and reminds us of the universal nature of loss and grief. The story of Jesus provides an important point of contact between the young people and God. A chalice is filled with the young people's least answerable questions. Focus on the phrase “Take this cup” becomes, therefore, an expression of acceptance—of life's questions, struggles, sorrows, and mysteries.

Preparation



Materials Needed

- refreshments
- several sympathy cards
- obituaries and news clippings of local deaths
- a large sheet of newsprint
- masking tape
- large markers
- a shoe box (or something similar)
- a copy of resource 1–A, “Box Quotes for Session 1”
- a scissors
- poster board
- a copy of resource 1–B, “Poster Quotes for Session 1”
- a small table
- a white cloth (if possible, with gold or silver threads or other hints of light in it)
- a vessel of holy water
- a Bible
- a copy of resource 1–C, “Signals for the Talking Hands Activity”
- fifteen or twenty magazines of various types
- pocket folders with several sheets of loose-leaf paper in them, one folder for each participant
- pens or pencils
- a copy of resource 1–D, “Game Cards,” for each small group
- three or four objects for each small group (see step F)
- small pieces of blank paper (about 2-by-2 inches), one for each participant
- a tape or CD player, and reflective music
- a candle and matches
- a chalice or chalice-like cup



Other Necessary Preparations

Prepare to lead this session by doing the following things and checking them off as you accomplish them:

- For step A.* Prepare and set out refreshments.
- For step A.* Prepare a variety of death-related items for display as directed in step A.
- For steps A and H.* Establish one part of your meeting area as the prayer space. In that space place a table, a white cloth, a vessel of holy water, and a closed Bible. Right before step H, add a chalice, a candle, and matches.
- For step B.* Display a copy of resource 1–C.
- For step E.* Prepare the game cards as directed in step E.
- For step F.* Collect and arrange sets of objects as directed in step F.
- For step H.* Practice reading aloud the Scripture passage (Mark 14:32–42) or offer this task to one of your young people during the break.
- Determine if you wish to change this session by using one or more of the alternative approaches described at the end of this session plan.



Opening Teacher Prayer

Take a few moments for prayer either at home or before the young people arrive. If you are at home, you might like to set out a vessel of holy water, a cloth, and a Bible as a prayer focus. If you are in the course meeting place, you could simply sit in the prepared prayer space. Either way, become as relaxed as you can, breathe deeply, and allow distracting thoughts to fade away. Then meditate with the following prayer:

Gracious God, as I teach this course, be my energy, my inspiration, my compassion, my wisdom. If I feel overwhelmed, help me to trust and to hope. Remind me that following you, even when it is dark, is safer than relying exclusively on myself.

“My grace is enough for you: for power is at full stretch in weakness.” (2 Cor. 12:9, NJB)

When I am touched in my own grief, weakness, and fragility, when I am vulnerable, hold me. Give me patience enough to wait for your power before reaching again for my own.

Commend what you do to Yahweh,
and what you plan will be achieved.

(Prov. 16:3, NJB)

In teaching this course, I shall surely encounter the suffering of the young people in my group. If I am to weep for them, stay with me—you who weep by night and by day for all who are crushed or bowed down.

Send out your light and your truth;
let them lead me.

(Ps. 43:3, NRSV)

Strengthen our faith as we ponder questions only you can answer. Deepen our hope as we touch wounds only you can heal.

The lame will leap.

(Isa. 35:6, REB)

Conclude with your own prayer or silent listening for God’s word to you.

Procedure

A Welcome, Introductions, and Opening Prayer (20 minutes)

Before the session. Create a homelike atmosphere in the meeting room, for example, by covering a table with a checkered tablecloth and setting out homebaked cookies and hot chocolate. You might want to keep snacks available throughout the session as a way of continuing the relaxed mood. However, there should be no eating during prayer time!

Display sympathy cards, obituaries, and death-related news clippings on a side table. Post a graffiti board, set out a box full of quotes on the subject of death, and display a poster of quotes related to death. These items can provide immediate interest for the participants and stimulate talk as they arrive.

To prepare a graffiti board, print the heading “Euphemism Graffiti Board” on a large sheet of newsprint and post it. Write on it two or three sample euphemisms, such as “pushing up daisies,” “selling the Buick,” or “going to the Pearly Gates.” Set out markers nearby. To prepare the box of quotes, cut apart the quotes on a copy of resource 1–A, “Box Quotes for Session 1,” and put the slips in a shoe box. To prepare a poster of death quotes, copy the

quotes from resource 1–B, “Poster Quotes for Session 1,” onto poster board and display the poster in the room.

Prepare the prayer space with a small table, a white cloth, a vessel of holy water, and a closed Bible.

1. As the participants arrive, warmly welcome each person and introduce yourself. If some young people arrive early, ask them to help prepare or serve the refreshments. Invite the participants to browse through the sympathy cards and the news clippings, to take a look at what is on the walls, and to write on the graffiti board.

Point out the box of quotes, explaining that each person is to look over and thoughtfully choose one quote and bring it to the opening of the session.

2. When it is time to begin, formally introduce yourself to the whole group and speak briefly about yourself. You might want to tell a little about your own experiences with death and how you are feeling about teaching this course. Be positive and sincere in what you say. Your tone can help the young people feel that the whole purpose and direction of this minicourse has to do with hope.

You might want to mention the themes of the three sessions or summarize the course goals and objectives in your own words. Before concluding your comments, assure the participants that throughout this course they will be free to disclose as little or as much of their personal experiences and feelings as they like. In other words, stress that they are in charge of themselves—they are free to explore as much or as little of their inner selves as they choose. Explain that if a person wants to remain silent or not take part in an activity, he or she can simply say, “I pass.” Tell the young people that recognizing and respecting one’s own needs and limits is important, and a sign of wellness.

3. Direct the young people to introduce themselves by giving their full name, by reading aloud their chosen quote, and by briefly telling why they chose that quote.

4. Have the young people assemble in the prayer space. Lead into the opening prayer with a call to silence and stillness. Open the Bible and read aloud,

- “In the beginning God created heaven and earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, with a divine wind sweeping over the waters” [Gen. 1:1–2, NJB].

Solemnly pick up the vessel of holy water, dip your fingers in the water, and make the sign of the cross, saying, “God of mystery, we are on holy ground. Sweep over us as you swept over the waters of the deep so long ago.” Hand the holy water to the person next to you, inviting that person to dip his or her fingers and make the sign of the cross. Have the participants continue in this way until all have had a chance to bless themselves.

B Activity: Talking Hands— Personal Attitudes Toward Death (10 minutes)

1. Lead the participants out of the prayer space and have them assemble, seated, in a circle. Introduce this activity as Talking Hands. Using resource 1–C, “Signals for the Talking Hands Activity,” explain to the participants the signals that they will need to use. Tell the young people that each time they hear a statement, they should consider their own attitude toward that statement and indicate their attitude with one of the following signals:

- Agree totally = two thumbs up
- Disagree totally = two thumbs down
- Agree somewhat and disagree somewhat = one thumb up and one thumb down
- Pass = two fists

2. Explain that after the statement is read, someone will count slowly to three. On the count of three, all the participants should display their signal and hold it long enough for everyone to see it. You might point out that the counting allows for time to think about the statement and ensures that each person’s response is uninfluenced by how others respond.

3. Ask for a volunteer counter. Take a moment to review the signals with your group, ensuring that everyone is clear on how to proceed. Then read the following statements, pausing after each one for the signals and to allow a moment for questions or comments:



- Dessert is the best part of any meal.
- Life is a bowl of cherries.
- To have to live forever would be hell.
- Death is mysterious.
- We need to stop and think about death more often than we do.
- Everyone hates going to funerals.
- Grieving is a good thing.
- Graveyards should be located in out-of-the-way places far from the sight of the community.
- Jesus rose from his grave.
- Because Jesus came back from the dead, we can too.
- What Jesus did is irrelevant.
- Because people suffer and die, God must be unloving.
- Modern medicine should be able to find cures for everything so that no one ever has to die.
- Religion is for people who cannot accept that death is the end.

After the last statement has been considered, you might briefly highlight any important points brought out in this activity—the intensity of emotion around the topic of death, the unknowns, the depth of suffering, the questions raised about God, and so on. In particular, comment on any tendency to deny death, making a transition to the next activity.

C Magazine Search: Exploring Cultural Death Denial (20 minutes)

1. Focus on the idea of denying death by posing the following questions:

- Whom have you told that you are taking a course on death? Is there anyone you have deliberately not told?
- How have people reacted to the news of your taking a course on death?
- Have they wanted to engage you in conversation about it?
- Why might some people not want to take a course on death?
- Let's say you are out with your friends and you suggest talking about death. What kind of reaction might you get?

Point out that in our culture people tend to avoid death as a topic of conversation. You might reinforce this point by focusing the group's attention on the

graffiti board. Explain that euphemisms are expressions used in place of a term that may be unpleasant. They are often used to talk around, sugarcoat, or make light of death. Ask why in our culture we so commonly speak of death in euphemisms.

2. Pull out a stack of magazines and spread them out in front of the group. Explain that the Talking Hands activity was an expression of individual attitudes about death. Point out that magazines express—sometimes explicitly, often implicitly—our collective, or cultural, attitudes toward death. Offer the following examples, asking the young people to make the connection between the product being advertised and the underlying denial of death:

- A suntan lotion advertisement says you never have to give up anything to get everything you want. [With death comes real and inevitable loss, but this ad suggests we never have to lose anything.]
- A facial cream ad promises the product can reduce the visible effects of aging around your eyes by covering lines, puffiness, and dark circles. [Aging leads inevitably to death; hiding the signs of aging is a way of hiding the signs of mortality.]
- A scalp medication claims the product regrows hair. [Preoccupation with restoring what is lost from the body can contribute to the illusion that the body itself might be prevented from finally dying.]

3. Direct the young people to form groups of three or four. Distribute magazines to each group. Explain that the participants should page through their magazines, paying careful attention to the advertising, and find as many examples as they can of death denial. Heighten the challenge by pointing out that the denial of death can be subtle or indirect. For example, mention that the emphasis on looking beautiful, being perfect, and being pain free contributes to death denial by creating illusions about personal power and limitlessness. It distracts us from the powerlessness, suffering, and limits that mark human living and human dying.

As the young people are doing the magazine search, you might notice a lot of laughter and spontaneous storytelling. Remember that laughter is an important natural buffer against letting things get too serious. And storytelling—or talking about one's own experience—is a skill that assists the grieving process and will be developed as the minicourse unfolds. Therefore, allow the laughing and the stories but, at the same time, gently keep the groups on

task. Tell them that they will be expected to report back to the large group about examples they have found.

4. After the participants have completed their magazine search, invite them to reassemble in the large group, bringing their magazines with them. Ask the young people, in turn, to talk about their examples and to explain how each contributes to cultural death denial. Be sure the following points are drawn out:

- Cultural death denial results from many little expressions of denial; all of us contribute to the denial, usually without awareness of what we are doing.
- Examples of death denial are found not only in our magazines but in our TV shows, videos, billboards, newspapers, and so on. In other words, we are surrounded.
- Death denial leaves us unprepared for death and grief, and it isolates us from one another by keeping us from sharing our deepest fears, hopes, and concerns.

5. Conclude this activity by telling the young people that after the break they will have a chance to discover what causes such widespread denial and what lies hidden beneath it. Distribute pocket folders with several sheets of loose-leaf paper in them. Explain that these are for each person's private use—for doodling or for jotting down points to remember, cherished quotes, helpful ideas, and so on.

D Break (10 minutes)

If you would like a young person to read the Gethsemane story in the session's closing prayer, find a volunteer and give him or her a chance to practice the reading during the break.

Other than that, keep the break agenda free. This allows the students to break the mood or change the subject according to their own needs. Some might simply want to get out of the room for a few minutes. Others may need more focus—remind them that the graffiti board is available for additional jottings and that the blank paper in their folder may be used for their own purposes.

E Card Game: Death Sentences (20 minutes)

Before the session. For each small group, cut apart a copy of resource 1–D, “Game Cards,” and arrange the cards from columns 1 and 2 in separate piles. Be sure to include the two blank cards from the resource. These will be used as wild cards.

1. Have the young people assemble in small groups of four to five people. Give a set of two piles of cards to each group. Tell the young people to begin by spreading out the cards, facedown, in the center of the small group, being careful to keep the cards from each pile separate. Point out that each pile contains a wild card—that is, a blank. Explain that the first person to play is to draw two cards, one from each pile. That person turns over the two cards for all to see and then formulates a single statement with those two words in it. If a blank is drawn, that person may insert any word. The only stipulation is that the statement be true. Once the statement has been formulated and spoken, the next person takes a turn following the same procedure. Share a couple of examples with the young people (the boldfaced terms in the following examples are from resource 1–D):

- **Death** sometimes comes to people we **cherish**.
- A **pallbearer** may **ponder** the meaning of death as he or she helps to carry the coffin.

Each group may play as many rounds as time permits.

2. Reassemble the young people into one large group. Use questions such as the following to help the young people identify some of the thoughts, feelings, and concerns touched on by the card game:

- Did you discover anything new about yourself? about the subject of death?
- Were there certain words you found difficult to deal with?
- Did you find yourself formulating statements that you preferred not to speak aloud?
- Were you reminded of any of your own experiences of death or loss?
- Did you notice the stirring of any particular emotions? To what did they seem related?

Before the discussion ends, make sure your group understands that we deny death because death is difficult to face. Point out that underlying death denial, we may find a sense of powerlessness, a fear of



suffering, a fear of the unknown, a fear of loss, a sense of abandonment, a sense of meaninglessness, doubts about God, or rage toward God.

F Story Sharing with Objects: Death and Me (10 minutes)

This activity can help the young people focus on their life stories, their experiences of death and grief. If you have only 5 minutes or so for this step, skip the group-dividing exercise in part 1. Simply form the small groups yourself and begin with part 2.

Before the session. Gather three or four objects for each small group. Use common items such as a piece of glass, a stopped watch, a knotted scarf, a burned match, a lock, a sealed envelope, a withered flower, a colorful bow, and a piece of jewelry. Use different items for each group.

1. Instruct each person to get a large marker and to take a half-sheet of blank paper from her or his folder. Ask the young people to think quietly of one emotion they feel when the subject of death is raised. After a moment instruct each to write the emotion in large block letters on the paper. Next, collect all the sheets, shuffle them, and spread them out where everyone can see. Ask for two or three volunteers to come forward. Ask one of them to pick up her or his own sheet and three others. The persons whose sheets are selected become the members of the first group. A second or third group can be formed following the same pattern.

2. After the small groups have assembled, give each group one of the collections of objects that you prepared. Tell the participants to silently pick up one object and ask themselves two questions about that object:

- In terms of where I'm at in my life right now, how am I like this object?
- How am I unlike this object?

It might help to demonstrate by picking up an object yourself. For example, you might pick up a burned match, reflect quietly for a moment, then say: "I'm like the burned match in that the thought of death leaves me feeling charred and burned, hurting and feeling like I could be destroyed. I am unlike the burned match in that I am only a little burned up whereas the match is almost completely gone." Or you might pick up the colorful bow, saying: "I'm a lot like this bow because it looks bright

and cheerful, and I'm a pretty upbeat person these days. But I'm not like this bow because it's big and flashy, and I'm pretty shy." Or you might take the withered flower, saying: "I'm not very much like the withered flower because it looks so alone and abandoned, and I have lots of friends around me. But I am like the withered flower in that it's very soft and pliable—I'm very easygoing and flexible."

3. After a minute of silent reflection, allow the groups to begin sharing their thoughts in this manner: each person in turn picks up an object and shares her or his responses to the two questions. It is likely that this reflective exercise will generate storytelling. Allow the free flow of such stories.

G Reflection Exercise: My Least Answerable Questions (5 minutes)

1. Introduce this exercise by reiterating the idea that death is mystery and that since the beginning of time, people of all ages, cultures, and races have asked tough questions about death. Jesus himself struggled with such questions.

Point out that questions themselves are of great value, even the questions for which we have no answers. Just posing the questions and being willing to struggle with them is already part of the answer. Also tell the young people that many of our most important questions require not so much answers of the mind but answers from the heart. Willingness to raise our questions can help to open—and free—our heart.

2. Pass out slips of paper (about 2-by-2 inches) and instruct the young people to spread out to allow each person the maximum of personal space. Then tell them to write on their slip one question they have about grief, death, and dying. Encourage them to write the question they find least answerable. Point out that they need not put their name on what they write but that you would like to record their anonymous questions afterward for all to read.

3. As the young people are composing their questions, play some calming instrumental music in the background. Compose a question of your own. During the remaining time, add a candle (unlit) and a chalice to the prayer space.

4. After 5 minutes, gently fade out the background music. Provide a bridge into the following prayer by reminding the young people of Jesus' struggle with his own questions and by telling them that Jesus found a way to deal with the most difficult, least answerable questions of all. Invite the young people to move silently into the prayer space, bringing their question sheets with them.

H Closing Prayer: Gethsemane (15 minutes)

Before the session. If you do not plan on reading the Scripture passage (Mark 14:32–42) yourself, use the break time to ask a young person to read it. Mark the passage and tell him or her to prepare during the break.

1. Allow sufficient time for all to assemble silently in the prayer space and to become still. Dim the lights. Pray aloud using these or your own words:

- Jesus, you know all our sorrows and all our doubts. You willingly entered the darkness because this is what God asked of you. Be with us now.

2. In a solemn voice, read aloud Mark 14:32–42, the Gethsemane passage, or direct your volunteer reader to do so.

3. After a brief pause, read aloud your own unanswerable question, fold your sheet, and place it in the chalice that you set in the prayer space. Then lead the young people in making an act of faith by reciting together, "Take this cup." Explain that as this refrain is spoken, it is a statement of entrusting ourselves into God's loving hands.

Next, explain that each person will be given an opportunity to read aloud her or his question. Tell everyone that when their turn comes, they may read their question either aloud to the group or silently to themselves. After each person's reading—or brief silence—have all repeat aloud together, "Take this cup." Then the person folds her or his slip of paper and places it in the chalice. The next person continues in the same way, and so on, until all the questions have been placed in the chalice.

Pause (for no more than a minute) for silent prayer.

4. To conclude the prayer, hold up the chalice and pray aloud in your own words or as follows:

- God of compassion, you who know us better than we know ourselves, you who care deeply about our every anxiety and hurt, you who know our most secret dreams, receive these precious questions born of our own struggles. As Jesus' struggle intensified, he entrusted his life into your hands. God of mystery, we are on holy ground; sweep over us as you swept over the waters of the deep so long ago. May your Spirit strengthen each of us that we might pray with Jesus, "Into your hands I commit my spirit" [Luke 23:46, NJB].

Lower the cup and place it near the unlit candle.

I Closing (10 minutes)

Optional Exercises

Tell the young people that you have two optional exercises for them to complete outside of the group, and that these exercises are truly optional—all the participants are encouraged to do them, but no one should feel obliged to do so. Then, offer the exercises:

- As you are watching television, listening to the radio, or reading the newspaper, notice instances where death is being denied.
- Talk to a trusted friend or family member about the first session—discuss your thoughts, feelings, and questions.

Personal Symbols

Tell the young people to bring a personal symbol to the next session. Explain that it should be something that reminds them of a person from whom they have become separated. This separation might be owing to the death of a family member or friend. It might be due to illness or geographic distance. Or it might be due to the hurt and alienation resulting from a breakdown in a relationship. The symbol can be anything that evokes thoughts, feelings, and memories about the person from whom they have become separated.

Be sure the participants understand that this symbol should represent the loss of a person rather than the loss of a pet. At the same time, point out that the death of a pet can be deeply saddening and painful and that you invite and encourage your



group to talk about such experiences during the minicourse.

Encourage the young people to use the next few days to reflect carefully on the symbol they could choose. Call or send a notecard to everyone a day or two before session 2 to remind them to bring their symbol.

Personal Notes

Next, ask the young people to write you a quick note about how they felt about the first session and any personal information that they would like you to know. Tell them that it would be most helpful if they sign their note, but they do not have to. They may use the blank paper in their folder.

Music for Session 2

As the young people are leaving, you might ask them to bring to the next session any CDs or tapes of music they find helpful in dealing with death.

Alternative Approaches

After reading the session plan, you may choose to do some things differently or to make additions to an activity. Consider your time limitations first and then these alternative approaches:

For step B. If your group is creative, let them suggest a few additional statements of their own. Invite the group to respond with the same signals as described in part 1 and on handout 1-C.

For step C. If your group has difficulty making the connection between death denial and advertising, offer additional examples, or help them find ads and explain how the ads promote death denial.

For step E. After the card game, let the young people suggest additional words for each pile. Regather in the large group and create a few new cards. Then have several volunteers choose from among the newly submitted words and compose their statements in the same manner as in the card game.

For step F. If your group works fast and is creative, extend the activity by inviting the small groups to exchange object collections, then repeat the process using the new objects. Regather in the large group and allow the young people to comment on what they learned from this exercise, what they enjoyed most about it, or what they found most challenging about it.

For step G. Allow a moment at the end of this activity for inviting the young people to reflect (aloud or silently) on what specific questions Jesus might have been asking.

For step H. If the final moments of the closing prayer seem conducive to brief spontaneous prayer, invite the young people to pray aloud just before you lower the cup and place it near the unlit candle.



Journal Options

You may suggest one or two of the following journal exercises for the young people to do *between* sessions 1 and 2:

- Add to your list of least answerable questions. Ponder your list—which of these questions are most urgent for you? In the silence and privacy of your own room, speak aloud your questions to God. Pause for silent listening after each. Close with a short prayer of your own willingness to trust God to help you hear the answer.
- Recall an experience you have had of death—attending a funeral, visiting a funeral home, being with a dying person. Write a descriptive account of what you remember most vividly—your feelings, words, thoughts, questions, and so on.
- Write a letter to someone you love who has died—or who is separated from you by miles, by sickness, by estrangement. Tell him or her whatever you would most like to say.
- Imagine you are with Jesus at Gethsemane. The others fall asleep, but you stay awake. You come close to Jesus as he pours out his agony to God. Write down what you say to Jesus and what he says to you.



Closing Prayer and Evaluation

Before doing the closing teacher prayer, you may want to complete the evaluation at the end of this session.



Closing Teacher Prayer

After the young people have left, remain for a moment in the prayer space. Light the candle. Ask God to help you trust in the Spirit of the Risen Jesus.

Opening your mind and your heart to God's word, read the notes the young people have just finished writing to you. Ask God to tell you whatever you most need to hear at this moment; then close with silent listening.



Evaluation

Take a few moments to evaluate the session. Think about the following questions and, for future reference, write your thoughts in the spaces provided:

1. Recall the mood and manner of the young people as they entered the room at the beginning of the session. Compare that with the mood and manner as the session was finishing. Did you notice any changes? If so, what might account for the changes? If the mood and manner seemed unchanged, what might this indicate about the group and how the session went?

2. Did the group seem particularly focused on or involved with any particular activity? What do you think captured its attention?

3. Did the group seem bored or uninterested at any point? If so, what do you think might have been the cause? What changes could be made to prevent such a reaction?

4. Do you recall any times in which a lot of laughter or distracted chatter was generated? If so, think back to what might have sparked it. How did you deal with it? Looking back, do you think times of laughter served the healthy purpose of keeping things from getting too gloomy, or did laughter and chatter divert attention from what really needed to be addressed?

5. Jot down the names of any young people who might have been doing the following:
 - acting out death denial more than others
 - experiencing emotional difficulty due to a current struggle with personal grief
 - feeling hostility or antipathy or being unusually defensive
 - feeling very reticent, having difficulty expressing emotions and sharing thoughts
 - experiencing despair



6. Prayerfully consider what response might be most helpful for each of the young people you named in your response to question 5.

7. Did the session touch or stir any emotions, memories, or concerns for you personally? What can you learn from this? What do you need to do to take care of yourself in these respects?

8. How well did the session meet the objectives of putting the young people in touch with their own experiences of death and grief?

Did not meet objective ↔ Met objective completely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

9. How well did the session meet the objective of helping the young people understand and recognize cultural death denial?

Did not meet objective ↔ Met objective completely

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Comments:

10. What really worked well in this session?

11. What could be changed to make the session even more effective next time?

Box Quotes for Session 1

I do not believe that sheer suffering teaches. If suffering alone taught, all the world would be wise, since everyone suffers. To suffering must be added mourning, understanding, patience, love, openness, and the willingness to remain vulnerable.

(Anne Morrow Lindbergh, as quoted in Hickman, *Healing After Loss*, March 7)

Have courage for the great sorrows of life and patience for the small ones; and when you have laboriously accomplished your daily task, go to sleep in peace. God is awake.

(Victor Hugo, as quoted in Hickman, *Healing After Loss*, November 9)

It is better to light one candle than to curse the darkness.

(Eleanor Roosevelt, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 8)

**If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain
Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain.**

(Emily Dickinson, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 14)

He who would teach men to die would teach them to live.

(Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 20)

Compassion means to lay a bridge over to the other without knowing whether he wants to be reached.

(Henri J. M. Nouwen, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 32)

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. . . . It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable.

(C. S. Lewis, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 48)

No love, no friendship can cross the path of our destiny without leaving some mark on it forever.

(François Mauriac, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 53)

**When a person is born we rejoice,
and when they're married we jubilate,
but when they die we try to pretend
nothing has happened.**

(Margaret Mead, as quoted in Perry and Perry,
editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 66)

**I cannot forgive my friends for dying;
I do not find these vanishing acts of
theirs at all amusing.**

(Logan Pearsall Smith, as quoted in Perry and
Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 78)

**My God! My God! . . . I'm dying. . . .
it may happen this moment. There
was light and now there is darkness. I
was here and now I'm going there! . . .
There will be nothing. . . . Can this be
dying? No, I don't want to!**

(Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, as quoted in
Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 72)

**He disliked emotion, not because he felt
lightly, but because he felt deeply.**

(John Buchan, as quoted in Perry and Perry,
editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 83)

**Sorrow is like a precious treasure,
shown only to friends.**

(African proverb, as quoted in Perry and Perry,
editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 84)

**The deeper the sorrow the less tongue it
hath.**

(Talmud, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors,
A Rumor of Angels, page 85)

**Death is a challenge. It tells us not to
waste time. . . . It tells us to tell each
other right now that we love each
other.**

(Leo F. Buscaglia, as quoted in Perry and Perry,
editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 16)

**Give sorrow words;
the grief that does not speak
Whispers the oe'r fraught heart,
and bids it break.**

(William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, as quoted in Perry
and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 88)

**I've discovered a new philosophy—
I only dread one day at a time.**

(Charles M. Schulz, *Peanuts*, as quoted in Perry
and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 95)

• **Poster Quotes for Session 1** •

**It's easier to kill a man than to
break the news that he is going to die.**

(Elie Wiesel, *Dawn*, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 33)

As men are not able to fight against
death, misery, ignorance, they have taken
it into their heads, in order to be happy,
not to think about it at all.

(Blaise Pascal, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 66)

He did not say: You will not be **troubled**,
you will not be **belaboured**,
you will not be **disquieted**;
but he said: ***You will not be overcome.***

(Julian of Norwich, as quoted in Hickman, *Healing After Loss*, April 26)

**It is such a secret place,
the land of tears.**

(Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, as quoted in Perry and
Perry, editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 85)

Dying is a *wild* night
and a *new* road.

(Emily Dickinson, as quoted in Perry and Perry,
editors, *A Rumor of Angels*, page 9)

One does not discover
NEW LANDS
without consenting to
lose sight of the shore.

(André Gide, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors,
A Rumor of Angels, page 171)

I'm not afraid to die.

**I just don't want to be
there when it happens.**

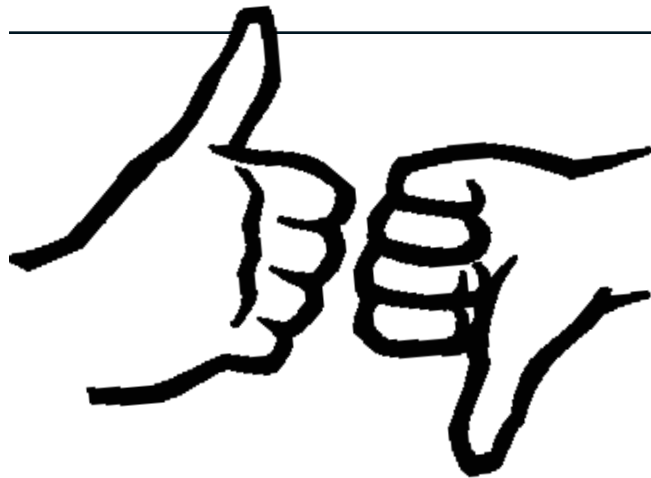
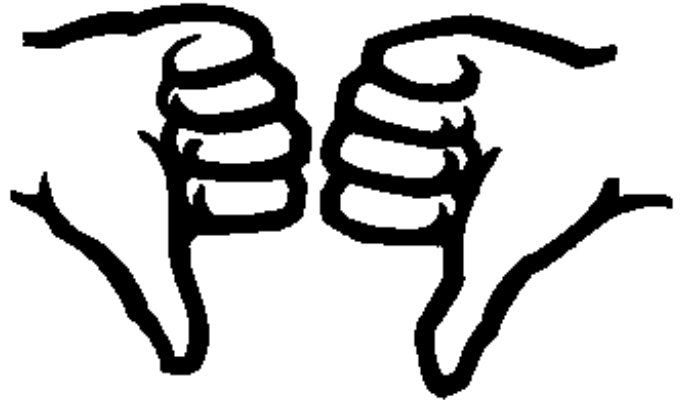
(Woody Allen, as quoted in Perry and Perry, editors,
A Rumor of Angels, page 73)

Signals for the Talking Hands Activity



Agree *totally*

Disagree totally



Agree somewhat
and disagree
somewhat

Pass



• **Game Cards** •

▼	funeral	▼	treasure
◆		◆	
	hearse		ponder
◆		◆	
	graveyard		wonder
◆		◆	
	pallbearer		dream
◆		◆	
	obituary		love
◆		◆	
	death		imagine
◆		◆	
	hospital		trust
◆		◆	
	terminal illness		cherish
◆		◆	
	tragedy		hope
◆		◆	
	last will and testament		promise
◆		◆	
	coffin		console
◆		◆	
	funeral home		heal
◆		◆	
▲		▲	