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Author makes grieving a preparation for living

by James Flanigan

GRIEVING WITH GRACE: A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

By Dolores R. Leckey

Published by St. Anthony Messenger Press, \$11.95

This book is different from many accounts of grieving and remembrance after the loss of a loved one, yet *Grieving With Grace*, subtitled "A Woman's Perspective" asks and answers the really big questions that the widowed often have.

It is not different because it is a woman's perspective. Grief is terrible and frightening in the same way for men as it is for women. What Dolores Leckey brings to her book is a different quality than most writings on grief. In 91 pages, including notes, she makes grieving a preparation for living, a pathway to grace.

Leckey waited until 2005 to start a book about her year of grieving after Tom, her husband of 46 years, died of congestive heart failure in 2003. She writes in her prologue that she decided to compose a journal of the difficult first year because it could include the small, everyday bits of life. "Death alters life forever," she writes. "This is especially true with the death of a spouse, the person with whom all the rhythms of daily living have been shared, at all levels: body, mind and soul."

She does not stint at telling of the pain throughout that first year. The Leckeyes, when Tom passed on, had grown children and grandchildren. But in the immediate aftermath, Dolores acknowledges the horror of a home now silent because half of her is absent. "Alone I wept and groaned, sounds reminiscent of Irish keening. I struggled to get balance, some understanding of life in the present."

Anyone who has lost a spouse, as this reviewer did when his wife of 28 years died of cancer, knows that awful emptiness. The screams are within and there are literal pains in the chest because the heart is

breaking. More frightening than the pain is the despairing temptation that perhaps it would be better if a heart attack did end a life now gone so bleak in grief.

Such awful grief has been rendered often, most notably in C.S. Lewis' posthumously published *A Grief Observed*, an account of the author's agonies following the death of his wife, Joy Davidman. In his book, transcribed from notebooks, Lewis wrote of harrowing mental and physical sufferings after Joy's death. He wrote of their joy together and then the fear that he would never see or know her again. And, a profoundly religious man, he raged and argued at God.



Leckey looked at Lewis' book and many others given to her. "They were

not what I needed," she writes simply, and not because she goes beyond such accounts of grief. A senior research fellow at Woodstock Theological Center, Leckey offers a theology of love between a life still lived on earth and one that has gone to a "risen life" beyond.

"The land of the living is marked by sharing," she writes, but that does not make it an easy place to be. Throughout the year, she approaches each feast day with trepidation. How lonely will Thanksgiving be, can Christmas be endured alone?

Dolores and Tom met on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, and she determines to celebrate the 50th anniversary of that occasion, even if it is lonely. Yet at every feast day, one or more of their four children and seven grandchildren are with her for a family dinner and there is music, laughter, the quiet joy of celebration in the land of the living.

As a couple, Tom and Dolores Leckey knew how to celebrate, and to live. In 1989 they joined others in founding the Arlington (Va.) Partnership for Affordable Housing. Recalling that commitment in her first year of grieving brings home a lesson: "I sense how life-giving it is to remain engaged and caring about the larger concerns of our community. ... [It] is a way to realize more fully that we belong to something larger than our own sorrows or our own selves."

On a journey to Ireland with Tom's brother and his wife, Dolores is frightened at the words of an old woman serving them tea in County Mayo. The woman is 92 and her husband had died a decade before. "It's hard without him, but we have to go on," she says.

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"I felt the shock of her words," writes Leckey. "Ten years and the same emptiness."

Repeatedly in *Grieving With Grace*, Leckey asks the big questions. Where has the loved one gone? Will I ever be with him again? In August 2004, she is still torn with doubts. "Suppose we *never* see our beloved dead again?" But love is connection not duration, the surprising joy comes from uniting with another human being. Which is why after grief and acceptance can come a new life and love and marriage to another.

The great beauty of Leckey's book is that coming through her grief brings her to an understanding of life's many mysteries. At the end of her book's journey, having endured the pain, she finds answers in the grace of God. The year, she writes, "has brought me to some understanding of Jesus' words about there being no marriage in heaven. I think I see now what he meant. Marriage is a special form of communion for this life; the resurrected life is communion with many."

"It's the overflowing love of God that becomes ever more inclusive until finally, we are all in all."

She cites a mystic, Elizabeth LeSeur, that "community is not interrupted by death, but continues in death. Our challenge is to be related to different others, to experience ourselves as together the body of Christ."

Leckey concludes her fine book with simple lines that sum up her -- and our -- journey to grace: "What remains strong is how necessary it is to give and receive love, with all the uncertainties and struggles, and how many faces of love there are. In our efforts to be human God does not leave us to fend for ourselves."

James Flanigan is a business journalist whose book on the economy and people of California, Smile, Southern California, You're the Center of the Universe, was published in February by Stanford University Press.

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