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Inside:

- Editorial:** *Something New for the New Year* 1
Guest Editorial: *Spirituality Rediscovered* 3

Articles:

- Self or No-Self: Is There a Middle Way?** *By John T. Campbell* 7
The Unique Benefits of Religious Support During Cardiac Bypass Surgery
*by Larry VandeCreek, Kenneth Pargament, Timothy Belavich, Brenda
Cowell, & Lisa Friedel* 19

- A Symposium on Brief Pastoral Counseling** *edited by Howard Stone*
Pastoral Counseling and the Changing Times *by Howard Stone* 31
**Pastoral Care and the Market Economy: Time-limited Psychotherapy,
Managed Care, and the Pastoral Counselor** *by Brian H. Childs* 47
**Staying Solution-Focused in Brief Pastoral Counseling:
A Conceptual Schema** *by Charles Kollar* 57
Solution-Focused Counseling: A Model for Parish Ministry
by Jim R. Sharp 71
The Power of Valuing in Brief Pastoral Counseling *by Jan James* 81
**Competency-based Relationship Counseling: The Necessity of Goal Setting
and Counselor Flexibility in Efficient and Effective Couples Counseling**
by Frank Thomas 87

Personal Reflections:

- Assembly Required** *by Jeffrey H. Miller* 101
The Pediatrician to Generations: Benjamin McLane Spock
by David M. Moss 105
Passive Physical Restraint *by Karen R. Nelson* 109
Unknown Charles *by Karen Osterman Fieser* 111
The Passing *by Mary-Leslie Miller* 113

- Poems:** *by Kenneth H. Carter, Jr., Jim Greear, & Edward Thornton* 115

- Book Reviews:** *by Dorothy E. Shelly, Clyde Clandon, Mark E. Jensen,
& Claude Barbre* 117

- Pastoral Abstracts:** *selected and edited by W. Noel Brown* 125

- Continuing Education Quiz** 139

A Personal Reflection

Assembly Required

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We were sitting in the surgical waiting room on the second floor of the newly built wing. The florescent lights were bright but the room was still dark and the air was very heavy. Molly and I were completely alone despite the steady din of soft voices coming from clusters of anxious relatives.

We spoke, but not continuously. Every few minutes—or was in hours?—the room became silent as the phone on the volunteer's desk rang. The old man with a badge called out the name of the patient whose surgeon was on his way to talk to the family.

Molly and I had been chatting for a few minutes about nothing important when our conversation quickly broke off. Our eyes returned to the complimentary periodicals we were holding, but we were only pretending to read. We were staring at the yellow pages of the outdated magazines while our ears were tuning in on the conversation taking place ten feet in front of us. The group spoke as if they were in the privacy of the doctor's office; they were completely unaware that so many people were eavesdropping.

We weren't trying to be rude; we just wanted to know what the surgeon was telling the anxious relatives. We desperately wanted to know the prognosis of a person we knew nothing about. We prayed silently that his family was receiving good news, believing irrationally that if they were getting a good report, so would we. We began to talk again after the doctor left, but this time Molly was staring out into the darkness of her thoughts.

I was never actually taught how to make a hospital visit. No articles and textbooks were assigned, and no supervised visits or role playing occurred during my six years at two Rabbinical schools. Some aspects of *Bikkur Cholim* (visiting the sick) are codified in our sacred legal texts, but dealing with the sick and their families is primarily a function of common sense. The problem is that common sense departs many of us as we enter through the hospital doors.

I have made my share of insensitive remarks to patients and relatives as I strove to be profound. I've seen quite a few eyes roll as my rabbinical council came out as crude and unsympathetic. Nowadays, I don't pretend to be a psychologist or a social worker. I usually sit and listen, and do my best to comfort the person I am visiting without the benefit of any formal training.

Molly cried to me that God is nonexistent. Immediately contradicting herself, she stated that God is evil if He can allow her daughter to agonize for so many years. She reasoned that she must now respond to God's indifference by withholding the devotion that had been such a central part of her life. She will not come to the synagogue anymore. She will not bring the light of the Sabbath into her home anymore. She will even go to the cafeteria and eat each unkosher food!

If this had been an adult education class I may have suggested a plausible defense for the existence of evil and hardship. But we were not in a classroom. This was for real. I was with a woman whose daughter may die. I felt her pain and I believed that her mistrust of God was not a position that needed to be

The Journal of Pastoral Care, Spring 1999, Vol. 53, No. 1

corrected as much as it was a cry of agonizing pain. So I let her cry without jumping in to rescue God. Instead of defending God, I changed the subject.

I suppose that if I were being observed by my homiletics professor at that moment he would have scolded me for being trivial, and I freely admit that he would have been right. Still, I defend myself by telling him that neither Molly nor I wanted to have a deep theological conversation that day. I was in no mood to defend God's unjust display of cruelty toward a child created in His own image, and Molly was not interested in any spiritual excuses I may feebly offer.

Some people bargain with God. They promise to be more devoted to tradition if only their prayers are answered. A week earlier I sat with a man who was so profoundly grateful for his new lease on life that he was going to give more to charity and come to daily services more often. I praised his bright and positive outlook, and I cynically bet myself that his commitment wouldn't last a month. I also wondered what he would be telling me if his surgery hadn't been so successful.

We are all taught that God rewards goodness and punishes evil. True, we believe that much of the reward and punishment occur in another world and reality, but we still look at the suffering of others and silently speculate as to the sins they must have committed to merit their current predicament. We play God by judging God's justice. It's a lot like playing Monday morning quarterback.

It's more complicated when we are the one who is suffering. We still search for the hidden reasons for our pain, but this time we have to look deep into the mirror to see our own souls. We desperately want to find out why some evil has befallen us. We say things like: I was nasty to that woman on line at the market. I didn't help the flood victims and I don't really care about the Serbs and Croats. I am being punished for my indifference to humankind!

But after careful cross examination, we are forced to conclude that God has made a terrible mistake this time. Our suffering was not dispensed in proportion to our sins. We may be frustrated by our own shortcomings, but we accept the fact that we are imperfect creatures. We were made that way by the very God who is now punishing us for that imperfection! Our hearts tell us that we are basically good and decent and that we don't deserve the pain in our lives. We don't understand why God has sentenced us to such a cruel punishment while we would have rendered a kinder verdict based upon compassion.

Why, when we would have sentenced ourselves to probation or community service, has God sentenced us to life in prison at hard labor? Why has God been so hard on us and our loved ones? Our anger swells at "He who is the Creator of our Pain" like the waters of the rivers that periodically flood the Midwest.

Molly was not about to bargain with her God anymore. She felt entitled to a life of joy, but that very moment her daughter was being mutilated by masked doctors who were not very optimistic about the outcome of their complicated procedure. Molly was angry and I didn't have the heart to deprive her of that anger. I didn't want her to continue her blasphemy, but I wasn't about to deny her the right to question the principles of faith.

I suggested that we take a break, and I escorted her to the cafeteria. As we sat there with a couple of cups of bitter coffee and a bag of chips, she told me about her open heart surgery a few years earlier. She also spoke proudly about her grandson's simple question about God. "How come," he asked her, "did your heart break and need to be fixed by doctors if God made it?" She couldn't answer him.

Who could blame her for being speechless in the face of such a simple yet

profound question? The boy asked a powerful question with many implications. I could have taken the opportunity to offer Molly a theological explanation for the boy's question, or I could have chatted endlessly about some of the different religious perspectives regarding medical care. Instead, I changed the subject again.

I told her about the time I bought a large toy for my son only to be dismayed when I opened the big box to find that hundreds of nuts, bolts, screws, pipes, small pieces of plastic things, and dozens of decals that had to be precisely placed, were all neatly wrapped up in see-through bags. I was dismayed that the toy didn't arrive in one piece, and I scanned the outside of the box and found what I had feared: "ASSEMBLY REQUIRED." And directly below that dreaded phrase was the companion announcement, equally horrifying: "BATTERIES NOT INCLUDED."

I chose the English version of the instructions and went to my basement to fetch the necessary tools. I knew that even if I were lucky enough to finish assembling the project before nightfall, I would still have to make a special trip to the 24-hour market to purchase eight "AA" Alkaline batteries.

Unaware of why I was telling her this frivolous story, Molly allowed herself the luxury of temporarily forgetting where we were. She listened as I told her how I fumbled while putting together a three-in-one, Pool, Ping Pong and Hockey table. I told her about my son's keen observation that we should call our neighbor for help. Molly was anxiously hoping that there was a quick point to my anecdote.

I wondered aloud why children's toys often come "ASSEMBLY REQUIRED," and I wondered why I always had the wrong kind of screw driver in my hand, why there were so many extra parts when I was done, and why the illustrations never matched the written instructions.

I proceeded to ask her why some people, like my cousin Nathan, could put together a model airplane that really looked as if it could fly, while my planes always had faulty landing gear and lopsided wings. Why, I demanded in mock anger, do I always miss a crucial part of the instructions which forces me to unscrew, unbuckle, unattach, and unassemble the last three steps. Molly laughed for the first time in weeks.

Why, I continued to wonder, do houses also have to be assembled? Why didn't God simply make the split level and colonials on the seventh day, and rest on the eighth? Why are people born so completely dependent upon others for so long, whereas some of God's creatures can care for themselves only days or hours after being born.

Toy manufacturers aren't being cruel to unsuspecting parents. Toys, like life itself, are packaged "ASSEMBLY REQUIRED." Molly and I realized together that assembling toys with our children allows us to teach them one of the most precious truths of life. When young minds play with their Playskool workshops they are learning that life requires assembly and cooperation. Our children love to play with plastic tools; they enjoy making everything from easy bake cakes to spin art projects. I marvel at the subtle lessons they learn without even knowing it. Life demands hard work, occasional mistakes, and some broken toys, in order to produce and appreciate beautiful paintings and near perfect projects.

Unassembled toys are symbols of our obligation to put things together and make matters whole. The job of humankind since the Garden of Eden has been to assemble things from all the raw materials we can find. God wants us

to perfect the world and make it better. As with our children's toys, sometimes we succeed and sometimes we fail. Our bodies are no exception. They also require assembly and constant maintenance. They sometimes flourish and often fail. But if we have learned the lesson of "Assembly Required," we are better prepared to face the challenges.

Molly's daughter underwent extensive surgery that day, and even in the best case scenario her life will be permanently altered for the worse. I had no answer to a mother's "why," but I gently told her that her heart is now strong enough to deal with the difficulties that still lie ahead. It will take great courage to deal with all the tomorrows yet to come, but I reassured Molly that she now possesses the physical strength.

Molly began to understand, and I hope that she will teach her young grandson that next to the heart itself, God's greatest gift to humankind was the intelligence that lets us assemble complicated toys and to repair a defective heart. We are blessed with the thoughtfulness that lets us ask "why" when we know there is no good answer, and the strength to face tomorrow when today was so bad. ♪

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