

Book review

Melissa Miller

Grief and Sexuality: Life after Losing a Spouse, by Rachel Nafziger Hartzler. Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2006.

In *Grief and Sexuality: Life after Losing a Spouse*, Rachel Nafziger Hartzler has brought a treasure to the church, mined from her own experience as a widow, and polished with astonishing candor, painstaking effort, and admirable courage.

Those who have lost their spouse to death often feel alone in their grief and sense that others “don’t get it.” Pastors and other caregivers, wanting to be supportive to widows and widowers, may be unsure of what to say or how to act. Others may simply be

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curious about what’s it really like to become single after having formed an identity as a married person. For all of these kinds of people, *Grief and Sexuality* provides insight and resources.

Hartzler was fifty-one when her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. As she grieved her loss and rebuilt her life, she became a seminary student, in part “to work at emerging questions about life and death”

(13). *Grief and Sexuality* resulted from her master’s thesis on widowhood. One of the strongest contributions of this book is the words of those who have been there: Hartzler herself and the 152 people who completed her questionnaire. (I suspect that the unusually high questionnaire response rate—nearly 70 percent—illustrates the eagerness of such individuals to speak about their experience.)

Hartzler explores themes of loss and suffering, lament, transformation, sexuality, and implications for pastoral care. She speaks of

“living well beyond the crisis” (105), a reflection of her interest in and capacity to see “suffering as an opportunity for life-changing and life-giving growth” (195). She invites readers to consider how widows and widowers respond to these theological themes. Her invitation, if accepted, can benefit those who walk compassionately with the bereaved, especially given that these experiences of loss are so common. Another strength of the book is the section on pastoral care, which is chock-full of guidelines for care of the bereaved. The practical, realistic suggestions are excellent, in large part because they come from the mouths of those who know what helps.

Hartzler’s willingness to explore, reflect on, and write about sexuality after the death of one’s spouse is particularly brave and insightful. Her material on death, sexuality, and identity introduces a host of life and faith questions, ones to continue to ponder and discuss in pastoral care and congregational settings. Her own deep faith and robust relationship with God set a solid foundation for her remarks.

The book presents a few challenges for the reader. Occasionally *Grief and Sexuality* reads like a master’s thesis: some transitions could be smoother, and the material is sometimes dense and could benefit from unpacking. Now and then the tone is heavy, as in this sentence: “Things with which society lures us—youth and beauty, health and power, admiration and financial success—will not endure” (25). Such prose occasionally distracts from the author’s stated intention to engage in a research-based exploration of widowhood.

Grief and Sexuality can help educate caregivers about widowhood “from the inside.” It deserves a place on the pastor’s bookshelf, where it should be well-thumbed and serve as an inspiration for pastoral practice! Church librarians may want to include it in their collections as well.

About the reviewer

Melissa Miller is a pastor, counsellor, and author. A recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, she is currently pastor of Springstein Mennonite Church, Springstein, Manitoba.