

Where life is a garden of memories

Dialogue

Notre-Dame-Des-Neiges Cemetery Newsletter

Vol. 1 No. 3 December 1999



Hope: A SMALL RAY OF SUNSHINE

ur annual convention, whose theme this year was Hope, took place on September 24 and 25. More than 300 people came seeking support, comfort and understanding as well as a quiet place to reflect. They also sought ways to learn how to live with the loss of a loved

one or, for those involved with the health care system or the community, to help someone else deal with death. Nearly 30 guest speakers shared their knowledge and experience with participants in twenty-odd workshops and a few plenary assemblies.



vention was Parisian psychologist and psychologist and psychologist Marie de Hennezel. In addition to her professional career, Ms. de Hennezel also practises haptic fetal communication, gives seminars on supportive care and attention for palliative patients, and writes books

What's the Point? The play, which was written specially for the convention, told the story of a mother, whose husband had died two months earlier, and her three children sitting down to a family meal. Through the actors' skilled portrayals, we could watch each character's feelings emerge and feel each of their reactions to grief, which enabled many people in the audience to better understand and accept their

own personal feelings and reactions.

This 4th annual convention, which constitutes one of the myriad facets of our mission and illustrates one of the numerous ways we strive to serve our clientele, served as a kind of path toward hope. If the increased number of favourable comments by participants is anything to go by,

we have achieved our goal. The cemetery's annual convention is an occasion where empathy and sharing, support and hope are the main priorities and we hope that you accept our invitation again next year.

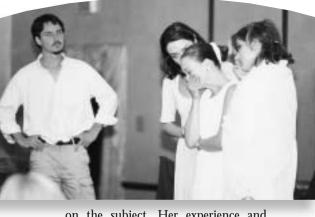
In closing, we would like to leave you on this note of hope written by Albert Cohen in *Book of my Mother*.

"...nothing will bring back my mother, will bring back she who answered... to the sweet name of maman... Many years have gone by since I wrote this song of sorrow. I still live, still love... I have committed the sin of living, just like the others. I have laughed and I will laugh again." ◆

While all featured topics and guest speakers were appreciated in their own right, two speakers in particular attracted attention. Let us begin with Renée Pelletier, doctor and "cancer survivor," whose workshop topic was entitled, "Why do we live, why do we die? One question, a hundred answers." This sensitive, del-

icate, generous and clear-sighted woman captured everyone's heart with the provocative story of her experiences as an invalid. Step by step, she walked us through that painful period in her life, from the first stunning announcement of her illness through to her acceptance, touching on the intermediary stages of denial, despair, sorrow, anguish, confusion and fear, then gradually moving to the discovery of that first glimpse of light, a new-found energy and the will to fight and to live

rather than submit or merely survive. Many people who attended the convention told us that Ms. Pelletier's simplicity and genuineness renewed their hope and let them rediscover meaning in their lives. The other grand dame of the con-



on the subject. Her experience and expertise touched layman and professional alike during the two plenary sessions she hosted, entitled, "Death: what's the point?" and "Those who leave and those who stay."

One of the high points of the convention featured a special event that capped off the first day. To illustrate the difficult passage though the mourning process in a complete departure from the workshop format, the Mise au Jeu theatre troupe from the Théâtre-Forum presented a play entitled, Death:



Yoland Tremblay
General Manager

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By Johanne de Montigny, psychologist

The first Christmas... without them

verywhere on the planet, the countdown to the millennium is on. It is a special time, marked by Christmas festivities at one end and New Year's celebrations at the other. A special time that, for many, will be spent without the other one. The Other One, that significant other being that can now and henceforth be evoked only through memories, joyous and troublesome, and by remembrance of things past, family experiences, moments shared together, now to be faced alone.

In cities and towns. Christmas trees are lined up along fences and stacked up in the snow, waiting to be taken home by families reunited in their traditions, watched over by their ancestors. No, the missing one will not be at this annual reunion but, in his or her memory, a tree will soon sparkle with garlands, bathing us in its twinkling pool of light, under the wings of an angel perched on the topmost branch, gazing up toward heaven.

Once decorated, the tree can symbolize the loved one. It can take his or her place, a presence in the very heart of the home, where love and



May the Christmas holidays and the arrival of the new millennium grace us with the importance of coming together and the strength of love, tenderness and generosity.

disappointment lived side by side for too few years. Death intrudes even at Christmastime. It calls to us, mingles tears of joy with tears of sorrow, the need to be together with a desire to be alone, outer peace with inner anger. It propels us between the shadows and the light, like a snowflake deep in your heart, a heart that no longer beats as one with another, but now must beat alone for two. A heart forlorn, laid at the foot of the nativity scene, lost among the wise men, carried back to an "ancient Babylon," cowering in a cave for the modern mourner, searching for the chosen one or a shooting star. A real rainbow, made up of overlapping pastel emo-

tions on a round trip of luminous explosions and tempestuous implosions. A tempest of tears in a raging snowstorm, right in the heart of the forest inside, forsaken, uprooted, facing the unknown, as brittle as a Christmas fir, obsessed with unmitigated hope in a time of rejoicing.

A time of celebration that reveals broken hearts, trades in pearls of anguish for silver bells to loosen the heavy mantle of the adult and let in the child's heart filled with wonder. Wonder at the Birth, at the very same moment the person in mourning is hit by the "unbirth," the death of the Other One, that illustrious yet difficult rebirth.

It will most likely be during midnight mass or while receiving the priest's blessing that a fresh flood of tears will remind us again and again of how important life's rituals are to better understand the death of a memorial that cannot die, of a "here lies" the person for whom I survive.

May the Christmas holidays and the arrival of the millennium grace us with the importance of coming together and the strength of love, tenderness and generosity. May this time of peace and retreat focus us on the glory of solicitude, brotherhood and solidarity. Being alone for the holidays may be beneficial, but complete isolation could prove catastrophic. Let us not falter in the effort to receive what our friends and family are trying to offer. At some other, future Christmas, we will rediscover that same capacity for giving.

Happy holidays, despite the sorrow, beyond the bereavement. ◆

Death is a meeting with God our Father

hese days, it is impolite to talk about death, let alone think about it. And yet events in our lives are constantly forcing us to deal with it. If it's not a well-loved relative who has passed away, it's an airplane full of strangers who have disappeared out over the ocean or a famous artist who has suddenly died of a heart attack.

Even so, ignoring death when it does occur serves no purpose. It's no use hiding our heads in the sand. And one day, in any case, our turn will come. Nor is it enough to deal with only the sociological or psychological aspects of death. Why?

"It is in the face of death that the human condition attains its summit," states a text from the Vatican Council II. In all human civilizations, from the most



primitive to the most scientifically or technologically advanced, the ways in which we deal with death, the rituals we perform, are all based on one fundamental question: "Where do human beings come from and where do they go?" In other words, what happens after a human being dies? Is there a difference between an alley cat crushed under the wheels of a car and a human being who dies of cancer?

This last question, which is essentially of a religious nature, seeks an answer that the animal obviously doesn't have. The rituals surrounding death are a response to this question and, in a way, help relieve the anguish. Christianity has an answer and it is God himself who reveals it.

What happened to Jesus, the Son of God, will happen to us as well: he died and was resurrected, and this gives solace in our time of sorrow. Studies show that people who have faith or solid beliefs find it easier to deal with their grief. •

Msgr. Yvon Bigras, p.s.s., C.S.S.

THE HOLIDAY SEASON: NOT ALWAYS EASY TO GET THROUGH

Christmas holidays are a time of rejoicing in the celebration of the birth of Christ and the advent of the New Year. Often, they can also be times when we feel fragile, vulnerable. For many, doesn't this emotional state stem from the fact that we wish to banish, at the very least over these few days, all the misery and solitude in the world and, at the same time, see those loved ones who have left us come back to us?

Unfortunately, although it is poised on the brink of a new millennium, the human race seems to have failed to improve living conditions on a planetary scale and is still just as impoverished when faced with death. At the beginning, living in the black hole created by the loss of a loved one, we think that time will never change anything. And in a way we are right, since we are the ones who end up changing something by accepting to go on living, looking forward to the future and being able to smile at the memories.

With all due respect to the pain you may feel at this time of year having lost a loved one that you miss terribly, we at the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery offer our understanding and support. We are confident that your strength and "My mother is gone but
I am hungry and soon,
in spite of my sorrow,
I will eat. The sin of living.
To eat is to think of oneself,
to love life. My eyes, ringed
with shadows,
hold my grief for
my mother, but I do want
to live."
Albert Cohen

willpower will help you discover inner resources you never thought you had.

And, since tomorrow will inevitably be as much a part of your memories as yesterday, we wish you a joyous holiday season filled with gentleness and warmth.

by Christian DeCacqueray, editor-in-chief, Le Passage

Rediscovering the rituals of death

ver the past few Udecades, French society, like all other Western societies, has cloaked death in such a powerful shroud of denial that outsiders observing our society might think that death had become rare at the end of the 20th century. External manifestations have practically disappeared and it is difficult to distinguish between people in mourning and the rest of their fellow humans. The reality of the situation is, as we well know, that it is not death that has become rare, rather the rituals that surround it. that make it visible. All of a sudden, funerals are becoming less and less of a social event while funerary businesses are flourishing. To lampoon this situation, we are like to say that the modern funeral home slogan should say something morbid like, "You die, we'll do the rest."

But there is always a hint of reality behind the parody: no one can deny that the development of funerary businesses, which currently represent sales of FF17 billion in France, rests in part on the gradual withdrawal of the family and its supporters.

By default, funerary businesses have become a service-oriented industry, the result of social failures culminating in the professionalization of funeral rites. Today's reality, which has evolved from profound changes in our society, is not a question of where to place the blame, rather something to be taken into account to better serve families in mourning.

Indeed, in circumstances concerning death, families need powerful rituals for obvious therapeutic reasons. To help families become more involved with these rituals, a group of professionals from the French funeral industry initiated a new collaborative effort with families in mourning. Specifically, they asked grieving men and women to participate in different activities and stages of the funerary process. This involvement came in many various forms, from getting the body dressed to closing the coffin. Obviously not every family responded positively to this request. The degree of involvement is not to everyone's taste. However, nearly one family in five agreed to play a

more active role in funerary processes that had been previously delegated to professionals.

What seems to me to be the strong point of this initiative is that it allows us to discover that all activities and gestures with regard to the body of the deceased have potential ritual value. When these gestures are made by anonymous hands, they become little more than technical movements. But as soon as we give them back an emotional and sensory dimension, they become ways to respect and pay homage to the life of the departed.

In some communities, relatives of the deceased help prepare the body, respecting the different genders with the utmost modesty. Such behaviour is impressive.

Surprisingly, this evolution away from the professionalization of funerary rituals very closely resembles another trend regarding the end of life: palliative care. In this field as well, professional caregivers are trying to redefine the roles and responsibilities of both the patient and the family. •

QUESTION:
Is it helpful or
harmful to carry
with you or
have near you a
photo of a loved
one who has
passed away?

ANSWER: Many of your close friends and relatives, even "expert" grief counsellors will tell you that it is better not to linger too long in painful memories but to begin dealing with the loss by putting the past behind you where it belongs and looking toward the future. This is good advice; however, you must remember that people mourn at

their own individual pace. Reference points vary from one person to the next, in the sense that what is right for one is not necessarily good for another.

Trust your own intuition, your own past experience. Trust the gestures, the routines, the habits that make you feel good. Trust yourself to know when it's time to break away from the past, when it's time to start looking forward. And there's your answer.

Because death has a way of undermining stability and eclipsing every-day life, you will need to rely on a friend, a helpmate, someone close to you or someone more objective to help guide you. This is a good thing. However, giving advice is a sensitive issue: it is risky to try to apply something to yourself that automatically seems to have worked for others. A bereaved person's guide is a companion, not a mind reader. The friend or family member must adjust themselves to the pace preferred by the one who has lost his or her reason to live and who is searching, for better or worse, for a sense, a direction, a glimmer of hope that life can go on as before while knowing that nothing will ever be the same.

The death of a loved one paralyses the survivor. This psychological numbing can last indefinitely. To start the healing process, some try going through photo albums of the past; others can only survive by answering the call for the future, for change, for posteriority.

For some, memories are a precious reminder; for others, the only way to stay upright is to move forward. One thing is certain: there is no way to plan how to deal with bereavement. Suffering the sorrow of grief cannot be side-stepped, or it will return in force and without warning, whether you want it to or not. People in mourning must be flexible, able to ride the emotional roller coaster and allow time to heal. If a photograph of a loved one comforts you despite the pain, do not hesitate to look at it and touch it again and again, but if it hurts you, destroys you, you must put it away, for tomorrow, perhaps for always. Time is still your best ally. The answer is not urgent.

Dear readers, please send your questions to the following address: Readers' Forum

Bulletin Dialogue Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery 4601 chemin de la Côte-des-Neiges Montréal, Québec H3V 1E7

A time to commemorate

rom the time we're born to the time we die, we humans think, speak, act, react and love, and so do those whom we miss when they're gone. Through our memories, we who remain behind continue as a living link, uniting us with the one who has departed. A season, a song, a smell, a food, a flower, a country, a book—anything

can remind us of that person, but each of us remembers in our own way, according to who we are and what we shared with our loved ones.

Honouring the memory of a loved one should be a gentle, painless experience. At the Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery, we respect your needs and your choices by offering, in addition to a commemorative mass on the first Saturday of each month for all those who are or have

been in mourning, a selection of items that give family, friends and acquaintances alike the opportunity to honour the memory of a loved one.



In memory of the deceased, we offer a line of six pins, each of which comes with a message of hope that you can chose from among our eight suggestions. Cost per pin is \$10 tax included. Our beautifully illustrated wall calendar is also available for \$5 and includes valuable information on our wide variety of services.

Too often, someone close to us passes away before we have the chance to say all the things we needed to say. The



book of remembrances helps to express these thoughts and feelings, and also serves as a permanent testimony to the loved one's memory. Cost for this service starts at \$175. If you purchase a crypt, niche or plot between December 1999 and February 2000, the book of remembrances is included, free of charge.

Our greeting cards are designed to offer condolences or to commemorate the anniversary of a loved one's passing, and are available individually for \$1.50 each, \$8 for six cards or \$15 a dozen.

As each bereavement is a personal journey, choosing the appropriate services is a personal decision and our specialists are available to provide advice. Please do not hesitate to contact us... we will be there to provide understanding, comfort and support in this difficult time. •

Johanne DuchesneDirector, Customer Service

Detween the lines



Vivre le deuil au jour le jour (Dealing with grief day by day)

Nowadays, we do not allow ourselves to mourn after the loss of a loved one. We go through it in silence, trying somehow to stifle the pain. Grieving is a legitimate healing process after the trauma of death, a complex journey of acceptance and assimilation that is important to experience in the search for peace. Using numerous examples, Dr. Christophe Fauré, a psychiatrist who specializes in palliative care, explains the

"act of grieving," which varies depending on the relationship with the deceased or the circumstances under which he or she died. He describes the different stages of grief, analyses the feelings (anger, guilt, depression, etc.) that overwhelm the bereaved, and provides answers to guestions we usually dare not ask aloud:

- Is it true that "to grieve is to forget?"
- How much time will it take until I want to get on with my life?
- Will things ever be the same as before?
- Is it normal to feel quilty?
- Why does the pain keep coming back again and again?
- Should I hide my sorrow or let it out?
- Can other people understand and share in my grief?
- How can I help someone who is suffering?

This psychological guide, geared toward people in mourning and those close to them, helps to better understand grief and the feelings it engenders, shows how to provide support to someone who is in pain, and is a great comfort to anyone who is dealing with bereavement.



Histoire de Josée , Pour expliquer la mort à un enfant qui va perdre un parent (Josée's story—To help explain death to the child of a dying parent)

tAt school, a solitary young girl is drawing a picture: a tree with one branch growing to the right and on the left, a stump where a large branch has broken off. She had just lost her mother a few weeks before. This image misrepresents the trauma these children

experience when they are ill-prepared to deal with the emotional and psychological shock of the death of a mother or father. Children are often left alone amidst the drama and the mystery that surround a death in the family. We often believe that it's enough to hold them close for a few minutes in silence, in our own pain.

This little book was written for children whose mother or father is dying to help them prepare for the experience, live through it and come out of it wiser and stronger. It is not enough just to hand this book to a child; the family should go through it with him or her and talk about the feelings it expresses.

A GARDEN OF Memories

The poinsettia

In Mexico, where the poinsettia was discovered, they tell the story of a weeping angel who asks a young Mexican to gather up the plants growing all along the road and offer them to the Virgin and her Son. When he arrives at the manger, he realizes that the angel's tears are turning his plants magnificent, vibrant colours. Here at the Notre-Dame-

des-Neiges Greenhouses, a tradition of excellence continues thanks to our expert horticulturists. Our poinsettias are of exceptional quality and renowned throughout Quebec. Over the years, we have been producing plants of extraordinary colour and size. A poinsettia cultivated in our greenhouses is a pleasure both to give and to receive.

or star of Christmas

Practical tips

Poinsettias like to be in well-lit spaces, even direct sunlight, but do not like to be in drafts or near direct sources of heat. They are happiest in a room in which the temperature varies from 16° at night to 20° during the day.

Use enough warm water to moisten the earth around your poinsettia without soaking it. Never leave the plant sitting in water.

For more information on how to care for poinsettias, please do not hesitate to come and see us. Our experts would love to answer your questions.

Yvon Pagé

Superintendent, Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Greenhouses (514) 735-1361

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Family vaults: Preserving heritage property





Monthly masses

These masses are celebrated on the first Saturday of every month, January 8, February 5 and March 4, and take place at 10 a.m. at the Chapel of the Resurrection.

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"À LA BRUNANTE" (DUSK) BY LAURENT LAFLEUR Notre-Dame-des-Neiges Cemetery has 71 Family vaults including 58 that were built between 1854 and 1925. They are scattered over three hilly areas within the cemetery and usually built right into the side of the hill so that the vault is completely buried.

The oldest vaults, or charnel houses as they were then called, can claim real heritage value given their increased architectural and historical interest.

In 1994, a team of master's students from the Université de Montréal's Faculty of Urban Studies with a keen interest in these vaults—those built before 1925 in particular—conducted a study that included a complete inventory of the vaults, described deterioration problems and suggested a maintenance and preservation program.

Consequently, and despite the fact that the Cemetery does not own the vaults and is therefore not responsible for them, the Cemetery decided on a more in-depth assessment of those that seemed to have suffered the most damage. Six of these were deemed dangerous to public safety, access to them was forbidden and the area around them was cordoned off.

A subsequent study showed that these vaults had sustained major structural damage, including expansion and contraction caused by freezing and thawing, shifting due to soil erosion, heaving or sinking caused by tree roots, and water damage due to leaky roofs.

In 1998–1999, restoration work was done on five vaults belonging to the Wilson, Delisle, Montmarquet, Roy and Préfontaine families according to plans and estimates submitted

by the architectural firm of Faucher Aubertin Brodeur Gauthier of Montréal. The work was carried out by DYC masonry in the summer of 1999.

During that same period, a summary assessment of all of the other vaults dating back before 1925 was conducted, including colour-coded indications of the degree of structural deterioration, with a view to developing a reassessment, maintenance or repair program for each over a five-year period.

A map allows the Cemetery to improve management of its maintenance and preservation program for these exceptional heritage sites.

Gilles Aubertin,

Partner Faucher Aubertin Brodeur Gauthier, Architects

For more information...

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