

SUGGESTIONS ON LEADING CLASS DISCUSSION AFTER A DEATH

One or more of three paths can be followed in leading a class discussion following the death of a student. First, mention in a kind and sensitive way what has happened and then simply open the floor for whatever anyone wants to say by saying something like: "This has come as such a shock to all of us. It's so hard to believe. Do any of you have any reactions or feelings or thoughts about _____'s death?" If it's a vocal group or emotions are high, this simple offer may be all that's needed for students to begin sharing their reactions.

Second, reference can be made to some aspect of the crisis and specific questions can be directed to the class about the concern. For example, the teacher can mention that the funeral will be at 1:00 p.m. tomorrow and that any student who wishes to, may attend; then follow this by asking, "How many of you have ever been to a funeral?" and asking some of those with their hands up whose funeral they went to and what it was like, was the casket open, what did people say at the funeral, etc. This more direct cognitive approach may be easier for some students to respond to. The teacher may choose to share his or her funeral experience with the class as well.

Third, depending on the teacher's own state of mind or his/her assessment of the mood of the class, the teacher may express his/her own emotional reaction in a very feeling way to the class and perhaps be silent for a moment afterwards to see if it triggers any student response. For example, a teacher may say something like, "I was 12 years old when my dad died. I was so scared I could hardly talk, but all I could think of was I better not cry because my mother's going to need me to take care of my little sister," etc. or "Last night when Mr. _____ called to tell me what had happened, I thought he was joking and said, 'If you think this is funny, you're wrong!' When I realized he was serious, I hung up the phone, slammed my fist on the table, and thought 'What a rotten thing to happen.' I couldn't get to sleep wondering all night what was going through her mind as she died and I kept getting sadder and sadder."

Emotion begets emotion. A genuine, honest heartfelt response by a teacher will be more likely to elicit an emotional response in a student than will a cognitive or light response. Death is a great leveler. Neither teacher nor student fully understand it, has an answer for it, nor knows how to make it better. Though used to being cast in the role of expert, few teachers are experts on death; so it's phony to try and play that role. It's far better to be human with your students, showing your feelings if you can, and modeling that it's OK to be upset or grieve when someone dies.

Being only human, some teachers may know themselves well enough to realize they are simply unable to lead a class discussion on death, in which case they may ask a counselor or someone to come to their class and take over the discussion.

*Reprinted with permission from Thomas T. Frantz