

# Family forum

**Minnesota Council on Family Relations**

State Affiliate of the National Council on Family Relations

## Policy Conference A Success!

**Vicki Thrasher Cronin**  
2003 Spring Conference Committee Co-chair

This Spring's conference, "Turning Your Work and Passion into Policy," was our first big step into the policy arena. We were fortunate to have two panels of experts who shared their vast expertise with and knowledge of the process for turning ideas and passions into policy. We

were also most fortunate to have a powerful and moving keynote address given by the Honorable Tim Penny. As family professionals, we need to focus our efforts around our common cause of



*Tim Penny provided an powerful keynote address.*

enhancing family life in Minnesota.

The conference was a very successful, thought-provoking and much appreciated learning experience.

Participants were moved by the passion of the speakers and indicated that their experiences were both professionally and personally valuable to them.

In behalf of the MCFR Spring 2003 Conference Committee, Regina Lai and I, want to thank all our speakers for their willingness to share their expertise with the conference participants. ♦



*Linda Rodgers tied everything together.*



*Members of Power Panel I shared their insights. Pictured from left: Todd Otis, Michael Benjamin, Don Fraser, Kathleen Vellenga and Dr. Reatha Clark King*



*Creative centerpieces solicited participation.*

### Passions List

Spring Conference attendees shared their passions. These comments fell into the four general focus areas listed below. Please watch for continued refinements as we develop our public policy agenda. Offer your input during our

business meeting at the Annual Conference, Family Ties In Troubled Times, on December 5.

- Support ECFE
- Support families (and family programs) through policy designed to improve family life, i.e., tax reform, educational choice, employer incentives, affordable health care, mental health services, etc.
- Outreach to educate and reinforce the importance of education.
- Address policy issues affecting families living in poverty, especially housing. ♦

Summer 2003

Family Forum is the newsletter of the Minnesota Council on Family Relations, a State Affiliate of the National Council on Family Relations

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## A Note from the MCFR President

Vicki Thrasher Cronin  
MCFR 2003 President



Vicki Thrasher Cronin

Minnesota Council on Family  
Relations

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Each January, MCFR's Board holds a day-long retreat to welcome new members and to plan for the new year. Based on our 5 year strategic plan, the Board articulates its goals and objectives for the year. This year, in addition to continuing our membership outreach to diverse communities, greater Minnesota and the business community, the Board determined that we would reach out, focus on policy to create a platform, and eventually to develop resolutions.

Our retreat discussion focused on our voices as professionals and as constituents/citizens; our heads and our hearts. We want to drive change, not just to react to it. We feel like we're always on the defensive, and we want to discover how we can become more powerful, more positive, more offensive in our practice and our research: as well as how we can become a more policy-focused professional organization.

Our work is passionate, and ethical dilemmas will confront us as we look at specific causes. We need to be aware of the many different perspectives on an issue and how they affect different families in different ways. We want to educate thoughtfully and intentionally those who formulate policy. We want to be seen as a resource, a credible, reliable resource, to policy makers and to family professionals.

While MCFR's mission, purpose and philosophy provide a framework for our platform, the MCFR Board needs to know your issues and your concerns so we can flesh out the platform. We heard from those attending the conference (see sessions list summary on page 1). Please take a minute, to tell us about what's important to you as a member of MCFR. Email Vicki at [vickicronin@visi.com](mailto:vickicronin@visi.com) or give me a call at 763-753-5007.

Our first Board resolution (see below), one in support of Early Childhood Family Education, is an example of the thoughtful work our Board leadership and Section Chair expertise can provide to family social

policy advocacy.

This Spring's conference, "Turning Your Work and Passion into Policy," was our first big step into the policy arena. (see Conference Summary on page 1). The conference was a success due in large part to our outstanding speakers who I would like to acknowledge individually. They are: Todd Otis, Michael Benjamin, Don Fraser, Retha Clarke King, Kathleen Vellenga, Janet Gendler, George Latimer, Lori Swanson and Tim Penny. ♦

### MCFR RESOLUTION:

The Minnesota Council on Family Relations, an association of professionals,\* supports the existing law and rules regarding Early Childhood Family Education. We ask that the existing legislation NOT be changed. Language in HF 1404 amends existing law in a manner that has the potential to destroy Early Childhood Family Education quality as well change the program's hallmark of universal access.

The Minnesota Council on Family Relations strongly objects to the change in licensure standards for Parent Educators in the Early Childhood Family Education Program. Parent educators are professionals who require expertise which is accomplished through preparation, practice and examinations and is upheld by a license. Existing legislation provides for provisional licenses, if a licensed educator cannot be found.

Further, we strongly object to changing the age of children whose parents may be served in the Early Childhood Family Education Program. The legislature should continue to allow local schools to

*Continued on page 4*

# READER'S CORNER: Resources Addressing Ambiguous Loss and Related Losses

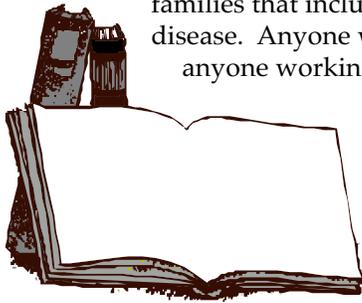
By Ted Bowman

*As a complement to the lead article of this issue of Family Forum, here are three volumes addressing themes of ambiguous and related losses. Each has a Minnesota connection as well. With the exception of one of the editors of The Healing Fountain, all the authors are colleagues here in our state. And two of the volumes were published by Minnesota presses. Home-grown does not mean any reduction in quality. To the contrary, colleagues like these keep holding the quality banner high, inviting those of us working with families to also do quality work. Their insights and practical thoughts will make that easier.*

## Alzheimer's Disease: The Family Journey (2000)

by Wayne Caron, James Pattee, and Orlo Otteson. Plymouth, MN: North Ridge Press, paper \$22.00

As the title suggests, the authors of this practical and haunting volume address the personal challenges of families that include someone with Alzheimer's disease. Anyone with a relative or friend, anyone working with elders, and all others - especially given the public implications of this disease in costs and impact - will benefit from reading this book.



The book is caringly organized to be easily usable for families living

with ambiguity and confusion. Early chapters emphasize that Alzheimer's disease is a family condition. Drawing on family systems and related theories, the authors discuss the impact for families, especially the uniqueness of this painfully confusing condition. Causes and effects are discussed in detail. Following these overview sections, stages of the disease and the implications for patients and families follow.

For me, this volume has both personal and professional use. Add a name here and there, personalize a few details, and the result could be a Bowman memoir. That's the power of this important book. While clearly connected to research and best practice, it is evident the authors have intimate knowledge of their subject.

## Parent Grief: Narratives of Loss and Relationship (2000)

by Paul Rosenblatt. Philadelphia: Brunner/Mazel, paper \$24.95

Paul Rosenblatt invites his readers to listen to the voices of parents grieving the death of a child. Be prepared as the

reader for stories of pain, resiliency, deep grief, and impressive family coping. Even as one working in the field, I found the breadth of subjects addressed, especially through the recorded words of bereft parents, both moving and, at times, overwhelming. I repeatedly put the book down only to reach for it later to read more.

Rosenblatt has the rare ability to weave the interviews with families with the growing literature on grief and bereavement. Covering subjects ranging from parent metaphors for their grief to the impact on couples' relationships to experiences of support, he weaves the stories of parents with commentary and linkage to research and theory.

## The Healing Fountain: Poetry Therapy for Life's Journey (2003)

edited by Geri Giebel Chavis and Lila Lizabeth Weisberger. St. Cloud: North Star Press, paper \$19.95

Speaking to the 2003 graduates of Emory University, Nobel Prize winning author Seamus Heaney reminded his audience that most true and necessary poems arose from places of suffering and decision. When written well, they speak to the realities of our lives in ways that are often accessible and insightful. The editors of this significant volume took Heaney's words further by linking quality poetry with skilled poetry therapists. The result is a wonderfully practical volume for family educators and therapists who want to integrate literary resources into their work.

*The Healing Fountain* is organized in such a way as to be immediately useful to practitioners working with families. Each section addresses common themes of family work. Coping with anger and fear, encountering life's choices, and the parent-child connection are but three of the chapter headings. In each, poems are included along with discussion of the use of poetry resources for that topic. All of the writers are certified poetry therapists in the National Association for Poetry Therapy.

**December 5, 2003**

**MCFR Annual Meeting**

**Families Ties in Troubled Times**

**Earle Brown Centre**

# Families in Communities Section Report

By Regina Lai, Chair, Families In Communities Section

Your knowledge, experience and talents are needed. The challenges:

- A. "Turning Your Work and Passion into Policy: Game Plans in these Tough Political Times"
1. We will be working on what goals can be achieved from attendees' passions and interests.
  2. We will be developing and conducting more advanced trainings as "work-shops", and further trainings to "take on the road" as part of reaching out to educate and train as many as possible. This ties into goals of MCFR, other agencies and University of Minnesota President Bruinicks' statement at the Children's Summit - for

advanced education and training in policy-making.

- B. Gaps in education and services for children and families become more visible when we're closer to the problems they cause, especially in our own and creative methods of positively influencing and strengthening children and families directly or indirectly. This includes children and families we are or may be related to, in our neighborhoods, in our communities, and in systems that govern our lives. We will also focus on strategies and action plans of methods we can support.

Please help make a difference.

Contact Regina  
ChildrensHopeInternational@hotmail.com.

## MCFR Resolution

*Continued from page 2*

manage decisions about their programs within the parameters of existing legislation. Existing legislation allows programs to determine who they serve, if funds are not sufficient to serve everyone.

Budget reductions in Early Childhood Family Education do not necessitate changing existing legislation!

Minnesota Council on Family Relations, a state affiliate of the National Council on Family Relations, is dedicated to strengthening families through the education and support of family professionals and decision makers.

The above statement was adopted by the MCFR Board on 4/25/03.

## Minnesota Council on Family Relations

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# Shattered Assumptions, Ambiguity, and Grieving

By Ted Bowman

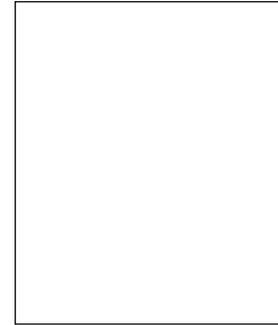
Grieving has taken on renewed visibility in recent times. Some date the heightened attention with the school shooting incidents highlighted by what we have come to call Columbine. Others point to the Oklahoma City tragedy as a time when newscasters and writers took on a public role of grief facilitators. Many news persons, for example, used the phrase "loss of innocence" to describe a change in the American state of mind. If terrorist, even domestic terrorists, could bomb Oklahoma City, they suggested, it could happen anywhere. Still others believe that the worldwide response to the death of Princess Diana of Britain marked the burst of attention to grief and loss. More recently, of course, the September 11 tragedy has been added to this social trend.

Whenever the attention to grief and loss expanded, the result for family clinicians, whether therapeutic or educational in focus, has been increased attention to grief in group or individual sessions. Because of these very public acts of mourning, permission has been given to people to speak about grief concerns that not too long ago would have been

*Whenever the attention to grief and loss expanded, the result for family clinicians, whether therapeutic or educational in focus, has been increased attention to grief in group or individual sessions.*

private and more difficult to voice. Ready or not, family educators and therapists have found grief on the agenda of those using their services.

In this brief article, the focus will be on special kinds of grief, losses that often contain elements of shattered assumptions and ambiguity, thereby complicating the grieving process. When our baby was born, a mom wrote, we lost something we were already in love with, our idea of what she would be (see Gill). A child with a disability was not in the family picture at all. The writer and her family faced ambiguity and the shattering of their assumptions. They had a wanted child, but not the child they had dreamed about. In a haunting poem about dying, Cornelius Eady described a man who prefers to be dead. Instead, his shoes have become obsolete, the word "private" never to be his again, and he turns to his son with, "The anger that the sick have for what a healthy body can not know." (see Eady) Grieving once more is complicated by ambiguity and by the shattering of pictures and hopes of what could have been. It happens at the beginning of life and at the end. To be sure, it also happens before and after life begins. Think of the infertile couple. Or consider that family that has no body to bury.



Ted Bowman

Grief has been defined as a whole body response to loss. One's emotions, as well as cognitive, physical and spiritual resources will be tapped when grieving. Loss occurs when something to which we are attached is taken. People like Colin Murray Parkes, Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, and our own Pauline Boss (see bibliography) have aided us in seeing that these basic notions, while accurate, benefit from attention to the layers of meaning attached to losses. Parkes, for example, wrote that anything that undermines core assumptions about the world can incapacitate a person or family. A child death breaks the norm that elders are to die first, not children. Assumptions are shattered. Rape or domestic violence frequently results in loss of innocence and ambiguity in sexual and intimate

relationships for the victimized person. The conspicuous losses in these examples -child death and sexual assault- are only the tips of an iceberg of grieving. Beneath the surface, often out of sight and voice, are other losses that may need the help of a family educator or family

therapist to become known. Failure to address internal losses, especially of assumptions and dreams can make it difficult for families to move ahead and rekindle hope after loss.

Four points deserve emphasis. First, grieving is hard. Even with increased attention and social support, it is still and will always be a demanding reality. To lose something of importance is rarely done without some emotional distress. Second, conspicuous losses can be exacerbated when the loss also shatters assumptions about the way things were supposed to be. It's as if the universe we thought we were living in suddenly has a crack in it. Thirdly, losses that also include ambiguous dimensions add to the confusion and distress. Pauline Boss indicated that the greater the ambiguity surrounding one's loss, the more difficult it is to master. A friend of mine is living and dying of ovarian cancer. From one day to the next neither she nor her family and friends know which to choose, living or dying. Such ambiguity compounds an already difficult situation. And finally, for this article, I have linked shattered assumptions and ambiguous loss because both relate to the need and desire for certainty or order.

# Shattered Assumptions, Ambiguity, and Grieving

Ted Bowman, page 2

It's often easier to mourn a death when a body is available for burial. Further, when the death conforms with beliefs about the course of life, it is typically easier than the death that "never should have happened."

So, you may be asking, how do family practitioners respond? How does good work with grieving persons happen?

## Responses To Shattered Assumptions And Ambiguity

Similar to other losses, those who have experienced shattered assumptions want respect for their story, feelings, and thoughts; a listening ear; and empathic understanding...what some call presence and attendance. Grieving itself can be confusing. So, it is important, first of all, to listen and aid the family in labeling what has happened. Boss repeatedly described experiences of relief when a person's ambiguity was named and acknowledged by a clinician. One way to assess whether or not assumptions have shattered or where ambiguity is present is through caring and careful listening. Also use of direct questions can be beneficial. Here are examples:

- When you pictured this time in your life, what did you picture?
- Is there anything about your situation that is confusing or difficult to grasp?
- Tell me about the plans you and (the name of the deceased) had?

Listen especially for wide discrepancies between what was pictured and how things have happened. Listen for ambiguity. Pay attention to specific details as well as "big picture" assumptions or hopes. Examples of shattered assumptions and ambiguous loss could include:

- the dream of retirement
- the dream about how or where a home "should be" – Divorce and death can cause a house to be sold because of size, expense, care or memories.

- the dream of autonomy / control, not being dependent on others for basic needs
- the dream that the family relationship could withstand any stresses or challenge
- the dream of dying and death...how, when, in what condition, where

Such validating efforts frequently support persons in grieving and mourning the range of their losses. If it's unmentionable, it's unmanageable is an old saying. Where there is ambiguity, discuss it. When acknowledged the sense of craziness is reduced. Look also for areas where the family has some control and order, not to camouflage the ambiguity, but rather to restore balance and perspective. Further, acknowledgement of shattered dreams can quickly, or as time passes, facilitate consideration of other dreams. Thomas Attig called this, relearning the world (see Attig). Caregivers, he wrote, can facilitate grieving persons as they recognize and address the tasks of what some others call, the new normal. The relearned world can include modifications of earlier plans, pictures, or hopes or something completely new.

Ronald Valdiserri wrote a book of essays while a pathologist and researcher at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, Georgia and also while his twin brother was battling AIDS. His brother died during the writing of the volume. In it he wrote: *It would be easy to assume that the AIDS epidemic, so often associated with loss, generates nothing but sorrow in those it touches, that the personal adjustments we make are all negative. I find, on the contrary, that AIDS has helped me to clarify just what does and does not matter during our brief time in this world. The epidemic has not taken hope away from me, but it has taught me that inadequacy of looking toward the future as a means of rescue from the present (see Valdiserri).*

For many, like Valdiserri, coming to grips with a death results in the realiza-

tion of what is truly important. The tragedy or loss shakes many from what was a more casual appreciation of who and what was of value to them to new clarity absent before loss. Assumptions and meanings that were disrupted by loss cause reconsideration of ways of behaving and dreaming. It can, as it did for Valdiserri, cause some to live more in the present, even with their hopes and dreams, rather than far into the future. Would that many could achieve such peace. Perhaps with our help, they can.

## Resources

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Harvard University Press.

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