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On Death, Dying, and Disbelief

by Candace R. M. Gorham, LCMHCS

“I have never read a book like this before. It is the first of its kind. In a world where religion dominates, where grief is often seen through a religious lens, this book finally normalizes grief and loss for those who are secular. . . . Sharing her own experiences of grief and loss as well as her clinical expertise, Candace Gorham offers concrete actions you can take to process your emotions and support yourself and others in their journey. Sooner or later we will all need these tools. This is a must read.”

—Darrel Ray, EdD, founder of The Secular Therapy Project

“The Lord is going to help you get through this.” “They’re dancing up in Heaven waiting for you.” “I’ll be praying for you.” Anyone living in a Christian-majority country who’s ever lost a loved one has likely heard these exact words, or some variation of them. For many, they provide a source of comfort—and a hope for a future time. But for that growing percentage of people who don’t believe in a god—or an afterlife—appeals to spirituality offer little solace in their time of grief.

Everyone mourns in their own way, the accepted wisdom tells us. And this wisdom is especially true for those nontheists who don't believe in a great reward or heavenly reunion, but who live in a society where most people do.

As a mental health professional and nontheist who has dealt with her own share of personal grief, Candace R. M. Gorham, LCMHCS, understands well not only the natural quest for relief most everyone has when mourning, but also the unique challenges nontheists face in their bereavement when surrounded by religious family, friends, and communities. As she explains in her new book, *On Death, Dying, and Disbelief* (Pitchstone, October 2021, paperback, \$14.95), the truth of the matter is there is no one way to grieve, but there are things that are important to pay attention to while mourning—things that will help make the mourning process, for lack of a perfect word, better. This is particularly true for those who do not find comfort in appeals to a god or an afterlife.

“There is a massive industry for helping people who have recently lost someone,” says Gorham. “One can now swim in a pool of books, workbooks, workshops, self-help groups, support groups, retreats, and psychotherapy, that all tell people how to grieve.” Yet, in their time of deepest grief, she notes, many nontheists are starved for support of a nonreligious and nonspiritual nature. “They are looking for practical advice, just like everyone else, but they also need a special kind of support that makes room for their own particular existential struggle,” Gorham writes. Questions she regularly receives from fellow nontheists about grief and mourning range from the more practical, “Is it okay for an atheist to go to a church funeral?” to the more profound, “Why do some nonbelievers

turn to God after a loved one dies?” Sometimes, she says, she has a response. “Sometimes I don’t,” she adds. “I would love to have a response to all such questions.”

While she may not have all the answers, she provides plenty of useful and actionable advice to those in mourning. While much of the guidance and many of the straightforward tips she shares are universal, the book will be of particular value to those nontheists struggling with the loss of a loved one—and offers helpful, life-affirming steps for them to remember and heal.

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About the Author

Candace R. M. Gorham, LCMHCS, is a licensed professional counselor. She is the author of *The Ebony Exodus Project* and is on the advisory council of the Black Humanist Alliance of the American Humanist Association. She lives in Greensboro, North Carolina.

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