

**David Kessler, *Finding Meaning: The Sixth Stage of Grief* (New York: Scribner, 2020), 272 pp.**

Spiritual caregivers and religious leaders in general will respond positively to the title of this book. Such professionals, along with the readers of *Reflective Practice*, have long thought that the missing element in grief work is the spiritual dimension, which helps bereaved people find meaning, purpose, and spiritual solace in the midst of their pain. In this book, David Kessler, a popular speaker, workshop leader, and writer whose work has been featured on several media platforms, offers a guide to meaning making. This book, along with his workshop by the same name, offers what I would characterize as practical wisdom—lots of easily understood and usable if at times overly simplified insights, approaches, and methods suitable for both the grief sufferer and the spiritual caregiver. I recently viewed one of Kessler’s workshops, and clearly he is a mature, warm, accepting, verbally engaging and practical caregiver. In addition to his several books and workshops, he offers a website ([www.grief.com](http://www.grief.com)) where people can find resources, receive referrals, and participate in webinars and virtual workshops with Kessler.

One of Kessler’s previously published books is *Grief and Grieving*, which he co-authored with Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. Clearly, the use of the phrase “sixth stage” in the title of this book is meant to position this volume in the tradition and legacy of Kübler Ross’s work. Unfortunately, the term “stage” and the stage theory of grief work is no longer credible if it ever was. Kessler knows that. He quickly writes that “stages” was never meant to be linear or prescriptive. So, he seems to be using the term “stage” in a metaphorical way or maybe just as a ploy to get our attention. That being said, Kessler argues that finding meaning is an important and even at times crucial element in the grieving and healing process. He defines meaning very broadly, writing that it is “relative and personal.” He sees various religious rituals and theologies of loss and grief as part of a larger human need for meaning and does not evaluate them except within that frame. He also defines grief very broadly and inclusively and does not distinguish between

anticipatory grief and bereavement, or trauma and loss, although clearly he understands the concepts. I am sure that some scholars would make sharper distinctions between the kinds of grief and loss than Kessler does in this book. If there is a common undercurrent to Kessler's theoretical framework, it appears to be cognitive psychology. How people think about what happened to them colors how they feel, and in turn, if grieving people want to work through their grief or are stuck in their grief, they need to examine or re-examine what they think about what happened or, in short, what meanings they are making of their loss. But along with that re-examination, Kessler, as I noted above, offers a wealth of behavioral interventions, techniques, and exercises designed to move people along in their grief work. Like Kessler, I have spent years writing, studying, and ministering to bereaved people. So, much of what Kessler has written about is not new to me. Nevertheless, I took two pearls of wisdom away from his workshop. The first is the simple truth that meaning is found in what comes after the loss, not in what came before. In Kessler's terminology, finding an explanation for what happened is not the same as finding meaning. Meaning-making is something that is found in the days, weeks, and even years after the loss. It is shaped by what people make of the loss in their lives. Does tragedy ruin their life or become a catalyst to personal growth, deeper connections, and greater societal goodness? Second, Kessler's comments about the size of grief are insightful. He writes: "We falsely believe that in time your grief will get smaller. The reality is you must get bigger." If people do their grief work well, their soul (my term) will get larger, richer, as the bereaved make room for what is lost rather than leaving it behind. Grief is ultimately not just a process of letting go but also a process of incorporating what is lost or who is lost in a new, enlarged self. Or to put it more mundanely, one does not get over the pain of loss so much as one learns to live with it. These two truths, even apart from the many others that Kessler offers in *Finding Meaning*, are worth the "price of admission" and your valuable time to read this book.

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