

## Book Review: *The Group: Seven Widowed Fathers Reimagine Life*

by Donald L. Rosenstein and Justin M. Yopp. (2018) Oxford University Press.

Reviewed by Eunie Alsaker

I heard about *The Group: Seven Widowed Fathers Reimagine Life* from three separate sources within one week this past winter. It seemed a book I should read, and I am glad I did. *The Group* is an important contribution to the field of thanatology as well as simply being a good read.

While working with terminally ill women with children at home, authors Dr. Rosenstein, Director of the UNC Comprehensive Cancer Center, and Dr. Yopp, a clinical psychologist, became aware of the distinctive needs of widowed fathers and the lack of focused resources for them. In 2010, the authors decided to offer a grief support group specifically for fathers who had lost their spouses to cancer. Five men started together and were later joined by two more fathers. The group, originally designed to run for six sessions, became a lifeline for these men and ran for nearly four years. This book is their stories.

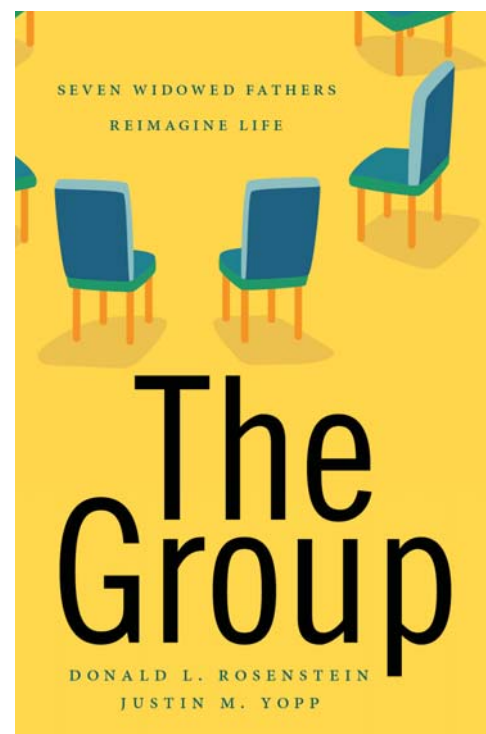
One of the strengths of this book is that it creatively weaves contemporary grief knowledge with the participants' experiences. Illustrated through narrative, theories are easier to integrate and ultimately seem more relevant. We learn about the dual process of grief by hearing how the fathers mourned their wives while maneuvering the needs of their children and getting to work each day. We gain insight into how profound the loss of one's assumptive world is when we watch a dad explain to his child how things have changed. The authors help the participants and the readers understand how the outdated idea of grief stages sets up false expectations. Instead of a straight recitation on

how grief impacts children at different ages, we hear about a son who blamed himself for his mother's death and about the extent to which a child will go to not appear different from his peers. It felt like the "just right" approach between pure theory or personal stories.

This book skillfully displays what can happen when grief is shared and recognized. The men "got" each other. For instance, each held some level of belief that "the wrong parent died" at the beginning of the group. Through shared misery, mistakes, and advice, they grew to see their abilities and strengths.

*The Group* has a broad appeal. Primarily it is written for widowed fathers, but it is a must-read for clinicians. It will provide insight to adult children who lost a parent. And because it is well-written and engaging, most anyone who enjoys memoirs will appreciate this book. The men's lives demonstrate post-traumatic growth and recreated meaning. I cared about these men. I wanted to learn more about their lives. Frankly, I didn't want it to end, and now I'm left wanting updates.

I am grateful these seven men allowed the authors to share their stories. Their generosity did not end following the publication of *The Group*. You can hear their encouraging and wise words on the website [widowed-parent.org](http://widowed-parent.org). Some of the dads became involved in trainings for health-care providers on end-of-life issues, sharing both the positive and negative experiences they had with the health system. One of them even provided possible scripts for providers who deliver dev-



asting news. These voices, along with Atul Gawande (*Being Mortal*, 2014) and others, are steering the conversation on end-of-life care in a more humane and ethical direction.

I enthusiastically recommend this book to MCDES members!