Necessary Losses Study Guide

Necessary Losses by Judith Viorst

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Judith Viorst's "Necessary Losses" is a compendium of philosophies, studies, opinions, poetry, literary excerpts and anecdotes that define her outlook on life, childhood, maturity, grief, sexuality, old age and death. Always with a sense of humor, she packs this book with loads of food for thought about every stage of life, and how each one affects us as adults.

The losses necessary for growth, health and maturity begin with the loss of our oneness with our birth mother, who feeds, protects and loves us unconditionally. Other losses include the movement through the stages of life, when we lose our definitions of who we thought we were, and move on to create new ones. As she moves through the psychological losses of childhood, Viorst increasingly addresses the tangible losses of loved ones, marriage, the death of children and the losses that devastate us and change the course of our lives. Although our childhood losses can be insurmountable, we usually find ways to compensate and reframe our lives so that we can continue.

Viorst discusses the different ways in which people deal with grief and its devastating effect on our lives. She emphasizes that completion of the mourning process is important to mental and physical health. Becoming stuck in obsessive grief leads to illness. Grief is a process that we must move through, and we do live through it even when it seems impossible.

Aging, another "loss" is an issue that many do not want to face. We often see aging people as disposable and inconvenient, since they are not able to participate any longer. Further, we sometimes see ourselves the same way as our bodies begin to fail us and we are often left alone. Viorst gives numerous examples of how to age with vitality and life, and how the aging process can offer us opportunities for growth and change, even in the latest years of our lives.

Finally, Viorst relieves us of the notion that we must die gracefully and follow the rules of going through the proper stages of death. She insists that everyone has a different way to die, based on their personalities, their attachments, interests and innate traits. She uses the examples of her sister and friends, each of whom chose a different method of dealing with their impending death. Viorst feels it is appropriate to commit suicide or to resist death until the end if that is what we choose, since there is no correct way to die.

This delightful book opens up questions about marriage, divorce and every stage of living, as well as dying. Although Viorst bases her conclusions on the research and thoughts of others, she has clearly thought through what it takes to live a life well, and has shared some valuable insights with her readers.

Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary and Analysis

In the first chapter, The High Cost of Separation, Viorst discusses our absolute need for a mother in our early years, and what a challenge it is for children to become distinct individuals, separate from their mothers. Even children who are injured and abused by their parents, still cry for their mothers, who represent safety. Abandonment by mother is inevitable in the natural course of life, when a mother goes back to work or has another child, but extended separation can cause pain and permanent damage. Even grown adults who cannot stand to be alone can trace their feelings of abandonment to childhood separation from mother. Viorst gives examples of adults who have achieved much, but who are emotionally immature due to early separation trauma, which can result from mother's absence and the fear of her absence. Children who are hospitalized, as the author was, can be desperate for their mother and grieve for her at the level of adult grief. Viorst says, "Absence makes the heart grow frantic, not fonder," and perhaps, later, the heart freezes. Children who have felt abandoned may even reject their mother and become distant to mask their rage, and intense hatred for being abandoned. Viorst gives us an extensive look at the tumultuous life of her friend Art Buchwald, She is concerned that since "mother-need is innate," and the price is high for children whose mothers spend too much time away, too early in the child's life. This calls into question our societal structure, and suggests that emotional pain and anxiety from separation may result in defenses that affect our entire lives.

In Chapter two, Viorst describes the first loss from the "original bliss" of umbilical connection may lead us to pursue the oneness through other means. She suggests that orgasm might bridge the connection through the momentary extinction of self. Drugs, communing with nature, observation of art, religious experiences and mystical union through meditation might serve to bridge the loss. Some methods of searching are socially acceptable and some are not; she suggests that even prostitution could represent the search for mother. Certain experiments using the subliminal message of "Mommy and I are one," have proven to result in higher achievements. Although some oneness experiences can go too far in self-annihilation and cause anxiety, we continue to persist in our "yearning to restore the bliss of mother-child oneness...".

Chapters 3-4

Chapters 3-4 Summary and Analysis

Human children naturally withdraw from the bliss of oneness through an evolving perception of distinctness, or "differentiation." As babies grow and become upright they can "grow drunk on omnipotence and grandeur," being narcissistic, megalomaniacal and imperialistic, but we still view mother as an appendage, and she is always our safety net.

Eventually, we lose our self-perceived status as "king of the world," and begin to develop fears about separation and seek parental assurance, just in case we cannot make it out there in the big world. The stepping out and pulling back goes on at every stage of development - we want to be free, and we want to be protected. When mothers who reject our dependency push us from the nest too early, we "adapt, or crumple, or compromise...we give in, or make do, or prevail," all of which makes a lasting imprint on our lives. Further, when a child sees his mother as all good or all bad, depending whether she pleases him, the child may split from relationships all his life, thinking in terms of black or white, good or bad.

As we view ourselves as an independent being over a lifetime, we release the childhood illusion of being perfectly protected and form an identification of "I." Viorst feels that the ways in which we form our self-identity are primarily in imitation of our parents (particularly upon their deaths), and eventually each of us becomes a product of everyone we have met and all we have experienced. However, the earliest identifications tend to be the strongest. If we identify with an aggressor, such as an abusive parent, we may become abusive ourselves. One of the necessary losses is to give up the many identities we try out. When a person feels he must adjust his existence around the expectations of others, he suffers from the secrets about his perceived invalidity. Some children develop a false self from over-protective or involved parenting, which prevents them from trusting their own feelings. This is called an "as-if personality," a sort of chameleon with no sense of self.

Viorst discusses the borderline personality, who is able to split his feelings completely and only feel one at a time, so that one does not contaminate the other, such as love and hate. When a parent can provide happy confirmation for the child, at least occasionally, that he is a prince to be proud of, it will help the child's self-image and esteem. If not, those missing pieces of the personality may create a narcissistic gap, leaving a person to constantly attempt to be the center of the universe to prove his validity and "specialness". Narcissism often is related to having parents who are not able to empathize. When the narcissist's "augmentations" begin to fail- they begin to age, lose their relationships, or looks, they often become depressed, since what is missing is a "stable, internal self-love." Unfortunately, narcissistic parents often force their children to "bury" any traits that they don't like, leaving the child with no choice but

to be something other than what he really is. The "Private I" is the person who lives underneath the facade that is created in order to please those around them.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

Even an average mother is perceived by a child as perfect. Infants perceive their needs to be the same as their mother's. Only when separation occurs does it become clear that the two have a different set of needs, and that mother is a separate person with her own needs. Viorst thinks that our wish to "undo" that separation remains in some of us into adulthood, and that we are always seeking the unconditional love of mother's arms. She differentiates infantile, mature, immature and mature love, and feels there is always a grain of hatred in our love relationships. She quotes Winnicott, who argues that denying hate prevents "the developing child from facing and learning to tolerate his own hatred." Viorst thinks perhaps hatred is "nothing more than our expression of disappointed, deprived or frustrated love." Although philosophers disagree as to our natural state, Viorst feels we require hate along with love. Actress Liv Ullman feels we have to make a conscious choice to be good or bad. Although fathers can be just as important to a child, their interactions differ. Children can more easily learn certain things from their two parents. The maternal bond may be stronger, the father bond being only secondary. Viorst does acknowledge the possibility of "father hunger."

Viorst discusses repetition compulsion, or the ingrained patterns we repeat in adulthood due to childhood experiences by recreating them in different forms. We not only try to re-live the good experiences, but also seek to recreate the bad ones, perhaps to correct them. However, we cannot get what we needed at a different time, so we must create a new and better experience for ourselves rather than be trapped in mourning for what we did not get. Nevertheless, it is necessary to connect with others, even though the sense of separateness can represent loss. Viorst feels that only through love can "our loss be transcended."

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary and Analysis

Brooke Hayward's interesting account of a childhood experience describes an "anguished hate" toward her younger sister. Our desire to own our parents' love entirely is obvious with many children's attitudes toward a new sibling. Viorst describes the mechanisms of defense against rivalry as repression, reaction formation, isolation and denial. Some solutions for a child with the socially unacceptable hostile feelings toward a new sibling are regression, or escaping to an earlier stage of development; projection, or seeing our own feelings as those of the baby's; identification, such as trying to mother the baby, and turning the hostility against the self. Children also "undo" the damage, such as hitting the baby, then kissing him. Sublimation is when the child decides to replace the hostility with some other activity. De-identification allows siblings to assign differences to each other so each can feel superior in some way, which, although it assuages jealousy, can impose limitations on our talents and interests.

Alfred Adler noted that if a child can fight a sibling and win, he becomes a fighter. However, if he is not allowed to win, he will often not compete later in life. Siblings often are affected all their lives by jealousy and competitiveness, and often families do not discuss the rivalry. Viorst discusses some famous siblings, such as Joan Fontaine and Olivia deHaviland, Jimmy and Billy Carter. Robert White suggests that this rivalry can spill into other aspects of our lives long after the parents are gone, and sometimes affects marriage.

Our birth position determines how we are treated by our parents. Favored siblings face resentment, envy, competition and guilt and, we often feel "gypped," according to Viorst. Siblings destroy our "dream of absolute love." However, siblings can also provide a valuable partner when parental love is not present. Hansel and Gretel siblings are extremely close, bonded by tragedy or parental failure.

Even if we repeat destructive patterns in adulthood, insights into our behavior can change our relationships with siblings, as well as family tragedies and simple maturity. Rivalry tends to diminish as we grow older, and the common memories of childhood can be bonding. Viorst concludes, saying that "For while brothers and sisters mean loss — the loss of our mother's exclusive love — that loss can yield immeasurable gain."

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary and Analysis

Viorst believes in the Oedipus complex, that we all are in love with a parent when we are small and that we experience sexual tension. The contacts between infant and mother produce a "deep libindal pleasure," in the opinions of Freud and Erik Erikson. A child falls in love with the opposite sex parent, the other parent standing in the way, whom the child loves and hates. Viorst feels that in adulthood, we may seek out the wanted parent simply to symbolically win the battle with the other parent. Viorst feels that our adult sexuality is in response to oedipal conflicts. Moreover, it is possible that some people's fear of success is attached to their fear of winning the battle against the parent whom he perceives as competitor and being punished or unloved because of it. This scenario, winning the battle, brings up our fear of abandonment.

Viorst states that "all of us, to some degree, are bisexual," with the female sexuality being more complex due to being born of another female. Girls, in outgrowing their Oedipus complex, have to give up two people instead of one. When we seek a same-sex partner, it may be in the form of choices we make in relationships and not necessarily end in homosexuality. Viorst feels our sexual nature is inborn as well as made by relationships and environment, and that normal parents are often sexually attracted to their children. When that is acted out, it can be emotionally devastating to the child. The family serves as a buffer between the individual and outside world. Incest destroys the innocence of the family bond, as well as causing a separation in the child's perceived role in the family. Healthy contact is a fine line in a family, and actually winning in our oedipal struggle, beating out the rival parent, can be destructive. In divorce, when the mother wins custody of the son, the son often wins the oedipal victory.

To resolve the complex in a healthy way, we must consolidate our own "inner law enforcer, or superego". Margaret Mead points out that we have labeled the Oedipal issue as a negative, and not as a success. Viorst quotes a poem that describes a healthy resolution of the Oedipal complex.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary and Analysis

The limitations imposed on us due to our sexes are another one of Viorst's "necessary losses." Parents have different responses to boys and girls. Freud felt women see themselves as defective boys and as such, tend toward low self-esteem and character defects, while modern science says that mammals start out female. Although there are many unanswered questions about the innate differences between the sexes, four have been established. "That girls have greater verbal ability. That boys have greater math ability. That boys excel in visual-spatial ability. And that verbally and physically, boys are more aggressive." Of these, only male aggression and visual spatial ability have any basis in scientific fact, and some even question that.

Viorst goes into great detail about the Cinderella Complex, coined by Collette Dowling, which says that women are programmed for dependency and boys are trained for independence. Logic and evidence seems to confirm this for Viorst, because women tend to see themselves as a part of a relationship or community, while men measure their maturity based on their own pursuits. She feels that men and women crate their gender identity differently. Boys are forced to de-identify from mother, while girls are not. In the process, boys may develop a fear of intimacy and even contempt for women as they try to reject their own feminine aspects. Girls, more frightened by separation, identify themselves through relationships. It has been suggested that females are more accommodating in their relationships because they are forced to renounce their female relationship with the mother. Perhaps men envy the ability of the womb and his creative pursuits are a substitute for the ability to bear children. Viorst suggests the "symptoms of pregnancy that men often experience when their wives are pregnant, and their increasing involvement in the birthing process may be uncloaked envy.

Penis envy seems to be a reality, since women often do not feel they have what it takes to have the same advantages as men. Grade school studies show girls seeing advantages to being male, but boys seeing very little advantage in being female. Little boys may envy their father's larger penis in their oedipal desire for mother. Castration anxiety may be linked to fear of losing something so special.

The concluding thought in this chapter is that, although we cannot change the body we were born with, we can recognize our limitations and still "impose our destiny on anatomy."

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary and Analysis

Guilt slows humans down and deprives us of certain satisfactions. We develop a superego around age five and, until then, we only want what we want. Guilt could be fear of the loss of our own love. While our parents help create our early conscience and others also influence it over time, it is really a result of our "primal struggles with lawless passions and is born of our inner submission to human law." If we do not behave in accordance with our conscience, it will punish and impose guilt on us, which is how we eventually resolve the oedipal complex.

Guilt can be unreasonable, and at times cannot discriminate between bad thoughts and bad deeds. Suffering over bad deeds and excessive punishment may rest on the illusion that we have control over the events in our lives. "By blaming ourself, we are saying that we would rather feel guilty than helpless, than not in control." Some people believe that a larger power is meting out punishment and shame.

We need the controls provided by guilt to live a healthy life, but a "Gestapo" type guilt is neurotic and may be connected to the oedipal complex, a rage for a parent turned inward. Viorst refers to Philip Roth's Portenoy as he deals with our moral checks and balances. Some people who inflict harm or injury to themselves may do so out of guilt, and criminals who leave evidence of their crimes may be expressing unconscious guilt.

Although Viorst feels that some guilt is good because it keeps us from being monsters, unconscious guilt may manifest in physical illness. Some of us unconsciously prefer to suffer and make sure that life goes accordingly. Some people who are afraid to admit to being wrong believe they cannot survive guilt. For some, guilt only punishes but does not prevent them from being immoral. The author reviews Stanley Milgram's experiment where people were afraid to challenge authority, even when acting against their own conscience. Healthy guilt does not result in self-hatred. However, relinquishing our sense of moral responsibility can lead to such out of control acts as lynch mobs. The ways in which we idealize our selves is involved with the prohibitive qualities of guilt, which are part of being human.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary and Analysis

The age of latency, according to Freud, is age seven to ten, is when we acquire social competence, which helps us separate from our parents. It is difficult to make the break if we are riddled with fear, anger, and a harsh conscience, but it is in this stage that we learn our parents are not perfect. We begin to learn through others and feel more in control, mastering certain tasks and developing what Erikson calls a "sense of industry." Non-family group membership helps develop our sense of identity. It is at this age that an adult, other than a parent, might influence a child, and when we develop a clearer sense of reality in our play. This is a good time of life because we own our identity and still have the protection and security of being a child. Many children are content with this stage in life and don't necessarily relish growing older.

Adolescence "involves our nutty-desperate-ecstatic rash psychological efforts to come to terms with new bodies and outrageous urges" and can be frightening. Asserting ourselves against our parents at this age can make us feel guilty and angry. Viorst likens it metaphorically to "killing our parents" when we abandon our roles as children and take more control of our lives. Adolescence requires us to revise our personality and self-image, and any slight difference we perceive in our physical bodies causes us to feel inferior. Obsessions with body image, mood swings and "disharmony" are all part of this stage of life. Anna Freud noted the "inconsistent and unpredictable" behavior of adolescents that causes fluctuations that would not be acceptable in other stages of life.

Viorst notes that in the latency period we tend to think we have figured out our identity, but puberty causes it all dissolve in to confusion, and we only reorganize after passing through the crisis of adolescence. The whole thrust of adolescence is determining who we are and want to be. Our "narcissistic dreams" of childhood are forced to grow up. The loss of our childhood and attachment to parents, as well as our innocence needs to be mourned in order to "commit to love and to work in the human community." This may be the basis of nostalgia.

Young and newly emancipated people have different ways of grieving the loss of childhood. Viorst suggests that drug abuse can be a result of this grief. A fascinating story is that the independent, transcendental thinker, Henry David Thoreau, although alone in the woods at Walden Pond, was only a mile from his mother and visited her every day. Thus, if the break is too hard, isolating, lonely and confusing, we may not try it again. This is called "prolonged adolescence." Saint-Exupery's idea of growing up is to be responsible, not blame our childhood for our actions.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary and Analysis

Our fantasies, although usually fulfilling childhood-based needs, can often turn ugly. We sometimes fear that our fantasies have power to control events, and that our thoughts can be harmful. Viorst feels this idea of the power of thoughts belongs to a stage that we all go through and never quite leave. We also perceive that there are cosmic lessons provided to us to remind us of what we wish and do not wish to be. However, Viorst feels that our fantasies express "what, in actual life, we have civilized, harnessed, transformed and tamed." Of course, fantasies can dominate the unhealthy mind, but most people feel if we can express our fantasies and acknowledge that they are harmless, we will find "release and relief."

Sleeping dreams are part of our unconscious realm where reality does not necessarily apply. Our sleeping minds create symbolic representations of things we need to figure out, such as obsessions with people or things. Freud said dreams contain wishes linked to childhood.

In dreams we can make wishes come true and can, to some degree, satisfy fantasies.

As adults, we are able to see ourselves as in control of our own lives, and not the victim we perceived in childhood. We have the power to reason out the incongruities of life and see patterns and themes. We can look at our pain, be constructive, and recognize what is possible and impossible. We can distinguish reality from fantasy and satisfy ourselves with what is real.

As children, Viorst thinks we test reality with wishful thinking. Reality allows for accurate assessments of the world, understanding the good and bad parts of life and ourselves. However, we often trouble ourselves with infantile wishes that cannot come true. She states that life, "at best, is a dream controlled" and that "reality is built of imperfect connections."

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary and Analysis

Growing up involves giving up the illusion that friendship is infallible. Perhaps more important than being a friend in times of adversity is being one in times of joy. Some of the competitive, sub-conscious ill wishes we have for friends come from childhood and family experiences. Viorst describes a petty aspect of the personality that, perhaps, not everyone has, which is biting and jealously ambivalent toward our friends. As expected, she addresses the idea that we may have unconscious sexual thoughts toward friends that affect our relationships and are masked as concern, devotion and affection, which is more easily displayed by women to one another than by men.

Viorst contends that there is sexual element in all physical impulses, such as the urge to hug a friend. These feelings do not necessarily indicate homosexual urges. Some people feel we should act on all of our urges, since we are all bi-sexual, but Viorst thinks that the different roles we assign ourselves is what keeps life interesting and fluid, rather than constricting. She discusses the need for friends and intimate partners, and how different the two relationships are. Predictably, men are not as intimate in their friend relationships with other men, withholding information and staying closer to the surface than women. Women are often able to tell one another everything about their lives with trust and comfort. Intimate male-female relationships are rare because of the sexual tension. Although it is possible to have a different-sex platonic relationship, Viorst contends there is still some sexual element in all relationships but we bow to our social restrictions.

Friends reinforce our self-knowledge, widen our worldview and support our self-esteem. Viorst differentiates among convenience friends, special interest friends, historical friends, crossroads friends, cross-generational friends and close friends, each of which offer us a different relationship based on our interactions with them. Close friends, or intimate friends, enhance our lives in many ways but we are not always able to establish such a bond. A necessary loss might be the idealism of what we think friendship should be, since even the closest of friends cannot fill all of our needs or provide us with everything we need. Reciprocal indulging and forgiving are key to intimate connections and can be as strong as family ties.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary and Analysis

Although we may accept the flaws in our friends, it is sometimes more difficult to accept flaws in the married partner we fantasized about in adolescence. Psychologist Israel Charny feels that immaturity is the cause of marital difficulties, and that we must balance love and hate wisely. Because of the romantic version of marriage that we so often see in the movies and hear in songs, marriage does not always meet our romantic expectations. Even when everything is perfect, it is difficult to sustain the peaks of happiness and sexual pleasure in a marriage. However, it is possible to "cross and erase the boundaries that separate self from other, woman from man...," but we often have to settle for connections that are not perfect.

Baggage from childhood puts great pressure on a marriage, and periods of hatred are part of marriage. Our personal goals of marriage based on underlying neuroses involve shared assumptions that form a bond between a married couple, described as neurotic complimentarity. However, one may get tired of the polarized nature of the relationship over time, for example, a woman may get tired of babying and mothering a man, which results in tension.

The basis of some couple's relationship can be projection of one's dreaded traits or fears onto the other by unconsciously forcing the partner to act out the behaviors one fears most about herself or himself. Dinnerstein says there has always been tension and pain between married couples due to the woman's original role of instigator of the relationship and will continue until men and women raise their children together. So long as the woman is the first parent, the primary supporter and enemy of the self, needed and hated,

Viorst feels that because boys have more of a challenge in breaking with their mothers than girls, it becomes a threat to become too close to others. Females want to discuss feelings, but men are afraid to get too involved. Viorst is convinced that marriage can be the most damaging relationship we have, but that "love can survive the hate." However, hate is clearly part of the equation, whether or not it is conscious or sustained, and it is important to acknowledge aggressive or hateful feelings in a marriage, at least to ourselves.

The hazards of romanticism involve learning about sorrow, "crooked hearts" and the necessary loss of lost expectations. Nevertheless, adult love can be built on these lost expectations by acknowledging the limits and frailties of love. There can be no love without ambivalence, and marriage mates are enemies.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary and Analysis

Viorst describes a mother's anxiety over her children's safety, and how mothers really do believe that their physical presence can keep their child safe, linking separation from the children with danger to them. We fear for our children's "psyches," and try to accommodate every small nuance of their personalities, "orchestrating their environment," to protect them from discomfort. Our own painful childhood separations can influence our feelings about letting our children go. This can stretch to being too careful about reassuring them, being too understanding and not allowing the child to be frustrated. Children whose feelings are constantly analyzed will tend to shut themselves off to preserve the self.

It is important to let our children be who they are, even if we are disappointed in them. We indulge our children with the things we did not have in an attempt to make them better than children than us, and then are disappointed when they do not meet our expectations. Letting our children go is a necessary loss.

A mother and child are one in the sense that the mother often knows and anticipates the child's needs. The more "primary maternal preoccupation" a mother has with her infant, the more obvious the need will be to let go and separate. Again, Viorst mentions the "good-enough mother" whose failures actually are beneficial to the child's maturity.

The parent child relationship is constantly in flux and needing to be redesigned as a child matures. We are compelled to replay our past, and treat our children as we were treated, despite our best intentions to be better parents than ours were. Mothers often mistakenly believe that unambivalent love will save their child from danger and failure. However, we often have negative feelings toward our own children that result in guilt and the sense of failure as a parent. The normal events of life distract us from being consistently perfect parents, and Viorst thinks that facing our fallibility as parents is another necessary loss. However good we are, some kids do not succeed in the world.

The True Dilemma Theory of Parenthood is that "no matter how much of our life we devote to our children, the result is not entirely within our control." Their fate is determined by many things other than a parent, and each person is born with his own "temperaments and coping capacities." At times, the temperaments of babies and mothers do not fit or connect correctly, and a mother will often blame herself, but a mother's powers are limited, and children come into the world with their own traits and strengths. Not all children who go through disastrous or neglected childhoods turn out bad, either. Judith Viorst believes that our childhood events play a huge part in our adult lives and that the soul takes form very early. However, she admits there are limits to our power and dangers we cannot control.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary and Analysis

Parents often unconsciously foist a role on each child, at times in an attempt to make the child fulfill the parent's own lost or failed dream. If it is not a good fit with the child's personality, this can be disastrous. Only when we make an emotional break from our parents can we truly find ourselves, but it is often a frightening process because we may secretly fear the loss of our parents' trust and approval. In our thirties, we begin to see our parents in ourselves and perhaps become more tolerant and less judgmental of them. Being a parent can help us heal ourselves from some of our childhood perceptions and begin to forgive our parents. Grandparents often become their best selves in that role since they are not responsible for the lives of their grandchildren and it is easier to let go of the tension and control we feel with our own children.

Joseph Featherstone observes that we are not so interested in family history when we are young because we are focused on the future. However, in middle life we may seek to know our family origins and may want to reconnect, having gained a more mature understanding of our parents' behaviors.

In middle life, Viorst thinks that we begin to accept our less than perfect childhoods, and accept our parents' in ability to be perfect, recognizing how little power people actually have to make strong connections.

Although Viorst does not rely on research to describe the changes that take place as we mature and raise our own children, she seems to be pretty much on the mark in her observations of how most people grow emotionally as they raise their children.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary and Analysis

Judith Viorst describes loss as a "lifelong human condition." Mourning our losses depends on many factors, and there is some agreement that a pattern exists in mourning. Although there is no formula for mourning, the patterns can enlighten us about the process.

The first stage of mourning often involves shock, disbelief, and the inability to grasp the reality of what has happened. Following this denial is a period of pain and anger. Our anger is often focused on the person who has passed on or whomever we perceive has caused the death. We can also feel anger at ourselves, sometimes coupled with guilt, over "what we have done — and what we didn't do." We imagine that things should have been different, and ways that our own behaviors should have been different. Also in this phase, people often tend to idealize, or "canonize" the lost person, being able to see only their positive attributes. As we are accustomed to the dead being alive, we often see, hear and feel their presence, and pretend that they are still with us, searching for them or some trace of them in dreams and waking life, in an attempt to "deny the finality of the loss." Ultimately grasping the finality of death allows us to pass through our mourning.

Eventually we make the adjustments that allow us to live normally again, even though we may still have fresh moments of grief. We adapt to life without the person who has died in what seems to be a circular pattern, which Viorst describes as a circular staircase. There is the phenomenon of internalization, wherein we tend to take all of the memories of the person lost into our hearts and minds and carry them with us. This process can be powerful and healing. Identifying with someone we have lost, or taking on some aspect of their identity, can also be healing since it allows us to keep some part of them with us, and let go of the physicality of them.

Chronic mourning is not a healthy state, although there is no timetable for the process. Chronic mourning can take the form of repeating memories, and even "mummufication," where the mourner tries to maintain the dead's life as it was before. Avoiding grief altogether can result in tension, pain, withdrawal, agitation, insomnia and nightmares, and can be detrimental to our general health.

Survivors of the loss of loved ones have a higher possibility of dying, themselves, and part of grieving involves making that choice. Loss of a family member rates as the most stressful event in life, increasing mental and physical illness. The more vulnerable people tend toward having a prior history of mental or physical illness, or have lost someone to suicide, or have a partner whose relationship was ambivalent or dependent.

Viorst reminds us of the death-like experience that children go through when they begin to break away from their parents, and she feels children may deal more thoroughly with

grief than adults. Even more fragile children can get through loss with constructive, supported mourning, but very early loss can make other future losses more difficult.

Parents perceive the loss of a child as an abomination, since parents are not supposed to outlive their children. Viorst speculates that parents may never complete the mourning of a lost child since, along with the child, the parent may lose a "central definition" of herself as the child's protector. The loss of both future and past hopes and expectations can change everything. Even Freud felt the inconsolability of losing a child.

Losing a spouse or partner can change an entire way of life and remove the role we once played. Wives, in particular, can lose their identity when they lose a husband, and become confused and disoriented. Divorce may take a larger toll than even the death of a spouse since we are forced to mourn someone who is alive, and some people would rather be widowed than divorced. Mourning a sibling is a special kind of sadness, since, as children, we often compete with a sibling and may even secretly wish they would disappear. A parent, having lived a long and full life, is not missed any less by her children, but there may be some consolation in losing an elder parent, since we have had time to say goodbye, and the death of a parent can often stimulate a new maturity in the grown child. Viorst feels that the only choice we have is to choose what do with our dead - to let them go and complete our grief being the preferable course.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary and Analysis

We are redefined by the changes in our lives, including the losses of those close to us. Research shows that during periods of stability that alternate with transition, we build the definition of ourselves. During the transitional periods, we question the structure, or definition, and change it accordingly. Losing our youth is particularly poignant, since we often feel that we are still young, or that we just got started. However, our bodies and systems change and our children grow up. Our sexuality is no longer noticeable.

Susan Sontag says that women become sexually ineligible much earlier than men, and Viorst suggests that a woman may fear age because it will "steal her power" and possibly cause her to fear being abandoned and vulnerable.

Middle age can be a time of letting go of our youth, dreams, plans and ideals, and make us feel unsafe. We fear new aches and pains and realize that life is fatal, that we are mortals and that we will die. We often find ourselves having to take care of aging parents, and we feel the emptiness of our nests as our children live their own lives. Viorst feels that at this age we consider whether we have sold out, and daring we want to be. It is a time of life that may make us inflexible and rigid, wanting to maintain the status quo or go back and have what we had before. To alleviate the psychic stress, we may develop illnesses that force the hospital to be our caregiver and protector. We may engage in frantic activity, exhausting ourselves. We may experience depression and question whether this is all there is to it, or feel envious of those who are younger. We may relive old anxieties as we feel our prior definitions slipping away. Some people are so attracted to what seems like the glamour of youth that they have to give up what they have in order to realize that it was really what they wanted all along.

Marriage can become constructively redefined when one partner refuses to play an earlier assigned role. When men become softer and less driven in mid-life and women become more driven and perhaps more "masculine," there is what psychologists call the "'out of phase' or the 'career trajectory' problem." The division of labor in a marriage begins to change as children grow and this can change the formerly polarized sex roles of the parents, allowing for more personal duality and maybe a better balance between the two.

Roger Gould feels the final step in maturity is to move away from childhood consciousness, which consists of an illusion that we can live in absolute safety. Gould notes four false assumptions we make as children that go away when we face the inevitability of our own death. Allowing this knowledge gives rise to vitalization of some of our restrained or hidden attributes, making us whole and more alive. Artistic creativity may depend on the "'constructive resignation' to hate and death in the midst of life." Integration, or uniting ourselves with reality and achieving balance, is the key achievement in mid-life.

Chapter 18

Chapter 18 Summary and Analysis

Old age may make mid-life seem easy, but mourning our losses can help us grow and enjoy what is left of our lives. The losses of old age are multiple and involve not only the losses of friends, home, purpose, status, security and control, but also the loss of strength, beauty, reflexes and memory, but it is our attitude toward aging that determines its quality, according to Viorst. We can focus on every little ache and pain, or transcend the focus on our body, being realistic about our capabilities.

MFK Fisher believes one needs to use everything gained in life to transcend the physical annoyances and appreciate life. A gerontologist describes aging as if it is simply a turning down or reduction in all of our senses. Society tends to see the aged as useless and dependent, and to pity or patronize the elderly. If an older person still has sexual urges, he is considered "dangerous or pathetic." The elderly can feel "diminished" by retirement, since their identity and worth seem to disappear.

Viorst thinks men's work remains less option because they do not bear children, thus, they may suffer more from lost status and self-esteem than women may. Despair can be a natural result of a history of losses, isolation and boredom that can accompany old age.

Rather than being revered, the elderly are seen as ineffectual and an inconvenient burden in a society where youth is prized and aging is not. This can influence the elderly's attitude toward himself, but some people view age as a gift, learning and developing along the way. Viorst gives us many examples of people who have accomplished amazing feats and who are enjoying their old age. She notes curiosity and a real interest in people as key factor in one woman's very successful old age and a gentle letting go when life has been lived to its fullest.

"Good aging" can take many forms, including acceptance of the negatives in the world, or activist work for change, extricated from it all or actively involved. Viorst feels it is easier to age if we are "neither bored nor boring," if we have things we care about and can accept our losses. To feel concern, pleasure and ability to invest ourselves even though we may not see the results of it are her ideas of "ego transcendence." The ability to leave any kind of connection to the future is a constructive way to deal with the grief over the loss of our selves, according to Viorst.

Viorst mentions the enhancing effect of being in the present moment but notes that examining the past can lead to acceptance, integrity and responsibility for our lives. She reviews the highly active life of Benjamin Spock, whose definitions of himself continued to expand and grow throughout his old age, and who saw the world, even as a child, a his oyster.

Viorst cleverly notes that irony sees the same event as tragedy, written a little smaller, thus encompassing more of the bigger picture. We can view life's tragedies more flexibly as ironies, easing the emotional problems of old age. It is possible to overcome childhood problems through psychoanalysis and therapy, regardless of our age.

Chapter 19

Chapter 19 Summary and Analysis

We live in denial of death, which diminishes our lives, according to Viorst. She feels we replace our fear of death with anxiety about other things. Although we are, as humans, aware of our mortality, it does not make death acceptable to us. We often cannot personally believe that death applies to us, as illustrated by Viorst's recounting of Ivan Ilych's writing.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross has helped us learn that it is important to talk about our death, but Viorst does not necessarily agree with her assertion that we go through a patterned process when we die. Nevertheless, she does agree that being close to the dying we can learn what they need. Viorst's younger sister, Lois, died defiantly, concentrating on enjoying life, maintaining hope. Her friend Ruth courageously committed suicide rather than let cancer take her down the long road of destruction. She also mentions elderly couples who commit suicide together as a logical end to their old age, and the terminally ill who opt for suicide. Death in these cases becomes a friend rather than enemy, and an accepted part of life. We do not know the proper way to die, according to Viorst, and like our lives, each of us does it our own way.

Some feel we die the same as we live, with the same characteristics. However, Viorst sees the possibility for growth in the "last step forward," with the potential for our hidden strengths to surface and to experience death with calm satisfaction. Of course, many die abruptly, and many would "rather not be there when it happens." However, Viorst thinks the hospice movement can help us use death as an instrument of growth. Although some see belief in God as a childish wish for protection, the thought of living on through nature does not seem unrealistic.

Some people live on through the impact of their works, and we live on in our children and their children, biologically and "bio-socially." The experience of transcendence can be compared to the infant's symbiosis with mother, but not everyone has that experience.

Our self will die, although we hope that some portion will remain. Viorst feels we must live with a sense of transience, and that our stay here is brief.

Chapter 20

Chapter 20 Summary and Analysis

Viorst's conclusion is that "losing is the price we pay for living" and is "also the source of much of our growth and gain." Accepting, over and over, and giving up what we care about is part of losing the illusion of absolute safety and gaining the freedom of standing alone. We give up our expectations and connect where we can, renouncing the idea of perfection in relationships, confronting losses, mourning them and adapting.

She feels that there is a frequent convergence of opposites, such as loving and hating, being good and bad, repetitive and changing, out of control and yet authoring our own lives. She feels each stage shakes up and revises our self and we can get insight at any age. We can reverse our decisions, and must include continuity as well as change. We must include inner and outer realities, nature and nurture in our thinking. Our losses and gains are intertwined, and loss, leaving and letting go is what allows us to mature and be responsible.

Characters

Art Buchwald

A well-known political humorist, Viorst uses Art Buchwald's story of his childhood as an example of a motherless boy who, because he was bounced around and left in different foster homes his entire childhood, experienced confusion, and withdrawal from any involvement with people. He experienced a sense of shame that affected him throughout his life. He was first placed with all three of his siblings, and later he and his sister were separated from the others, then two more foster homes, then a year with his father — Buchwald had no sense of stability or security whatsoever.

At an early age Buchwald decided that he was facing the world by himself, and ran away to join the Marine Corps. He learned to put on a pleasant facade, and was a great humorist, but his self-anger, following a move from Paris to DC, left him desperately depressed, in spite of his popularity and the admiration of others.

His course of psychoanalysis saved his life because he learned to understand how his childhood experiences were affecting him as an adult, making him a loner, keeping him from trusting and making him feel guilty for his success. He learned about his fear of losing everything, and that it was all right to be angry with both his father and his deceased mother. He learned to trust and let people in emotionally, although he still struggles with intimacy. Buchwald understands how life can inflict scars on the brain, and Judith Viorst obviously admires him for the way he was ultimately able to handle what could have been a crippling childhood, and went on to teach others by example. Viorst presents him as a shining example of an unfortunate child who, through therapy, became a healthy adult.

Sigmud Freud

One of the most famous psychologists of all time, Freud connected almost all of life's patterns with our sexuality and urge to procreate. Viorst quotes him extensively and is clearly a student of Freud, relying heavily on his theories and philosophies throughout this book, particularly in her descriptions of symbiosis between infant and mother. She also quotes him relevant to passages in her book on the subjects of love, dying, hatred, narcissism, the Oedipus complex, penis envy, repetition compulsion and sibling rivalry. When she authorized this book, Viorst was a graduate student at Washington Psychoanalytic Institute, whose basis of education is primarily Freudian.

Freud's opinion was that we suffer neuroses as adults from sexual trauma that may occur in childhood. However, he also believed that many stories of molestation confessed in therapy were patients' fantasies. However, he was concerned with the idea that the competitive hatred that many boys carry for their fathers can manifest in unsuccessful adulthood due to the fear of their own violent fantasies.

Viorst also tends to agree with Freud that women, who realize as young girls that they do not have a penis, often envy boys for that reason and feel that they are missing a part, and therefore perhaps missing some status and power, that boys have. In fact, Freud opined that women are more masochistic, narcissistic, jealous and envious than men, and less moral - all because of the anatomical differences between girls and boys. Freud lived during a time when it was believed (incorrectly) that all embryos start out male and the final sex is determined during fetal development. In what was, perhaps, a more enlightened moment, Freud said that our relationship to both sexes are already determined and set by the first six years of life, and everyone a person meets after his mother, father and siblings are substitutes for these "first objects of his feelings." Another astute observation, and one of his most famous, is that when we find ourselves in repeated patterns that seem to end the same way, such as multiple failed relationships, for example, we are orchestrating those events ourselves, and are under the influence of infantile imprinted patterns. This theory is called "repetition-compulsion," and among others, is still highly regarded by psychoanalysts today.

Benjamin Spock

Judith Viorst refers to Spock as a great expander of our time. Benjamin Spock is a famous baby doctor whose political activism and personal growth has been the subject of public observation. Once a conservative Republican, he marched against the Vietnam War and was convicted for conspiracy involving draft resistance. He became a feminist, divorced after fifty years, married to a woman forty years younger. Still in therapy in his advanced age, he knows he is out of touch with his feelings, but as a child, knew that the world was "his oyster." Viorst uses Spock as an example of how incredibly vibrant and dynamic we can be as we go through old age, and how we do not stop learning and growing simply because our lives are changing and our bodies are aging.

Leonard Zelig

Woody Allen's hero, Zelig, is a "human chameleon" who has no identity of his own, but "turns into whomever he is with." In the movie Zelig, Allen's hero goes through being black, Chinese, obese, Native American, a Nazi soldier, an assistant to the Pope and part of Babe Ruth's baseball team. Viorst uses him as an example of a borderline personality who, never finding his true self, adapts to his situation by trying to please and conform to whoever is around him, creating false selves by reading the signals and clues around him, imitating and mimicking others' realities, having no inner experience of his own. She discusses how a borderline personality can divide the good and bad in himself, in her chapter entitled "The Private I."

Liv Ullman

Judith Viorst refers to Liv Ullman as one who taught her that in acting, only a character who contains both good and bad, is convincing. She refers to a scene in The Chalk Garden who finds a baby and decides to take the baby with her. However, in playing this role optimally, she had to hesitate, to doubt, be afraid and not represent total goodness. Viorst says Ullman has been called "the world's most charismatic actress."

Colette Dowling

As author of the Cinderella Complex, Colette Dowling's work is mentioned by Judith Viorst because it supports her idea that women have more of a tendency toward dependence than men, and that the world teaches women that they need protection. Although women are participating more in the workplace, Viorst feels we need to "consider that the source of female dependence may run deeper than the customs of early child care. We also need to remember that dependence isn't always a dirty word."

Susan Sontag

Susan Sontag argues that when women feel they are losing their physical attractiveness, they fear the loss of power and abandonment. She feels that women experience shame with aging as it makes them vulnerable. The loss of power is one of the things that Viorst says we must let go of.

Roger Gould

A psychologist, Roger Gould coined the term childhood consciousness to describe the stubborn illusion we maintain that we can live in absolute safety. It makes more sense in childhood, but by the end of high school, it is no longer true and must be repudiated. If not, it will "exert great power over our adult lives."

M.F.K. Fisher

The author of Sister Age, Viorst calls MFK Fisher an "elegant transcender and realist." Fisher asserts the interesting philosophy that in old age we must "use everything that has ever happened in all the long wonderful-ghastly years to free a person's mind from his body." In other words, we need to use our experiences to keep from becoming obsessed with the fact that our bodies are slowing down and aging.

Ivan Ilyich

Ivan Ilyich is Leo Tolstoy's character who realizes he is dying, and expresses his incredible disbelief and astonishment that this could actually happen to him. He finds it

impossible to accept that the logic of mortality could apply to him when he is not abstract, but a real creature who had parents, a childhood, love, thoughts and emotions. Viorst uses a passage from The Death of Ivan Ilych to illustrate how hard it is to personally accept our own mortality, and how difficult it is for others to speak of it openly without denial.

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross

The author of On Death and Dying, Kubler-Ross proposes that there are stages of dying that people go through, and need to go through, to have an appropriate death. In this book, Judith Viorst disagrees with Kubler-Ross, because she feels that everyone does death in his and her own way, and that there is no pat, prescribed method for a good death.

Objects/Places

Loss

Loss is a key concept in Viorst's book. Loss, in Viorst's opinion, is a natural part of living and continues to repeat in different forms throughout our lives. Without the necessary, natural losses we experience, we would not have as much room to grow, change and mature.

Ultimate Connection

The ultimate connection described by Judith Viorst is the symbiotic relationship we have with our mothers. As infants, we do not recognize that we are separate individuals and, until we begin to break this connection by walking, talking and growing, we do not recognize our mothers as autonomous, but as part of our selves.

Narcissist

Excessively self-adoring with an absence of a stable internal self-love, a narcissist uses others for self-enhancement, using them as reflections and extensions of himself.

Oedpial Complex

Viorst and Freud feel that all people, as children, have an Oedipal complex to some degree. It involves our seeking the basic relationship that we had with our parents, as well as an inappropriate sexual love toward a parent.

Cinderella Complex

The Cinderella Complex is a phenomenon defined by Colette Dowling regarding the tendency of women to fear independence, wanting to be taken care of and protected by men.

Adolescent Angst

Adolescent angst are the typical issues that cause anxiety for teenagers and adolescents, which include the possibility of anything about their bodies or appearance being any different from their peers, worries about their development and feelings of inferiority.

Sibling Rivalry

Sibling rivalry is the natural sense of competition among siblings, who compete for parental love and attention.

Grief

Grief is the process of mourning loss, sometimes described in stages, that includes disbelief or denial, anger, bargaining and ultimately, acceptance of loss.

Regression

Regression is reverting to an earlier stage of life as a method for coping with stressful events or feelings.

Canonizing

Canonizing, as used in this book, is our tendency to idealize the dead, attributing positive traits to them while forgetting or ignoring anything negative.

Internalization and Identification

Within the context of this book, internalization and identification refer to how people will take on the characteristics of someone they have lost, assuming that person's habits, modifying their behavior to become more like the lost loved one.

Guilt

Guilt is an emotion felt when one's actions conflict with the conscious ideal or moral standards that one has established for himself.

Themes

Loss is a Necessary Part of Life

Judith Viorst drives home her point through the entire book that life consists of a series of losses. Without them, there would be no gains. If we did not lose the symbiosis with our parents as children, we would not gain the sense of curiosity and wonder to step outside the world of our mothers. If we did not lose the bond with our children that allows us to protect them at every moment, we would not be able to establish a healthy relationship with them as adults. If we did not lose the romantic expectations we bring into marriage, marriage could not exist, since idealistic goals and dreams hit the wall of reality at some point. Our spouses are no more perfect than we are, and we all bring childhood needs and desires to our marriages. Some of the more subtle losses Viorst explores are associated with subjects that are not readily discussed, like our Oedipal attachments to our opposite parents, and the loss we experience when a new baby comes into the home. With each stage of life, we are faced with something we must give up in order to be healthy. Viorst explores some of the proper or more functional ways to let go, or "lose" childhood attachments, since holding on to them results in adult problems. The final, and perhaps the most poignant loss on the road to maturity is letting go of the idea that there is such a thing as absolute safety. As infants and young children, we often believe in this concept, and even carry it into our adult and married lives, seeking to find the person who will keep us from all harm so that we can re-experience the pleasurable feelings that we had when we were bundled, rocked, held, guided and nurtured.

There is Not a Proper Way to Age or Die

Whether one chooses to sit and contemplate the past or take up new hobbies, aging is a personal process and does not require anything of us that we would not naturally do. Viorst gives us many examples of people who have aged in an exemplary way, but she does not preach or suggest that there is one best way to do so. What she does emphasize is that aging is not the end of life, and that our attitude toward it, although it can be influenced by the world around us, is what makes it either a happy or a miserable experience. She implies that we should take up whatever is appropriate to our physical and mental status at any given time, but not to have unreasonable expectations, shame or disappointment about the process. Her repudiation of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's theories of the stages of death is not so much a denial that the stages are real, but more a resistance to the notion that everyone, in order to have a complete or proper death, must pass through each of them. She generally condones any form of death we choose to take, because we are the only ones in the world who really know what we need and want. An "incomplete" death is a misnomer, since death is final and takes its own course, one way or another. Viorst adamantly suggests that suicide is not bad or wrong, but that it is a personal choice, particularly in the case of terminal illness or prolonged pain. There is no successful way to age, in that some people enjoy the

process of shutting down and reminiscing about the past, and some seek activity and health as a way to prolong and enjoy their lives - Viorst contends there is no wrong way. If what we are doing as elderly persons is making us happy, we should not feel as though we are not doing it correctly.

Change is Innate

Change is probably the only thing that we can rely on in our lives; we can be sure that not only will our circumstances change, but our bodies, our outlooks and our lives, in general, will change, as well. Life is a series of changes and, in Viorst's view, a series of losses. Even when we rigidly hold on to what we think we believe and who we think we are, this too will change, if only through old age and death. To accept this concept and learn to flow, to see tragedies as ironies, is a graceful way to view the larger picture and enjoy the course of our lives, appreciating both good and bad aspects. Perhaps it is stating the obvious, but one of the first things we learn as human beings is that things will change. Our spatial relationships change, the way we move about changes, the way we eat changes, and our bodies change as we grow. Our thinking capacity and emotional structure change as we age, as do our relationships to other people, including our primary family members as well as those outside the family circle. Embracing and welcoming change is the healthiest approach and, while we may become stuck in old patterns due to changes we have resisted making and attachments we have failed to let go of, the outcome of that behavior produces change, which may be more complicated to unravel.

Style

Perspective

Judith Viorst's non-fiction book is written from her own perspective, and she incorporates hundreds of quotations from poets, authors, philosophers, scientists and others to support her ideas. She has managed to take a step back and look at life as a whole, and dissect its parts as they relate to the shifting changes that every human experiences. Viorst relies on her extensive education in psychology and the imminent figures she has studied, such as Sigmund Freud. In addition, being an empathic person, she tells the stories of many of her friends, her relatives and acquaintances, as well as relevant stories of her own life. In writing this book, Viorst has taken a wide range of life experiences and condensed them into potent, information-laden chapters to help us manage the difficulties everyone faces in life. In her way, she has summed up why life presents us with challenges, and has concluded that it is the losses we sustain that trouble us most, and our capacity to accept them and move on is what helps us continue to grow in a healthy way. The losses we are unable to accept are the ones that cause us trouble, such as neuroses and psychological problems. Viorst restricts this work to her own opinions and, for the most part, does not give much credence to those who disagree with her. For instance, she is clearly not a religious person, and, although she shows respect for peoples' reliance on religion, she makes it obvious that it is not her path. She also challenges the work of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, with whose steps of grief in the dying process Viorst does not agree. Primarily, Viorst uses this book as a way to expose her most constructive, helpful stories and lessons she has learned, structuring it something as a recipe book for living, with the pitfalls, the solutions, and what to expect, at least according to her knowledge and education.

Tone

Having been a humor writer, Viorst keeps her tone light, even when dealing with such serious issues as aging and death. For instance, even when describing the tragic death of her younger sister, Viorst still refers to her as the "interloper," as she felt when they were young. Although well educated and highly intelligent, Viorst is down to earth and a practical, perhaps optimistic person. She is very empathic. She herself has been blessed with a good marriage, but is still able to understand and analyze what happens to people who lose their mates. Her sense of wit and irony come through in the excerpts she includes, and the fact that she is very well-read is obvious. She comes across as an earth-mother type, who is very matter-of-fact and likeable.

Viorst uses many quotes from many different sources, and often follows them with several fragmented sentences to emphasize their meaning, using sentences that start with, "What he is saying ...", and "I am saying...., and "I am saying....." Viorst writes as if she is in front of the classroom, and is a very effective instructor. She is such a

seasoned writer that she does not worry about such rules as sentence fragments - she writes the way she speaks, and is extremely effective in her communication.

Her tone is consistently one of empathy and humility. Viorst does not pretend to be Freud, but only speculates on the possibilities, probabilities, and examples of which she is aware. By the end of the book, she seems like a very warm, knowledgeable friend who has tried to give us the benefit of her realizations and life experiences, for which she is grateful. The book has an obvious flavor of the 1980s that comes through in Viorst's observations about women and issues that have changed since the book was written.

Structure

This book is divided into twenty chapters and is 412 pages long, including the notes and elaborations, which are extensive. The book does not consist of any particular studies done by Viorst, herself, but refers to copious works and lives of other people, as well as her own. It is a compendium that contains Viorst's personal philosophies about life and death, and her sharing of experiences and acquaintances that have influenced her.

The book starts with Part One, The Separate Self, which describes the symbiosis infants experience with their mothers. It goes on to discuss the process of disconnecting from the mother and identifying her as a separate self. In the Second Part, entitled The Forbidden and the Impossible, Viorst moves on to the young child, the oedipal complex, sibling rivalry, guilt and the process of maturing. Part III, Imperfect Connections, deals with relationships among adults with families, spouses, friends and children. Part IV, Loving, Losing, Leaving, Letting Go, is about mid-life and old age, and how we cope when we begin to lose people, our abilities and, ultimately, our own bodies. Thus, Viorst covers a lifetime from birth to death.

She often uses indented quotes, and at times relates a lengthy excerpt if it is relevant to the chapter and is on point with what she wants her reader to realize. It is apparent that Viorst, herself, is something of a poet, since her book contains verses that have no author noted and seem to be in her own words. Viorst, since she has experienced her own fame and fortune, tends to give attention to famous people whose lives she feels are exemplary, such as Art Buchwald and Liv Ullman.

Quotes

For none of us can possibly begin to have an "I" without some early assistance from an "other." All of us, in the beginning, need a mother who helps us be, a mother who helps us reach out and claim what is ours, a mother who helps us establish a central certainty — as unquestioned as our heartbeat — that our wishes and our feelings are our own. (65)

No matter how hard they clap for us now, she will never clap for us then. We have to relinquish that hope. We have to let go.(79-80)

"The potter who works with clay recognizes the limitations of his material," writes Margaret mead; "He must temper it with a given amount of sand, glaze it thus, keep it at such and such a temperature, fire it at such a heat. But by recognizing the limitations of his material he does not limit the beauty of the shape that his artist's hand, grown wise in a tradition, informed by his own special vision of the world, can impose upon that clay." She is saying that freedom begins when we acknowledge what is possible - and what is not. She is saying that if we come to know the nature of our clay, we can impose our destiny on anatomy. (129)

True guilt, it can be argued, is not the fear of our parents' wrath or the loss of their love. True guilt, it can be argued, is the fear of our conscience's wrath, a loss of its love. (131)

Our conscience is our parents installed in our mind. (131)

Healthy guilt is appropriate — in quantity and quality— to the deed. Healthy guilt leads to remorse but not to self-hate. Healthy guilt discourages us from repeating our guilty act without shutting down a wide range of our passions and pleasures. We need to be able to know when what we are doing is morally wrong. We need to be able to know and acknowledge our guilt. (139)

Later, as Thoreau the Transcendentalist, he did indeed go away — to a hut he built in the woods at Walden Pond, where he made much of the solitary, self-reliant life. However, Edel points out, his cabin was merely a mile away from his mother's house in Concord and there he returned for a visit — every day. Thoreau once said, "Methinks I should be content to sit at the back door in Concord, under the poplar tree henceforth, forever." Edel says that's waht he iun effect did — all his life. And although he created a myth of getting away from the world, of sturdy independence, "Thoreau, shut up in his childhood, could not leave home." (155)

For in our daily experience we see evidence of the elderly becoming ever more clearly what they have been. And the way we too may age — be it self-pityingly or bitterly or gallantly — has been in large measure prepared for earlier on. All of us have met those types whom Fisher calls "bright souls" — merry, lively, serene both in youth and old age. But because the greats stresses of life are likely to occur in our later years, and because disturbing traits are very likely to be accentuated by stress, the mean may get

meaner, the fearfulmay get more afraid andthe apathetic may sink into near-paralysis. (298)

But although our present is shaped by our past, personality changs are possible, even unto the seventh, eight, ninth decade. We are never a "finished product" — we refine and we rearrange and we revise. Normal development doesn't end, and over the course of our life, important new tasks — or crises— will arise. We can change in old gge because every stage of our life, including our last one, affords new opportunities for change. (299)

Why, a seventy-six year old woman was asked, are you seeking therapy at your age? Reflecting both her losses and hopes, she answered, unforgettably, "Doctor, all I've got left is my future."

Looking death straight in the eye, we may hate it a lot. And although oru sense if finitude may be the mother of beauty, the frame of the picture and even the yolk of the egg, it may make amockery of our works and our days. By assaulting our feelings of personal significance. By rendering all of our enterprises meaningless. By tainting our deepest and dearest attachments with transcience. By taunting us with the question Why were we born if it wasn't forever? By taunting us with the question Why is there death? (307)

And although I know that suicide may be viewed as a crime or a sin, or cowardly, or weak, or pathological, I believe that Ruthie's suicide - the suicide of my sorrowing, suffering friend — was an act of courage and consummate rationality. (314)

Topics for Discussion

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross identified the stages of dying through her experiences of spending an enormous amount of time with people who were close to death. Judith Viorst disagrees with Kubler-Ross's defined stages of death. Wtih whom do you agree, and why?

Viorst comments that we tend to find the elderly somewhat repugnant and dismiss them as we find them irrelevant. Are there elderly people in your life who have this effect on you? Are there some who do not?

Why do we resist the idea that death will apply to us?

As infants, we do not see ourselves as separate from our mothers. What finally causes us to determine that our mother is a separate entity with different needs from our own?

Judith Viorst tells us that love can overcome the loss of a marriage. Discuss how that might be possible under the devastating circumstances of adultery or mid-life crisis.

Why is guilt necessary? What are some ways guilt can be used for constructive purposes?

Discuss the definition of an Oedipal Complex, and how it can affect us later in life. In what ways do young boys resolve and let go of their attachment to their mothers; girls to their fathers?