

Grief: A Journey Through Grief: Living our Losses
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Learning to grieve is important no matter what our stage of life but, especially as we age. As we get older our losses mount and the need for conscious grieving becomes more necessary. In a culture that emphasizes not only stoicism but moving forward as quickly as possible, we have little tolerance for taking time to grieve, each in our own way and on our own timetable.

Loss is part of life, although many of us resist this reality. Our little egos like things to be predictable and under our own control—at least mine does. Loss is neither predictable, nor for the most part, under our control. Many of us journey through loss without much conscious thought or reflection on the process.

Loss comes in many forms. Death of a loved one generally ranks at the top of the list, followed by chronic or life-threatening illness. Then somewhere along the continuum our losses include: separation or divorce, estrangement from a friend, family member, accident, and unemployment. In addition, and not inconsequential are: an inability to fulfill a dream and / or a crisis of faith, a loss of the meaning of life. These latter two, although less definitive than the former losses, are perhaps even more difficult to grieve, precisely because they lack a single focus or point in time. Yet these two often leave a greater mark on our souls. Even events we think of as positive such as weight loss, or giving up an addiction involve some loss, even if the outcome, over all is positive. One woman I know, who lost a lot of weight, said she missed her old jolly, devil-may-care self., replaced now with the calorie counting watchdog.

In loss we feel as if something has been taken from us—usually a sense of security, independence, freedom, predictability, or love. And grief is our reaction and response to any loss. Grieving occurs for some aspects of every major life change. All changes require leaving something behind, some good-byes, some letting go,

Because we often focus on the biggest and most dramatic losses of life such as death, disaster, and divorce, we forget the importance of addressing little losses, the little good-byes we say along the way.

As one of my friends says, all our little good-byes are practice for the big good -bye. How do you say your little good-byes? Good-bye actually comes from an shortened version of “God Be with Ye”

How Do We React to Loss?

Our culture isn't very helpful when it comes to supporting loss as a journey and grief as a process. We aren't very good at living our losses. Our media tells us to move on quickly from grief to the next new thing. For example The Pope's funeral, once the

day and the service were over, the media was filled with who the next Pope would be. It's hard to resist the media's manipulation, unless we understand it for just that, emotional manipulation.

The new event is more exciting, sells more papers, hooks more viewers. Even take a child's loss of their first tooth, which might seem trivial, but all the same, it's still a good-bye to babyhood, hello to childhood. Parents would do well to discuss what it means to "lose a tooth. And discuss how it is the same and how different from losing your best friend or having your pet die. Moving on too quickly can cause us not to learn to live our losses.

Consider, also the way we describe, the ultimate loss, that is death. Scanning obituaries, is very instructive in this regard.

Descriptions such as : "Jane Smith went to be with Jesus on April 7. She had been ill for several years and was looking forward to her eternal rest in him". Think of the term "I lost my mother" and how a young child might hear that. For me it conjures up images of a celestial security guard finding her and bringing her back sometime soon. Listen to yourself and in particular notice how you speak about loss. Both the children around you and your own inner child hear the way you describe loss, and this in turn influences attitudes and actions in dealing with loss.

Besides our media, and images and language we hear and use, culture, ethnicity and religion also play a role in how we respond to loss.

Grief, that is our response to loss can take many forms.

Two extremes- stoicism and eternal grieving.

The stoic example, comes from my grandmother of British stern, sturdy, and stoic stock, who modeled the "stiff upper lip" method of grieving when her husband of 45 years died. I was about 8. She didn't shed a tear at her husband's funeral.

And yet when she'd come for a visit from Connecticut to Vermont, as she was leaving on the train, she'd wave her hankie out the window, but even as a child I could see she was wiping her eyes. I couldn't figure out why she was crying. She never cried and she didn't seem sad to be leaving. Then as a psychology major in college, I learned about displaced emotions and came to realize that since she hadn't allowed herself to grieve the loss of her husband, she hadn't healed from it, so each little goodbye from the train was a re-experiencing of a deep and unhealed loss.

The other extreme is what I call "eternal mourning". An example comes from my Portuguese neighborhood in Providence R.I. where for the past 20 years, the same little old Portuguese ladies are garbed entirely in black including a head covering, announcing to all the world their widowhood and their eternal grief. So our reaction to loss comes from many places.

However, perhaps the most powerful the models for dealing with loss come from our early upbringing.

How did your family deal with Loss?

Think about your own childhood memories of loss. I had two very different role models. My father didn't deal with loss. When my mother left him after 35 years of marriage, he found a replacement immediately.

My mother on the other hand dealt with loss with realistic optimism and viewed loss as an opportunity for growth. When she lost kidney function and she went on dialysis, she befriended others at the renal center, and provided a compassionate listening ear and heart.

She also used humor as a way of dealing with loss. Her sister Esther, just 13 months her junior was an avid bicyclist while my mother was unsteady on her feet and had already had two hip replacements as a result of falls, at age 68. One day my Aunt Esther was talking excitedly about her latest bike trip and what fun and great exercise it was. My Mom quipped, "I get my exercise falling".

To neither minimize or maximize loss, but to see it as a journey and grieve as a process is what's important

But how do we do that?

How Do We Live Our Losses?

1. First, acknowledge loss for what it is. The fact is we are forever changed by loss. Healing is not returning to a pre loss state. Some changes always occur in body and spirit. A woman whose husband died suddenly at age 37, and who later became an Episcopal priest (in fact she was the first Episcopal woman ordained in the state of Oregon). She writes about the lingering effects of the untimely death of her husband:

**“Grief lived faithfully
heals itself in time not fully .
Where once an open wound burned unbearably
Now a thin transparent scar.
Still I know that till
The hour of my own death
The scare glows
And now and then bad weather
Will come and waken the same old ache.”**

2. Understand grief is a process and is accompanied by myriad emotions including sadness, anger, fear, confusion, loneliness, loss of meaning of life and guilt. Guilt often plays a large role. As the saying goes, "Guilt is the gift that keeps on giving". Guilt is the self-punishment and torture, we inflict on our selves; the psychological tapes we play in our heads that begin "If only" . . .

For example, I have advanced arthritis in my hands. For this condition, I play the guilt tape in my head that begins something like "If only I taken better care of my hands, and hadn't gardened so much, or if I had eaten a healthier diet, with fewer carbohydrates, knowing full well the arthritis is not my fault. It may be human to want to take some personal responsibility for our losses, but at some point we need to let go of that self-flagellation. It's not the guilt per se, but what you do with it that's important.

Here are some steps you might take to rid yourself of guilt

1. Hear what the guilt is saying to you and bring it out in the open
2. Educate or re-educate yourself. That might mean speaking openly ; go to counseling; attend AA; or take class or join a support group.
3. Reconcile with “the what is “ and “not what might have been” .
4. Practice truth and reconciliation- it really works- tell the truth straight from your heart and then do what ever it takes to reconcile the feelings—like forgiving yourself and others or making amends.

Ways to Live our Losses and Recover from grief.

Numerous ways help us heal and help us on our journey through loss. Grief Guru, Nancy Reeves, a clinical psychologist from Victoria, B.C. has worked for the past 30 years, with loss, often with adults with brain injuries and with children who have had a parent die. She suggests journaling as one method to help us heal as she explains in her book a book entitled: **“A Path Through Loss: A guide to Writing your Healing and Growth,”** with specific questions to help you live through the grief.

Another way to heal is through ritual . Most important is that the ritual have deep meaning for you. Some rituals work for some and for others not at all. For example, Native American healing circles or Catholic praying the Rosary, or the Jewish wailing wall .

For me what I find looking most helpful is what I call “moral mentors”, the stories of individuals, who have gone through loss and found successful strategies for coping. For example, Ram Dass who suffered a stroke and wrote an upbeat and spiritual book entitled “Still Here”. And sometimes we just need to lighten up, not take ourselves so seriously. Humor helps.

Common needs we all have in times of loss.

No matter what kind of loss, no matter the language we use to describe it, our personal patterns of grieving, the guilt, the baggage we might be dragging along, we all have common needs in times of grief and loss.

1. Need for structure and stability during chaos and instability change
3. Need to find a new sense of direction and meaning
4. Need for a sense of congruency (body, mind, emotions and spirit working together)
5. Need for a sense of belonging; a sense of community; a sense of having a place on the planet.
6. Need to get our spiritual bearings again. At times of loss many of us have our faith shaken. We may re-examine our beliefs about the meaning of life and our p we re evaluate the meaning of life.

7. Perhaps of all the needs we have in time of loss, is the need to feel supported and understood. We feel alone in our grief—until we meet another, like Grief personified in the reading. Grief who wailed and nearly went mad at the death of her child, until

“One day at the edge of the forest Grief heard another woman crying out. She spoke with her. She listened to her story. Grief was surprised. She had never met anyone else who had suffered as she had. Together the women sat in the clearing and mourned their children. “

It is not easy to let go, to embrace change, to say good-bye. But it is also true that if our energy becomes stuck in the grief, we will never be able to say hello to life and love again. In order to say hello you have to say good bye.

Again from the reading on Grief.

“Through the long afternoon . through the twilight, through the night, they wept and wept, and wept and wept. In the morning Grief was washed cleaned of her tears. She came to our town and started to do her real work”.

Let us be about the work of living our losses so we can engage with those we love and with the larger world , with compassion and enthusiasm so we can begin our real work.

Let us pray,

Spirit of life,

We ask for help in healing our losses.

We has for guidance on our journeys through grief.

We seek a special remembrance for those who have gone before us.

We seek a special remembrance for all those who die in war, especially the young and the innocent.

We ask for strength to hold fast to our faith

Spirit of Life,

we are grateful for all that is our life.

We are grateful for each day, made glad by loving friends, by beauty and compassion.

May we rejoice in the love and life we have been given.

Amen