



From Grief to Gratitude

by JUDY BERANGER

“What we have once enjoyed deeply we can never lose. All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.” ~ Helen Keller

Just recently I lost a dear brother – the reality is slowly sinking in as I take a little time each day to be conscious of his presence in my heart. We all face loss. Hardly a week goes by for me without receiving a call from one of our members who is also facing a loss of some kind. Some are resilient, choosing to make connections, seeking supports and sharing stories of the unique loss that has caused them varying degrees of sadness and anguish. Others are unable to do that for a while, if ever. Intentional grieving involves hard work and can take a life time to integrate. We are unique in how we have learned to grieve and how we accept the notion of death as part of nature’s cycle.

I have had the privilege of witnessing many resilient teachers and entire school staffs consciously weaving grief into their daily lives with intention and hard work. When faced with a devastating loss, such as death, just standing upright and keeping functioning may be the most a person can do. In the words of a teacher grieving two major losses: *“While managing my cancer diagnosis, chemotherapy treatment and blood transfusions, I stayed determined. The next year my brother was diagnosed with cancer and died within three months. It felt like somebody hit me with a huge mallet. Though I managed to get to school each day, it took me a year to feel any shift from this pain. I had to leave my classroom at times to cry my eyes out.”*

In February, a teacher from Gander, after having an MRI, discovered she had an aggressive tumor and died a month later! Despite this, with great strength and courage she was able to sing at her Dad’s funeral two weeks before she passed, knowing this was also her own good-bye. A week later, another school lost a well known and respected student assistant. Though still in shock, the staff and school communities came together, supporting each other and students alike, with active presence and compassion.

Loss can strike at a moment’s notice, taking many

forms and shapes, reducing energy and creating imbalance. If we ignore its impact it will affect our overall health and wellbeing. Losses can include the passing of a family member or friend, loss of optimal health, losing a family pet, separation and divorce, estranged family relationships, and loss of childhood, to name but a few. Any of these losses can be expected to result in significant change and upheaval.

Society can sometimes judge loss. Loss due to death elicits extra caring and support for people which may not be as present when the loss results from separation and divorce. Unfortunately, people attach judgements. Loss brings out a coldness in some that can be warmed by healing and care. H.W. Longfellow said it wisely: *“...every heart has its secret sorrows, which the world knows not, and oftentimes we call a man cold, when he is only sad.”*

None of us will escape grief – it is a part of life. Initially, grieving can keep pounding on us, consuming what seems to be every ounce of our energy. Some days, it can feel like a chore just to lift our heads and every step seems like an effort. V. Harrison maintains: *“Grief is like the ocean; it comes on waves ebbing and flowing. Sometimes the water is calm, and sometimes it is overwhelming. All we can do is learn to swim.”*

Some people say they grieve in a linear process with defined stages. Others say their grief is more like a roller coaster. One teacher said: *“If I could plot my grief as a graph, you’d see a sharp set of zigzags.”* Feelings such as denial, anger, frustration, resentment, despair, hopelessness, sadness and fear can happen. The challenge is not to get stuck in any one of them. Eventually acceptance comes, though it only takes a trigger to initiate spiralling again. Keeping a stiff upper lip doesn’t work with grief. Allow feelings to ebb and flow, like those tides in the ocean.

Ideas for self-care

The literature abounds with ideas for self-care in grieving:

- Set realistic and minimal expectations. Forgetting is common during stress. Do what is necessary and give time for healing.
- Choose healthy food. We especially need the antioxidant foods that are deep blue, purple, red, green and orange and contain the nutrients to boost our immunity. Drink plenty of water.
- Deep breathing for the oxygen necessary to function normally. A technique to stay grounded: breathe in through the nose for the count of 5, hold for the count of 5, and exhale through the mouth for the count of 5.
- Movement and exercise are important. Time in nature, even five minutes, if energy is low, can be nourishing as nature knows the seasons of life.
- Allow tears. There is sacredness and power in tears. A teacher shares: “I finally decided that I would rather feel something than nothing at all.”
- Finding comfort with someone special can be helpful, even if it seems like they can only help us crawl across the floor.
- Journaling to express feelings. Trust what comes. Write how you can make the bad thoughts that creep in, creep back out.
- Write a letter to your loved one for further connection and reflection.
- Take relief breaks. Consider photography, music, nature hikes, the pursuit of knowledge, spiritual practices, art, pictures – anything that gives you energy and makes you smile.
- Grief groups, on-line therapy and/or counselling can be helpful, and a powerful means of support.
- Attend to the emptiness. The more intense the loss, the greater the emptiness inside. Nourish this place with what gives you renewed energy: good friendships, gardening, volunteering, recreational activities, travel, redefining and healing the broken parts of your heart.

The choice of “not grieving” is to “not choose” to move toward optimal health. The literature suggests that angry, sad and judgemental people are often carrying unresolved grief.

Gratitude

Acting grateful can heal at a very deep level as we accept our losses and the brevity of life. For me, being grateful for lessons learned by observing my brother, Glenn, and what he managed to accomplish in his last days on earth while so conscious of others’ needs, will forever stay with me and teach me about energy that can be harvested. Recalling his compas-

sion helps keep him alive in my heart. I am continually amazed by all the active love he displayed when he could have been focused on his own suffering, loss and impending death.

Practicing gratitude, even for simple pleasures, helps us to shine light on the blessings in our lives despite our grief. It can sometimes transcend the anguish, allowing in goodness. A gratitude journal, including things we appreciated, can be helpful, informative and energizing. Some things are going right! It is tough, but important to choose to reengage with life. Author Mary Oliver remarks: “Someone I loved once gave me a box full of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift.”

Grief changes us and can cause fear, negative thinking and feelings of isolation and loneliness. We can’t get around that; we can only work through it toward healing. Focusing on our own path frees us from the need to change others. Gratitude helps us banish disease-producing thoughts.

Anita Moorjani in her book *Dying to Be Me*, asks us to imagine a dark warehouse where we live with only one flashlight by which to see. All we know within that space is what we can see by that beam of light. We may look for something and not find it even though it is there. We only observe where we focus our senses. A switch is turned on and we see the room in its entirety, and nothing is like we imagined. The willingness to face and attend to the hard work of grieving is like turning on the switch. The work of grieving provides greater visibility, which in turn leads to deeper awareness. Though painful, we see and become more. Transformation can be healing and fulfilling but does not come without some level of struggle and anguish. Now with “the room” fully illuminated we gain a new understanding and clarity. Author John Steinbeck reminds us, “It’s so much darker when a light goes out than it would have been if it had never shone.” Intentional grieving allows us to truly understand this concept.

In losing someone dear, the relationship is changed but despite the aching, death cannot take away the love that weaves its way through every painful fiber of our being. Eventually we can learn to ride the waves with gentle acceptance and gratitude.

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