

A Dozen Good Things about Grieving

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Grieving is a hopeful process. Many feel hopeless, even desperate, in the midst of the crises of ego, soul, spirit, family, and community and the intensity of suffering that can follow loss. When we hope, we envision, open to, and reach for possibilities of living well, meaningfully, and purposefully. Hope is a movement of will that has been called “active receptivity.” It contrasts with wishing that is more passive, a waiting for good to come, often when it is either very unlikely or even impossible. And it contrasts with expectation that is more cognitive, rooted in calculations of what is probable and often a matter of taking for granted what has not yet been granted.

The understandings outlined here are all about hopeful aspects of grieving, as they enable grievers to envision, open to, and reach for meaning and value through grieving response.

Helen Keller once said, “Although our world is full of sorrow, it is full also of the overcoming of it.” Grieving in its fullness is exactly the process of overcoming or transcending the suffering that comes over us in bereavement.

Grieving is not just about unwelcome and difficult things that happen in our lives. Clearly, things do happen to us as we grieve. Much of our experience is choiceless, not in our control: a) *bereavement* - the death of a loved one experienced as a loss and b) *grief reaction* - the brokenness and sorrow that come over us in all dimensions of our being - psychological, emotional, physical, behavioural, social, intellectual, soulful, and spiritual.

It is not surprising that many believe that in grief we are entirely, or at least predominantly, passive or helpless victims of happenings beyond our control, since such views are entirely too common in contemporary culture. This belief takes root in the limits of thinking of grieving as a) invariably and inevitably unfolding in Kubler-Ross’s familiar five *stages* (or in other *stage/phase* understanding) or as b) *symptoms* that signal we have come down with something like an illness that must be treated by others who know more than we do about our needs and how to meet them.

Grieving is also about what we choose to do with what happens to us (grieving response). As we grieve, we actively reengage in living, again in all dimensions of our being. Grieving is more than what happens to us when a loved one dies; it is about what we do with what happens to us. Grieving is effortful and pervaded with choice. It requires not only time but effort. I understand the effort required as a process of relearning the world – that is, as one of relearning how to live (how to be and act) in a world transformed by loss.

There is no one right way to respond to bereavement, brokenness, and sorrow any more than there is one right way to live. Each of us grieves in our own way and in our own time, just as we learn how to live in our own way and in our own time.

Victor Frankl, writing of living with suffering, once said, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing; the last of human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given circumstance, to choose one’s own way.”

Grieving response asks us to do what we are made to do and have been doing since birth – learning how to live. Of course, learning how to live is a life-long effort that none of us ever finishes, as life circumstances constantly present new opportunities and challenges. So, too, is relearning how to live in the world in grief. Because this is so, and despite what public media and some misguided counsellors say, *closure* is an unrealistic and inappropriate goal in grieving. We will never stop either missing or loving those who have died.

Learning how to live is by no means an easy thing, and what we think we have learned is always subject to revision. Bereavement and grief reaction can present especially daunting challenges that should never be discounted. Still, there is reassurance in recognizing that the relearning how to live that bereavement requires is not a radically unfamiliar kind of thing. We have been learning how to live day after day and year after year through good times and difficult, through crises and beyond.

Bereavement does not entail that we have to start all over again in learning how to live. Much of what we know about how to live remains viable. Although there is much new to be learned, we've all had experiences of changing and reaching into the new that contain lessons for meeting current challenges in grieving.

(I would find the currently fashionable distinction between “intuitive” and “instrumental” styles in grieving useful only if I thought that there were only two styles or ways of living a life. I firmly believe that each of us has our own way of living a human life with meaning and purpose; the variation in styles of living and grieving, is infinite, by no means limited to two styles.)

We humans are amazingly resilient. Yes, there is a great deal of *brokenness* in our experiences when we grieve. We are often all too painfully aware of such things as the shattering of our illusions of invulnerability and control; undoing of our daily life patterns; disruption in the unfolding of our life stories; and troubles or distress in our ties with others, community, or the divine. In the midst of crisis – suspended between life as it was before the death and a life yet to be after the death – it can be tempting to conclude that everything is broken, and hopelessly so.

It can be very difficult to recognize and draw upon *what is not broken* – our own resilience and resources in the great web of life that holds us all. We have our health and physical stamina, such as they are. We are able still to solve everyday problems, make decisions, and protect ourselves from threats. We know a great deal about how to make ourselves at home, care, and love. We still can draw upon capacities for courage, faith, hope, perseverance, and searching for understanding. We continue to love fellow survivors and the deceased. We are able to reach out to countless lifelines of support in our surrounding worlds.

Through grieving we emerge from only apparent chaos. We can think of grieving as a process of reintroducing order into the brokenness of our lives. Our resilience enables us to do so. Relearning the world involves a) learning how to carry pain of missing our loved one; b) relearning how to live in our physical and social surroundings, within ourselves, and in the greater scheme of things; and c) learning how to love in separation. As we grieve, we reengage with a world filled with reminders of separation from our loved ones, reshape our daily life

patterns, enter new chapters in our life stories, and open our hearts to caring and loving again, including the possibilities of loving in separation.

We can learn from our emotions about things we need in order to heal (become whole again). Our emotions are not merely painful or difficult to bear sensations/experiences. Like physical pains or distress, they cry more for *attention* than for *expression*. We commonly try to suppress, cover, or flee from them, but these strategies do not serve us well. Emotions function in many ways that are parallel to immune systems or early-warning systems. When physical or emotional pains are serious, they persist or intensify until we give them the attention they cry for and deserve. Bottom line, we are not victims of our emotions; they can help us if we attend to them.

Emotions are our friends. We can learn from them about our deepest selves and deepest needs through sorrow-friendly practices such as reaching out to others to attend to sorrow with us, keeping a grief journal, meditation, dream-keeping, using the arts, leaning into faith, and opening the heart in prayer.

We can reach past the pain of separation to reconnect with some of the best in life. Many wonder how long the worst of grief is going to last, whether it will be unrelenting and eventually overwhelm us. But the intensity of emotion tends to ease up when we pay attention to the emotion, learn from it, and begin to use what we learn in relearning how to live in the world after loss.

First encounters with painful reminders of loss are usually the most difficult; we can become accustomed to such reminders as we revisit them. Most importantly, the things, places, experiences, events, other people and the like that remind us of separation do so because they also remind us of something of persons who died or life with them that we still value. When we reach past the pain of being reminded of separation, we can remember what we still hold in memory and legacy that no one can take from us.

At its heart, grieving is a labour of love. Learning to love in separation is both possible and desirable. We can see that it is possible when we realize that we are apart from our loved ones most of the time when they are alive. We are by no means always at home together, in the same room, with eyes and ears only for one another. We don't stop loving one another when we part. We know a great deal about how to love in separation, how to hold one another in our hearts when we are apart – thinking of, speaking about, remembering, sharing interests, being grateful to one another, drawing inspiration from one another, etc.

Bereavement entails only that we can no longer love one another in ways that require physical presence with one another – a very great loss. But, in bereavement we can continue to love in all of the other ways we already know well that do not require physical presence. When we learn to love in separation, we fulfill our deep desire to continue loving and to feel our loved ones' love for us. And we fulfill their deep desires to be remembered and cherished for what they have given and continue to give even after they've died.

Remembering is the key to loving in separation. There are countless ways in which we can share, collect, recover, record, add to, value, and explore the meanings in memories and cherished stories of the lives of our loved ones.

Memories bring the past into present awareness – enabling us to reach across time and retrieve some of the very best of life. In this it is as amazing as perception that enables us to reach across space and bring what is “over there” into awareness “over here.” Remembering is a vital and dynamic process of reengaging with the very real past that we cherish and has made us who we are in so many ways (in no way to be confused with bringing to mind an “inner representation,” as some would have it). We carry within ourselves and in our families and communities stories of our loved ones that no one, nor anything including grief itself, can take away from us.

Grieving enables us to recognize and embrace enduring legacies of lives now ended. A legacy is, by definition, a gift from a person who has died. Our loved ones leave us many, including memories of irreplaceable characters and lives together. Physical legacies include money, property, and other inheritances. Some leave us siblings, cousins, children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. Biologically, some leave us our genetic make-up and physical traits. Practical legacies include ways of doing things, skills and abilities, interests, avocations, and even vocations. Soulful legacies include roots and grounding in family, friendship, and community and ways of caring and loving others, the environment, or the divine. Spiritual legacies include aspirations, courage, faith, hopes, and ways of searching for understanding of meanings and our place in the great scheme of things.

Memory enables us to recognize these legacies. As we embrace them, we appreciate how they contribute to making us who we are as individuals, families, and communities, how they live on in and through us.

Grieving is a healing process. Healing, or coming into wholeness, is not merely a matter of recovering physical health. We can heal in all dimensions of our being as we address our brokenness and find and make ways of returning to wholeness in our daily life patterns, new trajectories in our life stories, improved interactions with those who survive with us, reshaped family and community lives, ways of being at home again in our lives or in the greater scheme of things, renewed and deepened connections through memory with our roots and the best in the past that has made us who we are today, and in sustaining and life-affirming loving ties in separation with those who have died.

Resources:

Attig, T. (2012). *Catching Your Breath in Grief...and grace will lead you home*. Victoria, BC: Breath of Life Publishing.

Attig, T. (2011). *How We Grieve: Relearning the World* (Revised Edition). New York: Oxford University Press.

Attig, T. (2000). *The Heart of Grief: Death and the Search for Lasting Love*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Web site: www.griefsheart.com