

Life with Loss
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You cannot get to be very old at all before you will experience a significant loss. It may be a loved one that leaves you or dies, a dear animal companion, a job or a place that you must leave. Each time there is a grieving process that we go through. The greater the love for what was lost, the greater the time and intensity of grieving. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, that pioneer of grief research writes, "The reality is that you will grieve forever. You will not 'get over' the loss of a loved one; you will learn to live with it. You will heal and you will rebuild yourself around the loss you have suffered. You will be whole again but you will never be the same. Nor should you be the same nor would you want to."

When someone close to us dies, some part of us dies also. The experience of that person, of that beloved place or thing recedes into memory. It is up to us to use those memories and allow them to continue to enrich our lives. As Kim Crawford Harvie suggests, "The very best thing we can do, both in grieving and supporting others in their grief, is to articulate the ways in which the one who has been lost to us will be carried forward in our lives. ...Who lives on in you? In small part, when I am patient, funny, or generous, when I tell stories or talk about the weather; when I am kind especially to children and elders, when I love without condition, my grandfather lives on in me, and among us, and my grief gives way to joy."

I read a story about a man whose father was quite charismatic and no matter what was going on at the time if there was a beautiful sunset, he would drag the entire family outdoors to watch it together. After he died, he was deeply missed. One day, looking out the window at the sunset the son gave a shout to everyone to go out to see the sunset. As

they watched the sun go down together they felt his father's presence and were able to share that memory together. Family rituals like these or simply enjoying something on your own or with others that your loved one liked to do can be a way of consciously remembering them, more so than just calling them to mind.

Bringing flowers to the service in memory of a loved one is another ritual that can bring the person or persons into the room with you.

These kind of remembrances bring up the pain of grief but also are healing and allow us to keep the person a part of our lives. Many of us keep mementos of a loved one. I have this cat that sits in my home office on a shelf. It's got a rather sorrowful expression I think. My mother found it at a garage sale and really wanted it. It was very unusual to ever hear my mother express a desire. She loved cats and after years of always having a cat in the house, because of my father's allergies at the time she couldn't have any more real ones. This stuffed cat used to sit on a sofa in the living room of my parents' house. Once when I was visiting her, I picked it up and she told me how she came to have it. I don't remember how but the subject of naming the cat came up. Without any real thought I said, "Grace". My brother, being a contrarian by nature, said that that wasn't a good name for a cat, even a stuffed one. And he started to suggest something else when my mother said to me, "you've named it, her name is Grace." So, when I look at this sorrowful cat, I see my mother and recall the grace that she so wanted and needed. It's a sad but also joyful memory of her letting herself have something she loved and a rare intuitive communication between us.

Gabriel Horn is a contemporary Native American writer who shares this perspective on dying:

“When we are born, it’s like taking a cup of spirit out of the gene pool of life that the Mystery provides. We must pour that cup back when we die, like a drop of rain that falls back into the ocean where it originated, except that the drop of spirit we take into this world should increase in size. It can do this if we become closer to the spiritual things of life rather than the material. That way we put back more than we came in with. This assures each generation of enough spirit-power to be born spiritually strong, with innate understandings and knowledge.

The key idea...is to fill our cups with goodness. That way, when we die, all that goodness pours back into the Mystery and into those we love. A slow death by cancer is not a choice of death anyone would make, but it...[allows] the spirit of [ones] life to fill up with even more goodness.

Joan Chittister is a well-known religious in the Catholic church. She wrote, “One of the most poignant of our community customs is the Celebration of Memories ceremony. The night before a sister is buried the community gathers at her coffin to remember together the moments of her life that taught us all something about life. The simple ritual turns death into life at the very moment we feel its loss most. It is a model, this finding life in loss, for dealing with death of all kinds.”

Let’s just take a moment and reflect on how those we’ve lost have poured their goodness into us and the larger world. Can you think and feel the ways that this happens? Do one or two of you have a really stunning example of this that you wouldn’t mind sharing briefly?

It could never be a betrayal to take that goodness and make more goodness as Horn suggests.

Accompanying a loved one as they are dying is a very lonely experience, as I suppose is dying. In a way part of us dies with the loved one. And so death really is a shared experience after all. One man dying of lung

cancer had an insight about prayer. He confided to his family and doctor that although he wasn't religious, he had been praying a lot. The doctor asked what he was praying for and he replied that he wasn't praying *for* anything. He said that praying made him feel less alone.

I can't imagine anything more frightening than to die alone. Strangely, it seems that few of the dying people I have visited are afraid to die. Those that are conscious tend to be peaceful, even happy.

I'll never forget a man that I went to see in the hospital years ago. He was a retired doctor and quite a character. He was a major flirt. That Saturday night he was waiting for test results having had some chest pains, he was well into his 90's. He was sitting up in bed and in a loud voice full of bravado, he said to me, "Tell them all that I'm doing fine!" He died that night in his sleep. His 45 year old mentally ill son wrote his eulogy and asked me to read it for him at his memorial service. This son used to freak out visitors to the church by ranting in a paranoid way. I went with him to the funeral home thinking that he might need some help. But he did a beautiful job, acting maturely and in a straightforward manner, as much as any of us do when we are grieving. At the service I read the eulogy he wrote. It was a very well-written, affirmative and clear description of his father. It quite surprised me. The shock of the loss of this man that he was so close to seemed to bring the son into reality in a way that he seemed rarely to be normally. I hope that his father's memory or rather the memory of their relationship might still provide an anchor for this man at times.

It's so important to realize that can be plenty of life after loss. Were it not so, we would only live a very short life. In the words of Augustin Burroughs, "No matter how huge your loss, as long as you remain engaged with your life, the best days of your life may be still ahead of you.

...Deep sorrow and deep joy can exist within you, side by side. At every moment. And it's not confusing. And it's not a conflict.

This is among the oldest, deepest, most primal truths: the facts of life may be, at times, unbearably painful. But the core, the bones of life are generous beyond all reason or belief. Those things that ought to kill us do not. ...The truth about healing is that you don't need to heal to be whole. By whole, I mean damaged, missing pieces of who you were, your heart—like some of your most important parts. Yet not missing any part of you at all. Being, in truth larger than you were before. Because all of us are made not only of what we have but of what we lost.”

We're going to close with a song that you will all recognize. It was mentioned in a story which I'll relate to you now. A coroner is describing one of his interns who did autopsies. He said that this intern would read to the corpses. What did he read from? He read from the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. Sometimes he would come in early so he could read a whole chapter to them. He also sang to them. Fortunately he had a great voice. He would sing “You Are My Sunshine” or “Hark the Herald.” Apparently they sang “Hark the Herald” a lot. We've sung Hark the Herald enough at Christmas, so let's sing *You Are My Sunshine* to our lost loved ones.