

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

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By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

Grief's Strange Encounters: Part II

Addressing These Experiences

The great C.S. Lewis in his classic book, *A Grief Observed*, described what occurred after his wife, Helen Joy, had died. Helen Joy was now helping him "from the other side." His words: "She can help you more where she is now than she could have done on Earth."

Part I described some of our clients' after-death communications. Sensing the presence of their beloved, hearing their voices, feeling their touch, smelling their fragrances and visiting them in dreams are ways which C.S. Lewis described as "helping from the other side." For some, visits and signs afford survivors degrees of comfort, tranquility and relief.

Mourners often feel vulnerable when they share their innermost thoughts and experiences with their therapists – and even more so when they disclose these "bizarre" grief events that may not make sense to their friends and family and even to themselves (and to therapists, too!).

We may assist them through the use of the acronym, H-E-A-R.

H: Hear what clients are experiencing.

We can't do a good job of listening while we are talking. A good listener has been described as a "personal intensive care unit." David Augsburger in his book, *Caring Enough to Hear*, states, "In caring-hearing, the hurt is opened, the festering bitterness of resentful illusions are allowed to drain. The light is allowed to pour in."

The counsellee is not the superior; the counselor, the lowly subordinate. Don't you hate it when your physician greets you by saying, "How can I help you?" Instead, I say to my clients, "How can you help me?" At first they look bewildered until I add, "I learn more about life from my clients than from my textbooks." There is then a look of understanding. Our ensuing therapeutic sessions become more relaxed and engaging.



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E: Enter into their world.

Each person is unique with his or her own singular life's experiences. Our clients' experiences are not ours. We cannot walk in their moccasins. They cannot walk in ours. It is not unusual that we sometimes secretly hoped that our counselees would have selected different solutions from the ones we thought best. They didn't . . . and it turned out to be the best for them.

We must communicate our empathy and respect the dignity of their unusual experiences. We leave our own feelings outside the door. As psychologist Carl Rogers says, "One anxious person in the room is enough."

When they may ask, "Am I crazy?" assuage their fears. Tell them of the scientific laboratories and other experimental research in parapsychology at Duke University. Then their anxiety may diminish and they will be more likely to express their feelings. Knowing that it happens to others as well is a great source of consolation.

A: Attend to non-verbal feelings.

Our body language and facial gestures convey our acceptance – our relaxed posture, eye contact, nod of the head and affirming facial gestures. If they are taking the risk of sharing post-death contacts, they need our acceptance.

An expression of personal interest may be a most eloquent form of communication. Consider: "What an awesome experience."

There is nothing like an appropriate touch. Recall the telephone slogan, "Reach out and touch someone." Since antiquity, the "laying of hands" is one of the most transformative healing spiritual powers. Reduce their anguish and rejection by gently touching their shoulders or by a warm handshake. There are staff experts in hospitals and hospices whose role it is to reach out with gentleness and calmness for the well-being of their patients. It is called Therapeutic Touch (IT). Norman Cousins in his *Anatomy of an Illness* confirms how human contact helped to liberate his heart-searing emotions.

R: Respond.

We learned in graduate school never to draw conclusions until we have heard the complete story. Psychiatrist Haim Ginott in his book, *Teachers and Child*, affirms this principle: "I postpone giving instant advice. I try to find out what they think about the situation and what alternatives they have considered. I encourage them to talk about their fears and hopes and to risk stating opinions and making decisions." Shakespeare was more concise, "Give every man thine ears, but few thy voice."

- Give full attention to their demeanor, both verbally and non-verbally.
- Beware of distractions that often cause the discussion to go astray. Do not answer the phone during the session.
- Don't anticipate or constantly interrupt.
- Apply positive, direct, open-ended questions that may not require just the one syllable response, yes or no (e.g. "Since we last met, tell me what's happening.>").
- Seek additional information (e.g. "What other thoughts do you have?").
- Clarification (e.g. "Could you please repeat that again?").
- Rephrasing (e.g. "As I understand, you said that . . .").
- Concentrate on the important elements. Perhaps conclude the session, "When we meet next time, you may wish to consider . . ."
- Allow interludes of silence. A place of calm is at the eye of the hurricane. Some believe that prayer is efficacious because it provides much-needed quietude. The small, still voice is the voice of prayer – the language of introspection.

A personal reflection: I recall reading Raymond Moody's book in 1975, *Life After Death*. My first response was to summarily dismiss the contents. In the intervening period, I met Dr. Moody and have had clients with near-death experiences. Most of them describe detachments from the body and feelings of liberation in the presence of a light. There was a serenity and lack of fear of death. I no longer reject the 10 million near-death experiences or those with post-death contacts.

Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom*, states that she has learned as a physician: "That things happen which defy science. We need to wonder more because life is best defined by that which is unknowable."

Many of us professionals have to cope with unseen mysteries where reason may not always suffice. Grief doesn't always respond to logic.

About the Author

Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is internationally acclaimed as a writer and lecturer. A recipient of the Death Education Award by the Association for Death Education and Counseling, his books on coping with bereavement have sold close to a million copies.

For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.

Touchstone One

Open to the Presence of Your Loss

“In every heart there is an inner room, where we can hold our greatest treasures and our deepest pain.”

~ Marianne Williamson



by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

When someone you love dies, you come to know your deepest pain. From my own experiences with loss as well as those of thousands of grieving people I have accompanied over the years, I have learned that we cannot go around the pain that is the wilderness of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes shuffling along the less strenuous side paths, sometimes plowing directly into the black centre.

In opening to the presence of the pain of your loss, in acknowledging the inevitability of the pain, in being willing to gently embrace the pain, you in effect honour the pain. “What?” you naturally protest, “honour the pain?” Crazy as it may sound, your pain is the key that opens your heart and ushers you on your way to healing.

In many ways, and as strange as it may seem, what you need to do when you are grieving is to honour your pain. Honouring means recognizing the value of and respecting. It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honour; yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honour your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is self-sustaining and life-giving!

You have probably been taught that pain is an indication that something is wrong and that you should find ways to alleviate the pain. In our culture, pain and feelings of loss are experiences most people try to avoid. Why? Because the role of pain and suffering is misunderstood. Normal thoughts and feelings after a loss are often seen as unnecessary and inappropriate.

You will learn over time that the pain of your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you have the courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative – denying or suppressing your pain – is in fact more painful. I have learned that the pain that surrounds the closed heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you, the pain of feeling alone and isolated – unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you.

Instead of becoming dead while you are alive, you can choose to allow yourself to remain open to the pain, which, in large part, honours the love you feel for the person who has died. As an ancient Hebrew sage observed, “If you want life, you must expect suffering.” Paradoxically, it is gathering the courage to move toward the pain that ultimately leads to the healing of your wounded heart. Your integrity is engaged by your feelings and the commitment you make to honour the truth in them.

Setting Your Intention to Heal

You are on a journey that is naturally frightening, painful and often lonely. No words, written or spoken, can take away the pain you feel now. I hope, however, that this article will bring some comfort and encouragement as you make a commitment to embracing that very pain.

It takes a true commitment to heal in your grief. Yes, you are changed, but with commitment and intention you can and will become whole again. Commitment goes hand in hand with the

concept of “setting your intention.” Intention is defined as being conscious of what you want to experience. A close cousin to “affirmation,” it is using the power of positive thought to produce a desired result.

We often use the power of intention in our everyday lives. If you have an important presentation at work, you might focus your thoughts in the days before the presentation on speaking clearly and confidently. You might envision yourself being well-received by your colleagues. You have set your intention to succeed in this presentation. By contrast, if you focus on the many ways your presentation can fail, and you succumb to your anxiety, you are much less likely to give a good presentation.

How can you use this in your journey through grief? By setting your intention to heal.

When you set your intention to heal, you make a true commitment to positively influence the course of your journey. You choose between being what I call a “passive witness” or an “active participant” in your grief. I’m sure you have heard this tired cliché: Time heals all wounds. Yet, time alone has nothing to do with healing. To heal, you must be willing to learn about the mystery of the grief journey. It can’t be fixed or “resolved”; it can only be soothed and “reconciled” through actively experiencing the multitude of thoughts and feelings involved.

The concept of intention-setting presupposes that your outer reality is a direct reflection of your inner thoughts and beliefs. If you can change or mould some of your thoughts and beliefs, then you can influence your reality. And in journaling and speaking (and praying!) your intentions, you help “set” them.

You might tell yourself, “I can and will reach out for support in my grief. I will become filled with hope that I can and will survive this loss.” Together with these words, you might form mental pictures of hugging and talking to your friends and seeing your happier self in the future.

Setting your intent to heal is not only a way of surviving your loss (although it is indeed that!), it is a way of guiding your grief to the best possible outcome. Of course, you will still have to honour and embrace your pain during this time. By honouring the presence of your pain, by understanding the appropriateness of your pain, you are committing to facing the pain. You are committing yourself to paying attention to your anguish in ways that allow you to begin to breathe life into your soul again. That, my friend, is a very good reason to give attention to your intention. The alternative would be to shut down in an effort to avoid and deny



your pain, which is to die while you are still alive.

You must learn to gently and lovingly confront your grief. To not be so afraid to express your grief. To not be ashamed of your tears and profound feelings of sadness. To not pull down the blinds that shut out light and love. Slowly, and in “doses,” you can and will return to life and begin to live again in ways that put the stars back into your sky.

Making Grief Your Friend

You cannot heal without mourning or expressing your grief outwardly. Denying your grief, running from it or minimizing it, only seems to make it more confusing and overwhelming. To lessen your hurt, you must embrace it. As strange as it may seem, you must make it your friend.

When I reflect on making grief my friend, I think about my father. Sometimes when I fully acknowledge that I’ll never see my father physically on this earth again, I am engulfed by an overwhelming sadness. Then I, with intention, try to give attention to what comes next. Yes, I feel his absence, but I also feel his presence. I realize that while my father has been dead for over three years, my love and admiration for him have continued to grow. With every day that passes, the love I have for my father grows larger, undeterred by the loss of his physical presence. My intention has been, and continues to be, to honour his presence, while acknowledging his absence. The beauty of this is that while I mourn, I can continue to love.

About the Author

This article is an excerpt from Dr. Wolfelt’s book *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*.

It is available for \$14 at www.centerforloss.com. Click on Bookstore.

Dr. Wolfelt is an internationally-noted author, teacher and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is an educational consultant to funeral homes, hospices, hospitals, schools and a variety of community agencies across North America.



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Parthemore Funeral Home is providing this complimentary newsletter to you with the hope that the information it contains will be useful to you in working with families who are dealing with the death of a loved one. We believe that your professionalism, dedication and understanding are an important part of helping families that have experienced a loss.

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