

# 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

## “Good Grief” The Two Sides of Guilt

It may surprise you to learn that the term “good grief” did not always connote a healthy and positive approach to healing the sorrow of loss. According to the American Heritage Dictionary of Idioms, there was initially a negative, even a snarky and sarcastic connotation. Their example, “Good grief, I lost my money.”

In 1950, Charles Schulz continued this ridiculing interpretation in his iconic comic strip, Peanuts. Recall how Charlie Brown with his pumpkin-sized head surrounded by a single curl always attempted to find favour with Lucy. When his attempts failed, the gloomy response: “Good Grief!”

Therapists today talk about “good grief” as their clients’ positive need to lighten their emotional burdens by not keeping them bottled up inside. “Keeping your chin up” often misleads mourners into a false sense of security. There is no getting around the anguish of grief. Otherwise, angers, frustrations and disappointments could fester like a sore. The only cure for grief is to grieve. That’s “good grief.”

We often explain that the bereaved may grieve deeply because they loved deeply. But beware of guilt! Often they hear: “Self-recrimination is not the way we go. What is past is past. There is too much pain to add the burden of self-reproach, self-accusation and self-depreciation.”

Do we then distinguish between these guilt reactions that are normal and sometimes unjustified and those that acknowledge an accountability of offensive behaviours?

### The Other Side of Guilt

One of my favourite authors, Dr. Joan Borysenko, explains how guilt may or not be healthy, positive and constructive. In her volume, *The Psychological and Spiritual Aspects of Guilt*, she notes that irrational and unjustified self-blame could inflict enduring pessimism, physical illness and chronic depression.

At the same time, she urges that we not glibly validate those who were guilty of dishonest actions. Guilt should be appropriately discussed and examined. Only then will the self-searching result in valuable, constructive and productive conclusions with “a psychological rebirth.”

While reading her provocative book, I began to question whether we therapists have too conveniently discarded our counselees’ inappropriate behaviours. When clients utter those familiar words, “I should have,” “If only,” “Why didn’t I?” (initial natural grief reactions), do we too quickly let them “off the hook” without the culpability of blameworthiness and possible harmful injustices? Forget the popular expressions “Move on” or “Life is for the living.”

Life is for the living. But what’s wrong with healthy guilt when there is still unfinished business to be resolved? That is why Dr. Karl Menninger applied his psychiatric genius by offering insights into questions of morality. In his stimulating volumes, *Whatever Became of Sin*, he chides society for summarily blaming offensive behaviours solely upon environmental factors and former traumas. These may be cogent force-



ful considerations, but Dr. Menninger argued that too often we deny legitimate guilt for those who are justifiably blameworthy.

Unhealthy guilt occurs when the mourners' remorse is hugely out of proportion to the perceived wrongdoing. The eminent Professor Granger W. Westburg of the University of Chicago Medical School cites the illustration of a daughter who refused to leave her aged mother's bedside in the hospital. The doctor firmly orders her to go home for needed rest. You've guessed the rest of the story. While the daughter is away, the mother dies. The daughter remains guilt-ridden and clinically depressed.

We like to believe that we have total control over the events that govern our lives and those of our loved ones. The reality is that there are parts of our existence over which we cannot take command.

In this above case of the guilt-ridden daughter, there is the logical explanation that no one is all-knowing and all-seeing. Who can foretell future events? She might be reminded of the positive loving life she had with her mother and the happy times they had together.

There are many examples of when mourners bring harm to survivors and others:

- cheating on their spouses
- being a bully and hurting another person's life
  - killing a pedestrian while driving drunk
  - gambling away a child's college funds

Surely, this is a legitimate guilt that demands further examination!

Counsellors might discern:

- Is it legitimate guilt? What do they think they are guilty of? How valid are their assumptions? What harm has been inflicted?
- Do they verbally assert their honest wrongdoings? Listen for words of regret: "I was at fault." "What I did was inappropriate, reckless, dishonest, wrong, sinful, immoral." In the words of Dr. Therese Rando, executive director of the Institute for the Study of Treatment and Loss: "Do they own it?"
- Is there a rejection of past behaviours? "I can't believe that I ..." "What I did was really out of bounds." "If only I could blot it out." Do the mourners feel appropriately responsible for their actions?
- Is there a determination to change? It's not enough to be stuck in yesterday's regrets. (More than half the population keeps their New Year's resolutions for less than a month.) Learning from yesterdays' mistakes, how will they now live a more honourable, trustworthy, upright existence?
- Are there rectifications for their guilt? A mother disowns her child for being gay. Years after his death from AIDS, and upon the urging of her clergy, she joins a PFLAG group, an organization that is committed to advancing equality for lesbian, gay,

bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people. Only as she begins to reach out to other parents of LGBT children does she begin to feel at peace. Slowly her guilt assuages. In this way, she makes living amends with her son.

## From the Rear Window, Forward

Guilt is the dividing line that separates animals from human beings. Over a hundred years ago, Mark Twain wrote, "Man is the only animal that blushes. Or needs to ...."

Legitimate guilt should not summarily be discarded or concealed as just another grief reaction. Authentic guilt teaches authentic responsibilities. James Joyce urges us to meet our wrongdoings as tools of self-correction. Of course, it is painful. But it's a pain with a purpose. It may be the right way – the only way – to feel OK again – to grow anew.

There is the expressions, "As long as the candle burns, mending may still be done" and "what is freedom but the possibility for change?"



### About the Author

Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours "his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person and grief counselling." His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit [www.beacon.org/grollman](http://www.beacon.org/grollman).

# Mustering the Courage to Mourn



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

**“Whatever you do, you need courage.” ~ Ralph Waldo Emerson**

Loss brings uninvited pain into our lives. 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 demonstrate the courage to honour the 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 courageous and life-giving.

The word express literally means “to press or squeeze out, to make known and reveal.” Self-expression can change you and the way you perceive and experience your world. Transforming your thoughts and feelings into words gives them meaning and shape. Your willingness to honestly affirm your need to mourn will help you survive this difficult time in your life. Your spiritual purpose is not to repress or overindulge your emotions but rather to allow them so fully that they move through you.

The pain of grief will keep trying to get your attention until you unleash your courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative – denying or suppressing your pain – is in fact more painful. If you do not honour your grief by acknowledging it, it will accumulate and fester. So, you must ask yourself, “How will I host this loss? What do I intend to do with this pain? Will I befriend it, or will I make it my enemy?”

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 dying 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. After all, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin.

As an ancient Hebrew sage observed, “If you want life, you must expect suffering.” Paradoxically, it is the very act of mustering the courage to move toward the pain that ultimately leads to healing.

## Take Grief's Hand

Someone you have given love to and received love from has died. You are grieving. You are “bereaved” which literally means you have been “torn apart” and have “special needs.” You are beginning, or are in the midst of, a journey that is painful, often lonely and naturally frightening.

Among your most special needs right now is to have the courage to grieve and mourn in a culture that doesn't always invite you to feel safe to do so. That said, I have written this article to help you draw forth your courage – the courage that already exists within you – to accept grief and mourning as they come.

There is a difference between grieving and mourning. Grief is the constellation of internal thoughts and feelings we have when someone we love dies. Mourning is when you take the grief you have on the inside and express it outside yourself. In other words, mourning is grief in action.

I encourage you to take grief's hand and let it lead you through the darkness and toward the light. You may not see the light at first, but forge ahead with courage, and with the faith that the light of hope and happiness does exist. Feel your pain, sorrow, sadness, disbelief, agony, heartbreak, fear, anxiety and loneliness as much as you can.

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This may seem odd, as these emotions could well be the ones you most want to avoid. You might fall into the common thinking of our society that denying these feelings will make them go away. You might have the urge to “keep your chin up” and stay busy and wait to “get over” your grief. Yet, ironically, the only way to help these hard feelings pass is to wade in the muck of them. To get in, and get dirty. Grief isn’t clean, tidy or convenient. Yet feeling it and expressing it is the only way to feel whole, once again. Unresolved grief can leave you feeling “stuck” or empty. Your ability to engage in life could be inhibited and you might feel like you’ve shut down.

Instead, choose grief. And as you walk with your grief, actively mourn. Cry when you need to, call a friend when you feel overwhelmed, join a grief support group, express yourself through writing, music, dance or sports. By taking action, you will eventually integrate the death of your loved one into your life. In exchange, you will find the hope, courage and desire to once again live a full and rewarding life.

While walking with grief, remember two important things:

- 1) Grief and mourning have no timeline. Your grief journey is unique and will take as little or as much time as needed, depending on the unique circumstances of your loss.
- 2) Taking breaks along the way is needed and necessary. I like to use the word “dosing” when referring to grieving and mourning. Grief is not something you can do all at once. Feeling so many feelings often leads to overwhelm. Instead, take in “doses” of grief and mourn in bits and pieces. Retreat and welcome respite as needed.

Grief may never leave your side, but it will allow you to let go and venture forth on your own more and more as days, weeks, months and years pass. Tap into your innate courage and accept the hand held out by grief.

What is courage? When you think of courage, images of bravery might come to mind – knights on horseback charging the line, firefighters risking their lives to rescue a family from a burning building or hikers summiting Mount Everest. This is bravery, not courage. Bravery is loud and boisterous. Courage is soft and quiet. Without the steady, quiet resolve and unfailing commitment of courage, bravery would never happen. Courage is what fuels bravery. It is the bridge between fear and action. It is a still, quiet voice encouraging you to go on.

Bravery is daring and doing, courage is friendly and welcoming. Find ways to make friends with courage. To “befriend” literally means making an effort to “become friends.” Imagine what it would be like to have courage as a friend who walks beside you at all times; a friend who never nags, never pushes, but simply places a gentle hand on your back and whispers words of encouragement, helping you take the next step, and the next. With courage by your side, you are able to go on, to walk through your days and do the next right thing.

Cultivate a relationship with courage every day. Each morning, welcome courage. Before you rise, say your favourite quote on courage out loud. Maybe it is the Serenity Prayer, borrowed from Alcoholics Anonymous, and one of my favorites: “God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.” Or maybe there’s another that you especially like. If you want, write down your favourite quotes on courage and put them on your fridge, dashboard, mirror or computer at work. This will help you keep courage close, all day long.

Look for simple ways to give voice to courage throughout the day. Maybe it is simply having the gumption to get out of bed. But maybe it’s the courage to share how you feel about your loss with a co-worker or friend, or to walk through the doors of a grief support group. It could simply be making a phone call you’ve been putting off, writing a thank you to someone who helped after the funeral, going to church alone or finding the backbone to be honest with yourself about something you fear. Healing after a death is hard. It takes courage in all shapes and sizes to mourn fully while living day to day. Congratulate yourself on welcoming courage, regardless of its size or reach.

### About the Author

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School’s department of family medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Understanding Your Grief*, *The Mourner’s Book of Hope*, and *The Mourner’s Book of Courage*, from which this article was excerpted. Visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com) to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.



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