

Grieving
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Grieving is a normal and healthy part of life. Of course, just because something is healthy for us and good for us doesn't mean that it comes to us easily or that we embrace it with enthusiasm. If so, I know I would be getting a lot more exercise than I do and I'd probably eat more green leafy vegetables. Grieving is a natural human response to loss. Yet, like other natural abilities, it is possible to get better at it through learning and experience.

Knowing how to grieve starts with knowing how to love. We often say about our loved ones—partners, children, and other family members—that we could not live without them. That's a nice sentiment to put on greeting cards. If you really believe that, however, be careful that it does not become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If we love someone because it keeps *us* alive, we are not experiencing the deepest form of love to which we should aspire, which is to love someone wholly for who they are, accepting them completely and unselfishly, oftentimes in spite of what they do—or don't do—for us.

If we can't be healthy, happy, and whole by ourselves—put another way, if we cannot affirm our own inherent worth and dignity—then we are surrendering our identity to the one whom we profess to love, and I respectfully suggest that that is not love at all but simple neediness. If the person or persons whom we have made guardians of our identity dies, then the most vital part of what makes us who we are will die when with them.

To rephrase something I said earlier, the highest form of love is not the one that proclaims, "I could not live without her" but the one that says, "I can live without her, and I still choose to love her."

What does this have to do with grieving? If loving others is like walking on a tight rope, then the ability to grieve is our safety net. Just as a safety net enables performers to go higher and to walk with greater confidence, knowing how to grieve, how to carry on after a loss, gives us the courage to embrace love with greater confidence.

Before I go on, I need to back up and go over a few definitions.

Grief certainly is related to sadness and depression. Depression is an illness, and it can be treated. Sadness is more generalized. It more aptly describes a person's orientation to life or outlook on life. Sadness and grief are distinguished more by degree than substance. For today's sermon, I will focus on the definition that holds that grief is an acute sense of pain related to a loss, an acute sense of pain related to a loss.

I want to spend a few minutes expanding the idea of loss. Any loss may be a source of grief. Having one's best friend or a close family member move away may be the source of grief. Other sources of grief include the loss of a job or career or a divorce. We are our own sources of grief when we lose some capacity that is important to us. It may be sudden and accidental, such as losing a limb or one of our senses, or it may be quite predictable, such as when the natural aging process forces us to give up driving and the independence that goes with that.

There's another source of grief that I think is overlooked, and that is things that we never had. Here's a personal example. You can see that I am someone who struggles with weight. As an adolescent, my weight kept me from participating in a lot of activities. I entered my 20s largely misinformed and rather immature about a lot of things in life many people learn in their teens. I never knew what to do with that information until

someone told me one time that I needed to grieve the loss of my childhood. I think there are a lot of people hearing this who know exactly what I'm talking about, even if they never were overweight. To paraphrase the Paul Simon tune, there must be 50 ways to lose your childhood. Let me identify just one other that may hit home for some people. For all of you whose parents—one or the other or both—were never physically or emotionally present for them or worse, were abusive to them, you, too, lost your childhoods and I respectfully suggest that it is important that you grieve that loss.

Most of us have had the experience or known someone who has had the experience of not being able to diagnose some medical condition. If so, you know the relief that comes from having a diagnosis, even when it is a serious condition. When my friend told me that I needed to grieve my childhood, I had an epiphany. I felt like I had a diagnosis. I was excited. That excitement lasted about 10 minutes, and then I thought, how do I grieve for my lost childhood? Is it any different or is it the same as greiving for someone who had died? It's a little of both.

The models that have been generated to help us understand the grieving process can be useful. Yet, models are meant to be adapted. Whether it is for the loss of a person or the loss of childhood, each of us experiencing grief does so differently, and we need to make our own models of recovery. The good news is that we need not start with a blank page. The models that are out there can be useful. My advice is to take what you want and to leave the rest.

The most famous model of grief is by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, who identified five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. Another model suggests that grief is experienced as a series of six dramas: shock, emotion, negotiation, cognition, commitment, and completion. These concepts are familiar to us, and I won't spend a lot of time on them in this sermon. As I said about getting a diagnosis above, sometimes simply being able to identify that someone we love is in a particular stage can be very helpful.

Let me add this caution about what you do when you identify that someone else is in one or another of these stages. It is a quite normal and natural urge to want to help someone move through these stages, to help them get past their anger or out of their depression. I urge you, let them be where they need to be. It is not our jobs as friends and loved ones to determine that someone is stuck in a stage and that we are responsible for getting them unstuck. One of the hardest parts of loving someone who is in pain is letting them have that pain, but that is what we must do. We can create a safe place for that pain; we can hold people, be a shoulder to cry on or a meaningless distraction. But we must allow our loved ones to own their grief.

If you believe that your loved one is one of the small percentage of people who need professional help processing their grief and going through these stages, my counsel is that you seek help first. Find a counselor or other professional—or even check out your feelings with a trusted friend and say, “My Dad lost our Mom or my brother and his wife lost their child and one or another can't seem to let go of the anger and I am anxious about what I should be doing to help them in their grief.” If you're in that situation, I encourage you to check your impulse and ask whether the intervention you are contemplating is really to relieve your loved one of her anxieties or to relieve you of yours.

Now, all of that applies to other people. What about you and your pain? These models are more like observations than prescriptions. They answer the question, what does grief look like? They do not answer the question, how do I make the pain go away?

First, I ask you to reframe that question. The pain never will go away. The better question is, how do I keep the pain from overwhelming my life?

According to one of my early mentors, grieving is telling your story as many times you need to tell it. My telling you a few minutes ago about my childhood and my sense of loss about that is part of my grieving process. There is a catch to this. Telling our story is not the same as repeating the same thing over and over again. We must re-write our story. For this next section, I am indebted to Arthur Frank, the author of *The Wounded Storyteller*. The context of Frank's work was the product of his own reflection and study after surviving first a heart attack and then, just a year later, cancer.

Each one of us has our own story. A human life is a narrative. It has characters, setting, plot, and drama. We are the central characters of our story, and everyone else is a supporting player. Of course, some people are so involved in our lives that they might be described as co-stars, while others are just walk-ons.

Earlier, I gave you a long list of possible sources of grief, things like death, divorce, or even having a good friend move away. Let me suggest a more generalized source: grief comes from anything that significantly changes our story.

If the central drama in your life today, for example, is your caregiving for a person who is seriously ill, then, when that person recovers or dies, you will need to find a new drama to give meaning to your life. The same is true for a parent sending a child off to college.

If relocation changes the setting for your story, and you are no longer surrounded by familiar friends and familiar places, your grief will not be complete until you are able to find a way to continue your story in that new setting.

If the central character of your story, which is you, is known for some ability such as being a great cook or a talented golfer, and that ability is lost, then grieving for that loss cannot be completed until you are able to find another way to identify that character. Notice that I didn't say, find some other ability (or person) to replace what was lost. I said, you must find a new way to identify your character, who you are.

We oftentimes say in casual conversation something we know we shouldn't, and that is that someone needs to "get over" some loss. We never get over significant losses. We are changed by our losses. Grieving for a lost love is not about re-writing our stories without that love in it. It's about finding a way to incorporate that loss into our stories.

Both of my parents are dead. Yet, they still are a part of my narrative. I still acknowledge the part of them that I know is in me. When I see something that I think my Mom or Dad would have enjoyed, I'm making that memory part of my story.

In short, grieving is not about learning how to leave something behind. It is about learning how to take something with us. It is not about explaining loss or understanding why something happened. Grieving is about finding meaning in the absence of an explanation. Let me repeat that. Grieving is about finding meaning in the absence of an explanation.

There is no simple 5-step process for finding meaning in loss. Many find it through such solitary activities as prayer, meditation and journaling. Yet, though each of us is the only person who can tell our own stories, we need not do this work alone. We

are here because, as Unitarian Universalists, we have made a covenant with one another to affirm each other's inherent worth and dignity and to nurture each other's spiritual growth. We are all characters in each others' stories, and this Fellowship and our commitment to Unitarian Universalism is part of the setting of each of our lives. When something happens to change the story of one of us, something changes in each of our respective stories. As John Donne wrote, "no man is an island unto himself."

To summarize, it is through our ability to grieve that we are able to experience the deepest form of love. The more we fear that someone's leaving us will take part of us with them, the more we will hold back. To recall the words from our opening hymn, "Open to a deeper loving, open to the gift of care, search for a higher justice, helping others in despair." Grieving is a natural process and, except for a small minority of individuals who may need extra help, we should allow that process to take its natural course. When someone else's grief becomes a source of our own anxiety, the solution is not to try to fix the other person's grief, but to attend to our own anxiety. Reframe the question, "How do I make the pain go away? And ask instead, "How do I keep the pain from overwhelming my life?" Grieving is not about explaining loss or understanding why something happened; it is about finding meaning in the absence of an explanation.

Most importantly, perhaps, is that, like our need for air and water, grieving is an attribute of the human community. Helen Keller wrote, "We bereaved are not alone. We belong to the largest company in all the world—the company of those who have known suffering."

This brings me to this Fellowship. We often say that what is important is that this place be a place where one can believe what one needs to believe. True enough. In light of today's sermon, though, perhaps we should insist that what is most important about this Fellowship is that it be a safe place to tell our stories, as often as they need to be told.

May it be so. Blessed be. Amen.