



Healing the ache of Alienation

By Thom Dennis, D. Min., LCPC, CT

Reece's friend Jeremy was murdered when he was out of state visiting a relative. The circumstances surrounding his death are still somewhat unclear; there are no suspects. She wasn't even informed about his death until a few days after the funeral.

You might imagine that Reece's grief fluctuated between shock, rage and profound sadness for quite some time. She tried to find out more information about his death but could find little more than the details printed in the newspaper. Jeremy's family didn't approve of their relationship and Reece's family didn't even know about Jeremy. It wasn't as if she was trying to hide him from them, it was just that she never really knew how to explain who he was to her. The truth of the matter was, Reece had a hard time defining the relationship, herself. Reece and Jeremy had known each other for more than ten years. At first they were just friends, but over time their relationship evolved into much more than that. Because work required that they lived in different cities, they never really got around to defining their relationship.

A few months after his death, the attorney handling Jeremy's estate contacted Reece and gave her an envelope containing a letter and a diamond ring. The attorney explained that Jeremy must have had some kind of premonition because before he left for his trip, he had written a Will and, in the event of his death, arranged for Reece to have the ring. The letter explained that he had purchased the diamond a few years back in the hopes of one day asking her to marry him, but life never seemed to provide the right opportunity to pop the question. Ironically, he had finally expressed his undying love for her and he begged her for forgiveness for not acting sooner.

Reece had been having a hard time dealing with her grief before she received the letter and was now completely devastated. Although she had secretly hoped he would propose, now that he had finally expressed the depth of his feelings for her it was too late. She felt like a widow, but no one would be granting her that title. She chastised herself over missed opportunities and words unsaid. She struggled with the murder, the unanswered questions, and the open-ended injustice of it all. She grieved for a future life together that would never come to pass, but the deepest wound of all was the fact that nobody could really acknowledge her loss.

Of course Reece and Jeremy are not their real names and a few details have been changed or omitted to protect their identities but their story is true. Having experienced your own loss, I am sure you can sense just how complicated her situation is and I trust that your heart reaches out to her with compassion. Reece could be the poster child of what grief counselors describe as ***disenfranchised grief***. The term was coined in 1989 by Dr. Ken Doka, Ph.D., and he defines it as “*grief that persons experience when they incur a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, socially sanctioned or publicly mourned.*”¹ He suggests disenfranchised mourners fall into one or more of the following scenarios:

1. When the relationship is not recognized
2. When the loss is not acknowledged
3. When the griever is excluded
4. When the circumstances of the death are troubling
5. When the way the individual expresses their grief is not valued

Dr. Doka says that in every society there are unspoken rules that specify who, when, why, how, how long and for whom a person should grieve. When these conditions are not met, the bereaved person is often left to mourn silently or alone.

Relationships that are not based on kinship ties are seldom acknowledged publicly at funerals or in obituaries. Consequently friends, neighbors, co-workers and roommates are often not even counted among the bereaved. Persons in second degree relationships such as siblings, grandparents, cousins, foster-parents, former spouses, in-laws or step-relationships also grieve but are often not extended the same consideration as first degree relationships. Even today, non-traditional families, such as cohabitating couples and life-partners, gay or straight, are often not afforded the same support as legally married surviving spouses.

¹ Kenneth J. Doka, editor. *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow* Lexington Books, 1989.

Age is, also, often a factor: children and the elderly may not be considered capable of truly grieving. The same could also be said of the dementia patient, the mentally ill or developmentally challenged. And yet, they grieve; perhaps on levels that we can hardly comprehend, but they do grieve! I have also observed that when the one who died has reached an advanced age, the bereaved are often afforded less sympathy and less time to grieve. In fact, there are all sorts of situations where the loss is not considered *significant*: the death of pets, the death of celebrities or admired public figures, the loss of a job, friends moving away or relational break-ups.

Feeling ostracized often accompanies traumatic death. Suicide, murder or deaths that occur in the context of a crime are particularly alienating for all families involved. Intrusive media coverage puts their personal losses on display as legal cases unfold. Perinatal loss and intentionally terminated pregnancies are often endured without a community rallying for support.

When a person’s grieving style is not socially sanctioned, their reaction to the loss is suspect. The community might question their reaction to the loss or judge the relationship negatively. When this happens the grieving have few public opportunities to express their authentic feelings and to experience the comfort and consolation that comes from neighbors, co-workers, friends and family.

The disenfranchisement usually begins long before the death and extends through all of the significant mourning rituals. This is unfortunate because these activities help facilitate healthy grieving. Like Reece who wasn’t even told of Jeremy’s death until after the burial, some people are excluded from caring for or visiting the dying, planning or participating in funeral rituals or shunned at these important events.

Confronted by a life crisis, we simultaneously reach in two directions to guard against becoming overwhelmed: 1) We turn inward and search for previously acquired internal coping skills that might offer direction as to how

to deal with the new crisis, and 2) We turn outward for external resources and support. Sometimes our existing coping skills are adequate to meet the presenting challenge. However, at least initially, we typically won't know how to cope, so we will rely on our support network to carry us. Most of us will eventually learn new coping skills and adjust to life without the deceased, but this takes time, intentionality and lots of external support. Again, the challenge for the disenfranchised is that this essential external support is offered minimally at best, or never offered at all.

In American society people tend to avoid potentially emotional provocative topics like death, politics and religion. So to a certain extent, all who grieve will experience some degree of disenfranchisement.

Around the circle of grief support groups and in counseling rooms across America, the bereaved commonly express their disappointment, frustration and anger with best friends and confidants who are unwilling (or unable) to support them in the ways that they need. Sometimes spouses can be insensitive or impatient with the long debilitating nature of grief. Siblings who differ in temperament and need become estranged. Managers and co-workers have short memories, and even professionals, like clergy persons, could fail to acknowledge the enduring impact of loss. Empathic failures such as these lead to the same kinds of struggles as those whose grief meets the more traditional definition of disenfranchised grief.

So what can be done? I would encourage Reece (and all the disenfranchised) to do two things: First, find at least one ally who can bear the burden of her loss with her. It will do her no good to try to carry the load all alone. William Shakespeare offered wise counsel to the disenfranchised when he said, "Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break." Second, I would encourage her to use her creativity to invent her own rituals of remembrance. In the absence of participating in culturally prescribed memorials she has the freedom to customize her mourning. By creating personal memorials that are meaningful to her, she might feel empowered to claim some of the consolation she was previously denied.

Additionally, I think we all need to recognize the universalizing nature of loss. Although we can never know exactly how someone else feels, we know how our own losses feel. Grief is difficult in any circumstance. Imagine how much harder it would be without the support you currently experience. If any good can be said of grief, it is this: it has the capacity to teach us compassion. Compassion means to *suffer with*. If we can put aside our assumptions and biases and reach out with our wounded hearts to others who suffer, we will go a long way in healing the ache of alienation. An amazing thing happens when we extend our hearts to others, the comfort and consolation we focus on them radiates in all directions.

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For more information about how to bring the *Grief River*® model to your group or community, contact: thomdennis@hotmail.com (773) 454-9176 P.O. Box 409427 Chicago, Illinois 60640.