

Open to the Presence of Your Loss

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When someone you love dies, you come to know your deepest pain. From my own experience with loss as well as those of thousands of grieving people I have companioned over the years, I have learned that we cannot go around the pain that is the wilderness of our grief. Instead, we must journey through it, sometimes shuffling along the less strenuous side of 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 honor the pain. “What?” you naturally protest, “honor 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 honor your pain. Honoring means recognizing the value of and respecting. It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honor yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honor 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, honors the love you feel for the person who had died. As an ancient Hebrew sage observes, “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 honor 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.

It takes a true commitment to heal in your grief. Yes, you are wounded, but with commitment and intention you can and will become whole again. 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 intentions 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 presupposed 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 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 honor and embrace your pain during this time. By honoring 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 shutdown in an effort to avoid and deny your pain, which is to die while you are still alive.

On your journey, the goal is 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 will 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 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 honor his presence, while acknowledging his absence. The beauty of this is that while I mourn, I can continue to love.