



## The Four Healing Streams

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

*"Losing a loved one is life's white-water trip on a river of tears."*

Margaret Brownley

When people come to see me for grief counseling or to one of the support groups sponsored by the hospice where I work, I usually hear them describe their experience of loss in one of two ways; they talk about the grief *process*, and they describe what it feels like to be flooded emotionally by those overwhelming waves of grief. If you have come to see me you will know I'm not particularly fond of using the word, *process*. It suggests grief will follow a predictable pattern, and that it can be manipulated or managed, given the right set of tools.

**I prefer waves as a descriptor for grief because it suggests something which is much more fluid, dynamic, and at certain times incredibly turbulent.**

Having grown up in Illinois and only an infrequent visitor to either coast, I typically don't

imagine ocean waves when I hear the word, instead, I think about the rivers I've know. Mostly, I think of the mighty Mississippi with its over ninety-five tributaries, large and small; the Wisconsin, the Illinois, the Missouri, the Ohio, and the Arkansas Rivers, to name just a few.

Admittedly, there really aren't any major rapids or waterfalls on the Mississippi, at least not anymore; over the last one hundred and fifty years or so, it's been dredged, dammed, and constrained with locks and levies by the Army Corps of Engineers. Of course, every time there is a heavy rain, those who live along its banks know we're only fooling ourselves by thinking this wild river can be controlled.

The same could be said of our attempts to manage the waves of grief. When emotionally flooded we scurry to fill-up sandbags and close

floodgates, often to no avail. Those artificial banks we create seldom last for long, and again, as Lamentations 3:48 says, a "rivers of tears" washes over us.

There is another way. Rather than trying to control the waves of grief, might we be better served by the notion of learning to go with the flow? William Worden, a leading authority on grief, argues one of the primary tasks of mourning is to, "feel the pain."<sup>1</sup> In other words, we shouldn't do everything in our power to avoid those uncomfortable and distressing waves of emotion, but rather,

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<sup>1</sup> Worden, J. Willam. *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2008. Worden describes four principle or primary "Tasks of Mourning;" 1. Accept the reality of the loss, 2. Feel the pain, 3. Adjust to an environment without the deceased, 4. Find an enduring connection with the deceased while embarking on a new direction in life.

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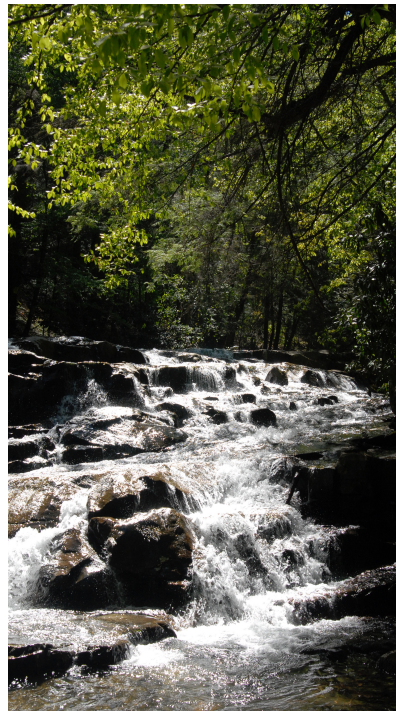
find meaningful and healthy ways to express them. Always avoiding the pain of loss, taken to its logical conclusion, means we're certain to reach the end of our own journey unprepared to face it.

Loss is inseparable from life, and yet every person's journey on this river of tears, from its very beginning, is going to be unique. To understand it we should first look at the headwaters, what I might call the, Lake Itasca<sup>2</sup> of life. These include things like, family background, personality and temperament, and the relational history we had with the person who died. It includes all the cultural assumptions we mostly take for granted, one's philosophical or religious understanding about the meaning of life and death and the belief in the possibility of some kind of continued existence after death. We also need to consider a person's experience, or lack thereof, with previous losses. All of these factors at first glance may seem like ancient history, water under the bridge, so to speak, but I can tell you they can have a tremendous impact on the way an individual makes sense of and copes with their current loss.

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<sup>2</sup> Holland, Robert. *The Mississippi River in Maps & Views from Lake Itasca to the Gulf of Mexico*. New York: Rizzoli, 2008. In 1832, the explorer Henry Schoolcraft determined a small glacial lake in what is now Clearwater County, in upper Minnesota, to be the primary source for the Mississippi River. He renamed it, lake "Itasca," a made-up Latin word meaning, "true head."

Second, grief has to flow through the contours of contemporary life. Instead of the muddy Mississippi, your grief river might be flowing through a landscape that looks more like the Colorado, the Columbia or the Niagara River Gorge. For some it's grief AND a foreclosure, for others, it's grief AND personal health concerns, for still others it's grief AND the predictable, yet stressful, ups and downs of family dynamics.



Mercifully, if we are willing to go with the flow, the circumstances of life will certainly change. We will pass through this and a variety of other phases of life before we reach the sea. Fortunately, all of life is not sadness and suffering, sometimes those tears are tears of joy. It is important to keep in mind, grief is just one of the currents that propel us forward, it flows side by side

other motivators like, love, desire, ambition, fear, anger, and hope. If we are open to all of the experiences of life, we can learn to negotiate these waves of emotion with the skill and dexterity of a seasoned kayaker.

*"You must learn to run your kayak by a sort of jujutsu. You must learn to tell what the river will do to you, and given those parameters see how you can live with it. You must absorb its force and convert it to your use as best you can. Even with the quickness and agility of a kayak, you are not faster than the river, not stronger, and you can beat it only by understanding it."*<sup>3</sup>

Stung, Curtis & Perry

### The Four Healing Streams

A little ways north of St. Louis, the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers meet. If you're interested, you can walk or bike across the old *Chain of Rocks Bridge* and see a curious site. Stretching for miles south of the confluence, these two muscular rivers seems to be wrestling side by side; the darker, muddy-colored water of Mississippi refusing to take-in the lighter, clay-colored water of the Missouri.

Whatever your river might look like, into it flows what I call the four healing tributaries or streams. I like to think of them as springs of fresh, life-giving water. They spill into this river of tears; they mix and mingle, and have the

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<sup>3</sup> Stung, Norman, Curtis, Sam, & Perry, Earl, *Whitewater*, New York:, Mcmillan, 1976.



ability to change the water's composition and rate of flow.

### 1. Communication

The first stream is communication. I'm talking about the books, the Internet sites, the videos, and movies made available to the bereaved by mass communication. Typically this is the first place people look to find resources for coping with their river of tears. The challenge, of course, is that there are tons of resources available out there and it is hard for river newbies to sort through them all. My advice is don't just stop at the self-help section; check out some memoirs, poetry, and novels, keep searching until you find something that resonates true for you.

**Each of these streams provides a foil, something that prevents or counters a dangerous or undesirable cultural undercurrent from dragging you beneath the waves.**

Communication provides a foil to the *prevailing wisdom*. That's a nice way of describing all the misconceptions that have somehow muddied the American psyche in regards to grief (like describing grief as a *process*, and) if you're not *over it* or have not *moved on* in six months you must be stuck or doing something wrong. When people say grief comes in *waves*, I think they're pointing to the idea that grief is *episodic*; it comes and goes, it ebbs and flows. Over a lifetime there will be many waves of grief (and later

hopefully, only minor ripples) so I don't think we can honestly say that we are ever really *done* with grief.

### 2. Community

More often than not the person who died was your paddle partner, captain, or first mate. Naturally, it's going to take some time to adjust to life without that companion and primary source of support. Friends, family, and a faith community are typically the next places we turn to, but occasionally they're not completely up to the task.



That's when a grief support group is helpful, or the services of a grief counselor like me. However, we should never underestimate the value of the various social groups you belong to or the finned, feathered, and four-legged members of your household. Community provides a foil to another concept endemic to

the American culture, *rugged individualism*. We've internalized some old version of the Declaration of Independence that suggests we must be weak if we cannot navigate these and other treacherous stretches of the river on our own. Nothing could be further from the truth. At some point we all need help. In relationships we take turns. A burden shared by two is half as heavy, and any boat rides higher when it carries a lighter load.

Many people, in their search for solace stop here. However, I can think of at least two more healing streams; but there may be more.

### 3. Creation

*"The second night we run between seven and eight hours, with a current that was making over for miles an hour. We caught fish and talked, and we took a swim now and then to keep off sleepiness. It was kind of solemn, drifting down the big, still river, laying on our backs looking up at the stars, and we didn't even feel like talking loud, and it warn't often that we laughed-only a little kind of low chuckle. We had mighty good weather as a general thing, and nothing ever happened to us at all-that night, nor the next, nor the next."*<sup>4</sup>

Mark Twain

<sup>4</sup> Twain, Mark. *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, New York: Dover Thrift Edition, 2000.

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Samuel Clemens, better known by his pen name, Mark Twain, knew that particular stretch of the Mississippi, just north of St. Louis, very well. He grew up along its banks in Hannibal, Missouri and as a young man, for two years he meticulously examined every inch of it while studying for his riverboat pilot license. When you live that intimately with a river, you're bound to learn a thing or two. The natural world, creation, has something to teach us about life and death if we take a detour from the frenetic pace of modern life and slow down long enough to engage with it.

Engaging with creation provides a foil to *isolation*, the underlying feeling of loss that comes as a result of cutting ourselves off from the rest of the natural world. Nature teaches us there are consequences to unchecked *materialism* and the absurdity of the notion that we have dominion (*control*) over much of anything at all. Maybe what your grieving heart needs more than a book or support group is to strike out on a voyage of discovery, like Marquette and Joliet or Tom Sawyer and his buddy, Huckleberry Finn.

#### 4. Creativity

The fourth healing stream is more akin to a journey within. The written word, the performing arts, and the visual arts also have lessons to teach the bereaved. It could be your own personal form(s) of self-expression or somebody else's. To think, "I'm not creative," or to have

been told as much, cuts a person off from this healing stream, Yes, you are! **Don't judge, just do.** Then see what happens.

Ritual is another form of creative expression that needs to be mentioned here. They typically involve some aspects of the other healing streams, but individual rituals do not always require engaging with them all. Rituals communicate on a deeper, pre-verbal, pre-cognitive level. They often involve the community, and they typically involve one or more of the natural elements, earth, air, fire, water. My sense is that rituals facilitate movement; they connect us to the mystery that connects us all. Death and loss force us to ask lots of big questions, rituals remind us that we do not have to have answers for them all.

Creativity provides a foil to a few more of those cultural values that can, unintentionally, negatively impact people who grieve; *productivity, efficiency, and practicality.* The creative arts refuse to be constrained by locks and levies and suggests neither should we. Like a river, when we meander through a museum, or poem, or story, we are taught how to linger, to wonder, to connect, to feel.

The *meander*, explains William Bridges in his book, *The Way of Transition*, "is the technical name for the loop in the course of a river...(it) is life's natural path, I think.

Straightened out, canalized, Department-of-Engineers pathways are as artificial in life as they are in riverbeds."<sup>5</sup>

South of St Louis, near Cairo, the southern-most tip of Illinois, where the Ohio River meets the Mississippi, the river enters its home stretch. There are no more locks and dams from this point on, only levees engineered with the goal of keeping the river in check. The lower half of the Mississippi twists and bends back upon itself so many times, it resembles a ribbon casually cast off and allowed to drift down and settle wherever it will on the floor. From this point to the Gulf of Mexico, as the crow flies it's only about five hundred miles, but because it meanders so, for a river traveler the journey is nearly twice as long. If you haven't learned the all-important lesson yet, this phase of the river provides one more opportunity to learn it: the fastest way is not always the best way.

*"Rivers know this: there is no hurry. We shall get there some day."*<sup>6</sup>

Winnie the Pooh

Learn more about the *Grief River*<sup>®</sup> by visiting our website at:  
[www.griefriver.com](http://www.griefriver.com)

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<sup>5</sup> William, Bridges, *The Way of Transition*. Cambridge: Perseus, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> Milne. A.A. (Inspired by) *Pooh's Little Instruction Book*, New York: Dutton, 1995.



