



Gifts of Grief

Discovering the beauty along the way

By Thom Dennis, LCPC

When you look back at the anguish, suffering, and traumas in your life, you'll see that these are the periods of biggest growth. After a loss that brings you dreadful painful months, you are a different man, a different woman. Many years later, you will be able to look back and see the positive things- togetherness in the family, faith or whatever- that came out of your pain.

Elizabeth Kübler-Ross

Your grief may be too raw, too new to appreciate the above quote, but when I think about many of the things that grieving people have shared with me over the years, the quote certainly rings true with my experience. We are all too familiar with the emotional pain associated with grief. Mourning definitely has physical side-effects. Nobody in their right mind would wish, even upon their enemy, the kind of open-ended suffering that accompanies loss. It's no wonder our society does everything it can to avoid talk of death and dying. It hurts to grieve so naturally we want to do everything in our power to move this process along as fast as we can. And yet, if we open ourselves to the voice of wisdom she whispers in our ear, wait, be patient, even grief has gifts to give.

I offer the following reflections as seeds of hope. While every person's experience is different and we all grieve at our own pace, I imagine that with time,

you too might identify that grief has to offer some gifts to you too.

Empathy for Others

One widow told me, "after watching my husband struggle for so long, I can't help but be moved by the stories I hear of other families who are going through similar experiences." Grief can teach us how to walk in someone else's shoes. It's not pity, it's different from sympathy, it's the ability to feel with someone as they deal with their own struggles.

Gratitude for the smallest kindnesses

Another widow reported that her eyes were opened to all of the little things people did to offer her consolation and support. She added that "sometimes their attempts were misfires or foul balls but, at least they tried and that made all the difference."

Confidence in newfound competencies

A division of labor develops naturally in most relationships. One person is better at balancing the checkbook another inexplicably

loves to clean. It's not uncommon for some widows to report that they have never pumped gas or widowers to admit their cooking skills are limited to the grill and the microwave. Learning new skills like financial planning, furnace maintenance, or culinary arts may be frightening but every newfound competence is reason to celebrate.

New interests and relationships

Is it possible that sometimes our relationships keep us from developing parts of ourselves or keep us from exploring aspects of life that we might enjoy? Being a caretaker requires sacrifice. Perhaps the long winding road of grief can open us up to explore new

paths and introduce us to some interesting people along the way.

Resolve about how to live your life

Carpe Diem, or “seize the day,” was a rallying cry in a popular movie a few years ago. Survivors often report that they learned a hard lesson from their loved one who died with unfinished business. They often make a commitment to themselves that they want to live their lives with no regrets: worry less, take more vacations, go to more of the kids soccer games, etc. Life is too short and you never know what can happen; if you love someone, let them know.

Memories

No one can take our memories away from us. They are treasures that are ours for certain. A lifetime of memories is like a rich storehouse from which we can draw upon in times of trial and drought. As we grieve, we review our relationships and discover that sometimes events that we thought were of no consequence take on new significance. Make every effort to record those memories in a diary or journal. Objects often have memories associated with them. Because of their association with a person, place or time, inexpensive things can take on a value beyond price.

Resolution of emotional issues

Unfortunately, people sometimes die without us having the opportunity to share our thoughts or feelings with them. We may wish that we could have said good bye or expressed our hurt, anger, disappointment, gratitude, pride or forgiveness. Just because a person is no longer physically present to us, does not mean that we cannot express or work

through to our own satisfaction any unfinished business. Seek out the help of a grief professional or clergy person who can help you create a ritual of resolution. With time, it's possible to bury life long resentments and embrace a newfound peace.

Existential questions

Grief has the ability to stop us in our tracks. Suddenly we must examine our long-held values and beliefs.

Your spirituality may continue to be a source of comfort from which you can draw untold strength, or perhaps you have never given much thought to issues of an afterlife but now the death of a loved one has put you in touch with some of the most profound questions you've ever asked in your life. We don't always find the answers but the questions themselves invite us to grow. The struggle to come to terms with some of life's most profound issues

provides the rest of our life with meaning, direction and purpose.

As time passes I am sure you too will discover that grief has offered you some gifts. As rich as they might be, I imagine any gift grief has to offer is a poor compensation for the loss you have experienced. As for me, in my weaker moments, I would trade them all for a minute with my dearly departed and yet, I know that is not a possibility. Perhaps this lesson too is one of grief's parting gift. As with all gifts, we get to choose what we do with them. It is my hope that we will share them with each other and all be the better because of it.

...as scientists understand more and more about the interdependence not only of living things but of rocks, rivers--the whole of the universe--I am left in awe that I, too, am a part of this tremendous miracle. Not only am I a part of this pulsating network, but I am an indispensable part. It is not only theology that teaches me this, but it is the truth that environmentalists shout from the rooftops. Every living creature is an essential part of the whole.

Desmond Tutu