

Grief and the Myth of Closure

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Have you ever noticed how the term “closure” is thrown around the television landscape following some kind of tragic killing or mishap? Intrepid television reporters invariably ask either the victims or relatives of the deceased, “what will bring you closure to this ghastly event?” They ask this in spite of the fact that barely a few days have passed since death has occurred and surely the reality of the event has yet to penetrate the consciousness of the bereaved individual. American culture, even in 2013, remains significantly illiterate about the process of grief and we advertise that illiteracy time and again on our national networks. The writer and grief therapist, Robert Niemeyer, has wisely proclaimed that “closure” is a term that applies to bank accounts, not love accounts.

We don't want to ever close love accounts. On the contrary, it is best to “draw interest” from the memories of our loved ones forever. Why should we ever give up on the love and nurturance we have received from our deceased loved ones? Those who tell us to let go, severely misread what it means to be human and severely underestimate how difficult it is to learn to love in absence.

Nonetheless, it is possible to become “stuck” in grief in an unhealthy manner. By this we mean remaining invested in a hope for life to return “as it was,” even when the possibility for that return is non-existent. In the movie “Silver Linings Playbook” Pat, the character played by Bradley Cooper, is grieving regarding the end of his relationship to his wife. He insists on bringing the relationship back to life just as it once was, even though all signs point to that impossibility. In the course of that obsessive desire to return his life to a long passed state he misses many opportunities to allow love and meaning to enter his life.

It is only when he is slowly able to let go of his hope for things to be as they once were that he is able to make new connections and find a new direction in his life through his relationship with Tiffany, played by Jennifer Lawrence. Every day we see in our work with clients that devastating effects of loss (whether from death, divorce, disease or illness). Learning to let go of the hope for a previous life is at times excruciating work. But it is in fact this letting go that opens the door to accessing that which remains and has the potential to reward us for a lifetime: the voice, memory and love of those who have left us. Yes, it is not as good as having the real thing – but it is what allows us to live an unstuck life of meaning in the present.

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