

On the Path from Loss to Renewal

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I sometimes find myself walking down the street thinking about my daughter's wedding. I imagine how the lovely bride and her proud groom will look in their festive outfits. I see the loving smiles of friends and family in attendance at this deeply meaningful moment in our lives. I envision how I will feel watching our youngest child begin a new life on this most special of days. And of course, the sight of the joyous dancing and singing takes me to a wonderful place of rapture. Ah yes, the joyous dancing and singing!

What might seem strange to some people is the fact that no engagement has taken place, and no ring rests on my daughter's finger. Such events are not likely to occur in the near future. My daughter, you see, has recently turned seven years old, and I know that she is more concerned with beginning the second grade than with ceremony planning and wedding cake.

Yet I as her father am full of hopes about her life, for to love someone deeply is to invest in them dreams about the future. People we care about are often our unwitting dreamkeepers. They guard our most precious and often unexpressed wishes and hopes. I have spoken not one word about "my wedding plans" to my daughter. Such dreams as these are clearly not bound to a present or even possibly a future reality. They are full of assumptions about how I want my life and my daughter's life to unfold. They are full of my hoped for projections into the future. When I dream about my daughter's wedding I assume that I, my wife and other children will all be alive at that time, that my daughter's sexual orientation will be heterosexual, and that she will choose to get married. In truth, I have no foolproof knowledge about any of these matters. I have something much deeper than knowledge – I have my dreams.

However, if and when these "core level dreams", as therapist and writer Ken Moses, Ph.D. labels them, fail to reach fruition, I, the dreamer, must learn to live with the fallout from shattered assumptions. Should my daughter not get married, I will have to come to terms with my unfulfilled dreams. I will have to separate from my deep attachment to these core level hopes, and will have to learn to live in a world in which my hoped for projections into the future have come to naught.

We have a name for this "emotional fallout" – it is called grief. Shattered dreams, and hence grief, wreak havoc with the maps of our lives and inner worlds. And thus, when a woman's husband dies, she perhaps has lost more than a companion, a sexual partner, or a father to their children. Perhaps she has lost a dream that reads: "my husband will protect me from ever again having to feel alone and unworthy." For many years that woman has been able to hold her fear about being a separate and whole person at arm's length. That fear now envelops her, and it can not be pushed away, despite all her attempts to do so. This woman is now on the path of grief.

In a state of deep grief old trusted paths are strewn with roadblocks. Familiar emotional landmarks are no longer recognizable. Is there any greater "stranger in a strange land" than the person who has lost a loved one - someone reeling from the shattering of a core level dream? When I am coping with my loss, I

am involved in drawing a new map of my world. **The feelings of grief are my companions and even guides through this difficult and painful endeavor.** For you see, the deepest part of me does not want to draw this new map. I want the old roads, the old highways. I was comfortable with the “emotional geography” of my existence. And so I keep trying to reconstruct my old life, yet inevitably I fail. **The feelings of grief that ensue highlight my failure, and remind me that the old world is no more, and push me, often against my will, to explore new territory.**

The various feelings of grief place me in front of an existential mirror. I see my reflection and I have to answer many important questions. Who am I now that my loved one has died? Where do I belong now? What do I believe in now? How do I explain my life to myself? How can I live with the often repugnant and revolting feelings I am forced to encounter on a near daily basis?

In Ken Moses’ formulation, highlighted in his article “The Impact of Childhood Disability,” (Ways Magazine, Spring 1987) the major feelings of grief each contain an existential situation or question that begs for a response. I answer these questions through my day to day experiences in a loss filled world. Each attempt at living a new life, whether it is deemed a “success” or “failure,” contributes to my bushwhacking through the jungle of my new life. **The feelings of grief push me into new territory, and help me create a new emotional landscape for myself.**

Below I present a description of the major feelings of grief, and of the existential questions imbedded in each feeling. The reader is cautioned to remember that grief is not a linear process, but one of ongoing loops. These feelings do not appear in an orderly fashion, and clearly can be experienced in varying forms over the course of one’s grief journey.

Anxiety

When I lose someone I love, I am constantly surrounded by my awareness of his or her absence. I no longer feel safe within my own skin. My body is playing tricks on me. At times my heart is wildly palpitating, beating with a fierceness that often leads me to expect that my chest might explode. At other times I am lightheaded and dizzy. Perhaps I feel shaky and out of balance. Sweat pours from my glands at unexpected moments. I formerly experienced my body as a friend. It now seems to be my enemy. I am anxious, and I hate feeling this way.

My anxiety is a clarion call whose message is unmistakable: my life is not working. My old way has worn out. As much as I want it to return, I can’t make it happen. **Anxiety is the fuel that leads me change my present way of being in the world.** I can’t sit still. I know no ease and comfort. For me to feel at peace in my own body and soul I must make serious adjustments in my hopes and expectations about life and all it has to offer.

Depression

When my loved one was by my side, either literally or figuratively, physically or emotionally, I experienced a sense of freedom to move about in my world and make some choices about how I wanted to invest my energy. Perhaps I put my energies into my work, and I become the best I can possibly be in my field of employment. I derive tremendous satisfaction from my sense of **competence** that results from my deep involvement in my job.

Or perhaps I put my energies into being the best possible husband I can be. My greatest efforts are invested into my relationship with my wife. I feel **competent as** a human being because my beliefs about the supreme importance of marriage are being actualized on a daily basis. The moments I spend with my wife continuously reinforce the positive sense I have about myself that **I am good and worthy.**

And then.... whether it is through a protracted illness or from a sudden cataclysmic moment, my wife is no more. She has died, and I am empty and bereft. **I am depressed.** I wander through my life as if in a dream. I once knew what made me important, what made me valuable. But now I am buried in sadness. My vision of myself is reduced for I can barely see through my near constant tears. I walk with stooped shoulders. The weight of my burden is excruciating. My work no longer brings me pleasure or meaning. It was once my essence, a wellspring of meaning and vitality, but now it matters not in the least. Money, status, power, and knowledge: none of these seem important any more. I am **no good** without my wife.

I can no longer be the man I loved being, for I am no longer a husband. My sense of competence has been robbed from me, and my depression forces me to ask: how can I recreate a new sense of meaning for myself? **How do I rediscover a renewed sense of human competence when old categories of meaning are no longer viable? What now makes me good and worthy?** Depression leads me towards an exploration of deeper emotional territory and formerly unknown parts of my being.

Fear

Each time I become close to another human being, I become vulnerable. My loved ones become important to me as I open up the tender and soft parts of my heart. I allow myself to be affected by their presence and absence. I take risks in sharing my most innermost thoughts and feelings, and over time, as my deepest self is respected and honored, I become intimate with my loved one through a process mutual sharing. Even though closeness requires ongoing infusion of vulnerability, the love I receive in return brings me a sense of protection and safety.

And now with the loss or death of my loved one my heart has been broken. I have no more protective covering. My heart is exposed to violent fluctuations of feelings. I am afraid – afraid that I will never again know love and affection. Afraid that I will forever remain in this morass of pain and disillusionment. How can I ever trust another soul with my deepest love, pain and desire? I can't take the risk of becoming intimately close with another human being again. I know what it is like to lose love, and I can't ever again face that heartbreak. Yet as time goes on I begin to feel lonely. I feel alienated from the rush of true human vitality. I need contact, companionship, and camaraderie. Maybe there is a way to become close without giving away the keys to my heart. I am afraid. I soon discover that this path of half in and half out doesn't work. There is no safe middle ground. Love requires whole heartedness. Love requires risk. I am afraid.

My fear asks me: how **intimate do you want to become with loved ones now that you know up close that lost love brings grief and pain? Can you afford to love once again? Can you afford to not love once again?**

Guilt

Like all human endeavors, my relationship with my loved one is marked by imperfections. From time to time we hurt each other, acting thoughtlessly or speaking unkind words. Nonetheless, loving feelings predominate over negative feelings, and our relationship continues on its daily journey. I am not overly troubled by my hurtful actions, for always in the back of my mind I think about tomorrow. Whatever goes wrong today can be fixed. I can make it up to my loved one; I can be a better parent, spouse, child or sibling.

And then tomorrow comes no more. There is no more fixing, no more repairing. My loved one is gone, and in her absence I constantly, at times obsessively, return to the instances when I acted improperly at best, cruel at worst. I am horrified by my callous behavior. How could I have been so thick, so self-centered, and so blind to the wonder of my loved one? Perhaps in the stressful days preceding my loved one's death, I failed to perform the necessary deed or speak the necessary word. If only.... If only I had

acted differently, I might not be living with this dreadful loneliness. I repeat in a mantra like fashion: I should have done differently. I should have been better. When I go to sleep, if I can sleep, my failure to act lies down next to me. When I awake, in the middle of the night or in the morning, without fail, I am tortured by my sins of commission or omission.

I am faced with a myriad of questions, and I am empty of explanations. Perhaps if I blame myself I can regain control and a sense of logic to my life. I am filled with guilt, and over time my guilt confronts me and demands to know: how **powerful are you? Over what situations do you legitimately have control, and when are you an active observer to the mysterious ways of the world? What are the consequences of your actions, and how cognizant are you of the ramifications of your behavior? Why are you waiting to act in the present moment? And finally, why can you not be more compassionate with yourself given your inherent human limitations?**

Anger

With my loved one by my side, the world **as it is** seems tolerable to me. I can live peacefully with the sundry ills and problems within the human community at large. From time to time I become disturbed with a particular unfair situation or a case of gross injustice, but I am not filled with a bitter rage that unendingly questions the very fabric of existence.

But then my loved one is **stolen** from me. I have been robbed and I have been cheated. Help me, help me! Something heinous has happened here. A great injustice has been perpetuated. My loved one was not supposed to die! This was not supposed to happen! I have tried to be a good person. I have struggled to live a peaceful and legal life. The death of my loved one was not my just due. I have been violated! We had so many plans to complete. We had not yet exhausted our storehouse of tomorrows. I am bitter and full of venom. This death should not have occurred at this time or in this manner. What about my input? What about my needs? Why me, and why now?

My anger burns with in me, and as my inner world is torched, it asks me the following questions: what **is your sense of justice and fairness? Does the world truly follow a pattern of cause and effect? Is there any way to understand what has befallen you without seeing yourself as a powerless victim? Why were you so comfortable with injustice before your loved one died? Can you truly force the world to conform to your standards and needs, or do you need to be more respectful of the mystery of life that seems to dole out its gifts in an unequal fashion? And lastly, is there any way you can use your anger to help make a dent in the pockets of overwhelming suffering in your own community?**

As the days, months and years of my life without my loved one continue to pass, I begin to recognize how much I have changed. I am no longer the person I once was when my loved one lived. I am a close relative of that person. Slowly, and with great effort and strain, I find answers, or perhaps more truthfully, approximations of answers to my questions. Perhaps only intimations of answers. I find a way to live with my questions, to live with myself, and to live with the mystery of life that brings that very life to an end. I discover that I am capable of growing and changing. I still do not like what has happened to me, at times I even experience resurgence of old grief feelings, but slowly I begin to take in the truth that loss is part of life. I recognize that I have discovered new strengths in myself, and even uncovered points of vulnerability I never knew existed. Grief has taught me the need to be more compassionate with myself and with others, and to be more mindful of the moment. Grief has bestowed upon me the awareness that I am part of a larger process of attachment-loss-reattachment that is at the center of being human. Perhaps I am sadder, but certainly wiser, as I struggle and learn to dream new dreams.