

On the Path from Loss to Renewal

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By R. Benjamin Cirlin

I recently met with a woman whose husband had died some seven months earlier. She entered my office with tears in her eyes. The moment she sat down the floodgates were opened, and she literally wailed for a good five minutes. I sat with her in silence, respecting her pain, recognizing her need to unload the great burden she had been carrying. When she came to a halt, I gently inquired about the source of her pain. In a voice filled with passion and fear, she told me that she had been listening to a radio program earlier in the day on the topic of grief and bereavement, and that it had upset her greatly. The expert guest talked about the need for the bereaved person to say goodbye to the deceased loved one and to let go. As soon as the words "let go" left her mouth she began wailing once again, and dramatically shouted, "I will never forget my husband. I will never let go of my memories of him. How can I erase thirty eight years of love?"

It became clear over the course our session together that my client, with the help of this so-called expert, was laboring under the weight of a great misconception. She believed that she had to disconnect from all the good that she had had with her husband and start again with a clean slate in order to work through her grief. I tried to reassure her that nothing could be further from the truth.

Loss does not require us to forget our memories, but rather to embrace them. Loss does not require us to stop loving our dear ones, but rather to find new ways to love them. Once our love was mediated through presence. Now it is mediated through absence. We need to learn to remember them and love them even though we are separated.

Perhaps you, like this woman, might object. But what about letting go, everybody talks about the need to let go. The truth is, it seems to me, is that letting go is necessary, but only of a certain kind. When my love one dies, I have to learn how to let go of my longing for their return. I have to let go of my expectations that my life will be as it once was. In time, often a very long time, I have to learn how to let go of my pain, and recognize and trust that I can be close to my loved one without the presence of pain.

I have to let go of longing, and in its place, substitute remembering. When I remember, I am conscious of what I still have, of what I can still hold on to. I do not dwell on what on what I am missing, on what is absent, but on what remains.

This process of grieving can be very difficult. Each of us who grieves goes through a kind of emotional angioplasty, a process of opening up new space in our hearts. We grieverers have been placed in the classroom of life in which we must learn a new language. Any of you who have studied a foreign language knows the amount of time, repetition and often frustration it takes to become fluent in the new tongue. It is a slow process, but one that is not insurmountable. So too with the language of loving in separation. With practice, with support, and with faith in our abilities to endure moments, days and sometime years of practice, we too can learn to live in a changed world in which our memories of our loved ones become sources of nourishment and hope.