I Thought I Was Doing So Good
By Pete Reinl, CSG
Healing Life’s Losses
www.hlseasons.com   414-651-2737   pete.hlseasons@hotmail.com

About a year and a half after my mom’s death I was in a grocery store looking for some spaghetti. It was a ‘good’ day, as I recall, nothing unusual about it. Although mom died pretty suddenly and her death led me on quite a powerful experience of grief, I had progressed well on my journey and life was pretty much back to ‘normal.’ When I got to the spaghetti aisle a wave of emotion suddenly came over me, so much so that I was moved to tears and needed to leave the store immediately. Finding my way back to the car I just broke down crying – sobbing would be more accurate. The spaghetti reminded me of my mother as she always cooked enough pasta to feed an army and received plenty of playful teasing about it from her husband and children. This reminder of mom led to other memories and the tears came from a place of deeply missing mom. I thought I was doing so good and was healing so well after the death of my mom. I hadn’t cried like that over my mom’s physical absence for quite a while. That day, in that moment, I was certain I had taken a huge step back in my grief and I remember telling someone I was having a ‘bad day.’

I hear similar stories weekly from those who are grieving. These sudden, surprise bursts of grief, triggered by almost anything (a smell, a sound, a sight, etc.), are such normal experiences for the bereaved and often happen at the most inopportune times. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we can continue experiencing them sporadically years after a death. What always strikes me each time I listen to people share these types of stories, including mine, is the judgment of ‘bad’ that we place on the experience, i.e. ‘I’m having a bad day’ or ‘It’s not a good day.’ Since when was missing someone we love a ‘bad’ thing? Since when was shedding tears over longing to hear our loved one’s voice a ‘bad’ thing? How can it be a ‘bad’ thing to yearn to be touched by and/or to touch our loved one again? How can it be a ‘bad’ thing to pine for our loved one’s presence? How can we disregard our missing the quirky personality traits of our loved one by labeling our desire as ‘bad?’ Why is it – how can it be – a ‘bad’ day when we remember our loved one!?

Words, and the language we use, create worlds. Of course missing someone, achingly so, is hard and difficult and painful and can elicit such overwhelming emotion in us. But ‘bad’ – I don’t think so. Associating ‘bad’ to these experiences can actually be a roadblock to our healing, a way of resisting what we need to experience to heal. Perhaps we can reframe, give different words to, these bursts of grief; this sudden flood of memories. Perhaps we can gain the perspective of honoring, reverencing, respecting our loved one through our tears – through our bursts of longing. Perhaps, instead of judging our experience as ‘bad’ or ‘good’ we can simply acknowledge and be thankful for the deep love we’ve shared with our loved one, so much so that we miss them incredibly.

This notion of judging our tears of grief as ‘bad’ or our days of non-tears as ‘doing good’ are often reinforced by those around us and those who care about us. They’ll use descriptions like ‘you’re having a bad day’ if they witness our crying or ‘you’re doing so well’ when witnessing a smile or are engaged in a non-tearful conversation with us. Crying isn’t ‘bad’ nor ‘good.’ Crying is an outward expression of what’s going on inside of us, and a necessary one at that. I find myself getting so frustrated when a caring person describes a bereaved person as ‘not doing well’ because they’re crying. What exactly makes them ‘not doing well’ - their tears? The tears they shed over missing their loved one? Their tears of deep sadness at the loss of the person they loved? What? Absolutely not! AND, we cannot buy into this notion that somehow we’re not doing well because we find ourselves crying. We cannot fall into labeling our emoting as bad because we miss our loved one. That’s simply nonsense and unnatural and unhealthy.

You can rest assure, we will experience those sudden bursts of grief – those bursts of longing – those bursts of treasured memories that will cause us to express ourselves emotionally whether it be through tears, sadness, anger, or just being withdrawn. These bursts are our psyches, our hearts, our soul’s way of acknowledging and manifesting what’s going on inside of us. Contrary to what others may believe, they are indeed a way for us to honor, remember, respect and reverence the relationship we shared with our loved ones, as well as acknowledge how deeply we love and miss them. They are a way for us to heal. Clearly, there is sadness and pain associated with them, but there is certainly nothing ‘bad’ about experiencing them at all and, having experienced them doesn’t reflect ‘badly’ on how we’re doing on our journey of grief. Dare I say, these ‘bursts’ are to be celebrated as profound moments of love and of having loved.