“I’m doing things I never thought I would do and never did while she was alive. In ways, I’m enjoying life more today than I ever did when we were together. Is that bad for me to say?” This is a portion of a conversation I had with a wonderful man during break-time at a recent presentation I had given. He went on to say, “I know more about life and what matters in life since she’s gone. I wish I would’ve known what I know now while she was still here – our lives could’ve been so much different.” I suspect you may know the conversation also included his experiencing guilt because of his new found depth of appreciation for and fully living life. But once he was able to make a distinction between false guilt (the imagined wrongs we’ve done) and real guilt (knowingly hurting ourselves or someone else), and once he reflected upon his wife’s pride in how he’s choosing to live his life, he couldn’t stop telling me stories about what he’s learned about living since the death of his precious Joyce just over a year ago. His sharing reminded me of a quote by Rachel Naomi Remen, “The purpose of every life (and death) is to grow in wisdom and learn to love better.”

Of course, there’s just got to be a better way to grow in wisdom and to learn to love better than by the death of our loved ones. No one would choose this way to grow and learn – this is just too hard and painful. But, as we all know, the truth is we don’t have a choice regarding death – death is out of our control, a natural part of the rhythm of life. And grief, because we chose to be in relationship and to love and to be loved, is also a natural part of life (whether we’re conscious or unconscious of it).

Ah, but here is another truth: what we get a say in, what we have control of, where our choice lies in this process, is who we become because of this death – because of our grief – because of what we allow death and grief to teach us about fully living again. Indeed, dare I say, we have a responsibility and an obligation to ourselves, to our loved ones, to our human community, and to our higher power, to fully engage in life.

So, what might death teach us about life? What wisdom does it have to share with us? What better way of loving might grief teach us? Only you can truly answer these questions. The answers come from deep within your heart – within your soul – much like tree roots that grow deeper with each passing season. If we do the authentic work of grief and mourning, if we befriend this significant journey we’ve been plunged into, we will come to know death and grief as our profound teachers sharing lessons with us about ourselves and about the gift of life. Allow
me to share several lessons I’ve learned about life, love and living from these teachers.

Seize the moment...
If we can deeply know (mind, heart and soul) the truth that all things must inevitably end then:
- We’ll stop wasting our lives on meaningless activities
- We’ll learn to loosen our grip – to not hold so tightly onto our opinions, desires, agendas, expectations, power, popularity, possessions, and prestige
- We’ll place less emphasis on the future and place the majority of our focus on this moment
- We’ll be kinder, more compassionate, more understanding, more merciful, empathetic, forgiving
- We’ll say “I Love You” more often

In the book The Courage to Change an anonymous writer wisely shares, “Though no one can go back and make a brand new start, anyone can start from now and make a brand new end.”

Embrace what is – embrace it all...
We cause ourselves such undo suffering when we choose to resist the reality of our lives as they are right now - the truth of this moment. From pain, hardship, agony, and despair to joy, love, laughter, and success – it all belongs. It seems to me, our job in living isn’t to approuve or disapprove of _____(fill in the blank)_____ or to rush to judgement of “good” and “bad.” I believe our job is to move toward reality. To welcome – to give hospitality – to be open to our lives, to the people in our days, to the feelings and thoughts that arise in us from moment to moment. To not reject or deny these realities, as this breeds ignorance and fear, and will stop us from showing up. This type of welcoming invites us to authentically experience and accept ourselves, others and life. It engages us to our core. It doesn’t require agreement. Neither does it give permission to approve of or allow abuse in any form. It does mean that we make peace with things as they are rather than trying to force them to be the way we want them to be. Instead of spinning a story we try to live into, we let our lives speak to us. Being human is an invitation to feel everything, including those things that are painful and challenging – to come into direct contact with the strange, the beautiful, the horrible, and often the very ordinary stuff of life. Perhaps this lesson is the fodder for authentic love and action and gratitude and surrender.

We need each other...
Relationship and connection and dependence are in our DNA – they are an intricate part of who we are. We need each other, quite literally, to survive. We help each other to grow physically, spiritually, emotionally, intellectually, and socially every single day of our lives. To think otherwise is an illusion and delusion. There is no denying it or avoiding it or dismissing it, AND we do so at our own peril, dying a premature death as we continue to walk this earth. Not only do we need each other, we are connected to each other. Your pain is my pain – your joy is my joy – your dream is my dream – your injustice is my injustice – your loneliness is my loneliness – your accomplishment is my accomplishment – your loss is my loss. It’s not that we aren’t independent, or individual, or free, or strong – it’s just that each of these, each of us, depend on something else, someone else, to make them possible. I have experienced in me and I’ve witnessed in others time and time again the devastating ramifications of the quest to “not need anyone” and to “go it alone.” The results are consistent: a life filled with loneliness, fear, resentment, isolation, slavery to control, and martyrdom (victimhood).

We don’t have a choice regarding death, but we do have a choice regarding who we become because of it. What kind of life will you choose to live because of what this death and your grief have taught you about life and living and loving? How will the lessons you’ve learned honor the spirit and legacy of your loved one? In The Five Invitations, Frank Ostaseski writes, “We cannot be truly alive without maintaining an awareness of death...Death is always with us, in the marrow of every passing moment. She is the secret teacher hiding in plain sight...And the good news is we don’t have to wait until the end of our lives to realize the wisdom death has to offer.”
Companioning the Bereaved to Spaces of Growth and Gratitude
By Melissa Minkley, MSW, CT, Healing Life’s Losses Grief Support Services, meliss.hilseasons@hotmail.com

“I never thought grief could teach me so much.” ~ Carol Staudacher

Many bereaved have expressed that grief has forever changed them. They are well aware their life will never be the same again, but in the depth of their sorrow they struggle to recognize and discover that their life can be meaningful. As a companion to the bereaved, I have learned over the years that it is possible to experience personal growth, but this can be a delicate and lengthy process – not one to approach too early in the grief journey.

Early in my role as a grief companion, I found myself eager to walk ahead of a grieving widower to show him what healing looks like (please note this was long before I became familiar with Alan Wolfelt’s companion model). My desire to take his pain away got in the way of my ability to journey alongside him through his wilderness without feeling responsible for finding a way out.

In our effort as companions, we must be able to assess when the bereaved are ready to move to a place of seeking meaning and purpose from their loss. We do this gently and kindly pointing out the positives in the changes they have experienced. It’s also important for us to recognize that this personal growth can take many forms for the bereaved. For some, it may look like a new value, or priority, or possibly a deeper appreciation for the brevity of life. For others, they find themselves investing more in relationships and a greater sense of gratitude for the people in their life.

As companions we help to create spaces of transformation by supporting the bereaved where they are on their journey while encouraging personal growth. It is necessary to remember that this encouragement is based on their readiness to embrace change and openness to personal growth. What follows are some practical approaches you may find helpful in your role of companioning the bereaved to spaces of growth and gratitude.

- **Empower**...The bereaved may focus too much on the loss and its secondary losses. Empower them by pointing out their strengths. Identify how they have been coping effectively and the positive decisions they have made.
- **New Knowledge**...Invite the bereaved to share new insights they have learned about themselves, along with new abilities and resources they didn’t know they had.
- **Feel Feelings**...Giving bereaved permission to feel and express their sorrow creates an awareness of all emotions. When we experience great sorrow it increases our capacity to feel joy, love and gratitude.
- **Priorities**...Guide the bereaved to identify how their priorities have changed since the loss. Give them permission to reorganize their life based on these new priorities.
- **Reassurance**...Sometimes the bereaved are fearful that any movement toward healing will lessen the bond they have with their deceased loved one. Provide reassurance they will always have that continued bond through their memories, and assist them with creating tributes and rituals that will nurture this bond. Ask them, “What would your loved one encourage you to do with your life?”

In Pete’s article, he emphasizes the reality that grieving people do not have a choice about their loss, but they do have a say about how they choose to mourn and heal from their loss. It is our role as companions to empower them to choose personal growth and discover the gifts in loss. Alan Wolfelt’s companion model, once again, gives us the nonjudgmental and thoughtful approach to serve in this role.
Upcoming Opportunities for Grief Companions and the Bereaved

**SAVE** these 2019 dates for Companions Supporting Companions gatherings:  
Saturday March 30\(^{th}\) and Saturday, Oct.26\(^{th}\), 9am to 1pm.

**NOTE:** We need your help in promoting these programs. Please do pass them along to colleagues as well as to those you companion. Thank you.

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**Sunday, Dec.16, 9:00am – 6:00pm (for Bereaved)**

**Finding Our Way Through the Wilderness of Loss**

*A Spiritual Retreat for the Bereaved Focusing On Secondary Losses*

Cost: $65 (scholarships are available)

Facilitators: Melissa Minkley and Pete Reinl

Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI

For more information go to [www.sienaretreatcenter.org](http://www.sienaretreatcenter.org)

“Like it’s not enough to experience the excruciating grief, sadness and loneliness of losing him, there are all these other painful losses I’m discovering and grieving because of his death!” A Bereaved Partner

There is a myriad of losses we experience because of the loss and these additional losses are grieved as profoundly as, perhaps even more deeply than, the original loss. These important losses are known as “secondary losses” or “loss of the assumptive world.” Simply, how do we navigate and find our way through this wilderness of loss? On this retreat we’ll:

- Unpack, acknowledge and honor these significant losses
- Identify healthy practical strategies to grieve and find a way through these losses
- Share in reflection, silence, discussion, prayer, meditation and ritual

This retreat experience is appropriate for adults who have experienced a significant loss of any kind.

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**Saturdays, 8:30am – 4:30pm (for Grief Companions)**

Jan.26, Feb.23, Mar.23, Apr.27, July 13, 2019

**Honoring Grief...Intending to Heal**

**Grief Companion Training Program**

Cost: $475 (scholarships are available)

Training Team: Pete Reinl, Melissa Minkley and Ann Marie Usleman

Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI

For more information go to [www.sienaretreatcenter.org](http://www.sienaretreatcenter.org)

(JANUARY continued on the next page)
“Healing means, first of all, the creation of an empty but friendly space where those who suffer can tell their story to someone who can listen with real attention.” Henri Nouwen

Honoring Grief...Intending to Heal is a training program for those who wish to companion the bereaved and/or are currently supporting the bereaved in various capacities. The approach of companioning serves as the foundation – the very root system in offering any modality of support to the bereaved be it as a counselor, support group facilitator, minister, pastor, social worker, hospice worker, chaplain, funeral home employee, volunteer, nurse, physician, spiritual director, friend, family member, etc. The companioning model makes a distinction between other models of treating, fixing, curing, analyzing or resolving another’s grief. Instead, companioning is “about being totally present to the mourner and even being a temporary guardian of the person’s soul.” (Wolfelt) The invitation in companioning is to allow oneself to be vulnerable enough to “get into people’s buckets” (Manning) of sadness, pain, confusion, anger, relief, guilt, shame, etc. In other words, to learn to be totally present and to simply bear witness to someone’s pain without trying to take away their right and need to be in and express pain so that she/he can authentically heal. The art of companioning is deceptively easy and simple, but most find it challenging as it demands personal accountability of and tending to one’s own losses and grief, as well as being counter-intuitive, counter-intellectual and counter-western-cultural. Its approach includes a healthy balance of head and heart, while leaning more heavily on the heart (since grief is primarily heart-based).

Components of the Companion Training Program Include:
* In depth exploration of the companioning philosophy (applicable in serving all ages, cultures, ethnicities, and spiritual backgrounds)
* Basic understanding of grief and its significance
* Connecting spirituality and grief
* Basic understanding of healing in grief
* Surveying the necessity of being with difficult emotions and feelings
* Clarifying the necessity of purposeful and intentional healing
* Learning and practicing necessary companioning skills with particular emphasis on:
  1. real presence
  2. creating and holding safe spaces
  3. the art of curiosity thru an appreciation and integration of “beginners mind”
  4. developing listening and questioning skills
* Practical implications of using the companion model in various grief support modalities

Gatherings Will Include:
* Presentation, Instruction, Reinforcing & Educational Activities
* Small and Large Group Interaction
* Meditation and Grieaver Friendly Rituals
* Opportunities to Practice Skills
* Opportunities for Personal Integration

Program Requirements:
* Attendance at all five Saturday gatherings
* A space of 1.5 years since a significant loss is preferred
* Reading, intentional reflection, integration and other assignments prior to the first gathering and between gatherings

Participants Will Receive
* Four grief related books
* Plethora of practical handouts
* Certificate of completion
* Four (4) continuing education units (40 contact hours)

Registration and Application Process:
1. Complete and submit the registration form and the non-refundable deposit.
2. Once your registration is received you’ll be sent (via email) a biographical application form which is required to be completed and submitted for review by the training program team.
3. You will be notified regarding your acceptance into the program and mailed the initial first gathering assignment. Registration deadline is Monday, December 31st, 2018.
Saturday, Feb.16, 9:00am – 6:00pm (for Bereaved)

Grieving Through the Seasons
A Spiritual Retreat for Those Grieving a Loss
Cost: $65 (scholarships are available)
Facilitators: Ann Marie Uselmann and Pete Reiml
Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI
For more information go to www.sienaretreatcenter.org

“We could learn many things from nature. One very important truth would be simply to be yourself...for that is your true spirit. Another valuable lesson is to live for today, to be part of the changes and the processes of now, for it is in experiencing this moment that you will be ready to experience the next.” Deanna Beisser

Grieving Through the Seasons is a day-long spiritual retreat for adults who are grieving the death of a loved one, friend, or co-worker. The day will integrate natural patterns of the grieving experience with the natural rhythms and changes of the seasons. The day will include:
- Grief related reflections
- Times of silence
- Safe spaces for sharing
- Prayer and meditation
- Journaling and other creative activities

Saturday, March 16th, 9:00am – 4:30pm (for Bereaved)

Grieving Through the Seasons
A Spiritual Retreat for Those Grieving a Loss
Cost: $45 (scholarships are available)
Facilitators: Ann Marie Uselmann and Melissa Minkley
Lake Lucerne Retreat Center, Neshkoro, WI (near Wautoma, WI)
For more information go to www.hillseasons.com

For a retreat description please see “February” above.