Loss, Grief and Spirituality…
Crisis? Invitation? Or Both?
By Pete Reinl, CSG, Healing Life’s Losses Grief Support Services, pete.hllseasons@hotmail.com

Perhaps you can identify with some of these statements shared with me recently by grieving men and women:

~ So, tell me, where is God in all of this? ~
~ I know he had to die, but why would God do this to me? Why would God allow my life to be what it is right now? ~
~ Going to church seems so pointless now. It just doesn’t mean what it used to mean. ~
~ Not sure what I believe about my Higher Power – not sure how my Higher Power fits into my life any more. ~
~ If God were so good and so loving, how could He have done this to my child – to us?! ~
~ I know she’s in a better place. If only I had more faith her death wouldn’t hurt so much. ~
~ If one more person invites me to church! “Just come to church,” they say, I’ll never step foot in another church! ~
~ Everything feels so dark and heavy to me, and life just feels so empty. ~
~ What purpose do I have now? Life seems absolutely meaningless. ~
~ Life is so unfair – it’s all a set-up! ~

Admittedly, for some, these statements are unthinkable, un-relatable, and couldn’t be further from the truth of their experience. But, I suspect, many can identify with at least a few of them. Each of these accounts, each of these proclamations, each of these ponderings point to the connection that spirituality has with loss and grief. Notice, I didn’t use the word religion or faith tradition to describe what is being expressed above. I used the word “spirituality” because it, rather than any organized religion we subscribe to, more authentically describes the stirrings in us that motivate such responses to loss and grief.

In general, spirituality goes to the core of who we are – what in our hearts, and deeper still, in our souls, believe about God, Source, Essence, Higher Power, Allah, etc., and how we understand life. It is a system of beliefs and the basis of our relating to God, ourselves, others, the earth, the world, the universe; our interconnectedness. While, overall, religion provides us an organized framework in which to give expression to our spirituality, it offers us a community of like-minded people to belong to and to be supported by, and, at its best, offers us avenues to enhance, deepen, discover, clarify and further tap into our core.

Having said that, please, make no mistake about it, the experience of grief is primarily a heart and soul-based (spiritual) experience, and true healing in grief comes from that space as well. In his acclaimed book, Seat of the Soul, author Gary Zukav writes, “The road to your soul is through your heart.” Nothing could be truer for us when we have experienced a loss because grief invites us to make a journey into the depths of our soul through our hurting hearts – to places and spaces we never knew existed in us. Grief is filled with paradoxes. One such paradox pertaining to grief and spirituality is: we can never go back
home (because that home doesn’t exist anymore – it has forever changed) but the invitation in grief is to journey home (deeper still into the home of our soul).

Some experience a crisis of spirituality when grieving which is very natural and normal. Anger with God, blaming God, uncertainty about life, etc., is a natural response to loss. Often the source of our crisis is that what we once believed in our core about God, life, people, purpose, meaning, and relationships is now in question.

What we choose to do with this crisis and how we respond, could actually lead us to a depth of spirituality we never could have imagined for ourselves. This is a path of spiritual dismantling that exposes hidden internal assumptions (and contradictions) and our cherished ideals.

Can we allow ourselves to be in a spiritual void, sometimes chaotic, confusing and dark without judgement, without numbing, without running away, without trying to force a way of being and believing that doesn’t seem to fit us any longer?
Will we allow and welcome new insights and revelations that we haven’t considered before about our Higher Power, our faith?
Can we allow our brokenness to reveal a truth and reality regarding the rhythm of life and living?
Will we permit this painful loss – this devastating death to share with us valuable lessons about life and what matters and what doesn’t?
Can we open ourselves in the midst of this sometimes deafening silence and stillness – this gut wrenching loneliness – to discover new purposes and new meanings and new appreciations?
Will we be receptive to redefining our faith, our spirituality, our assumptions and beliefs about God?
Can we contemplate a wiser, more mature image of God – a more grownup version of God?
Will we unlock a new depth of understanding regarding ourselves and how we engage with our Higher Power, others, creation?
Can we give ourselves permission to uncover new ways of spiritual expression and practice?

Although we may employ our intellect regarding these and other spiritual questions, they won’t be answered by our intellect. The answers truly lie within our hearts and our souls, and can only be found in part by the spiritual practice of surrender. And, it is the surrendering that is the hummus of transformation, but only if we give ourselves permission to go there and find others who can go there with us.

We know that so many changes take place in us and in our world when we experience a loss. A huge part of our grief work is finding a different way to think, view, function and, at some point, thrive in our changed lives – creating a new normal. What some of us don’t expect is our belief system to be inadequate. We find ourselves surprised in having to include it in the creation of our new normal – a new understanding of our spirituality – the core of who we are. On the other hand, some of us, after introspection, may simply reaffirm on a deeper level our earlier beliefs, while others may be nudged to modify aspects of their belief system. For all of us, grappling with these spiritual questions, being with these spiritual invitations can lead us to a more resilient spirituality – one that allows us to find meaning in the most difficult situations.

To be sure, the death of someone and the accompanying grief can result in a spiritual crisis. If we choose to remain there, to attach and hang on to this crisis, to place our identity in it, we will most certainly lead a life filled with resentment, blame, anger and live from a place of limited vision – a place of being a constant victim (consciously or unconsciously). Or, we can choose to see within this crisis an invitation to discover a deeper and more authentic sense of ourselves, relationships, and life; our spirituality. We can grow and become by finding deeper meaning and purpose in life again, if we allow both crisis and invitation.
Extending an Invitation to the Spiritual Practice of Surrendering
By Melissa Minkley, MSW, CT, Healing Life’s Losses Grief Support Services, meliss.hilseasons@hotmail.com

Grief is intrinsically hard. It contains all the emotions we automatically attempt to avoid as soon as these unpleasant feelings present themselves. Our natural defense mechanism of avoidance and repression may serve a purpose as we require a reprieve from grief from time to time. Unfortunately this break from emotional pain doesn’t go away. It lays dormant until our defenses become exhausted. Even though these emotions are unwelcomed, they do serve as the means to emotional healing and growth. But first we must spend time with these dark emotions. As Alan Wolfelt would say – “lean in to them.” This is what it means to surrender to our grief. It is recognizing that our pain is not to be feared but embraced. Emotional pain can create opportunities for growth by examining our beliefs and views of the world (spirituality). Viewing pain as transformational and meaningful is a paradigm shift moving away from our traditional cultural view of it as distress needing to be avoided, dismissed and minimized. It is a vital shift – an imperative shift that our culture would greatly benefit from. This shift would eliminate the feelings of isolation and aloneness, and it would promote more connection with each other. Ultimately, it would give us permission to explore our spirituality and our spiritual practice.

In essence, a significant piece of Pete’s article describes the spiritual practice of surrendering. As grief companions we are in a position to invite the bereaved to explore the spiritual practice of surrendering. This invitation is extended with a consciousness that values the role of pain in healing. As companions we must be ok with raw emotions and deep sadness, with uncertainty and confusion, and believe that it is precisely in the hurting that we find healing – that we are both drawn inward and downward to the very place of soul-work. If we are not comfortable with pain and sorrow, with ambiguity and insecurity, we will struggle with being fully present with others and their grief.

Over the years I have extended this invitation to the bereaved only to have it received with resistance. Many bereaved would prefer to accept the advice of their well-meaning friends and keep busy, get distracted and move on. Below are some suggestions on ways to extend the invitation of surrendering to those we companion:

- **Pain x Resistance = Suffering** – assist the bereaved with an understanding of what creates suffering. Grief is painful, but when we resist pain – when we resist darkness it usually makes the pain more intense and the darkness even darker which creates distress that leads to suffering. Research has shown that when we try to suppress unwanted thoughts and feelings they just get stronger. What we resist persists. These thoughts and feelings, questions and explorations require attention and compassion in order to heal. We aren’t able to provide the needed attention if we dismiss or avoid them.

- **Exploring** – encourage the bereaved to be curious about what they are experiencing, thinking and questioning. Invite them to *lean in to* the discomfort – the uncertainty – while reassuring them that they are bigger than what they feel.

- **Tolerating** – the grief process is all about enduring an array of feelings and ponderings without placing judgement on them (i.e. this is good or this is bad). It just is.

- **Allowing** – grief is unpredictable – our lives are now unpredictable – what we held as absolutes are now unpredictable. Encourage the bereaved to allow the grief, the unpredictability to come and go like waves. Being discouraged by them and attempting to control them only creates distress.

- **Befriending** – gently invite the bereaved to see the value in their thoughts and feelings by asking themselves these questions, “What can I learn from this? What is this inviting me to?”

- **Mindfulness** – teach the bereaved the basic practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness involves being open to the reality of the present moment, allowing all thoughts, emotions, and sensations to enter into our awareness without resistance or avoidance. This practice of mindfulness is particularly helpful when someone is experiencing a spiritual crisis. A
A wonderful resource you may want to tap into is a book entitled *Grieving Mindfully* by Sameet Kamur.

- **Self-Compassion** – remind the bereaved of just how important self-compassion is and treating themselves gently the way they would treat a dear friend who was going through a difficult and uncertain time.

It is encouraged that companions explore their own thoughts and feelings regarding suffering, spiritual crisis and surrendering. Below are questions that may be helpful for your own self-reflection:

- How do I know when I am resisting? Describe what this looks like? Where is the resistance coming from – what is its source?
- Have there been times when resistance was in your best interest?
- During those times you surrendered to your pain, to your uncertainty, what did you need from yourself to do so? What did you need from others?

Because resisting pain is natural and automatic, many bereaved are not aware of when this is happening. Surrendering is a slow and delicate process that requires a safe space with safe people. As companions, we extend the invitation to the spiritual practice of surrendering that honors the needs and the intrinsic ability of the bereaved to find their way. It is vitally important to take into consideration where the bereaved are on their journey and their readiness for such surrendering.

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**Upcoming Opportunities for Grief Companions and the Bereaved**

**SAVE** these 2019 dates for Companions Supporting Companions gatherings:

- Saturday March 30th (see March for more info) and Saturday, Oct.26th, 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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**Saturday, Feb.16, 9:00am – 6:00pm (for the Bereaved)**

*Grieving Through the Seasons…A Spiritual Retreat for Those Grieving a Loss*

Siena Retreat Center, Racine, WI

Cost: $65 (scholarships are available)

Facilitators: Ann Marie Uselmann and Pete Reinl

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

*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 the Bereaved)

_Grieving Through the Seasons...A Spiritual Retreat for Those Grieving a Loss_

Lake Lucerne Retreat Center, Neshkoro, WI (near Wautoma, WI)

Cost: $55 (scholarships are available)
Facilitators: Ann Marie Uselmann and Melissa Minkley
For more information go to _www.hllseasons.com_

For a retreat description please see “February” above.

Saturday, March 30th, 9:00am – 1:00pm (for Grief Companions)

_Companions Supporting Companions_ Gathering

Holy Apostles School Library, New Berlin, WI

(Holy Apostles School address: 3875 S. 159th Street, New Berlin, WI 53151...Enter the main entrance doors to the school which face 159th Street. Take the first hallway immediately to the left and the school library is down the hall on the left.)

RSVP: Directly to Pete at pete.hllseasons@hotmail.com at your earliest convenience

Purpose

CSC (Companions Supporting Companions) is a gathering for those who companion the bereaved to support each other personally, spiritually and in their work as companions.

Participants

Those who are invited to participate in CSC have completed the _Honoring Grief...Intending To Heal_ grief support companion training program.

Format (Pete and/or Melissa will facilitate)

- Opening Sacred Circle
- Personal Check-in
- Share Positive Experiences of Companioning and Meaningful Resources
- Address Companion concerns, challenges, issues
- Closing Sacred Circle
- Share Lunch

Responsible of Participants:

- RSVP
- Bring companioning resources to share
- Openness to share both positive and challenging companion experiences
- Willingness to listen and support
- Bring bag lunch

What CSC is NOT:

- A training program
- Focused on education
- A substitute for a personal support group, spiritual guide and/or a counselor
Most people don’t like to feel; few people want to feel pain. There’s a juncture we reach after a loss. We can’t choose what happens to us, but we can honor how we feel about what happens to us. Committing to our grief doesn’t mean we’re choosing to drown in sorrow; it means we’re choosing to heal our heart.

Melody Beattie

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**Friday thru Sunday, April 5-6**

*Honoring Grief – Intending to Heal* grief support companion training

_Nazareth Retreat Center, Grand Prairie, TX_

Facilitator: Pete Reinl, CSG
For more information go to [https://nazarethretreats.org/](https://nazarethretreats.org/)
Or contact Sr. Francesca at [info@nazarethretreats.org](mailto:info@nazarethretreats.org) or call 469-233-5547

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**Friday thru Sunday, May 3-5**

*Honoring Grief – Intending to Heal* grief support companion training (Part II)

_Nazareth Retreat Center, Grand Prairie, TX_

Facilitator: Pete Reinl, CSG
For more information go to [https://nazarethretreats.org/](https://nazarethretreats.org/)
Or contact Sr. Francesca at [info@nazarethretreats.org](mailto:info@nazarethretreats.org) or call 469-233-5547

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**Tuesday thru Wednesday, May 14-15**

*Honoring Grief – Intending to Heal* grief support companion training (condensed)

_Benet House Retreat Center, Rock Island, IL_

Facilitators: Melissa Minkley, MSW, CT, and Pete Reinl, CSG
For more information go to [https://www.smmsisters.org/retreats/benet-house-retreat-center](https://www.smmsisters.org/retreats/benet-house-retreat-center)
Or contact Sr. Bobbi at [retreats@smmsisters.org](mailto:retreats@smmsisters.org) or call 309-283-2109

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**Friday, May 17** and repeated on **Saturday, May 18**

*Grieving Through the Seasons…A Spiritual Retreat for Those Grieving a Loss*

_Benet House Retreat Center, Rock Island, IL_

Facilitators: Ann Marie Uselmann, MSW, LCSW and Pete Reinl, CSG
For more information go to [https://www.smmsisters.org/retreats/benet-house-retreat-center](https://www.smmsisters.org/retreats/benet-house-retreat-center)
Or contact Sr. Bobbi at [retreats@smmsisters.org](mailto:retreats@smmsisters.org) or call 309-283-2109