



Grieving in Your Own Way

by Kass Dotterweich

My father's death in 1995 was my first experience of deep grief. Other relatives and friends had died, of course, and I had experienced various kinds of grief other than death. But Dad's death left a vacuum unlike anything I had known.

As I talked about my sadness and grief with others, I received plenty of warmhearted and well-intended guidance, often of a contradictory

CareNotes[™]

*Take One—and take heart.
Give One—and give hope.*

nature. For example, one person said, “Now be sure to get plenty of rest,” while another said, “You’re going to want to stay busy”; one person said, “Relocate to be closer to your mother,” and another said, “Don’t make any major decisions right now.”

After months of listening to these kind directives, I realized that I was not following any of them; rather, I was grieving in my own way. My quiet, contemplative temperament was drawing me toward nature, to take long walks along wooded pathways; my love of books was drawing me toward reading; my passion for writing was driving me to record family history and personal emotions. In my own way, I was moving toward a peacefulness with regard to the vacuum that my father’s death had left. I missed him deeply—I always will—but because I was grieving in my own way, the physical absence of my father was losing its power to make the void a dark, forbidding, and painful place.

Working your way through

To be alive is to experience loss: the death of a loved one, the loss of a valued friendship, deterioration of our bodies, a decline in our sense of financial security, a realization that the God of our prayer is not, in fact, the God of our lived experience.

As a result of these losses, we grieve. Sometimes, our grief is acute; in our waking moments we are distracted with the pain, and in our sleep we are haunted with a sense of darkness. At other times, our grief is subtle; we’re not even

aware that we are grieving, and thus go about doing what we need to do to take care of ourselves. “I didn’t realize how much my son’s starting kindergarten was a time of grieving for me,” recalls Elsie. “Then, at Thanksgiving, when I went to get our holiday tablecloth, I noted that I had done some thorough closet-cleaning during the fall—and I realized right then that I had thrown myself into some major housecleaning as a way of working through a sense of loss in Nathan’s ‘going off to school.’”

The mental wellness field offers an abundance of good advice for those who grieve. This material is especially valuable because it usually gives careful consideration to a person’s age and the kind of loss being grieved. Despite its value, however, such advice will prove of little merit if we do not keep in mind that, ultimately, we must grieve in our own way.

■ **Grieve according to your personality.** I tend to be an introvert; you may be more of an extrovert. I tend to enjoy cold, dark, rainy days; you may dread the gloom. I tend to tire quickly when in a crowd; you may draw energy from being around people. These are personality differences. They are the way we are in life,

You know you are grieving in your own way when you:

Feel a greater measure of peace with each passing day;

Find yourself smiling at simple delights;

Begin to take a renewed interest in your favorite pastimes;

Realize your relationship with God has become more intimate;

Cease to ask “Why me?”;

Want to reach out to others who grieve.

and they bear heavily on the way we grieve. Take a careful inventory of what kind of person you are, and tailor your grief accordingly. The advice of family, friends, and experts will be valuable only if you apply it according to your personality. Choose things that fit your nature and that capitalize on your strengths and minimize your weaknesses.

“Grief can’t be shared. Everyone carries it alone, his own burden, his own way.”

—Anne Morrow Lindbergh

■ **Recall how you’ve grieved in the past.** Think of a time when you grieved a subtle loss, and let that suggest how you might grieve an acute loss. For example, I always grieve when my children leave after being with me over the holidays. As I hug and kiss the last one goodbye, I close the door, turn to face the empty, quiet house, and say to myself, *Now what?* Invariably, I head for the gifts the children gave me. I finger each one, recall the joy in opening it, and imagine what I will do with it or where I’ll put it. *In those subtle moments of loss, I remember the past and look ahead at the same time.*

That very same pattern helped me grieve my father’s death. I recorded all I could remember about special moments with him, and I pondered how precious that written memoir

would be to my children and grandchildren some day in the future, when I’m no longer around to share my memories and tell my stories.

■ **Ritualize.** Rituals are those symbolic gestures we perform to help us make real that which is too much for us to comprehend. Rituals express life’s mystery and meaning, and can take many shapes. They can be extravagant or simple; they can involve others or just ourselves; they can include tangible objects or mere images in our minds. As you grieve, turn to those rituals that have meaning for you.

Rich recalls how lighting a small candle each morning helped him grieve the loss of his job. “I just lit a candle each morning before I

Therapist William Rabior, who has directed grief support groups for over ten years, says, “For many years I have counseled people through various kinds of grief and loss—and invariably I find that people grieve in their own way. I offer directives, support, and guidance, and they use the basics of what I offer in ways that work for them. Often, however, people grieve in ways that are not genuinely healing or healthy.

Because times of loss make us especially vulnerable, we have a tendency to let our weaknesses influence what we do for ourselves. We are at risk of allowing habits that are not good for us under ‘normal’ circumstances influence what we do for ourselves when we’re hurting and grieving. So I always offer this counsel: Do not confuse comfort with escape. We know what we do that isn’t healthy. If we are to grieve in healing ways, we will not turn to unhealthy behaviors. What may appear to be comfort is actually escape and will leave us grieving longer, deeper, as we become less and less healthy.”

opened the Want Ads, and that seemed to help me face the fact that I had lost something important to me—and that there was, for sure, light at the end of the tunnel.”

■ ***Grieve with an image.*** Think about people you admire and who have faced serious grief, and hold their image as you grieve in your own way. “When my son was killed by a drunken driver in an automobile accident,” shares Renee, “I thought of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Her son, too, died unjustly. I thought of how she must have sobbed deeply and raged with anger, and although I still hurt awfully, I felt like I was really with someone who knew what I was going through.” The heroic spirit of others—people you may know personally or only know of—can be intimate companions as you grieve your own personal loss in your own way.

A friend recalls how a gentle rain fell during his mother’s funeral. A relative turned to him and said, “We Irish believe a little rain at the funeral is a good thing; it’s the tears of heaven. And you’ll know your mother’s at peace when you see your next rainbow.” Nine months later, on the morning of Mother’s Day, he saw a rainbow. And every rainbow since has brought a smile to his face and comfort to his heart.

Search your own memory for an image or object that was special to your loved one, or that helps you bring your loved one to mind—a favorite flower, a memorable song, an oft-quoted poem, a special recipe. Find a way to hold onto that

special “icon,” and let it bring you comfort and joy.

■ ***Grieve according to your own personal expectations.*** Nowhere will you find a universal list of “griefs,” for that which saddens one person may be of little consequence to another. When my sister’s cat died, for example, her sobbing moved me deeply, but I would not experience the death of one of my cats to that same degree. Yet, when the cat was dying, we both knew what to expect; my sister knew she would “fall apart,” and I knew I would hold her hand while she cried.

What do you expect of yourself? After all, no one knows that better than you. The fact that your employer gives you three “bereavement days” at the death of a close family member, for example, does not mean that you are finished grieving when you return to work. Grieve what you need to grieve, in your own way, in your own time.

Take heart

Grief, like any emotion, is your own—no one else’s. No one can determine for you *what* you will grieve or *how* you will grieve. You can turn to others for support and practical advice, of course, and this, in fact, is wise. Family and friends can offer comfort, and experts can guide you with healthy counsel.

No one is an island, as we learned from poet John Donne. But you would do yourself a grave disservice if you were to heed the directives of others without checking in with the foremost expert on your grief—you. ■