

GOOD GRIEF! SAYING FAREWELLS & LETTING GO

Grief is a normal part of life. Anthropologists used evidence of funerary rituals to mark the point at which early homo sapiens were considered fully human. More recent studies have confirmed what many people had long observed, that many animals go through periods of mourning in the face of loss. But grief is not just something that accompanies death, it is the process by which we come to terms with many of the changes we face in life. Our success in completing a grief process after significant life changes and losses is one mark of our mental stability. The failure to successfully grieve losses and changes may lead to neuroses and contribute to more serious mental illnesses.

Dia de los Muertos celebrations, funeral and memorial services, ritualized periods of mourning, keening and wailing, and other customs around death and cycles of life and death are often helpful to individuals who are grieving as well as to the communities in which these individuals live. There is no perfect way to go through the grieving process and persons must proceed at their own pace, though many find the mourning periods specified by their religious tradition to be helpful. An Irish Wake will do for some what a period of Sitting Shiva will do for others. An annual period of remembrance like Dia de los Muertos provides an opportunity for loved ones to reconnect with the dead each year when the veil is thin between this world and the nether realm.

Unitarian Universalist Memorial Services usually include a period of sharing memories of the person who has died. This tends to expand the group experience of the deceased while honoring their life and personality. I have come to believe that such sharing of memories is likely the most important way we ceremonially grieve our dead.

In doing dreamwork and in counseling we sometimes talk about the little deaths that we experience in life and in our dreams. These are changes that are significant enough to require some grief work but not actual deaths. These little deaths often herald a change in our self-understanding, self-worth, or relationships. Such little deaths may still require major changes in how we deal with the world physically, emotionally, spiritually, philosophically, or psychologically. Thus talking about grief work in such situations is quite appropriate.

The grief process around major changes, such as job loss, marriage and long-term relationship breakups, child-custody changes, and life altering medical situations such as cancer, strokes, and heart attacks, may be every bit as extensive a process as the deaths of parents, children, or partners. And of course there is much written about stages of grief. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's transformative 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*, has the stages of grief as Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression, and Acceptance. Some experts see these stages as sequential, but I have found them often to be intermixed in an individual's experience. In the case of chronic terminal illnesses, much of the grief process can be completed long before the point of death is reached, for both the individual dying and close family and friends. Like most life-processes, the progression and depth of experience may vary greatly between individuals.

Some religious traditions to some extent subvert the grief process around deaths by promising a future reunion with friends and family members in heaven or some kind of afterlife or through reincarnation. While nobody really knows whether there is anything for us after this life, the absence of loved ones in this life is enough to initiate a grief process even if there were a certainty of something beyond. Even if expectations hopes and dreams may differ, the grieving process is universal.

Mourning and sadness at the absence of a companion is also common to at least most higher mammals. I have observed cats and dogs looking for their companions and exhibiting lower levels of energy when the companion is no longer there. I understand similar behaviors have been observed with elephants, horses, dolphins, and whales.

There is a time component to the grieving process. When memories are fresh after a loss, the pain is greater. Over time, as memories fade, it is easier to get through each day without people who have meant much to us. After a year, most people have completed most of the stages of grief, though there will be moments and days of sharp memories that occur for unknown reasons, or around anniversaries, birthdays, and other special days. Unless we have lost our memories to senile dementia or Alzheimer's Disease or are suffering from some kind of amnesia, we will always have memories of those people who have been particularly important in our lives. When we can remember those special people mostly in good memories and without pain, we have likely reached the point of acceptance. If the pain of loss is still causing one to be unable to function after several months or a year, it is likely that professional help will be needed.

As we age, there is also frequently a sense of grieving for our youth that affects many persons. This may appear suddenly when we are faced with physical challenges that once we could easily accomplish which we can no longer do. Depression and loss of energy and sex drive may also accompany this kind of grief. As much as science and medicine have done to make our lives longer and better, humanity remains a terminal condition. The awareness that we will someday die has long been thought to be a sign of species intelligence in our self-awareness. Our lives, no matter how rich and full they are, will not last forever, at least on this earth. The drive to excel so as to leave a mark for future generations, as well as ultimate ontological depression may both come from this same awareness.

Denial, anger, bargaining, and depression probably need little elaboration or explanation, but acceptance, real acceptance is often one of the most elusive characteristics of life. How does one get to a point of acceptance about anything? Some might argue that we only get to the point of acceptance by going through all the harder more painful experiences, that we cannot really even understand acceptance until we have walked through much pain and wilderness. I have run into many people over the years who convinced themselves that they had accepted whatever situation they were in even though their behavior was frequently at odds with that assertion. In terms of the grieving process, getting to acceptance too quickly often means that anger, denial, bargaining, or depression will creep back in unsuspected. For some, assertions that they are alright may be another form of denial. Our society doesn't like talking about death or aging or the less savory sides of life, which in itself is a form of denial. The assertion that everything is fine, personally or in regard to society so often denies much that is wrong in our lives and with society.

To reach a point of acceptance, though, is really important. In our relationships, in our self-understanding, in our feelings about death whether our own or someone else's close to us, to reach acceptance is a great gift. When we reach real acceptance, we are able to let go of our fears and relate to others authentically, without pretext or secret agenda, but in a way that is fully present, fully aware, genuine.

As a movement, the Unitarians used to talk about Tolerance, and tolerance was surely better than intolerance, but acceptance is at least a level above tolerance for it recognizes not just the other's right to be wrong, but rather acknowledges that another may have as good or better an understanding of reality, truth, belief. Acceptance is much harder than tolerance because it presupposes that our own understanding may not be the highest or best, that we ourselves may be the one who errs. Tolerance too often is condescending, but acceptance is a more egalitarian goal for our age.

So, in the grieving process, acceptance is beyond denial, anger, bargaining and depression. It is the point at which one can truly move on with life, or if we ourselves are the ones dying, we can die freely, openly, curiously about what may come each day. Acceptance is the point from which we can truly let go of all the things that hold us back in life and in death. And letting go is a very good thing. Holding on to people and stuff and unrealized hopes and dreams can destroy our lives, take away our freedom, enslave us. Letting go frees us to enjoy all that we might experience, to learn from everyone we meet, to relate freely and with acceptance for all. Letting go is creative, and inspiring and it is the doorway to transformation.

If we hold on too tightly to what we thought the end of our lives might be, we will never see the possibilities for what we can yet see, experience, and accomplish. And if we hold on too tightly to those who are dying we may prevent them from reaching their own point of acceptance that may bring comfort of mind and spirit. Our medical health complex has often worried too much about length of life rather than accepting that even a short life may have great quality. The goal of keeping someone alive at all costs is a false goal, for when the quality of life is gone, life no longer has meaning. The uproar about euthanasia is discouraging because it is so unlikely that anyone with any quality of life would choose that route. Those with treatable depression would generally not qualify anyway, but many illnesses become so debilitating in their later stages that I would like to see alternatives available including the option of ending life on one's own terms.

Acceptance of the shortness of life and the meaning of death may change how we see many things. I want to live a good long life, but if I am unable to speak or think or move, then I hope those around me will have a sufficient level of understanding and acceptance to pull the plug. When life has lost its meaning for me, I will be ready to move on even if I expect nothing beyond this life. Until then, I plan to enjoy life as fully as I can, but when the time comes, please pull the plug. Perhaps I will be surprised to see those I have lost on some beautiful clouds with gentle harp music playing, but if not, ok!

Whales and tortoises and redwoods may get longer lives, but as I approach 3 score years, I have few complaints. I'd like to reach 4 score and ten, but even if I only make 3 score and ten I won't complain! If we have lived a life with meaning, it is easier to accept getting older, easier to be grateful about the experiences and relationships we have enjoyed. We all make mistakes and experience failures and broken relationships, but we all also have loved at least some others and done some good things in our lives. Acceptance starts in our own experience and over our own lives. If we love and accept ourselves, we can accept and understand almost anything. If we love and accept ourselves, we can love and accept others even if we disagree, even if we think they are wrong, even if another is dying.

Grief can be a long and difficult process, but experiencing grief is a human lesson that helps us come to acceptance and acceptance of ourselves and others may express the highest level of wisdom we are likely to reach! Unfortunately the lesson is learned through the whole process including denial, anger, bargaining, and depression. We can't just jump to acceptance unless we have already grieved deeply, and each death calls us to grieve. Many life changes also call us to grieve, and in our grieving in each of those situations, our acceptance, love, wisdom and courage may increase!

We are here in this community to support each other, when we mourn and when we celebrate. This is a gift that we give each other. This is what is most deeply at the core of community. We are here for each other.

So may it always be! Amen!