

Bringing Him (to) the Water | The Labyrinth

Natural Transitions

Sharing holistic approaches to end of life

Magazine



9/11 Widow:
Look Back Without Anger

The Other
Side of Sadness



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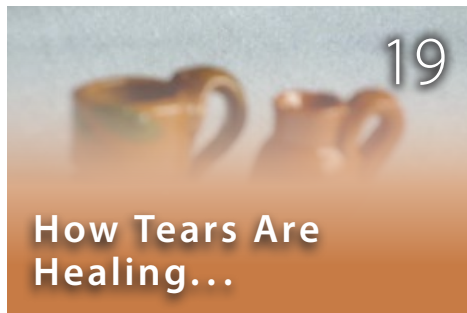
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It's always storming somewhere in this world.
A baby is always dying somewhere in this world.
We understand that Nature takes her course.
But when the hurricane blasts apart our very own home,
When the lost baby was cradled in our very own heart,
We ask, "Why?"
And the pain of our loss
Leaves no room for a reply.
For now, we can only cry.

I have mourned many a time, more so as I've reached middle-age. Each new sorrow seems to tap into a state called grieving that is always accessible but is sometimes difficult to leave. I see healing from grief as not so much getting over the loss as a mending of the ragged edges torn, an opportunity for new growth in order to bring connection with others back to healthier levels. While I believe that grief is not something we ever get rid of, we can try to steer clear of the disabling malady of disconnecting with life. Trying to preserve or recapture the life we had before loss more closely resembles an attempt at historical reenactment than really living in the present.

From the pioneering explorations of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, we learned her five-element paradigm of the Stages of Grief. Kubler-Ross based her work on the grieving processes of those who were, themselves, dying, and her groundbreaking work opened the door on the beginnings of understanding grieving. However, because her model was the first on this subject, it was used too rigidly, in some cases; some mourners whose grieving-styles did not match the anticipated "schedule" were believed to need – and were coerced into – psychiatric care.

Now, we have a broader base of information about grief, presented in a heartfelt and meaningful way by George A. Bonanno, psychologist and expert on grief and emotions, in his book *The Other Side of Sadness*. No longer do we have to fear that a different picture automatically means that someone is stuck in denial. We can participate in our grieving processes as they unfold, knowing that there is no one right way to feel or act in this circumstance. This book can educate and be supportive to professionals and families alike. Please see our review on page 31.

The articles in this issue are meant to broaden your range of tools for living with grief. From community grief ceremonies to the solitary walking of a labyrinth; from wilderness conversations with mortality to the support and anger in the 9-11 community; from the larger picture of grief in Bonanno's book to one widow's very personal color of grief – we offer possibilities for living better – and more fully – with grieving.

Natural Transitions

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Magazine

Issue 3 - Fall 2011: Living with Grieving

Our Vision

- Acceptance of death, loss and grief as a natural part of life

Our Mission

- To share holistic approaches to end of life
- To provide a forum for end-of-life care-givers and educators

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Natural Transitions' Mission

- Conscious, holistic education and support for dying, death and after-death care - including green, home funerals

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natural transitions news

When we first started “Natural Transitions,” it was important to have the word “guidance” in our name. We were originally “Natural Transitions Funeral Guidance.” The “guidance” part of our name emphasized our educational role and the ability to empower families to make end-of-life and after-death-care choices that were more personal, more meaningful, and environmentally sound. Now, our mission speaks of providing conscious, holistic education and support for end of life, including green, home funerals.

Yet, our working to provide direct care as guides continues. We still field calls from all over our state and beyond, and we hear from people seeking guidance on how to create a more meaningful, healing experience at the end of life. During one week, we'll hear from a mother whose teen-age daughter has committed suicide. She wants to know about the greenest funeral options. Then, a woman with metastatic breast cancer calls. She's worried about how her children will deal with an “ugly” dying process. A third woman contacts us late at night. She's angry that her husband is suddenly dying, and she cannot come to terms with it. Some people crave information about options in order to make choices. Others long to talk and need to feel heard. We're proud that NTM is the

ideal forum for the exploration of how we navigate the journey to our common destination. It complements our work and augments our mission perfectly.

Another aspect of our work is public education about end of life. Besides this magazine, we co-sponsor the Life and Death Matters Festival. September 1-4, approximately 1,000 people filed through the doors of the Nomad Theater in Boulder, Colorado, for film, theatre, and educational programming.

Keynote speaker, Temple Grandin, spoke of her journey of embracing the gifts of autism and using her talents to create more humane handling-systems for farm animals. Filmmakers from as far away as Germany traveled to experience the honor of seeing their work as part of the festival line-up. Mark Smolowitz, director of “The Power of Two,” collected the festival's Best Documentary Award for his inspirational tale of the Stenzel twins, Japanese-American sisters with cystic fibrosis, who received two new chances at life through organ donation. Mark Wexler's “How to Live Forever” won the Audience Choice Best Documentary Award for his light-hearted exploration of the lust for longevity. Find out more about future Life And Death Matters at www.ladmatters.com.

Artists Brighten Bereavement: Transposing Joyful Memories into Tangible Art Creations

by Bereavement Artists

Bereavement actually can have a brighter side – the “sweet” in the bittersweet journey of grief.

A nationwide niche of artists who know how to celebrate the life of a loved one can be found at BereavementArtists.com – a non-profit directory of artisans who specialize in customized bereavement work. From quilts, collages, portraits, jewelry, urns, and more, the purpose of the site is to connect any interested party, anywhere, to a desired art form and artist that speak to individual tastes, needs, and budgets.

Likewise, the bereavement artists’ goal is to transpose the joyful memories and essences of loved ones in lasting, tangible ways via custom art creations. “We are a community of artists who really enjoy working with the bereaved and who have a special gift. It’s not grim for us; it’s about lifting spirits up,” says Anita Larson, one artist who has put her heart and energy into launching BereavementArtists.com.

Bereavement artists may have been called to their work because they have lost a child, parent, or close companion.

This was the case for Teresa Dunwell. Her son, Sean, was four years old when he died quite suddenly. His memory lives in the work that she does as a painter. “I use the gift of Sean’s passing to help others to celebrate the life of their loved one. My gift is to be able to paint a ‘soul’s essence’ using their cremains as well as sensing their energies through a photo or a memento. This way of painting flows from a Divine source. I am just an open and willing channel of that grace of love and presence.”

Teresa apprenticed with a Hungarian visionary artist accomplished in the “Renaissance technique” – making paints composed of powdered pigment and egg yolk. This sacred process brings luminosity of spirit and many different dimensions to the “soul work” that she calls “Memorial Icons.”

Teresa feels honored to witness the process of the transformative power of healing as the bereaved move through the journey of grief. She also has reverence for the celebration and remembrance of the loved one’s spirit, which, in her perception, has become free and light-filled in its very essence. “As I have been led through this intense grief process myself, it is my sincerest desire and passion to help others find comfort and peace through a living representation of their loved one’s transformed light and energy.”



Another Angel Gets Its Wings • memorial icon with cremains

For years, artist and author of this article, Gina Klawitter, heard from customers, friends, and colleagues that her clothing-collage art could benefit the bereaved. She set these comments aside, however, because she felt unsure about how to approach that community. Finally, after getting the suggestion again and again, she reached out to Denver’s St. Joseph Hospital’s Chaplain Services and the local bereavement support community.

In turn, Gina received guidance, encouragement, and connections with those in need. Her bereavement service has been more gratifying – as well as surprisingly fun – than she ever imagined it could be.

From the tute of a four-year-old who had died to a mother’s signature sweater, Gina has used her art to help families enjoy their deceased loved ones’ possessions. For many in the throes of grieving, having to deal with the personal belongings of those who have passed can be very difficult. Meaningful, memorable possessions are frequently stored in basements or drawers or displayed in standard shadow boxes. Gina helps families share and enjoy such cherished items by re-forming clothing and other items into life-like, celebratory portraits. She calls her unique collage art “Alive on Canvas”™.

“It’s like he’s there!” Barb exclaimed when she first saw the art created from son Zachary’s beloved baseball T-shirt, cap, and related memorabilia. Nine years after Zachary’s death, Barb and her family had sorted through boxes of his belongings, reminisced, consulted with one

another, selected certain objects, and worked with Gina as she composed and created his special art-piece. Today, the family treasures Zachary's joyful collage, which fosters cherished remembrance.

Aubrey's Disney Princess tutu and well-worn shoes lay on her mother's dresser. Aubrey had died in an accident six months prior. Jeannie, her mother, had wanted to commemorate and celebrate Aubrey's life. She had also wanted to preserve and enjoy Aubrey's room and possessions. Jeannie decided to have two art pieces created. Aubrey had been happiest dancing around the house. A merry collage of her tutu and dance shoes now decorates Aubrey's repurposed bedroom. Art made from the outfit worn on her last day – a happy one spent with family at the zoo – is proudly displayed in the living room.

Some clients have definite articles of clothing in mind for artistic preservation. Many have several items and related memories they'd like to use. Through a process of showing and telling, a story is composed that captures the loved ones' essences. The created art-pieces are shared with clients at different stages for feedback and confirmation. Gina's "Alive on Canvas"™ portraits and collages are expressive options for bereaved families who wish to celebrate and memorialize loved ones who have died. The deeper purpose of her unique art is to lift grieving spirits, to celebrate the sweetness of lives that have ended.

Indeed, some are even has the power to bring bereaved family members together – as demonstrated by some of Anita Larson's collage work.

Kathryn was 22 when her mother was in a tragic car accident – she did not recover. Twenty-two years later, Kathryn's sister passed away from cancer at age 48. In 2010, her brother died unexpectedly from complications after surgery. The grief was overwhelming to Kathryn and her father – the only remaining members of this family.

For years, the relationship between Kathryn and her father had been difficult, at best. After each death, rather than growing closer, they had grown even further apart. Her father was in his late 80s, and Kathryn couldn't help but wonder if she and her father would ever reconcile.

Father's Day was approaching, and she wanted to give him something meaningful. She contacted Anita with "Art Honoring Life" to create a memory-collage

for her dad in honor of her departed brother and sister. As she carefully wrapped the artwork for shipping, she pictured him opening it and wondered what his reaction would be.

Kathryn included a handwritten note that said, "I commissioned this artwork in memory of the first two people to call you Dad." On the day the package was scheduled to arrive, she didn't hear from him. She wouldn't know until she spoke with him on Father's Day that he had been so overcome with emotion the day he received her gift that he had been unable to speak.

As he told Kathryn how much he appreciated her thoughtful gift, his voice cracked with emotion. "They were really cute kids," he said, choking back tears. He thanked her repeatedly. As their conversation came to a close, he asked her if they could keep in touch via Skype. Kathryn was astounded. They had spoken periodically, but he had never expressed a desire for face-to-face contact.

Custom-made bereavement art has evolved even further as some artists have focused on buoying up those who face their own long-term life-challenges, such as cancer.

Photographer Katy Tartakoff specializes in bringing such families together, and she captures celebrations of life and enduring love at her portrait studio. Angela Canada Hopkins helps clients approach their cancer by embracing it: She lays out colorful, playful, spontaneous images of cellular matter through her brush.

Grief, death, and bereavement are often considered taboo topics in Western culture. However, a shift in the ways many people are learning to process loss has begun – and bereavement artists are part of this evolving view.

BereavementArtists.com is one option that provides viable alternatives to those who grieve, as well as new perspectives that can bring greater degrees of comfort during difficult times.

"Clients smile and hug me when they see their pieces. We even have a few laughs along the way," says co-founder Gina Klawitter. "They delight in sharing their loved one's art with others. Tender, joyful stories are relayed."



Zachary's Gift

For contact information on more than 30 bereavement artists, please visit BereavementArtists.com or email info@BereavementArtists.com.

Grief as a Rite of Passage: Wilderness as Teacher

by Roy Remer

Although I have served in hospice for more than 13 years – an experience that has changed my life – I have learned even more about my own death from time I have spent sitting quietly in nature for days on end with nothing more than water, a sleeping bag, and the clothes on my back. I have experienced Bar Mitzvah, graduations, and marriage – and I feel that I have consciously begun to mark the transitions from one stage of life to the next only recently.

I will be forever grateful to my friend and teacher, Scott Eberle, hospice physician and author of *The Final Crossing: Learning to Die in Order to Live*, for introducing me to wilderness rites of passage.

I met Scott several years ago at a volunteer community meeting at Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco. I was already an avid backpacker and climber and had achieved a high level of comfort venturing into wilderness areas. In Scott's presentation that evening, he spoke of marrying the passion for service in hospice with the joy of being outdoors. I immediately understood the inherent relationship between rites of passage in the wilderness and the experiences of dying and death. I wanted to explore the ways in which wilderness rites of passage could prepare us for death and how the steps inherent in rites of passage could guide me – anyone – through the process of grief.

Since that time, I have participated in numerous rites-of-passage programs as both a participant and a leader. Solo fasting in wilderness has become my personal form of prayer. Again and again, I have returned to the land to be held – and to turn toward my own suffering. The ordeal of sitting alone for days, foregoing food, acts as a doorway by which I leave my old self behind and am “reborn” into something new. I feel a kinship with the ancients who sat quietly upon the land and died long before I was born.

Throughout human history, our ancestors have honored the transitions from one phase of life to the next. In every society, until very recently, initiation and rites of passage were woven into the fabric of life. The passages from youth to adulthood, adulthood to elderhood, and elderhood to death were witnessed, celebrated, and held in community. Rites of passage – whether the Native American vision quest, tattooing in New Zealand or the Philippines, or lion-hunting among the Masai – marked one's place in the society.

Contemporary culture – particularly Western culture – has lost touch with these important ceremonies. So much of our society exists within an unbalanced and, at times, bizarre cultural context. Mortality is often denied. We have become obsessed with youthfulness and seem to have lost respect for the wisdom and honor that comes with growing old. So many of us look to technology to rescue us from the inevitabilities of old age, sickness, and death. One popular way of relating to death is via the macabre or dehumanizing images of violent death – computer-generated or

real. Many among us are no longer able to discern the differences between glorifying death and honoring it. Modern wilderness rites of passage can act as powerful antidotes to the dehumanizing influences of much of contemporary culture.

The more I sit with the dying, the more I view death as a spiritual experience that is worthy of our respect, love, and ardent attention. In hospice, I have learned that the life-changing experiences of witnessing death often catch people by surprise. While unwelcome, the grief that follows the death of a loved one, a close friend, or even an animal-companion can be one of life's most transformative experiences.

My practice in the wilderness has deepened my understanding and appreciation of grief. Anthropologists who have studied rites-of-passage practices have identified three stages common to all cultures: severance, the threshold experience, and incorporation. By viewing loss as a rite of passage, I have come to believe that grief offers the potential for personal evolution, gifts for the people around us, and acceptance of our own eventual passing.

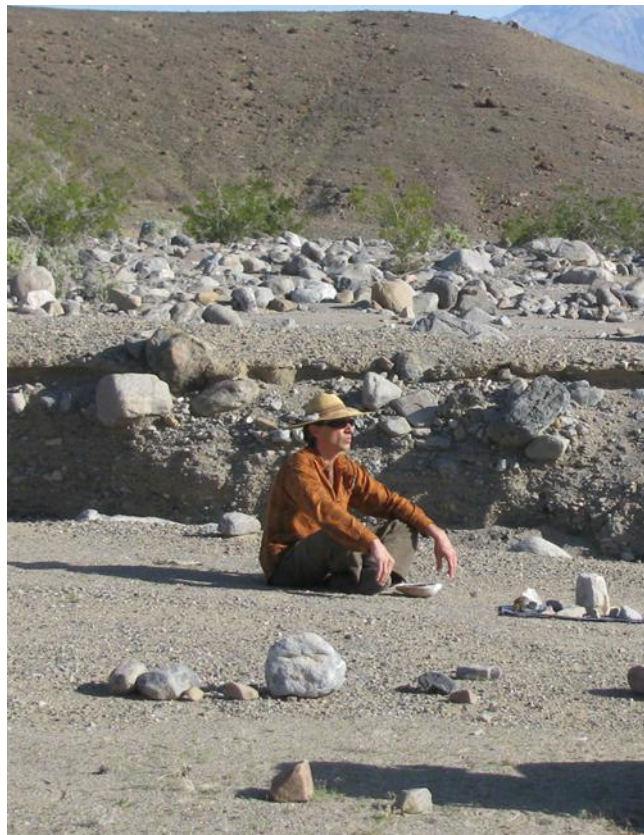
Following the death of a loved one, we often feel isolated from those around us, trapped in the unique storm of our emotions. Friends and family upon whom we usually count for connection and comfort may feel helpless and unable to offer solace, or they may be caught up in their own grieving. In grief, the once-familiar can become strange and alien. The personal crisis that death can bring is an unanticipated disconnection from the life and people we have known. In this severance stage, we can find ourselves cast into uncharted waters with no shore in sight and no one we can look to for rescue.

Cut off from the familiar by our loss, we experience intense suffering. We may feel as if we can't go on living. We can become inconsolable and helpless. Simply making it through the day can become an enormous effort, eating and sleeping can seem impossibly challenging, and the simplest tasks can easily overwhelm us. We can lose our capacity to imagine that the pain will ever end. In grief, we can be emotionally thrashed upon the rocks, broken and dismembered. This is the threshold experience of loss.

In any threshold experience, the suffering itself is the chrysalis of change: The more extreme the suffering, the more profound the transformation. When significant loss occurs, we don't necessarily seek transformation, but we do change. It has been said that, when a loved one dies, he or she takes a bit of us with them. In grief, our self-identity shifts, and resistance likely only brings more pain. After loss, we simply are not the person we once were.

Weeks, months, or even years after loss – there is no timetable – the overwhelming nature of grief begins to subside. Gradually, we become familiar with a new way of living life without the presence of our loved one. Connections with friends and family may be renewed. Others might find it easier to be around us. We are freer to reunite with the body of our community. This is the incorporation phase of our grief.

Any meaningful rite of passage offers insights and gifts. The suffering loss brings, although initially incapacitating, can transform into wisdom about the nature of our existence. The gifts of the ordeal are not ours to keep, however; we would do well to share them with those around us. Once grief subsides, we may feel moved to serve others in need. In many hospices, countless caregiver-volunteers have been inspired to offer to serve after experiencing the death of their



Roy with his altar

© All photographs Lydija Bird

loved ones. The incorporation stage is about being seen in a new light, which may translate into service to one's community.

Grief also confronts us with the reality of death as a natural part of life. When we prepare for our own death, we get to know and address our fears. Becoming intimate with our fears about death does not necessarily mean we will overcome them; however, it can mean that we develop more ease and familiarity with being fearful, which normalizes the experience – and this can serve us and those around us – at the end of life. Coming to terms with our own mortality and preparing for our death in advance is a blessing to others in our life. Instead of resisting this eventuality, we can model a peaceful acceptance of death.

Embracing death as a natural part of life requires acceptance of all life's transitions. How we face the changes that lead up to death will help determine the way we meet it when it comes. Although nothing can remove or minimize the impact of the death of a loved one, we can still prepare for the overwhelming nature of grief. We can begin to understand that grief – and the intense suffering it brings – is an essential and unavoidable human experience. It is the

portal through which we must pass to step into a new stage of life. We can take solace in the knowledge that grief can evolve into positive outcomes, which can be of benefit to others around us and that we will carry for the rest of our lives.

Roy Remer is the facility/volunteer manager at Zen Hospice Project's Guest House facility in San Francisco (www.zenhospice.org). He also guides wilderness rites-of-passage programs with Earthways, based in Sebastopol, CA (www.earthways.info).



The Labyrinth: A Metaphor

by Carole Lindroos, MA, LPC

A most valuable support in my grief-journey has been walking the labyrinth, which is an ancient spiritual configuration.

Labyrinths have been used by many cultures and religions for more than 4,000 years. Many varieties have been found in churches and cathedrals, as well as in landscapes and carved on rocks.

Labyrinths have single, winding, purposeful paths from their mouths or entrances to their centers – that same path leads back out again. Unlike mazes, they have no dead ends or wrong turns. Designed primarily to provide the participant meditative and contemplative experiences, labyrinths have ancient origins. Some believe that their use began during the Crusades, when pilgrimages to Jerusalem were no longer considered safe. However, this belief has been disputed, especially in light of many discoveries of labyrinthine carvings that predate these claims by centuries and even millennia.

The labyrinth as metaphor for the grieving process

The labyrinth-experience can be interpreted and used as a profound metaphor for the grieving process. There is only one way to walk, which is forward – and so it is with grief. The only way through is forward, with many twisting turns that travel back and forth over what may seem to be the same familiar territory. After we journey to the center of our grief – to the center of ourselves and the center of the labyrinth – we can then slowly return in order to re-enter the world anew. The circuitous path contains within it a rather mystical offer of hope and healing to all who enter. Each walk is potentially unique, which may be the result of the inherent uniqueness of our personal journeys and destinies.

Labyrinths offer refuges within which to safely navigate the emotional world of grieving. There is a

beginning, middle, and an end to the labyrinth walk, which can help us to experience the often-overwhelming nature of grief.

“The labyrinth is an archetypal image of wholeness that helps us rediscover the depths of ourselves,” according to Dr. Lauren Artress of Canon Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

The well-known labyrinth on the floor of Chartres Cathedral, southwest of Paris, has 11 circuits. The path is narrow enough that one must focus to stay on the path – it is not wide enough to allow another to pass without the first person stepping aside.

There is no one way to walk a labyrinth, just as there is no single way to grieve. We each travel the path before us at our own pace. The journey is neither direct nor straight and takes unexpected turns. By simply putting one foot in front of the other, we arrive where we are supposed to be. What happens inside the labyrinth can be a metaphor for life – as well as the role grief plays as a natural part of life.

For some, walking a labyrinth represents a time for peaceful reflection, like a stroll in the woods. For others, the experience is profound and comes with transformative insights. Labyrinths can be used to find hope and inspiration during the grief-process. They may symbolize or enhance prayer, ritual, remembrance, or time with a loved one who is dying or who has passed. The experience has the potential to calm, energize, clear, or give meaning or understanding. It can facilitate letting go, change, transition, and reconciliation.

Rituals formalize life’s many passages and offer opportunities to constructively reassess how its many elements might fit together anew. Reflecting on one’s actual position within the labyrinth can turn the simple experience of walking its path into a mind/body/spirit connection with the potential for wholeness. Thomas

Moore, in *The Education of the Heart*, says that rituals are, "... any action that speaks to the soul and to the deep imagination whether or not it all has practical effects... Even the smallest of rites of everyday existence are important to the soul."

A ritual is a structured experience designed to celebrate life. It creates a container in which we can learn more about ourselves and our relationships with others. Rituals deepen our connection to our psychological and spiritual centers. Within the labyrinth, many personalized rituals are possible. There are many ways of fitting the changing events of life together to make things whole.

A labyrinth can be walked with the intention of moving toward the healing of grief. This can be done alone or with a group and with any type of labyrinth. I am grateful to the teachers in my life that brought labyrinths alive for me during my personal grief-journey.

To use the labyrinth as a template to guide the journey through the grieving process, the first task is to physically locate one. This may be an outdoor walking labyrinth, one within a house of worship, or even a finger-labyrinth. The finger-labyrinth is a small version of the walking labyrinth and can be made of various materials. Usually, it is three-dimensional in order to allow fingers to follow the grooved path without having to look at it. Many finger-labyrinths are portable and can be used anytime.

First, reflect on your grief process and remember your loved one who has died. (Looking at old photographs usually stirs memories.) You might ask the question, "Will using this labyrinth be helpful for me?" Then, start your walk and release any thoughts or feelings as they come up. Walk as slowly as you like, stopping as you feel inclined. When you arrive at the center, just notice what happens. Is there an answer for you, any guidance or any inspiration to continue using the labyrinth in your grief-related healing work? When you feel ready, walk back out, and return to where you began. Write in your journal what just happened. What did you feel as you made your way? Maybe nothing... (No judgments!) Maybe you feel differently now. What did you discover? Maybe you learned you want to explore the grief-labyrinth model further.

Whether you choose to walk the labyrinth or not, the four themes of labyrinth walking can be very helpful as reference points as you progress through your grieving. Bear in mind that this is not a linear process but, rather, multi-dimensional. Working through your grieving requires times for reflection, remembering, and reviewing your loved one's life – and your life with him or her.

Consider the four R's of labyrinth-walking:

- **Review:** allows for reflection, remembering and gratitude.
- **Release:** a time of letting go, clearing out, resolving the past, and creating space in your life
- **Receive:** the opportunity to open up to possibilities – a sense of freedom, some relaxation, and time to embrace peace and acceptance. Most likely, you will cycle through reviewing and releasing many times.
- **Return:** to your present life and circumstances, and reconnect with your values, experiences, and beliefs that have given meaning to your life. Remember that your beliefs may change or be magnified during the course of your grieving.

Grief work is hard! The labyrinth offers sanctuary where you can grow through your grief and renew yourself. It can become a container for grieving that you can step into and step out of.

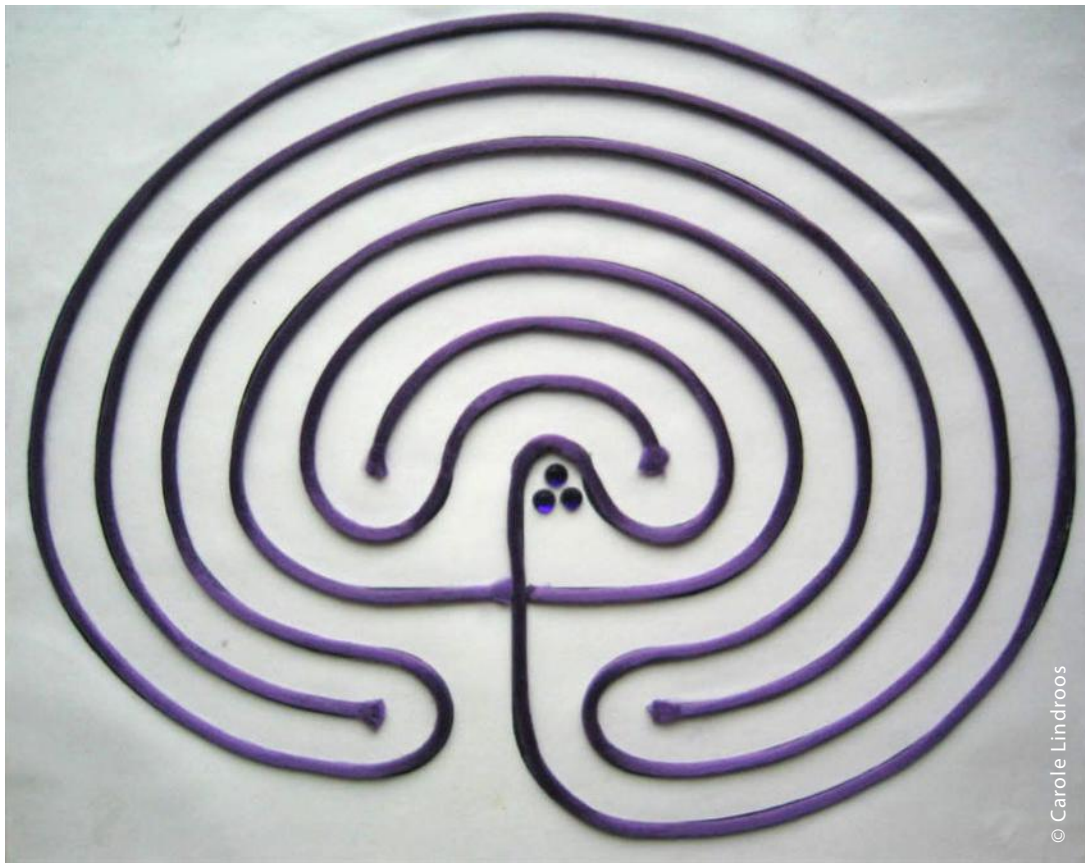
I have walked the Chartres labyrinth in France, Grace Cathedral labyrinth in San Francisco, and local labyrinths near my home in Boulder, Colorado. I have also walked the labyrinth to help focus my writing as I have continued my healing. I have found the finger-labyrinth to be of special importance, simply because I can always have it with me. I have also used it to assist others in their dying and grieving processes when working as a spiritual counselor with a local hospice.

The labyrinth is a sacred path where the mystical meets the ordinary, the divine touches the mundane, and the physical body supports the spiritual body. It is a path of deep silence. In the labyrinth, the mind-chatter of daily life can quiet itself. There is space for deep listening.

How to use the labyrinth

I mainly "walk" my simple handmade finger-labyrinth. It is 8 x 10 inches and made from a piece of Styrofoam® board on which a purple satin rounded ribbon is glued to mark "the path." At the center are three small colored beads. I "walk" it using my index finger to trace the pattern while my eyes are closed. I usually use my right hand but, at times, use my left.

Before I begin, I sit quietly with the labyrinth on my lap



A Finger Labyrinth

and take time to review or reflect upon where I am in my grief-process and life-journey. Often, I set an intention for the walk. I may be reviewing the past, remembering what my daughter, Inga, might have said in circumstances in which I find myself in my present life. I often look at photos of Inga, who died of breast cancer when she was 30, and contemplate those times in her life. I sometimes ask for help and guidance in navigating my emotional life. This may also be in the form of a question I pose such as, “What do I need today to support myself in my grief?”

After review and reflection, I close my eyes, enter the labyrinth with the index finger of my right hand, and feel the sensation of my contact with the satin ribbon. I notice when thoughts, sensations, or emotions arise, release them, and return to my finger-walking through the labyrinth. Usually, I move very slowly through the many curves of the winding path. I might stop if strong feelings come up and give myself all the time I need to move through or with them.

There is not a right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth, but I notice I do have my own rhythm, which is comforting. As with any contemplative practice, the experiences are greatly varied, but I do feel it always helps to calm and contain my often-wild mind. Grief often feels out of control. Walking the labyrinth is a time for containment and centering.

When I reach the center – the “destination” – I am usually a little surprised to feel the three beads, which let me know I have arrived. Here, I rest with an open mind and heart and a readiness to receive. I wait for whatever comes. If I have posed a question, I am attentive to my first thoughts, in particular. Sometimes, a sensation or a simple word may be what stands out. Sometimes, nothing really happens – or I might have a dialogue with Inga there or feel her presence. I have experienced senses of deep understanding that have not had words – a kind of transcendent knowing. Ultimately, my sense of trust has been built anew every time I have arrived at the center.

Again, a labyrinth is not a maze – one always arrives at the center, just as I reach my own center as I repeat this experience again and again. The more I walk it, the more I find the depth of my wholeness and how sacred life really is.

At some point, I leave the center and return to reconnect with my everyday world, always with whatever insight or sensation I have received. I usually feel lighter, and my return walk is at a different pace than my walk toward the center. I do the return walk still noticing the contact my finger makes with the smooth texture of the ribbon. I try not to get into too much evaluation of what has occurred and to just stay with the experience and sensations. I still keep my eyes closed throughout and, often, I smile, which spontaneously comes as I cross over the entry point, which marks my finish.

I encourage each of you to walk a labyrinth for yourselves. Take time to delve into your own grieving.

Carole Lindroos, MA, LPC, is a licensed psychotherapist and grief counselor in Boulder, Colorado. She has supported cancer patients and their families for 17 years and has worked as a hospice chaplain. Carole has four grandchildren and is an avid Argentine-tango dancer.

Blue is the color of grief.

So is red; green; yellow; black; orange; white; or any color that The Style Crone (my blog name) randomly grasps on the days that run together in slow motion.

I notice, simply notice. A change has occurred. I walk aimlessly in the hat room, having difficulty deciding which beauty makes sense to me today, which crown will top the outfit that I have little energy to create from a disorganized inventory that seems hesitant to pull me into what used to be a comforting and familiar haven.

Spontaneously stopping by a friend's home several weeks ago, I was unaware that, soon, I would descend into a grief so deep that I could barely move.

Passing the three-month mark has been discussed in books about grief, and hospice does not accept the bereaved into their "Creative Arts Support Group" that I will be attending until this time-period has passed. So this is what they meant!...that the state of shock would pass, and the reality of loss would inhabit my body...that I would become physically ill, my body collapsing into itself.

I had remained healthy during the six-plus years of Nelson's illness, his death, and the planning and execution of his memorial service.

I am riding an elevator with no operator or buttons that control the floor that I would like to access. I have no control of the up or down, the in or out. I descend and explore a memory, a facet of our relationship that I hadn't thought of before, an insight that had eluded me in the past. I feel immobilized and have difficulty communicating with others.

I feel more comfortable just sinking into it, the "it" of a fierce sadness that had not been exposed until this point in time. Multiple emotions and feelings sweep through me: sadness, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, confusion. Nothing seems off-limits as I give in to each, giving it a space to rush in and move out.

In a weakened state, I continue to go to yoga, meditate, eat, sleep, and maintain the bare minimum of my life, because I know, beneath all of this, I long to reach for reconciliation. I yearn to explore my plans and dreams that seem so remote and far away

that I can barely feel them, imagine them, flow with them.

[I'm] Waiting for the elevator to move up again to a floor that allows me to gasp for air before it lowers me to another level, unexpectedly, delivering me to the next degree of intensity, a place beyond sadness, a place so deep – a place shared by many before and with me at this time.

Within this space, I know a seed has been planted and will, at some point, grow.

Despite the pain and struggle, I have hope that this elevator will take me up to a level where I can once again enjoy the light of my experience, that all my dreams and plans will grow from this new depth that I have fully experienced and allowed – although I feel I have little control over the timing.

And, from this "knowing," I will somehow bloom anew, eager to discover the resplendent head-wear of the world. But not today...and I don't know when that day will come.

Judith Boyd has chosen her outfits, always including a hat, as a creative expression, a form of meditation: first, as a psychiatric nurse; then, six years as husband Nelson's caregiver as he faced a rare form of cancer; and now, grieving his death. She shares this powerful body art by chronicling her "displays" and experiences on stylecrone.com.

The Color of Grief

By Judith Boyd

Altar Therapy

by Alakananda Ma



Altar of Strength

Grief is a profound experience, reaching into the limbic brain to produce intense visceral sensations. Because of its limbic nature, grief cannot be addressed effectively by words alone. Actions of ritual and ceremony that involve the whole body are immensely helpful to the process of moving through grief.

Altar therapy is an example of a whole-body approach that also makes use of the healing power of time and repetition. Based on a West African ritual taught by Sobonfu Somé, Altar Therapy has been adapted to suit American lifestyles.

Although helpful for all kinds of grief, Altar Therapy is especially valuable for intensely complex and difficult grief-situations, such as abortion, miscarriage, stillbirth, rape, missing persons, or divorce. Typically, for these life-events, there are no ceremonies, condolence cards, or opportunities for community-comforting. Through Altar Therapy, we can reclaim our need to honor and mourn these defining experiences.

Creating Your Altars

Altar Therapy can be performed by anyone of any tradition. To begin the process as it has been traditionally practiced, set up three altars.

The first should be outdoors -- in your garden, on your patio or terrace, or any safe outdoor space to which you have access. This will be your Grief Altar. Rocks, painted pebbles, crystals, shells, moss, plants,

ceramics, wood, prayer flags, bottles, and statues can be used for your grief altar – whatever you choose to represent your grief and that will allow you to create a safe space to mourn. “Apache Tears” are particularly valuable for your grief altar. These black volcanic obsidian stones from the Southwestern United States are said to be the crystallized tears of Apache women after the massacre of Apache warriors. They energetically absorb grief and bring forgiveness. After completing your grief work, you can bury your Apache tears to allow Mother Earth to process any left over grief.

The other two altars can be set up in safe spaces inside your home. Choose a quiet corner or even a walk-in closet.

The second altar is your Altar of Strength. To set it up, use a table, large box, or an arrangement of bricks and boards. The Tohono O’odham (Papago) Indians make three-tiered altars from bricks and boards covered with cloth. (Since meeting a Tohono O’odham shaman, we have made our home altars the same way.) Once you create the base for your altar, cover it with a cloth. You could choose a piece of white linen, a red silk cloth, a rich brocade – whatever appeals to your personal style.

On your Altar of Strength, put pictures, photographs, and objects that remind you of the sources of your strength. These might include pictures of ancestors or mentors, saints or gurus, statuettes of Buddha, Mary, or Hindu deities, rocks or feathers from power places, a menorah, calligraphy, a copy of a book that inspires you – even a mirror that reminds you to look within for strength. Add a holder for incense sticks, and put candles in votive glasses to bring in the energies of fire

and light. Some people like to include all the elements in their altars – rocks for Earth, bowls of Water, candles for Fire, feathers or fans for Air, and incense for the Ethers. To keep your altar vibrant, regularly make offerings, such as incense, flowers, and fruits.

Altar three is your Altar of Healing. Set up this altar with a base and a beautiful altar cloth. Add an empty bowl – emptiness is an invitation to be filled – along with votive candles and an incense holder to maintain simplicity. Your Altar of Healing, bare and incomplete, represents your journey of healing. As you proceed with the Altar-Therapy process, you will be drawn to place pictures or objects on this altar that represent your milestones of healing and wholeness.

The Altar-Therapy Process

Your altars are ready, and you can begin the Altar-Therapy process. Set aside some uninterrupted time for your session. Light the candles on your Altar of Strength. Take time to honor this altar, and make offerings of fruits, flowers, incense, or simply breathe in the support that is represented by this altar. You might choose to sing a song or chant that inspires you or read a passage or poem that reminds you of your inner strength.

After you gain support at your Altar of Strength, visit your Grief Altar. Here, you can be completely spontaneous. There is no right or wrong way to mourn! You might weep, sob, scream, talk out loud, or simply sit quietly and hold your Apache tears. Your Grief Altar is your space to mourn and express grief in whatever manner is right for you at the moment.

It may be helpful to begin your Grief Altar session by stimulating your grief. Sometimes a letter, a photograph, a song, or an object associated with your loss can help you get in touch with your sorrow and the need to mourn. Once your Grief Altar session feels complete, thank yourself for honoring your sad feelings, and take a few moments to feel compassion for others who have experienced similar loss.

Return to your Altar of Strength and thank your guides, teachers, and friends for their support.

Move on to your Altar of Healing. Light the candles on this altar, and make offerings of flowers or incense. You may wish to play some music that inspires and uplifts you. By giving

yourself space and time to mourn, you have taken an important step in your healing process. Allow yourself to celebrate that step. Dance, jump, whirl, sing, clap, cheer – celebrate yourself in any way that works for you!

If, since your last Altar-Therapy session, you have found something you wish to add to your Altar of Healing, carefully place it on the altar.

Your session is complete.

Planning your Altar Therapy

At the outset of engaging in the process of Altar Therapy, allow yourself to decide on the overall structure. Are you going to do Altar Therapy daily at a



specific time, weekly on your day off, or monthly at a special phase of the moon? Would you like to work with your altars alone, or do you want a partner or friend to accompany you as a witness or participant?

During the course of your Altar Therapy, it is often helpful to keep a journal that describes your experiences and milestones of grieving work. Once you feel that your Altar of Healing is complete, you may feel some clarity that your grieving has begun to move toward the possibility of eventual resolution, which may replace the feeling that your mourning might never end. Perhaps, at this point, you would choose to have a special dinner or an intimate gathering of close friends to mark your progress.

Altar Therapy is a valuable tool for healing all types of grief situations, including the most difficult. Many who have done Altar Therapy have found greater peace and have been able to move into the exploration of new opportunities in their lives. Congratulations on undertaking this journey of healing!

Alakananda Ma graduated as a physician from St. Bartholomew's Hospital Medical College in London. In 1980, she embarked on a five-year spiritual pilgrimage in India and met her Ayurveda teacher, Dr. Vasant Lad. One of the first Western physicians to dedicate her life to Ayurveda, Ma has been practicing Ayurveda since 1989 and is the principal teacher at Alandi Ayurveda Gurukula in Boulder, Colorado. Ma is recognized by her teachers as a Spiritual Mother and emissary of the Divine Feminine. www.alakanandama.org



Grief Altar

How Life Flourishes

By Ann Griffin

I am assigned to sit with John one hour a week to keep him company, maybe to read to him, although I never know what the actual mix will be until it all begins. He has been flown from California to Boulder in a small jet and transferred to a care facility, where no best friend or neighbor from his usual surroundings are available. His son and daughter-in-law visit often. His single room has a tree outside the window. Family photos are arranged close by, and a big red oil painting of the out-of-doors hangs on the wall at the foot of his bed. Because of his paralysis, the staff takes total care of his body, including using a hoist to lift him out of bed into a large, comfortable wheelchair with an arm rest for his paralyzed arm – and back into bed.

On the day his family arranged our meeting, I greet a tall, muscular man of 93, dressed in sweat pants, a T-shirt, socks, and tennis shoes. We talk about my visits and what we might enjoy doing together.

Since his stroke four months prior, he has had aphasia. I can hardly understand his speech and am concerned how I will manage a visit without precious words. He is paralyzed on his right side, cannot write me a note, is unable to take anything by mouth – not even water or tea – and he is nourished through a feeding tube during the night.

John is eager to go outside in the afternoon sun when invited. He loves the sun, which is evident from the color and texture of his skin (“...70 years of playing golf,” he says). For our excursions, I have been asked to condition his arms, face, and the top of his head with moisturizer. Before we leave his room, I always start by putting his hat and glasses on him. I walk, and John rides – I push his chair through heavy doors, and we ride down to the ground-floor in the elevator and go outside to old shade trees, manicured green grass, residents’ gardens filled with tomatoes, flowers, and raspberries. We cross the street and go around a pond at the base of the Flatirons, Boulder’s well-known mountain landscape, just to the west. Sometimes, we hear children’s laughter wafting from the school on the other side of the large open park-space. Sometimes, we meet other walkers and have little conversations.

He comments on the beauty of a large sandstone rock with a waterfall flowing over it. It becomes his favorite spot to visit before going back into the

resident-facility. The texture, the soft oranges, tans, and browns, and the trickling sounds of water soothe and relax him.

Language is difficult for him – and not easy to understand. When he manages to express a thought or share part of his life-experiences, I am full of glee and high-five signs.

One day, after maybe 10 minutes, I finally figure out that he is trying to tell me he has donated his computer to the high school. Other times, a sentence rolls out of him with no effort: “That song was my alma mater’s.” “I wish you could come every day.” “I don’t need to know the names (of the flowers).” Halt-ingly, he speaks; his words rest on my ears. Even the “I love you” sentences linger in translation after they are spoken, although so much is transmitted from his steady eyes, his steady repetitions – a stillness, a gentleness gleams through. Each week, we meet each other heart to heart more and more in the little routine we have chosen.

We visit the assisted living part of the facility and listen to live piano-playing; residents call out their old-time favorite songs.

On the few days John doesn’t feel like going outside, I massage his feet and give him some Jin Shin Jyutsu energy-work on his toes. “I feel good all over,” he says when I finish.

Even when one person is 90-plus – even if that person is near death – two people can meet, and love finds itself as if life on this earth is not about to end. Even though he is paralyzed, even when he can’t use language, the sensuality of our essence stays alive.

I just happen to stop by his room on the afternoon he is only an hour from his death. I sit by his side, listen to his congestion from pneumonia, and watch as the nurse places a patch on his neck to help with the secretions that are collecting.

I leave the room with a feeling of soft sand where the light of me has been touched.

One more time, I am forever changed within a short 10 weeks.

Ann Griffin has been providing care with the elderly in the Boulder area for the past 12 years, following her retirement. She also loves to play in gardens and with poetry and painting as much as possible.



Mourning the Loss of Nature – the Hope of Recovering Our Senses

By Megan Drimal

If the world is a global village, as we have come to imagine, then I am a village- mourner. This is a character I have taken on in solitude. Perhaps I am among many – those of us able and willing to maintain a steady gaze upon the great cycle of loss that signifies our time. In every direction, we witness increased violence and delusion and, thus, the greatest potential ever dreamed for humanity to collectively wake up and live in peace – or burn out. We are, at once, nearest and farthest from our potential to live well. We stand now at a crossroads, and we must choose.

Uncovering the Loss

The great loss to which I refer is one that I have had the fortune, or misfortune, to experience and study in detail. My observations first began during my undergraduate work in applied health science at Indiana University. There, I coupled studies in environmental biology and toxicology with psychology and eco-philosophy. I graduated a bit more than slightly depressed and certain I had been raised in denial. My worldview was shattered. If you study changes in belief systems on a global basis, you will understand that such shattering was cataclysmic – I was lost to myself.

Some would say I then spent the rest of my 20s in semi-retirement, with volunteerism on the side. This was a decade of severance and recovery, through which I integrated a new worldview and rediscovered myself, therein.

*...the great cycle of loss that
signifies our time*

This period included a return to academia to explore my overwhelming sense of sadness for global cultural losses and the subsequent ecological losses of this age. I am blessed to have been encouraged in my exploration of the philosophical, psychological, and spiritual underpinnings of my response to a perceived unraveling of our families, communities, and home.

The opportunity to devote all of my thought and time to this cause of suffering undoubtedly catalyzed a process of coming to accept unfathomable loss and my participation in the fold. However, the greatest point of transformation occurred during a grief ritual in Washington State, far away from lectures and texts. There, within the shelter of community gathered for three days to explore and express grief, I let the well run dry. I walked away from this ritual filled with enjoyment previously dampened by a constant current of sadness and certain that joy was achingly subdued among us. Indeed, we have an overwhelming dependency on stimulants to get us going and keep us going through each day, when the only stimulant we require is the full spectrum of our senses, which gives rise to a sense of purpose.

Extinction of Our Senses Brings Extinction of Species and Cultures

So, the great loss I speak of may be recognized by its main symptom: a mass extinction of species and cultures, brought on by sensory deprivation. Our senses include intuition, also known as the sixth sense, which is interwoven among, and, thus, served by the first five. Intuition, as our highest sense, has been sorely misunderstood, ignored, and blatantly denied to the extent that we can hardly feel one another. When we can and do feel one another, we don't have as much cause for recognition as we once did, so the feeling is either lost or disregarded as mental confusion. We forget that intuition initiates hypotheses and is, thus, the driving force of the scientific method and all other methods of knowing this world.

The symptoms of sensory deprivation are set and will run their course like a fever. This world is in transition now beyond our control, as has always been the case. However, we can regain control of our senses enough to enjoy the life we have and share with one another. My hope lies not in saving anyone from death but in trusting that we are still capable of using our five lower senses for the higher purpose of intuiting this world. Herein lives the possibility and ability to dream a bridge between the present war state and peaceful world order. We must let go of assumptions and "isms," though, and I am by no means naïve enough to claim this is the clearest path ahead. The clear path is the one we have been walking. I've seen quite enough to know we are nearing a premature dead-end, so I encourage a turn.

The Great Turning

Joanna Macy and friends have coined this time "The Great Turning." While this is a collective turn, we must first take responsibility for ourselves. Think of the example of being instructed to place the mask over your own face and nose before assisting your child on an airplane.

What constitutes the brambles and barbed wire of your life? Begin paying attention to that which confines you and, often, keeps you comfortable. Paying attention will turn you in the right direction, and, in turning toward the right direction, you will come to understand your first step along the path so well

What constitutes the brambles and barbed wire of your life?

Perhaps we must first allow ourselves to weep before an audience.

hidden. Pay no mind to whether others follow, and be cautious if someone takes the lead. The Great Turning requires that each and every one of us regains our own senses and follows our own leading. This is not to say you will walk alone on the path you choose – only that you will be certain of it without being directed by someone else.

I want to encourage you on your path, having cleared some of the clutter from mine. Be assured it is possible to survive the discomfort of the turn. The turning will not kill you, but it will not free you, either. There's a lifetime of clearing to do once you face your path of choice.

I cannot say what my first step was – each new step was born of the one before it and wed to the next. Having others bear witness to my grief was profoundly transformative. Grief ritual is perhaps the imperative of our time, for how else can one live with so much loss? Francis Weller, who facilitated the grief ritual I participated in, wrote of this his essay "Drinking the Tears of the World: Grief as Deep Activism."

Coming home to grief is sacred work, a powerful practice that confirms what the indigenous soul knows and what spiritual traditions teach: we are connected to one another. Our fates are bound together in a mysterious but recognizable way. Grief registers the many ways this depth of kinship is assaulted daily. Grief becomes a core element in any peacemaking practice as it is a central means whereby our compassion is quickened, our mutual suffering is acknowledged. (Weller, 2006)

Allowing oneself to fully experience the pain of others allows peace; suffering stems from walling off pain or not giving proper expression to it. A beginning point, then, is to give voice to the wounds inflicted by the briars and obstacles of our lives. Perhaps we must first allow ourselves to weep before an audience. You already know what you need most. Please have courage to proclaim it.

Megan E. Drimal, MS Environmental Studies, co-founded the Absaroka Institute (www.absaroka.org) with her husband in 2009. In the interest of peaceful transition, Megan supports open and direct dialogue regarding the personal and collective losses of our time.

How Tears Are Healing, How They Are Sacred

by Rayne Johnson

Have you ever considered why we cry? There are other ways of looking at tears than as just embarrassing and/or inconvenient. In fact, our tears act as healing agents, both physically and emotionally.

I have examined the little known history about the ancient practice of tear-collecting. Tears are not only healing but – through the ritual use of their collection in tear cups and bottles – can also provide a sacred element for grieving and mourning. This practice can be so profound that it has become part of my mission, as a grief coach and educator, to revive this profound tradition.

THE BENEFITS OF TEARS

There are three kinds of tears that provide benefits to us:

1 BASAL OR CONTINUOUS TEARS:

These keep our eyes lubricated continually and contain an anti-bacterial agent called lysozyme that helps protect our eyes from infection.

2 REFLEX TEARS: These help clear noxious particles from our eyes and noses, such as those from exhaust, smoke, pollutants, or the act of chopping onions.

3 EMOTIONAL TEARS: These are the tears we make in response to emotions, whether joy, grief, loss, compassion, or gratitude. I focus on emotional tears in this article.

When we feel emotional, toxins accumulate in the body. Tears release emotions, along with accumulated stress



Tear drop bottles

Crying also stimulates natural painkillers and ‘feel-good’ hormones called endorphins

hormones. Crying also stimulates natural painkillers and “feel-good” hormones called endorphins. The heart rate lowers and our biological and emotional states become more peaceful. Have you ever experienced calmer breathing and a sense of release after crying? Whatever situation has led us to cry may not have changed, but our tears have brought more ease. If I have had a good cry, I feel quite fatigued and usually need to sleep.

TEAR-COLLECTING: ITS HISTORY, BENEFITS, AND MODERN USE

I received my first tear cup in 1988 at a dinner party. There was a little cup at each place-setting as a special gift. I did not know what to do with it, other than to place it on my altar.

Mourners would shed tears into the bottles as a sign of honor for the one who had died

There it sat for 22 years, until I began studying as a professional grief coach at the Grief Coach Academy. I was giving a presentation to my class on palliative care work when I suddenly realized I could revive the use of tear-collecting as part of the way clients might mourn and grieve. Encouraged by the positive feedback and many questions I received, my fascination became inspiration. I could see how using tear-cups could support the processes of grieving.

Tear-collecting dates back thousands of years. The first documented reference appears in the Old Testament (Psalm 56:8), dated about 1,000 BC. It reads, "Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in Thy bottle."

Tear-collecting was also practiced during Mesopotamian and Egyptian times (3,500 BC - 540 BC). Small bottles, believed to be part of mourning rituals, have been found at the burial sites of Egyptian pharaohs and nobility. Mourners would shed tears into the bottles as a sign of honor for the one who had died. Sometimes, professional mourners (called wailers) were hired to attend the funerals of the wealthy and fill the tear bottles.

During a resurgence of tear-collecting during the Victorian Era, mourners collected their tears in bottles that could often be quite ornate, with special stoppers. The eventual evaporation of the tears was taken to signify the end of the mourning period. The special bottle was kept as a token of remembrance and eternal devotion.

There are also stories of wives who, during the Civil War in the United States, would cry as they missed and worried and fretted about their husbands away at war. Many collected the tears they shed in tear-bottles. Sadly, hundreds of thousands of soldiers never returned home. These wives, now widows, sprinkled the tears they had saved on their husbands' graves on the first anniversaries of their deaths in order to signify the ends of those years of mourning. The use of these tear-bottles as part of the ritual of mourning and remembrance provided an element of healing related to their losses.

I began to provide tear-cups in service to others dealing with grief. They are designed to be used as symbolic gestures to encourage tears. As previously mentioned, tears help bring comfort and the release of

Collecting Tears

By Rayne Johnson

Recognize your sorrow,
Acknowledge the grief
Touch thy cup to your cheek
Allow tears to flow
Hold a cup to your friend's cheek,
Catch their tears with love
Perhaps weep with them
In sorrow and in joy
Let bitterness turn sweet
For grief with no sadness may turn inward
and weigh heavy on the heart
Let the fountain of tears flow into thy cup
So you may be guided to faith and love
Grief you feel is food for the Spirit
Bringing softness to the heart and freedom in the mind.
Helping you to surrender to the pain
In times of grief and loss, tears help lift the gloom
and bring comfort and ease.

tension. Those who have obtained these special cups often place them by their computers or on their altars to remind them of how special their tears can be. Others have placed them at the gravesides of loved ones or buried them in special spots as ways of signifying milestones of "letting go" and giving back to the Earth.

Bring in your own creative ceremony to honor your passages through the grief-process, however you feel guided and led.

Remember, tears do not have to be inconvenient and embarrassing. Tears are healing, and they can be sacred. They are a gift to be respected and cherished.

Rayne Johnson lives in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and can be contacted at lorainej@shaw.ca 780-642-8703. Her tear cups and an informative booklet can be found at www.tearcups.com

Bringing Him (to) the Water: A Journey to the Ganges

by Jessica Richmond

When my father died, a part of me died, too – I felt that he took my heart with him when he left his body. He died so suddenly – his young, athletic body dropped dead of a heart attack right in front of me on that hot August day. The last word he said as he struggled for air was, “Water.” The last time I saw him alive, I was holding a glass of water to his lips, watching it spill all over his face and down his neck. He passed on August 3, 2002.

I cried hard for days that turned into weeks and months. People sent flowers and cards and made our family nice meals. We had Dad cremated and had a lovely memorial service. We looked through old pictures and told stories. We remembered what a funny man he was and how much he loved kids.

My mom put his ashes in some plastic containers and put them in our garage. Mom, my sisters, and I agreed that we would each take some of Dad’s

ashes and spread them in a place that was special to us. On Dad’s birthday, Mom spread some of his ashes on the land where we had built our family home. I will never forget Mom’s tear-stained face that night when she described what it was like to touch Dad’s ashes: “That was hard. Did you know ashes aren’t powdery? There were big chunks of your father’s bones and teeth in my fingers as I threw them out over our land.” We both cried and then ate pineapple-upside-down cake, Dad’s favorite that Mom had made him every year of their 33 years of marriage.

As years passed, the tears lessened, the memories faded, and life went on. Most of the time, though, I felt like I was just going through the motions and not really feeling things as I had before this tragedy.

When almost five years had passed, I finally felt ready to find a special place to spread his ashes. I was ready say good-bye. I had become an Ayurvedic lifestyle consultant and was fascinated with what I had learned about Hindu traditions. I looked through the lenses of my new experiences for a way to honor my dad and to have closure.

As I researched how the Hindus regard death and dying, my path became clear. I decided to spread Dad’s ashes in the Holy River Ganges in Varanasi, India. This is the greatest honor that can be bestowed upon Hindus at death. According to their beliefs, this practice grants the deceased moksha – liberation – the breaking of the cycle of



On the Ganges, in ceremony to scatter Dad’s cremains

birth and death, the ultimate goal of spiritual life there. I made my travel arrangements.

Mom gave me the plastic container that held Dad's ashes. I wrapped it carefully, put it in my carry-on, and hoped it would make it through airport security – which it did.

On the final leg of the trip, the air-conditioning on the plane was broken, and the temperature soared well over 100 degrees. It could have been that or – even more – the sacred journey I was on that made me to cry during the whole two-hour flight, as sweat poured off me.

The time to say good-bye was near. I wrote a letter to my father and told him that I had brought some of him all the way to this sacred Hindu land to honor him in the most beautiful way I knew how. I assured him that his ashes were in good hands with me and thanked him for being such an ever-present-yet-inconspicuous traveling companion for so many miles. I slept with his ashes nearby for one last night and, at last, felt ready for the big send-off the next day.

The day to spread Dad's ashes was five years to the day after his passing. On August 3, 2007, I spent the morning at a tailor's, sipping chai and picking out my favorite silk fabric – a beautiful light blue, the color of Dad's eyes. That was followed by a lot of measuring and adjusting to determine exactly the right sizing for making my ceremonial outfit for that evening. During the afternoon, I met with a Brahmin priest, who agreed to take me out on a boat and conduct the ceremony to set Dad's ashes free in Mother Ganga – “Ganges” in the Bengali language.

While the holy man went to purchase ceremonial items from the local street vendors, I went to the House of the Dying and met some widows who had been abandoned by their families and were living out their days there while they waited to die. A translator explained their stories to me: According to Hindu tradition, a wife should never live longer than her husband – if a husband dies first, the woman has not fulfilled her duty as a good, care-giving wife. If the husband's family is very traditional, they will ban her from their town. She will spend the rest of her life living away from her loved ones in this very austere environment, repenting for her sin. Her head is often shaved; if she shares her story with anyone, she might be lucky enough to get a few rupees' donation. Typically, families collect enough

money to pay for proper cremations, in which their loved ones' bodies are burned until they are all ashes.

A widow left behind also wants to achieve moksha by having her body cremated and her ashes spread in the Holy Ganga. Unfortunately, since widows' families will not pay for their cremations, they often do not have enough money to pay for enough logs of wood to be cremated fully. Because of this unfortunate circumstance, it is not uncommon to see a body part floating down the river, along with the beautiful floating tea lights from a ceremony of families who could afford more.

Being at the House of the Dying helped me practice one of my dad's favorite life-lessons. Whenever I would get upset about something, he would always tell me stories to help put my challenge into perspective. This is exactly what the widows' stories at the House of the Dying did for me. I had a new perspective on having lost my dad. I could focus on my grief and sadness about my loss and the trauma of how he passed. Or, I could choose to concentrate on the fact that I had cherished 30 good years with him – and at least he wasn't at the House of the Dying, banished from his family. He was lucky because, as his spirit had transitioned out of his body, his entire nuclear family had been around him, stroking his head, telling him we loved him, holding his hand, and offering him the drink he had needed.

Finally, the time had come to unite him with the water, his dying wish and his last word. As I chanted Hindu mantras, floated in a small rickety boat down the Ganga River past the House of the Dying, and waved incense, I followed the Brahmin's instruction: “Throw the ashes over your shoulder, and don't look back.”

Good-bye, Dad. Your ashes are with Mother Ganga now. You are part of the divine. I have let go of you in a way that I needed in order to embrace my evolving choices. My heart has been broken wide open with love for you. Now, I am ready for my life and my path this time around. Thank you for this gift, my sweet father. I will feel you in the water and see you in the morning mist.

*The last word he said
as he struggled for air
was, ‘water’*

*Throw the ashes over
your shoulder, and
don't look back*

Jessica Richmond is offering a grief retreat in India in the spring of 2012. Please contact her for more details at: jessrichy@yahoo.com

Grief and Joy Walk Hand in Hand

By Willow Ruth

I stood with a group of women and men singing the words to an African chant. Together, we composed the symbolic creation of “the village.” In front of a grief altar, people knelt, bent on hands and knees, or lay prostrate on pillows and showed varied expressions of their grief. Drum-beats pulsed through me as I sang and accentuated my fear that I would fail to feel. “Why did I come here?” I chided myself in my thoughts. “I don’t feel anything. I can’t just make myself cry!”

The sobs of mourners pulsed through the room with tidal intensities as the participants changed places – witnesses became grievers, grievers joined the chorus of the villagers or moved into position to beat on vacant drums.

I remembered Sobonfu Somé’s words: “In my culture, when grief is not released, it is said to create illnesses in one’s body. It can create things as simple as a cold, ulcers, even cancer... and, while you are sitting, wondering, ‘Do I really need to grieve?’ [the answer is,] ‘Yes, you absolutely need to grieve.’” But I needed to release this pressure that “something should happen,” that I needed to do something. I reminded myself that whatever I did experience today would be exactly right, even if I didn’t feel moved to go to the altar.

The ritual took place in a warehouse in Oakland, California. We had brought lamps, candles, flowers, rugs, and pillows to warm the bare concrete space, and we set up three altars: one devoted to forgiveness, one to the ancestors, and one for grieving.

I had learned that our leader, Sobonfu Somé’s, name means “Keeper of the Rituals.” She travels the world sharing the wisdom and traditions of her people – the West African Dagara tribe from Burkina Faso.

Her primary message conveys the need to establish relationships with our ancestors and incorporate the awareness of spirit into daily life. She offers the grief ritual as an essential ingredient for healthy individuals and communities. “There is a price in not expressing one’s grief,” she explained. “Imagine if you never washed your clothes or showered. The toxins

that your body produces just from everyday living would build up and get really stinky. That is how it is with emotional and spiritual toxins, too...We need to begin to see grief not as a foreign entity and not as an alien to be held down or caged up – but as a natural process.”

Do I really need to grieve?

Before our ritual began, we formed small groups and shared with each other why we believed we had come. We also took time alone to compile “grief bundles” out of items we had brought to symbolize our grief, as well as leaves, vines, and flowers that each represented what we felt ready to release. “Don’t put your relationship into the bundle, if you are not ready for it to be over. Put the problem in the relationship inside the bundle,” she clarified. We spat on them to seal our commitments and offered them on the grief altar. Somé taught us a song that had been sung in her village when a great flood had swept through and carried away many people. The words called for strength to grab hold of the people and save them from the high waters.

We could either sing those words with the “village” chorus, sit or pray by the forgiveness or ancestor shrines, grieve at the altar, or witness another. I had visited all the altars except the one for grieving.

Yes, you absolutely need to grieve

Although I had grown up in a communicative, expressive family, my culture had never prepared me for opening up to my deepest emotions in public.

I continued chanting and settled more deeply into the mystery of the ritual. Someone’s cry pierced my heart; hearing the grief of a stranger tugged at my own inner longing. Suddenly, in a fog, I found myself walking toward the altar for grieving. One of the “villagers” left her place and took a step behind me. When someone went to grieve at the altar, Somé had instructed a volunteer to follow and be with them until they finished their purging process. If the person witnessing also needed to grieve, Somé asked them to raise their hand to request a replacement. “Communal grieving offers something that we cannot get when we grieve by ourselves. Through validation, acknowledgment, and witnessing, communal grieving allows

us to experience a level of healing that is deeply and profoundly freeing.” Also, according to Somé, when others see and hear our tears, we cannot so easily forget the work that has been done or fall back into old patterns formed around our contraction.

Surrendering and feeling safe and supported by the presence of my witness, I sank to the floor. Great fear and anger wracked my body as a memory swept through me and transported me back in time one week, to a street in San Francisco, where a dark figure had pressed me up against a brick wall, alcohol heavy on his breath. The memory came fresh every time I swallowed, tender in my throat where the robber’s fingers had squeezed and slowly choked off my air supply.

I had kept my breath that fearful night, but something had cracked inside me. When I had heard about Somé and the ritual, I had known that I must participate. Although it hadn’t been the optimal way to receive a wake-up call, being attacked had catalyzed my ability to tap into an even deeper well of long-suppressed sorrow.

Kneeling down, I cried and sobbed and shook my fist at God and my angels and guides who had seemingly turned their backs: “You said I was protected!” That man had crushed an innocence concerning the goodness of the world’s intentions toward me and had illumined my naiveté about basic safety precautions. Angry and disillusioned, I cried out my blame and disgust. Looking around the room to see so many others in similar states of disarray made me feel allowed – and quite alive. A strange familiarity crept in, as if I had gained access to an ancient-yet-elemental rite. I let my emotions stream until I began to taste a morsel of faith – maybe I hadn’t been abandoned by the higher forces; maybe, somehow, even this had its place in the complex weave of my own life’s path.

My crying eventually subsided, and I told myself I’d taken enough time and space at the altar. But another voice came through: “Stay until you’re done.” With that, I knew I had permission to be at that altar



Grief bundle

There is a price for not expressing one’s grief

as long as I needed. I always considered myself a crier, but this new wave felt different; this was a pain beyond targeting. I lost track of who and what I cried for. The scope of it ran the gamut: I cried for my mother, for my long-lost brother, my dear dead aunt, my abandoned dreams. It broadened: I cried for the man who had attacked me and for the society that had spawned him. My sorrow merged with a great collective pool of sorrow that belonged to the suffering of the entire world. A new sound came through I’d never known, and I allowed it: a wail. I wailed through the place in me that felt ashamed to wail. I wailed as if my young self had already known the loss of a child or husband, reaching into the inky wells of what felt like many lifetimes on this earth, whirling into the corners of my soul’s accumulated sorrows.

When I finally finished, I washed my face in the bathroom and rejoined the chorus. Hours had passed, and fewer and fewer people grieved at the altar. I experienced a lightness in my being and intrinsically understood what Somé had meant about our capacity to feel joy being equal to our capacity to grieve. Even though, in some ways, I knew I had only just dipped into the reservoir, I felt raw and tender, clear, and strong like a willow whip.

At a women’s circle soon after the ritual, we each took turns speaking about current issues in our lives. I told myself not to talk about the mugging; I didn’t want to seem dramatic – or to garner sympathy. However, as I looked into these women’s eyes as they spoke, I felt the weight of the veiled grief that, once again, needed expression. My gut protested my attempt to suppress this rising truth. When my turn came, what I had thought to conceal tumbled forth, and I shared about both the attack and the grief-ritual. Somehow, having come so close to being strangled – and the subsequent grief-clearing – had left me totally incapable of holding back. By exposing my vulnerability to these women, I knew a new chapter of my own greater empowerment had begun.

I can’t say I know why things happen the way

they do, but I can see how the series of events that unfolded helped me to ground my spiritual beliefs in reality. I have since learned vocal as well as physical defense techniques in self-defense classes. Even though the deepest part of me believes the deepest part of that man meant me no harm, I know much needs to shift in our society for the illuminated intentions of our higher selves to step forward. We can start on this path to balance and fulfillment through the creation of safe spaces and avenues for expressing the range of emotions that compose our human experience.

Willow Ruth is a budding writer, artist, and student of life living in Oakland, California. She is inspired by the journey of personal growth, practicing expressive therapies, and building community to create sustainable lifestyles.



Sobonfu Somé

The grief ritual is a way for people to not only allow the part of them that has been hurt, but it is also a way of acknowledging that something else is being born in the self. Because grief is a doorway to healing, it is also a doorway to accessing one's power... and to getting into one's creativity

~ Sobonfu Somé

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Look Back Without Anger

A 9/11 Widow Redefines Her Life

Natural Transitions Magazine
interviews Fiona Havlish



NTM's Karen van Vuuren interviewed Fiona Havlish, who transformed her anger and grief and built a new life out of the ashes of the World Trade Center attacks.

At 5 a.m., on September 11, 2001, Don Havlish, Jr., showered, as his wife, Fiona, made coffee. It was three-year-old daughter, Michaela's, first day of school, and Fiona wanted Don to be at home for the occasion. Don had business clients he needed to see; after family hugs, kisses, and waves, he left their home in Yardley, Pennsylvania, as usual. His office was in the South Tower of the World Trade Center in New York City.

NTM: That first day of 9/11, what did you go through, emotionally?

FH: When I first saw the plane hit the building, it was shock. I really felt lost because the world that I knew was gone. I equate it to taking my life and throwing it in the air and watching it shatter on the ground, not knowing how to pick the pieces up. I really didn't know whether to cry or to start picking pieces up.

I made a decision that, in order to appear strong, I couldn't cry in front of anyone, so most of the tears that I shed were in private. Someone had to keep the family moving, and it was as though I didn't have time to sit down and mourn. It wasn't like there was a quiet moment because, within an hour of it occurring, my neighbors were on my doorstep with food. Everyone had this incredible need to do something, and I didn't know how to handle that. I was good at the doing. I was good at the giving. I was not good at the receiving.

NTM: Did you struggle with feelings of anger?

FH: I knew about all the stages of grieving, so I knew that anger was going to show up at some point. I didn't want it to. I stayed in shock a fair amount of time. Shock

didn't start wearing off until around Christmas-time because, I think, with a tragedy of this magnitude, it wasn't just about me – it was about the whole country and the loss of innocence. When I was angry, I felt ill, my head hurt. I could feel every cell in my body just wanting to hurt someone or something – break something. The anger really wanted to come out in a very physical form.

NTM: Do you remember a time when you were overcome by anger?

FH: I really only remember two days where I was lividly angry. One of them was in New York. I was walking with two other widows from 9/11, and we wanted to have a day of fun. We were in Soho, and it was my first time there, and I thought it was so neat.

All of a sudden, I felt this well of anger come bubbling up. I just started yelling at my two friends. I was walking by a Tibetan shop, and I was in tears, and I was yelling at people. I thought, "I need to get rid of the anger."

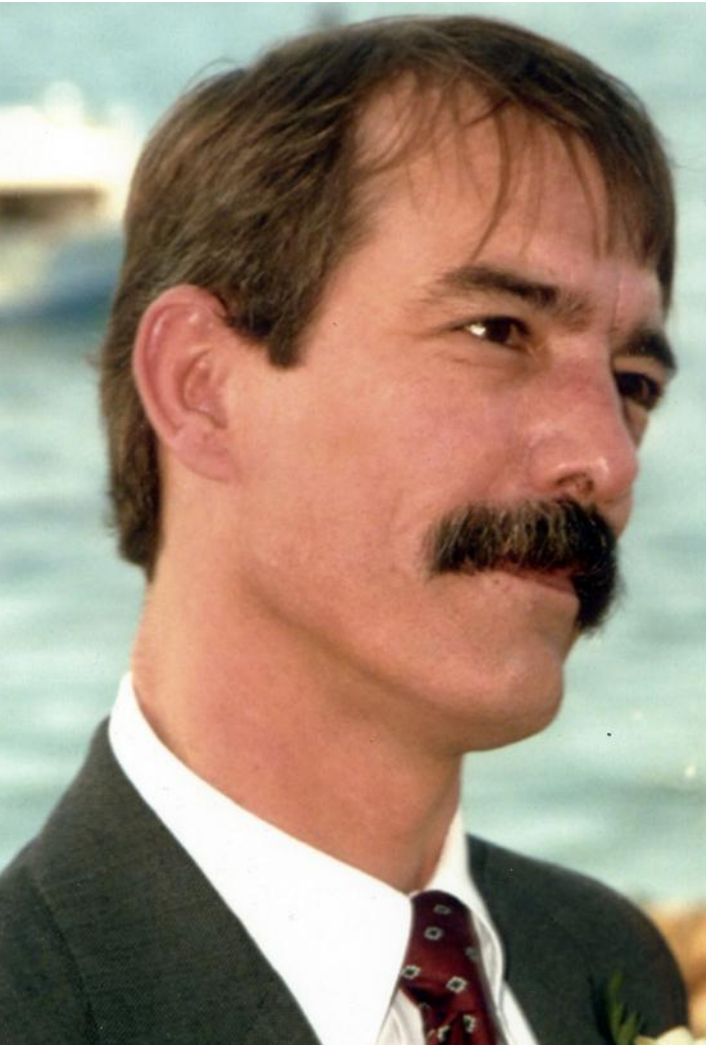
And for some reason, I walked into this Tibetan shop and said, "Do you have any music that will help me get rid of my anger?" The woman looked at me and smiled and said, "You bet!" Then she put this CD on, with music by Lama Surya Das, called "Rain of Blessings," and within four seconds, I was just sobbing. I bought the CD immediately, and I play it to this day.

I acknowledge the anger, and it just goes away. I listen to music and cry. There's a benefit to crying, and I did not understand that until that music came into my life.

The second time I went into fear and became very angry was after I knew Don was dead. I was informed of his identification on April 4, 2002. (I was one of the lucky ones!)

NTM: When you were with the other 9/11 families, was that a source of comfort? What was it like being with them?

...it was almost like a competition of who could grieve more...



FH: The other 9/11 families became my family. I have an extended family now of 6,000 people.

In the beginning, there really wasn't much of a conscious awareness of how many people were affected by that day. That seemed to seep in around October of that year, and then, by the end of November, we started a group. Where I lived, in this tiny town of Yardley, Pennsylvania, there were 17 families who had lost either husbands, wives, or children. We began group therapy, and it became the best thing. We could all sit there and see what we were going through.

I started paying attention to the differences between those who had lost spouses – I'm mostly talking about husbands – those who had lost children, and those who had lost their wives.

For a while, it was almost like a competition of who could grieve more, and I found that fascinating. That was when I realized that we all have different levels of grief, and how we grieve all depends on our backgrounds.

We became a very tight-knit family. I love them all dearly, but one of the things I've noticed is that, when I go to New York for the anniversaries, there is an incredible amount of anger. I mean, the anger is palpable in those rooms and in those spaces, and I need to leave. I can't be there. I don't feel angry anymore. I've

found a way to forgive.

NTM: Tell me how you found that way to forgive.

FH: Six months after 9/11, a thought just popped in that said, "It's time to forgive." I remember saying, "Who am I going to forgive?" and I heard the words, "The terrorists," and I was like, "Oh, God! How do I forgive the terrorists?"

So I went to my therapist, who really is an angel in my life, and I sat down, and I said, "Susan, I don't know how to ask you this, but how do I forgive the terrorists?" Her eyes got huge, and she said, "Fiona, you're not ready yet," and I said, "Yes, I am.

If it's come up in my life, and it's come up in my thoughts, I'm ready, and I have to do this if I'm going to move on in my life."

Over the next two to three months, this was something I focused on alone, with my therapist's support. I felt no one could really tell me how to forgive, and I realized that this was something I had to do on my own and figure out for myself. I embarked on the journey of forgiveness with an internal sense of urgency.

I learned as much as I could about forgiveness. The best book I have ever found on forgiveness is *Radical Forgiveness* by Colin Tipping.

Then, one day, I thought about the Muslim religion. It dawned on me that what they were doing, they believed in with every fiber of their being – what they believed was right, was in the name of Allah. I thought, "Well, that's how I believe about God. I would do whatever I think is right." Then, I thought, "Well, we both believe the same way. I don't necessarily agree with what they believe in, which is the destruction of others," but I realized that that was just a sect of the Muslim religion – it wasn't all of them. It was really on that level of belief and faith that I could forgive them.

NTM: How have you dealt with fear?

FH: Fear is interesting. You can either let it dominate your life, or you can choose not to. That's one of the lessons I learned. I initially did not go into a place of fear at all. I would tell myself, "I've already shared; they already took. I have nothing more that I am going to give." On an intuitive level, I knew that I was never going to be hit by terrorists again. Do I get fearful over other things? Yes, but over terrorism – in my life? No. I really chose that I was not going to let my life be run by fear.

NTM: When you share your story of healing with other 9/11 families, how is it received?

FH: Not well. When I have talked about it with other 9/11 families, especially in New York, they look at me rather horrified, because they're all still angry, they're all still fighting. The fact that I could forgive the terrorists is, on some level, blasphemous, in their eyes.

Up until now, I have kept quiet about it, because being put down or yelled at by other 9/11 families doesn't feel good. It makes you really question who you are and what you believe. But I believe so powerfully in forgiveness, and, because that's the only way that my life will continue to move forward, I have decided to just let everyone know that I forgave them (the terrorists) long ago and that I am grateful for September 11th, because I have received the most amazing gifts out of that day. Most 9/11 families don't see it that way at all.

NTM: How do you memorialize 9/11?

FH: When I was living in Pennsylvania, we initially created a

The fact that I could forgive the terrorists is, on some level, blasphemous, in their eyes

memorial called the "Garden of Reflection," which is located in Yardley. It's beautiful, and it's peaceful, and all those who died that day are honored there. Sometimes, I would go there, but, usually, I would go to New York, because that was where my husband actually died, and I would go to the memorials there. I love hearing every name being read. For me, hearing each name is so important. Wherever I am in the world, I will put on CNN, which live-streams the whole thing, and I will listen to every single name. When I am living in Boulder, Michaela (my youngest daughter) and I will go to Boulder Creek with 17 roses, because that's how many we lost in Yardley.

NTM: In this 10th anniversary year of 9/11, what message of healing and hope can you give to those who still live with anger and fear?

FH: I think one is [that] I am never alone. There is someone or a higher energy that will always guide me and take care of me. There are so many messages that have come out of September 11th for me. I look for them every day. Some of them are, "Life is short," "Live it to the max," "Appreciate every day." I know these sound like clichés, but I learned that some of the clichés are very, very true. We are all connected as one. Love your family, love those around you, just love! And just remember that the light at the end of the tunnel is hope – it's not an oncoming train.

September 11th was my wake-up call to live the life that I was destined to live and that I had agreed to live. I think that, somewhere along the line, I lost that thread. The thread was there – I just lost sight of it for so long. Nine/eleven woke me up to my spiritual life and to the reason I am here. People need to pay attention to those nudges from the universe that say, "You're not living your life!" – especially those nudges that show up when you're not happy, when you're fearful, when life isn't going the way you want. If you are like me, and you push those nudges aside, sometimes you get a spiritual 4 x 4 [smack in the head].

My belief is that Don and I, on a soul level, had an agreement that this was what was going to happen, so that I would live my life. I'm sad that he left, but, at the same time, I'm very grateful to him for doing what we agreed upon, so that I could live the life that I'm living now and exploring with a whole new level of consciousness.

Fiona Havlish is a former home-care nurse who now resides in Boulder, Colorado. She is authoring a book of her healing journey to be called Twin Flames: An Unexpected Journey.



The Other Side of Sadness



What the New Science
of Bereavement Tells Us
About Life After Loss

GEORGE A. BONANNO

Book Review The Other Side of Sadness

by George A. Bonanno, (2009), Basic Books, NY

by Claudia Helade

Many commonly held assumptions about grief are overturned in Dr. George

Bonanno's book, *The Other Side of Sadness*. What has commonly been referred to as "grief work" once required an automatic prescription of psychological counseling for the newly bereaved person. However, more recent findings have shown that earlier approach to be, in all but rare instances, not only unnecessary but even detrimental to the natural processes most people experience after a significant loss. Bonanno's research reveals a much more positive and hopeful assessment of the passage through grief, which indicates a resilience that has much to say about natural human responses to loss.

The famous model of the five stages of mourning posited by grief pioneer and physician Elisabeth Kubler-Ross (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance) was not developed from working with the bereaved, Bonanno says, but was observed in people with terminal diagnoses who faced their own deaths. He writes that "...facing one's own death is not the best experience upon which to model how people cope with the loss of a loved one."

Bonanno, Professor of Clinical Psychology and Chair of the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Columbia University's Teachers College, says that, for most people, grief is not "work." Instead, grieving can and does expand one's capacity for relatedness and adds strength and meaning to life. His significant research, illustrated by examples and personal stories of people who have coped with loss, indicates that, in most cases, a surprising resilience is experienced in bereavement.

He identifies the personality traits, capacities, and "tools" we utilize when we face loss, including fundamental optimism and confidence. Access to a broad repertoire of behavioral responses, some of which may appear inappropriate in normal circumstances, such as the ability to internalize grief and to shift back and forth between sadness and positive emotions, can be healthy indicators of resilient responses to loss. We are equipped, he says, with a set of in-born psychological processes that help us in the process of grieving.

Bonanno's research of grief in multiple cultures led him to the Buddhist foundations of The Four Noble Truths and their support for resilience in bereavement.

- The First Noble Truth is that life is suffering.
- The Second Noble Truth is that suffering is caused by "our clinging to and grasping at the illusion of permanence."
- The Third Noble Truth is that the acceptance of the impermanence of life enables the only path to happiness.
- The Fourth Noble Truth illustrates the path to attainment through contemplation and meditation.

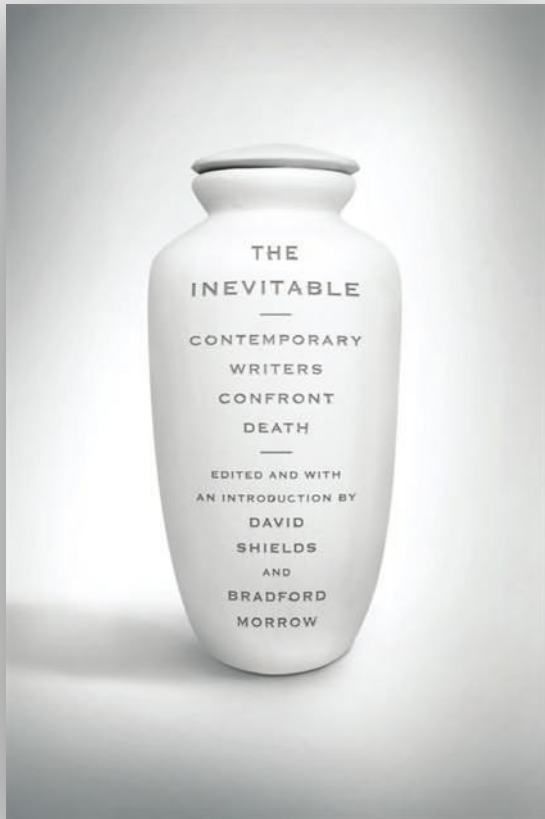
Siddhartha Gautama, the young Indian prince who would become the Buddha, was shocked to witness the profound suffering around him when he escaped the sheltering palace walls of his sequestered youth. He became determined to discover the cause of suffering and its amelioration.

Buddhism encourages testing the validity of these precepts by direct experience over time. Research has reported that levels of psychological stress have been extremely low in Buddhist groups that have been faced with the adversity that accompanies extreme circumstances and loss. A personal addition to this new theory of grief, one that affirms the power of ritual to heal and support resilience, arose out of Bonanno's own participation in public grief rituals in China to release his grief over his own father's death years before.

Of course, not all grieving follows the same trajectory, and not all individuals have the same capacities and circumstances. Bonanno speaks to those prolonged and consistently disturbing sojourns in particular bereavements and offers helpful perspective and support for times when "grief takes over."

The salient theme of *The Other Side of Sadness*, however, is that, for most of us, most of the time, the sad and poignant process of grieving the loss of a loved one is a natural, inevitable part of life. We can navigate this experience with the support of others, in a resilient manner, and we will be delivered to the "other side of sadness" with renewed capacities for connection and love. It is a hopeful message that defines most grief as part of the natural, normal passages of life, removes it from the realms of pathology and negativity, and leaves us strengthened and buoyed by compassion, understanding, and meaning.

Claudia Helade, Ph.D., is a psychotherapist and, for many years, taught a course called "Death as a Spiritual Teacher." She has published *Permission to Grieve with Sounds True*.



How do we face death? What is death, and how does it touch upon life? David Shields and Bradford Morrow asked these questions of 20 contemporary writers. The resulting anthology – each piece remarkable for its immediacy, story, depth, and literary excellence – will shake up your sense of death and dying.

Grief is the operative theme of the collection, but conventional definitions of grief dissolve in the range and unpredictability of the pieces. Joyce Carol Oates' "The Siege," brimming with heartbreak, is her personal story of her husband, Ray's, death and the near impossibility of her coping with it. Mark Doty, in "Bijou," uses his stunning gifts for memoir and lyric image to delineate the "spiritualized eroticism" of death's landscape during the AIDS crisis. In "Grace Street," Greg Bottoms speaks of the "narcissism of grief," even as he struggles to come to terms with his father's death and gives voice to former neighbors, richly characterized.

Death fascinates us, but our cultural terror of it truncates our understanding. This anthology will go a long way in making death, as a subject, at least, positively entertaining. Robin Hemley, in "Field Notes for the Graveyard Enthusiast," takes us on a tour of graveyards that is both informative and funny. I laughed,

Book Review The Inevitable

Contemporary Writers
Confront Death, edited and with an
introduction by David Shields and
Bradford Morrow. W.W. Norton, 2011.

By Gail Storey

but then, I'm easily amused. Jonathan Safran Foer delights with stylistic innovation in "A Primer for the Punctuation of Heart Disease." "The Sutra of Maggots and Blowflies," by Sallie Tisdale, is not for the squeamish, but it rewards with scientific appreciation for the perfection of decay. In "What Will Survive of Us," Geoff Dyer writes of ghost bikes – street/racing and mountain bicycles painted completely white as memorials to their former owners, who were killed by motorists on the roads.

The Inevitable is a chiaroscuro of light and dark: wry humor, physical pain, despair, redemptive love, life and death in the natural world. Grief and anger merge in Margo Jefferson's "Death Wish in Negroland," an essay about suicidal survivor-guilt among the black bourgeoisie. Readers of *Natural Transitions Magazine* will appreciate the personal styles of mourning for mothers, stepmothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, and friends by noteworthy writers, such as David Gates, Kyoki Mori, Robert Clark, Melissa Pritchard, Christopher Sorrentino, Peter Straub, Kevin Baker, Lynne Tillman, Lance Olsen, Brenda Hillman, and Annie Dillard.

Diane Ackerman mourns her Celtic anam cara, soul friend John O'Donohue, in one of the most luminous pieces in the book, "Silence and Awakening." She asks what dawn would have been like if he had not died. "It would have sung through your bones," she says. "All I can do this morning is let it sing through mine."

Each of the writers in this touching compilation lets grief sing through their ferociously compassionate bones.

Gail Storey is the author of two novels, a nearly completed book of outrageous transformation in the wilderness, and a blog at GailStorey.com.

ntm resource directory

Sacred Crossings

Olivia Bareham
sacredcrossings.com
olivia@sacredcrossings.com
310-968-2763

CycledLife, Inc.

Ed Gazvoda
CycledLife.com
303.459.4953

Threshold Care Circle of Viroqua, WI

thresholdcarecircle.org
info@thresholdcarecircle.org
1-608-606-8060

Rayne Johnson

tearcups.com
rayne@tearcups.com
780-642-8703
Grief Coach/ Educator on EOL issues.

Merilynne Rush, Home Funeral Guide

AfterDeathHomeCare.com
info@AfterDeathHomeCare.com
734-395-9660
After-death home care in SE Michigan.

Funeral Ethics Organization

funeralethics.org
info@funeralethics.org
Informing about and promoting ethical
business regarding funerals.

Minnesota Threshold Network

mnthresholdnetwork.wordpress.com
mntresholdnetwork@gmail.com

Holly Blue Hawkins

LastRespectsConsulting.com
831-588-3040

near and dear

Anita Garcia
nearanddear@vpweb.com
drgarcias1100@msn.com
520-896-0516 / 520-307-0028

Green Burial Council

greenburialcouncil.org
Setting standards, offering training and
technical assistance, and certifying
providers of green burial options.

Natural Transitions

naturaltransitions.org
info@naturaltransitions.org
Trainings and support with Advance
Directives, Home Funerals and more.

Life and Death Matters Film Festival

www.ladmatters.com
info@ladmatters.com
Sept 2-4th, 2011 in Boulder, CO
A project of Natural Transitions.

Eternity Cardboard Casket

eeternity.com
Affordability, simplicity, dignity,
environmentally friendly-perfect for
green cremation and green burial.

Final Passages

finalpassages.org
finalpassages@softcom.net
707-824-0268

Manena Taylor

heartmemorials@gmail.com
Heart Centered Memorials in the Pacific
Northwest.

Reva Tift MA

www.AHCDguidance.com
Guiding you through the process of
End of Life wishes & decisions
303-444-0152

Blessing the Journey

info@blessingthejourney.com
Olympia, WA
Sacredly guiding families through
the home funeral journey.

Life Quality Institute

lifequalityinstitute.org
Advancing Palliative Care Through Education
Offering trainings on palliative care.

Compassion and Choices

compassionandchoices.org
info@compassionandchoices.org
Rights of individuals to choose their
end of life scenario.

National Organization for Hospice & Palliative Care

nohpc.org
Find a hospice, learn more about
palliative care.

Funeral Consumers Alliance

funerals.org
Consumer friendly information on all
aspects of funerals, including consumer rights.

A Natural Undertaking

naturalundertaking.org
A Pennsylvania resource center for home
funeral care.

Sacred Ceremonies, Ltd

sacredceremoniesltd.org
Webster, Wisconsin
715-866-7798
715-566-2462

To be included in the Directory, please contact adsnaturaltransitionsmag@gmail.com.

ntm calendar

Fall-Winter 2011

NT LEVEL TWO TRAINING

Natural Transitions Level Two Training, date
to be announced.

naturaltransitions.org

Ongoing

Life Quality Institute- Colorado

lifequalityinstitute.org

Offering series of monthly talks regarding
palliative care and end-of-life issues in these
locations:

Reality of Care - Denver, CO
Called to Care - Pastoral issues -
Cherry Hills, CO
Prepared to Care - Denver, CO

See website for topics, times, and locations.

Natural Transitions Magazine

PLEASE SEND US... your upcoming events!

To be included in the ntm calendar, please contact us at

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JOE

There is NO AWAY

By Ann Griffin

A year to the day. The day after solstice.

Just like today.

There's only a few puffy white clouds in the sky,

not too hot. That day, Rolf passing me on our pedway, announces Joe fell to his death climbing In Eldorado Springs Canyon just now.

He dies doing what he loved best, living life fully.

And we sit in the circle once again.

His widow, with three children, the one who started our CSA* last year, puts the question to us, "What is the gift in Joe's death for you?"

For me, "I carry his shining dark eyes of love driven deep within as soft, full and sharp as a laser."

A single mom says, "I'm at the center of my life now. It just happened the night before he died. One short conversation. I don't know exactly what he said, but it changed everything."

A young man speaks slowly with long pauses, "He simply told me I could get another job when I lost mine, and there was no worry."

A man on the edges of the community: "He spent a lot of time with me right before he died. I realized life is too short and precious to not make amends with my wife. I'm a

problem-solver, and Joe's death was one problem I couldn't solve."

A father in his 60s, "His words to my 18-year-old son in jail is the reason he is now in Special Forces in Afghanistan doing what he loves best. He told me his soldier buddy was killed this week. Joe's death is a help to me now."

Men and women gather and weep. Not knowing what will come out of our mouths, not realizing tears are here until they are.

We barely move, we listen big and open.

We rarely see one another this way.

"He taught me to live life to its fullest, and that's what I'm doing."

And so, we continue round and round the circle. Joe changed us all before his 45th birthday.

We unknowingly come full circle into ourselves. Joe in the place he's always been in and will always be in living with us, "full energy I can feel right in front of me now," one says. There is No Away.

Ann Griffin has been providing care with the elderly in the Boulder area for the past 12 years, following her retirement. She also loves to play in gardens and with poetry and painting as much as possible.

Blog excerpt about a home, after-death vigil for a young mother

It is a powerful experience to sit with her body. Some day we will each be lying there. It's quite a gift to be able to contemplate it early. She looks so relaxed, but it's also plain that she has been through quite an ordeal. There are candles burning. The scent of essential oils. A table of books to browse. People who come will sometimes read, sometimes aloud, sometimes to themselves. Some people meditate. Most everyone cries. But there's a happiness in the room too.

One side effect of having the vigil for three days was that by this morning, her body had started to change. It was dehydrating, and while not ugly, you could very clearly see it was just a shell. A chrysalis. The kids, and I, and probably everyone who visited, got to witness, first hand, that the body isn't the person, but just a place for the person's energy to reside for a time. Yet another powerful lesson for us all.



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Education and Support for Conscious, Holistic Approaches
to Dying, Death and After-death Care