

Journeys

A Newsletter to Help in Bereavement



• HOSPICE FOUNDATION OF AMERICA •

September 2004

FIRST LOOK

It's So Different Now

I always thought grief was about feelings," Marianna shared. "I never realized so much of it is about coping with change."

Our life changes whenever we experience a loss. Sometimes the changes are major. We may miss the daily presence of someone who has long shared our life. All our routines, our rhythms of life, may now be different. What we used to do together, whether eating, walking, or watching television, we now do alone.

Activities that once had meaning may now seem insignificant. To Dave and Marne, buying a house was a lifelong

dream. It meant that their daughter, Julie, could have her own room, space to grow and play. Once Julie died, the house seemed like an empty burden.

**"WHILE CHANGES
ARE INEVITABLE,
THEY ARE NOT
UNCONTROLLABLE."**

BY
KENNETH J. DOKA

Sometimes the changes are more subtle. When Tyrone's parents died, holidays and traditions shifted. Their old house was sold. Family no longer gathered. Each of the siblings began his or her own traditions. The old ways died with the parents.

While changes are inevitable, they are not uncontrollable. We still retain choice, even in change.

The first step is to assess change. What are the ways that life has *(continued on page 2)*

How Do You Go on With Your Life?

BY JUDY TATELBAUM

After a loved one dies, the path toward recovery may seem like a mountain that is too difficult to climb. But there are steps you can take that will help ease the journey.

Allow your grief. No step is more important than this. Appreciate, accept, and allow your grief as a natural response to your loss. Let yourself feel your pain. Don't deny it.

Express your grief. Empty your feelings. Cry when you need to cry. Be angry when you feel angry. Don't suppress yourself or pretend to be stoic. The more you

express your pain, the more you free yourself from it.

Keep busy. You cannot dwell on your sorrow or your loss every waking moment. In the first rush of grief, you may feel you cannot control the extent of your suffering. But, with the passage of time, you will need to keep busy to nourish yourself, to avoid obsessing, to lessen your pain.

Add new activities. One of the hardest tasks of mourning is to go on with our lives. But we begin to heal when we open ourselves to having a new life. New activities stimulate us and awaken us to the fact that we are alive.

Add new people. Like new activities, new people can be stimulating and nourishing. It's rewarding to have the old friends who share our memo- *(continued on page 3)*

Inside

SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING

All My LossesPAGE 2

BY PAUL E. IRION

Living inevitably involves a series of losses. From childhood on we know what it is to gain or to lose. We gain new friends in school and we lose them when they move....

BECAUSE YOU ASKED

The Timing of GriefPAGE 3

BY RABBI EARL A. GROLLMAN

Since my wife died, everyone keeps telling me that "time heals all wounds." But why do I feel more pain now than when she died more than two months ago?...

LAST LOOK

Updating MedicarePAGE 4

BY JACK D. GORDON

As *Journeys* readers know, I have written in this space before about the hospice benefit in the Medicare program...



SPIRITUALLY SPEAKING

Living inevitably involves a series of losses. From childhood on we know what it is to gain or to lose. We gain new friends in school and we lose them when they move. We gain a new job and a circle of co-workers and we lose them when we quit or retire. We gain a sense of meaning when we love and are loved by parents, children, spouse, good friend, and we are deeply hurt when we lose one or more of these.

In one way, experiencing loss through all our lives is an important way of learning. Not all losses are of equal significance; some are large, and some are smaller. As we learn in our childhood and teen years that we can live through our losses, we become better prepared for the larger losses we encounter as adults. As experiences of loss accumulate, usually our ability to cope increases.

But sometimes the load of losses becomes too heavy. Within two years Rick experienced retirement, moving from his home of thirty years into a lovely retirement community, and the sudden death of his wife shortly after they were settled in their new home. This is what grief counselors call "bereavement overload." It is simply too many losses in a short period of time. It will not be easy to work through this series of losses. It will require time and exceptional support.

Another consequence of a series of losses may result when we do not work our way through an earlier loss successfully. Kate told her friend, Jane, "When my cousin died last month, I really wondered why I took it so hard. I cried and cried when I heard she had died. The odd thing was, we weren't that close. But when she died, it was like I'd lost my sister."

Jane, a trained hospice bereavement volunteer, immediately became interested because she had talked with other mourners who described similar reactions. She replied to Kate, "I can see why that would puzzle you. Is this the first relative you've lost?"

"The first in many years," Kate

All My Losses

BY PAUL E. IRION

responded. "My grandmother died when I was in my teens. She lived with us after Grandpa died. I never got along with her. She was awfully strict and old-fashioned; she was always telling my mom that I was doing awful things. It was just doing normal teen-age stuff. When she died, my mom had to make me go to the funeral. I felt like a hypocrite because we just couldn't get along. Mom felt bad about her mother dying; she cried a lot, but I didn't feel like that."

"That must have been real hard for you, wanting to comfort your mom but not feeling real grief because you didn't get along with your grandmother."

"It bothered me for a while, but then I just put it out of my mind."

It's So Different Now *(continued from page 1)*

changed? Are any of these changes truly problematic? Should some be reversed? Do others need to be accepted?

For example, some changes may negatively affect health. We may no longer eat properly or exercise. Marianna realized that without her husband, she would often forego her evening walk and not eat properly. She decided to join a health club. The walk no longer had meaning, but Marianna realized she needed to do some activity to maintain her health and stamina.

Other changes we may control. Not all change is inevitable. In some cases we can decide whether to move or not. We may need to choose whether or when to return to work. Here a guideline is helpful. Grief is highly stressful; therefore, as much as possible, we should control the pace of change. We may find less stress if we delay those major changes in our life as long as we can.

Some changes must be accepted. Death and loss will invariably bring

Jane said, "You know, Kate, I am wondering if it kind of came back when your cousin died."

"You mean I was crying for Grandma?"

"I don't know, but you might think about it, maybe talk to your mom about it."

Grief experiences pile up over the years, and it is understandable that they might become linked together. When we lose a loved one, it is natural that our feelings run together with our feelings at times of earlier losses. The piling up of all our losses greatly increases our need for support and should open us to the helpfulness of hospice bereavement workers and support groups. ■

Paul E. Irion is Emeritus Professor of Pastoral Theology at Lancaster Theology Seminary of the United Church of Christ, and was the Founding President of Hospice of Lancaster County.

changes in its wake. For Tyrone it was tough not to have family come together of the holidays. He missed the old traditions, but he realized the truth of a sister's comment. The holidays would be different anyway. His mother and father were gone. Their house was sold. So Tyrone began a new tradition, a "cousins club" that would meet once a year on the weekend closest to their parent's anniversary. Each year it would travel to a different family member's home in a different region. Over time, this would become a special event in its own right.

The secret to change is an old one best expressed in the Serenity Prayer. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." ■

Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, is Senior Consultant to HFA and a Professor of Gerontology at the College of New Rochelle in New York.

BECAUSE YOU ASKED

The Timing of Grief

BY RABBI EARL A. GROLLMAN

Q: *Since my wife died, everyone keeps telling me that "time heals all wounds." But why do I feel more pain now than when she died more than two months ago?*

A: When one suffers a loss, well-intentioned relatives and friends may make attempts at consolation but fail to comfort. Almost invariably this perceived pearl of profundity emerges: "Don't worry. Time heals all wounds." The truth is that it may not. Days by themselves do not automatically bring relief.

Many mourners worry because the future is far removed from their present unbearable reality. Moment by moment they struggle with lack of energy, anxiety, hopelessness, emptiness.

In the play, *I Never Sang for My Father*, Robert Anderson writes: "Death ends a life but it does not end the relationship which struggles on in the survivor's mind towards some resolution, some clear meaning, which it perhaps never finds." The aftermath of death echoes through the months and even years when poignant memories and feelings are rekindled.

When will you feel better? No one can give you the answer. There is no timetable for how long you will hurt so much.

The methods that you use to handle grief depend upon unique, personal factors. What is the relationship with the person who died? Like a wound on a body where some cuts are mere scratches and heal rapidly, others are very deep and need an extended time to begin to heal. Coping strategies revolve around how emotional distress was managed in the past. Age, religious beliefs, gender, and the circumstances causing the death are crucial. Above all, is the support from family, friends, groups, and professionals.

Time can be a great healer but time is a commodity which cannot be forced. It is unrealistic to do nothing but wait for the passage of time to relieve the hurt. What one accomplishes with time determines how long the gaping wound remains open and when it commences to heal.

The words "heal" and "holy" are both derived from the same old-English word meaning "to become whole." You will start to feel more whole again when you reshuffle old dreams with fresh plans; when you weave the threads of the past with the tapestry of the present (family, friends, activities, interests, responsibilities); and finally when you realize the inherent wisdom that mourning is a normal, personal reaction to loss and separation for as long as it takes. ■

How Do You Go On...

(continued from page 1)

ries and our grief yet new friends open the road to new possibilities.

Stay in communication with people who support you. Keep sharing yourself with loved ones. Stay in the world of people. Let yourself be loved. Love the people who are still alive.

Join a support group. People in grief need to break through their isolation and loneliness. Nothing compares with the intimacy and support you can get from a group of people with whom to share your feelings, your loss, your memories, and the process of your healing.

Keep a journal. This is a powerful method for expressing pain, as well as a means for having private, intimate time with yourself.

Move your body. Walking, dancing, swimming, or whatever activity pleases you, can effectively help you heal. Through exercise you build your physical strength, release tension, enliven yourself, and keep yourself well.

Be willing to change things around. It is natural to wish to keep things the way they were when our loved one was with us. Still, that doesn't keep them alive. My friend Ann kept her bedroom exactly as it was before her husband died, fifteen years ago. She might never have noticed until a visitor commented that the art on the wall was so masculine. Ann suddenly realized she was sleeping in her husband's room. We asked her "what if" it was her bedroom. The next time I saw that room it was transformed with color, frills, and flowers.

Although loss is never easy to face, we can go on with our lives...if only we will pay attention to taking care of ourselves and our needs. ■

Judy Tatelbaum, MSW, is a psychotherapist, professional speaker, educator, and author. She is also a frequent contributor to Journeys.

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LAST LOOK

As *Journeys* readers know, I have written in this space

before about the hospice benefit in the Medicare program. Specifically, I have argued that eligibility requirements need to be updated and expanded. The requirement that a patient must have a life expectancy of six (or fewer) months to be eligible for hospice assumes that doctors are much better at predicting death than in fact they are. It also ignores the realities of Alzheimer's disease, other dementias, emphysema, ALS, and other long-term and life-limiting diseases.

In April, I explained to our national teleconference audience that the six-month rule embraced in 1982 was simply a political compromise between federal lawmakers who wanted a more generous benefit and those who wanted a less costly one.

Now, the issue appears headed for re-examination. In late June, two members of Congress with a long-standing interest in the matter called upon the head of the Medicare program to update hospice eligibility criteria. These criteria have not changed substantially in over 20 years.

The request came from U.S. Representatives Pete Stark (D-California)

Updating Medicare

BY JACK GORDON

and Nancy Johnson (R-Connecticut). It followed a report issued by the Medicare Payment Advisory Commission, an independent body that advises both Congress and the White House on Medicare. The report termed the six-month requirement arbitrary and said it may exclude beneficiaries who could benefit from hospice care. It also pointed out that two huge private insurers, Aetna and Kaiser Permanente, have adopted more flexible criteria.

This follows a landmark report released in April, 2003, by the Hastings Center and the National Hospice Work Group. It called for immediate reform.

A more flexible hospice benefit is an idea whose time has come. I have always believed the benefit should be based on the diagnosis (the illness) as well as the prognosis (how long, on average, patients with that diagnosis are likely to live). It now seems that events are moving in that direction. You should encourage your elected representatives in congress to support the efforts of Mr. Stark and Ms. Johnson.

Our Web site www.hospicefoundation.org has more information on this and related hospice matters. ■

VOICES

I look forward to reading *Journeys* every month since my beloved fiancé, Chip, passed away in 2003. Chip was young, handsome, and energetic, until the termite of prostate cancer took over his body. For five years, he never gave up hope. His strength gave me strength. We were soul mates and Chip realized that I would always be there for him, right to the end of his life.

Determined to dwell on the present, I turned my attention to the word, TIME.

Time to heal, time to go though the roller-coaster of life's emotions. Missing his beautiful blue eyes and great smile was a deep sense of loss. His footprints are in my heart.

I am reinforced by the articles I read in *Journeys*, and the calls I receive from representatives of the Quaboag Valley Hospice.

I will always remember the wonderful memories, and that comforts me. Time waits for no one; treasure every moment you have. So plant your own garden and decorate your own soul, and you will realize that you really can endure and you are really are strong. With that said, I know Chip is smiling down at me.

--Marie Dwyer
Wilbraham, MA