

Prosperous Meditation: Reflections on Loss and Bereavement

Introduction

When I deal with death and loss whether with clients, friends, family or even with myself, existentialism is no longer just a philosophy it is the rubber that meets the road of life. There is no greater issue that we all face. When a loved one dies, we are faced with many external and internal challenges. Life is forever and unalterably changed; a door closes.

When we love we attach. Attachment is not just an external process involving caring for one who is outside of self; it is a complicated internal process in which we take (representations i.e. thoughts, feelings and experiences of) the loved one into the self. This is why it can be so painful and in fact feel like we have lost a part of our self. But what choice do we have? To not attach, to not love, to not live? Unfortunately there are no shortcuts involving the pain of grief but it is through the grief that one can eventually heal.

Circumstances

The circumstances involving death are of course very important to us. Was the death sudden or after a long and arduous illness. The death of a child seems unnatural and tragic to parents. Suicide can leave family members with guilt, shame and questions as to why, that they may never recover from. Even the elderly person whose soul-mate passes after a full lifetime can feel stricken and “left behind”.

When there are issues with a loved one, a love-hate relationship or psychological baggage and the love one dies there can be greater difficulties than with a less ambivalent relationship. This can lead to “complicated bereavement”. The circumstances or the “story” involving the person lost along with our own psychologies, beliefs and our intent (If one wishes to not move on it becomes more difficult to heal.) effect the way we grieve.

Stages of Bereavement

Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s ground breaking work on “Death and Dying” in the seventies highlighted that the acceptance of one’s own death occurs in stages i.e. Denial & Isolation, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and finally Acceptance. (Kubler-Ross’s last book on “Grief and Grieving” was written in 2004 as she herself went through a process of illness and death.) Grief work can be understood in terms of stages as well. The following is loosely what can be expected during different stages and what to do to best take care of self.

Shock or Disbelief Even when death is expected there can be feelings of disbelief and acute dismay over the loss. Alarm, confusion, disbelief, helplessness, preoccupation with the lost person, difficulties with sleep, poor appetite are all hallmarks of this stage. Coping with this stage can be difficult to completely gut wrenching. Spiritual, religious, communal rituals like sitting Shiva are very helpful. There is often a need to remain safe and be safe; it is okay to honor this feeling. This is a time when one needs to be patient and kind with self. Allow plenty of crying which is very cleansing. *Do not make any major decisions during this stage.*

Sense of Loss and Depression This is when loss can really hit home. There can be feeling of depression, separation anxiety, survivor guilt, anger, fear of death. Sleep disturbance, low energy and poor appetite may continue. Again, crying and allowing feelings is helpful. Don’t try to hide or repress feelings i.e. letting feelings get stuck. Allow feelings to move through you. Allow friends to be of comfort.

Withdrawal You may find a need to withdraw and rest; to be in a cocoon a bit. There may be less support from your support network as some time has passed. There may be a need to review your loss and life now. Again it is important to be kind and patient with self while allowing feelings to go through. One should pay attention to sleep and eating well. Do not force yourself to be communal during this time.

In Loving Memory of James Walter Stein Dec. 5, 1957 to July 13, 2006



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Healing This is a time of renewal and hope. Old roles may be shed or re-structured. There may be a changing sense of identity; a reemphasis of interests or a searching for new interests and connections. There may be guilt or confused feelings about moving on with life. Forgiveness of self and other can be healing and freeing.

One should not take the above phases as gospel, grieving and bereavement is highly individualized and one needs to listen to their own heart and mind as to what is best for the them.

At any point one may consider seeing a therapist or joining a bereavement group particularly if the circumstance and response to the loss are complicated or difficult.

Meditation

(Remember this is a meditation newsletter!) Meditation can be helpful during very difficult times but this only holds true for those who have established a meditative practice. Starting meditation practice directly after a loss may be damaging as it can open you up to feeling and thoughts without protective defenses. You may find yourself unable to meditate at this time anyway and mistakenly believe that you can't meditate in the future.

Gentle Reflection In the 18th and 19th centuries "The West" thought of "meditation" as "reflection" of a concept or a life decision. During bereavement and grief-work the lost object is in our thoughts all the time. Perhaps at these times one can gently reflect as a means to move along.

Doing Meditation Doing Meditation involves simply spending ten or fifteen minutes a day doing an activity that brings one joy and then observing how one feels. This can help with depression or getting out of a rut. This meditation can be found in the newsletter section of my web-site, www.prosperousmeditation.com.

Visitation Dreams

Therapists and bereavement counselors have long been aware of "visitation dreams" in those who have experienced death of a loved one. There was a recent article in Newsday by Jeffery Zaslow entitled, "Moving On: for Many Bereaved Families, 'Visits' From Late Loved Ones Provide Solace". I am sorry, I do not know the article date as it was given to me by a friend.

The article described the difference between "grief dreams" which have symbolism such as the loved one's trips on trains or planes without them. "Visitation dreams are much more vivid and can feel "sacred". While researchers can't say whether these visitations are real or an "expression of our deepest wishes" the following is an "eye opening" or perhaps mind opening story. In 1999 Glen Lord of Nashua N.H. lost his 4-year old son Noah, to complications of tonsillectomy. Shortly thereafter Glen had dreams that his son had grown into a healthy young man. Mr. Lord enjoyed and found these "visits" comforting. Glen dreamed that Noah told him that he could no longer visit but he introduced him to two boys who would stay with him. Glen awoke and told his wife he would not dream of Noah again. Late in 2002 the Lords adopted two brothers through a Russian adoption program.

Certainly this is a spine tingling story but it also illustrates an important principle around life, loss and the grieving process ...when a door closes a new door will soon open

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