

Supporting Grieving Loved Ones

Ken Wilson 8.29.2021

Someone in a small group I'm in shared that his sister had a just lost a spouse. This person who told us that is a very caring and empathetic person. But he shared something, many of us experience: "I'd like to be able to be there for her, but I don't know where to start. I don't want to do something that makes it worse. I feel stuck."

Our reading today says we who are consoled can pass the consolation we have experienced to others. (The word translated "console" is more literally "near-calling," so the core of it is connection not "make it better.") At any rate, those in our group who had lost close loved ones, shared how they experienced support from others after the loss.

Surely our increased isolation over this past year, is tough on those who are grieving. So anything we can do—even small things—to support people in our various communities—at Blue Ocean, our families, workplaces is needed now more than ever.

First a word about that initial powerless feeling—that "Oh no, what do I do?" feeling when you learn that someone you know has lost a loved one. Even people who are really good at this sort of thing, have that feeling. Death has that effect on us. Death is stupefying. In traditional cultures like ancient Judaism, the initial responses expressed that—tearing a garment, sitting down and throwing dust on your head. It was a ritual way of saying, "This is beyond me"

I mean there *are* stupid things we can do at first. Like an hour after my wife died, someone I barely knew literally walked into the house unannounced and said, "What can I do?" I was like, "I'm sorry, can you leave?" Most us know not to do that. In the earliest days, the people closest to a grieving person are the ones best suited to support. Duh!

I was in a grief group after my dad died many years ago. And people enjoyed telling stories about the stupid things people do or say. It's like comic relief for the bereaved to share these stories. But if we can just avoid barging into someone's house who we barely know and say, "What can I do to help?" And if we can avoid saying, "God must have a purpose," or "She's in a better place," or "Aren't you over it yet?" then I think most of us are going to be in the clear for doing stupid things. With that caveat, the fear of doing something stupid is much greater than the reality of doing something stupid.

Most bereaved people feel more weak, vulnerable, for months or years, depending on the loss. And in that experience, they also feel how much of their strength, is really a function of their relationships, their connections. This can have a lasting effect: you realize that the things we think of as “personal strength”—my social skills, my emotional stability, my physical energy—all these things pale in comparison to being loved by others (humans and other creatures)

When we’re feeling inadequate to support someone who is grieving, it helps to remember: **gestures matter**. You know how people send sympathy cards? I used to under-appreciate sympathy cards. The artwork! The lame sayings! And yet—surprise—I loved receiving sympathy cards and the artwork or the words inside didn’t matter much. The cards themselves were the physical gesture: someone picked out the card, someone dug up my address, someone found where the stamps were kept, signed it, dropped it in the mail. I also didn’t notice who didn’t send me a card. The loss had my full attention, not who did what in response.

You know when people hear (even years later) that you lost a close loved one and they say, “Oh I’m so sorry for your loss”—that still blesses me. This past week I made two calls to call centers: one to apply for social security benefits and the other to a financial institution. In each case, I was asked a question to which I needed to respond: “Yes, that was my first wife; she died.” Each time the person said, “I’m sorry for your loss.” Both times it blessed me. The kindness of strangers. Whatever divides us, the fact that we lose loved ones, unites us.

So gestures matter. Thank God. We don’t have to be trained grief counselors.

Here’s something our Jewish friends can teach us: the value in recognizing the death anniversary called, **Yahrzeit** in Yiddish (Yahr = year; ziet = time). How to observe a Yahrzeit? By lighting a candle—you can get yahrzeit candles—and keeping them lit through the day. I do that for my mom (January 30) my dad (early August) my late wife (Oct. 14), and Phyllis Tickle (September 22) I buy Yartziet candles in bulk. If I have a picture of the person, bring it out—light the candle and leave it burning through the day. Blow it out before you go to bed.

Candles in many traditions including ours, represent a person's life. (Elton John, Candle in the Wind at Princess Diana's funeral) They also represent prayer and divine presence. Just like Buddhists have prayer wheels that spin in the breeze as a form of prayer, lighting a candle and burning it through the day is a form of prayer. The menorah (lampstand) in the inner court of the temple. So when a friend loses a loved one, you can put the date in your calendar for the next year to remember to either light a candle in your home (and let them know you're doing it) or to send them a remembrance note or text.

Even if a person isn't consciously aware of the death anniversary, very commonly, the body remembers. I'll not notice it's a yahrzeit, partly because I'm not always carefully tuned into the calendar date—Oh it's the 29th of August already? The date is often a surprise to me. In my defense, I usually know what day of the week it is. But if I'm momentarily oblivious to the date on the calendar, my body reminds me. I feel a little funky and can't say why—then I check the calendar and realize, oh! this is my father's yahrzeit. He died 30 years ago. Body still remembers

Two more things you already know, but worth remembering.

Mourning lasts longer than most non-mourners estimate. Look at our bereavement policies.

Lose an immediate family member? Small business HR website recommends 3 paid days off.

If you're lucky. Most of us are pretty aware of a friend's loss for a month or two. But then it fades. Conventional wisdom maybe 40 years ago, was people cycle thru stages of grief in a year. Now we know there aren't predictable stages of grief that people go through in sequence over a certain time frame. They think the process of "recovering from a loss" is a matter of layering positive experiences on top of the loss—so the pain of the loss is always in the foreground, but it remains in the background, and pops into the foreground from time to time.

That means loving our friends who suffered a death in the family isn't all about the immediate response. It's a community responsibility, supporting the grieving. Some of us may be good at it in the early innings, some better at remembering to show up in the latter innings.

Last thing: the value in mentioning or sharing memories of the person who died. One of the most distressing things for a bereaved person in early phase of grief: moment they can't easily picture the loved ones face. OMG! Am I forgetting them? Especially when a death is sudden or traumatic the brain gets jangled and memories of the loved one can be difficult to access. And that's very distressing. A key task of mourning is transitioning from a relationship in space-time (flesh-blood interactions) to a relationship with the deceased in the realm of memory. So most bereaved people appreciate when their loved one is mentioned, remembered by others. Memories are stored in the community, kept alive in the community. That's the value in Feast of All Saints (Halloween)—remembering together those who have passed on.

Let's close with this on the way to communion: In the modern western world, we tend to think of memory as simply a mental activity. Like looking at a photograph we took of an event in the past. In Jewish understanding, memory can be more than that. It can be a participation in the event remembered. The words of the Seder meal are spoken the participants in the Seder are going through the original Passover along with their ancestors. It's memory as a participation in the event remembered. The instructions found in 1 Corinthians for communion include memory "do this in remembrance of me" but also participation: "the bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ" Memory as participation in the event.

All this is related to an ancient understanding of reality, expressed in "In the beginning, God".... These words were written out of the intuition, the experience that understands space & time as an artifact, nestled in something beyond space-time. There's an Otherwhere connected to this Somewhere. (For science nerds—a nifty little book on the physics that corresponds to this is called *The Order of Time* by Carlo Rovelli. One of the chapters is titled, "Time is Ignorance")

If that is the case then surely to remember our departed loved ones who bear the image of God, who are held in the mind, in the presence of God, the nest in which space-time is nestled—is this sacred sense of memory as a participation in the event, or in this case, the person remembered. The remembered one is present to us in the act of remembering.

It's like having a blessed dream of the loved one. I had one of my dad recently. It was so much more than a memory—I can't help but think in the dream he was really present with me. Like he really does exist in a realm beyond but connected to this one. That was a wonderful dream I waited 32 years to have. In a similar way, memories convey a presence.

Memory is a faculty of love. Not the only one. Those who lose memory are still capable of feeling love. But our love for our loved ones—living and dead—happens in the realm of memory. Is it possible to fall in love with someone without thinking about them a lot when they aren't physically present? Don't think so.

Time now for Diane to lead us in a meditation as we move toward our candle lighting, prayer for loved ones, and communion.