



Bereavement is a universal and integral part of our experience of love.

C.S. Lewis

Who Am I Now?

Looking in the mirror after my loved one has died, I wonder who that person is looking back at me. Her eyes are dull and filled with pain, and she seems to have aged dramatically overnight. I don't recognize her and the person she is becoming inside as the grief begins to settle in a little more each day. I wonder if I will ever again recognize the person in the mirror.

I worry I will always feel the way I do now, unable to find joy or meaning in anything, with a longing and an aching for my loved one that seems to have taken up permanent residence in my heart, mind, and gut—leaving me sick to my stomach and frightened. I don't know how long I can endure this pain, and some days I don't even know if I want to. I wonder if I will ever be the person I used to be before my loved one died.

I'm not the only one wondering about this. Those who love me are wondering the same thing—worried about me and feeling helpless when they are unable to give me back my lost motivation. All I can do now is survive and get through my day. They are saddened by my sadness, and would give anything to see me laughing and engaging in life as I once did. Though they wish the best for me, they sometimes push me in directions I'm not yet ready to move, thinking what I need is a cheerleader to lift my spirits. They mean well, but what I really need is someone who will quietly listen to me and not tell me what I should do, think, or feel as I move through these uncharted waters trying to find myself again. I am fearful I will never be the person I used to be before my loved one died.

Those who have traveled this journey before me tell me it will get a little softer and easier over time, and this huge boulder of grief I now carry on my back will get smaller and become more manageable until eventually it is reduced to a small polished stone I can carry in my pocket. Their ability to rejoin life tells me that I will one day do the same, perhaps not so much as the person I once was, but rather a wiser and more humane version of myself, capable of once again living a life full of meaning and joy. Facing my grief now will help prepare me for that day.

Self-doubt and Second Guessing

Written by Sara Olmsted, Bereavement Intern

When we lose someone we love, we face our grief journey, which can take many roads. We may search for closure, but it will not come—at least not in the way we can achieve closure with a business transaction or a disagreement with a friend. The realization that there is no closure in losing a loved one may feel like a burden, but it also may feel like a relief. Why would we want to shut the door on someone that meant so much to us, just because they are no longer living? Grieving zaps much energy from us and, at times, we can feel very conflicted. Although the pain we feel may seem like it will never leave us, it can often transform us, when it is time, if we open our hearts to our new reality. We can heal from a loss, and we carry our loved ones with us for the rest of our lives.

A feeling of things being unresolved often comes upon us when someone we love dies. This person is no longer living and we do not have direct access to them in order to get the answers we are searching for. Guilt is a common emotional reaction when grieving, often resulting from the fact that we cannot change what has come and gone. You may be asking yourself: Why didn't I tell my loved one how much they meant to me? Could I have prevented discomfort when my loved one was in pain? Is there more that I need to be doing for my loved one now that they have died? Should I have made different choices for my loved one and would it have changed where things are at now? This is a normal process when grieving. It is draining, but it speaks to the love and concern you felt for your loved one.

Processing the guilt you feel may allow some of the heaviness to be lifted. You might find it helpful to do this with a trusted friend, clergy, or a bereavement counselor. Remaining present and acknowledging that you did the best you could with the circumstances at hand is a step in the right direction. When we hold on to something we have no control over, we are not allowing ourselves the gentleness we need while grieving.

Feeling Joy Amidst Grief

Written by Jennifer Dimond, Bereavement Intern

Kathy* had been grieving the death of her husband, Jim, for a few months when she decided, with some hesitation, to go on a cruise. The trip was an annual event with a group of women she'd been friends with since college, something she normally looked forward to each winter. This year, however, was anything but normal. Jim had died suddenly of a heart attack in the early fall, turning Kathy's world upside down.

With the support of her friends, a few of whom were also widowed, Kathy decided to go on the trip even though her heart was still feeling heavy four months after Jim's death. "I'll probably spend half the trip locked in my cabin crying," Kathy said, "but my girlfriends assured me they won't mind. Besides, it's too sad to sit around here by myself. Everything reminds me of Jim."

When I asked about the cruise during her visit the week after her return, Kathy talked about how wonderful it was to see her dear friends, and how supportive they'd been whenever she'd become tearful as something sparked a memory of Jim. She mentioned that it had been pleasant to feel the warmth of the Caribbean sun on her face, and to have time to rest and relax after an exhausting few months.

"Something unexpected also happened to me on this trip," Kathy said after a few minutes. "We were ashore on one of the islands and my friends took me to a little restaurant we love. There was a band

* Client name and details have been changed

playing lively music, and people were laughing and dancing and having a wonderful time. Before I knew what was happening, I was up dancing with them. And laughing," she said timidly. "For a moment, I was just...*alive* again. Is that awful?"

"Did it feel awful?" I asked.

"No," Kathy replied. "It felt great, actually. But that's bad, isn't it? I lost the love of my life—how could I feel *happy*?"

Many people who grieve the loss of a mate or other central person in their lives share Kathy's question. How, in the midst of such deep sadness, is it possible to feel joy, even for a moment? Some people hide from happiness in the days or even months after a loved one's death, believing pain is the only appropriate way to honor that person's memory.

In fact, people experience a whole spectrum of emotions in grief—for many, this includes joy. For some, a happy or humorous memory of their loved one will bring smiles and laughter. Think of a memorial service where laughter rings through the tears as friends share funny stories of the person who died. For others, it might be the first glimpse of spring flowers pushing through the soil after a long winter that warms the heart and offers a sense of hopefulness and happiness. In Kathy's case, joy came through music and movement, and a feeling of being *alive* in her body. These moments, whenever they come, are gifts—chances to recharge your emotional batteries and heal, even just a little.

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