


Healing with Haven

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A Rock, A Wall, and True Grit- A lesson in "Grief Work"

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Grief work-it's the greatest challenge of good grief recovery. Anyone who has been through it can validate that it's hard work-physically abusive, mentally demanding and spiritually challenging. There is no other "work" that I have done that can compare to its intensity or its impact-except, perhaps, to compare it to constructing a rock wall. And I learned that both must be tackled one heavy rock at a time.

Last summer, after moving into a new home, the project of landscaping formed its dark cloud over us. My plan was to build a rock retaining wall about three or four feet high around two sides of the house-approximately 80 feet-and then continued down the length of the driveway. This would be my "Short-cut" to endless lawn and yard work. My vision wasn't clear, but I instinctively knew the task was enormous.

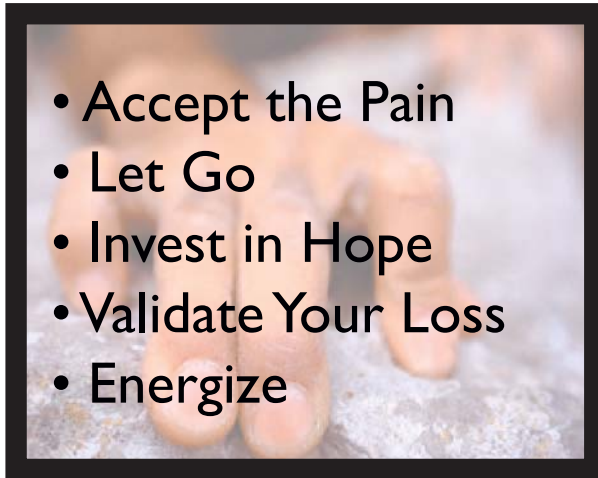
I assured my husband, Gary, that I could handle the challenge ahead with just a little assistance from him. (It would give me something to do when he was keeping evening appointments.) When the dump trucks carrying 33 ton of medium size boulders dropped their cargo in the front yard, I gulped and muttered to myself, "I shudda hired a professional with a Bobcat." Days later, another truck dropped 17 yards of pea gravel. How in the world was I going to handle all that rock? Before me, I saw piles of dirt, a lot of hard work, and a bleak vision of what the big picture might be. I was acutely aware of my challenge: a rock, a wall, and mustering up true grit! As I thought about my task (wishing the work were already over) I compared it to the hard task of grief work. In my journey through grief, I learned there is no such thing as a short cut. No matter what path I chose to take, I had to work through the rubble (problems) one situation at a time. After the first few months of seemingly "getting nowhere," my true grit (determination to not let this beat me) kicked in. Building my rock wall reminded me of that anxious, special time in the process of grief.

We've all heard the cliché "time heals all wounds" and many a well-wisher has offered those words of condolence to the struggling griever. Unfortunately, "time" is not the healer...action is. When we allow our grief to overcome us by dwelling on our misfortune, we become drained of energy and the vitality of life. We may become withdrawn, sullen, helpless, and even bitter. Grief work offers us a choice. For those who take up the challenge, there is an achievable outcome of peace, hope, resilience, and spiritual growth.

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Grief work requires being active in learning about the grief process and working through the invisible task of healing that lead to making you feel ALIVE once again. There are five tasks of grief work that I can personally attest to:



ACCEPT THE PAIN

Accepting the pain is, perhaps, the hardest and longest task of grief work. Like a rock, this is a hard and heavy choice. We have been conditioned in life to avoid pain and are resistant to accepting “things that hurt.”

Sometimes it takes just as much energy to avoid the reality as it does to face it head on.

Grief work confronts the unbelievable and forces us to experience our pain by facing the reality. We avoid the unavoidable by telling others things are “okay.”

We take out our frustration and anger on others, i.e. the physician, a friend, law enforcement and even our family support system. We believe that our suffering is greater than the suffering of others, and, therefore, we discount problems others are dealing with that are unrelated to death.

Choosing to face the pain takes inner strength. This task took considerable time for Gary and me. Truth and fact are foreboding teachers. Some details of our loved one’s death may be troubling. Sometimes we have to turn off the numbness and oblivion and experience heart-wrenching sobs. We look the unknown and fear in the face.

The ultimate task of accepting is realizing that your beloved will never come back. Then, you must make the choice to **Let Go**.

LET GO

Letting go is about “walls.” We build walls to protect ourselves from losing something precious to us. Instinctively, we shelter our grief, afraid we’ll forget our love ones-how they looked, how they acted and

who they were. Nor do we want others to forget them.

Our emotions take the proverbial rollercoaster ride. One moment they are up and the next moment they are down. Our emotions may seem controllable in some instances and spontaneous and uncontrollable at the next. A song, a television show, a fragrance, a piece of clothing or any small thing can trigger an emotional burst. We feel helpless when we realize that we can’t “fix” the pain. Sometimes we even feel that we are responsible for the loss and deserve to “hurt”.

By the time we finally accept the reality of loss, most of us have stumbled through every doubt possible.

We choose to put aside the “shudda, woulda, coulda” restraints. We banish the idea of ever understanding “why?” and we accept that we must live with the unknown. We dismiss the flashbacks or nightmare surrounding our loved one’s death and believe that he or she is okay. We give up the regrets of things we did or didn’t do or say. We put aside feelings of guilt about the death and accept that death may have been unavoidable, or long-suffering is over and it’s okay to feel relieved. Letting go means giving up what little control you feel you have over your pain. Letting go is not about forgetting, it’s about releasing the burden grief places on us physically, spiritually and emotionally. For Gary and me, letting go required putting trust into the hands of a higher power, our God. We accepted that we couldn’t change what had happened. All we could do was learn to cope with our loss. When we consciously made the decision to “let go,” we gave ourselves permission to invest in the future and hope.

INVEST IN HOPE

Investing in hope is about true grit and the determination to survive in spite of your loss. You choose to replace your sad emotions, frustrations, anger and loss of dreams for a Better quality of life. Grief work is composed of good days and bad days... and some just so-so days. When you have a “good day,” you become optimistic that this burden of grief will pass.

What you are feeling is hope. Know that this is what your loved one would want for you. We found “hope” was about investing in relationships again, building new dreams, exploring new ideas, discovering a stronger foundation in our spiritual awareness, assessing our priorities, finding joy in small miracles and appreciating life every day. We expressed gratitude for the “gifts” we are given. We became more compassionate to people and life around us. Hope builds a foundation

that equips us to handle additional life challenges, i.e. job loss, again parents, illness etc. Coping becomes our adjusted way of life.

Once we focused on “hope,” we were finally able to honor Chad’s life in meaningful ways. It was then time to validate our loss.

VALIDATE YOUR LOSS

After the emotionally difficult task of grief work, there comes a time of soothing—a time to VALIDATE experience and loss. This is your reward for the hard work you did. You stand on the threshold of being ALIVE once again. It’s a time when your new identity emerges. It’s a time when you are more comfortable and can talk about your loss, your story and your pain. It’s a time to say “goodbye” (and I’ll see you again someday!) in peaceful and meaningful ways. Now you strive to discover ways to validate the beauty, the life and the love of the person who died.

The spirit of life emerges and encourages you to VALIDATE through ritual, social causes, journaling, writing poems, memorial gifts, creating memory books, ceremonies and numerous other ways. For some, it’s just a time to feel at peace through pleasant memories. We chose to honor Chad’s life through grief education. First, we educated ourselves and then we chose to share our experiences with others through groups, presentations, writing and personal interactions. This resulted in a welcomed sense of peace and harmony. We felt ENERGIZED to give meaning to our experience and continue to achieve personal growth.

ENERGIZE

Energize is the source of Life, and it’s a time to feel ALIVE again. The opportunity for personal growth is

most clearly realized in this part of your grief work. It’s time to live in the present moment, honor the past and move forward to the future. You have evolved. It’s a time when you can smile again, laugh with your fiends, share your experiences without intense emotional pain, and face the world with unrealized strength. You gain energy from self-reflection, in-depth thinking, helping others and reprioritizing your life choices. You can attest to the powerfulness of working through your loss. Now we can remember our loved ones for how they lived—not why they died.

The profound impact of loss was life changing for us—as it will be for you. Though it has been over a decade of “learning new lessons” and discovering new purpose, we remain deeply touched by the outcome of our grief work. We can finally say we feel ALIVE again.

Building my rock wall last summer was therapeutic. Like grief, the work was hard, the process was slow and the initial vision—not too clear. Like grief, it took physical strength, mental concentration and spiritual determination to achieve a “job well done.” In the end, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. I felt in tune with nature and God. Both grief work and my wall made me consider options, choose paths, ask for help and give in to human weakness. Both made me appreciate my hidden inner determination and strength. Looking back, I discovered that my wall isn’t really a wall at all, it’s a firm foundation of lessons learned, challenges met and a renewed outlook on life. Like grief work, it became the test for getting me through life situations one day (or one rock) at a time. (The four tasks of grief are from a concept developed by Dr. J.W. Worden. ALIVE is my interpretation of five tasks of grief work based on my personal experiences.) 🏠

How Do I Know When I’m Getting Better

Dr. Earl A. Grollman

Grief is a process, not an event. Listen to the words of the teachers – the bereaved who share their thoughts with us as to when they know that the sun is finally peeping through the clouds:

“I can find something to laugh about.”

“I like going to the cemetery but I don’t have to go as often.”

“I disposed of some memory marks without feeling disloyal.”

“I attend funerals and am able to focus on that person who died rather than my own loss.”

“I go to the support group mostly to help the other bereaved people, no longer for myself.”

“I sleep better and am not so tired all the time.”

“I now like looking at the photographs.”

Grief & Loss Seminars

The next seminar will be held August 24th from 3pm-4:30pm @ 2895 Temple Ave, Signal Hill. Light refreshments will be served. For more information please contact Tina Stephenitch at 562-426-7500 ext 406. This event is free and open to the community.

Make a Difference in Someone's life

Do you have a few hours a week to listen, give support, or assist in the office? Haven Hospice is seeking people who would like to give some of their time visiting patients, helping in the office or doing community outreach. If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or know anyone who maybe interested in volunteering their time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 ext 406 for more information.

Help us keep our mailing list current!

Are you moving and still wish to receive Healing with Haven? Or perhaps you no longer wish to receive our monthly newsletter? Please, call Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.

Individual/Group Support

As many of you may already know, Haven Hospice offers individual support and group support to all people in the community who are going through the difficult journey of bereavement. For more information on our groups or to make an appointment for individual support please contact Tina Stephenitch, Bereavement Coordinator at (562) 426-7500 ext 406



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