

PRACTICING GRIEF

Most of us have experienced loss and grief in our lives. These losses range from “small deaths” such as loss of a job, change in health, or a child leaving home, to the larger losses such as death of a parent, friend or spouse. In some cases these losses are “grieved” and given cultural sympathy and support, in other cases they are barely recognized as important by others or the self. To honor each individual’s grief, no matter how serious we judge their loss is an important task.

I am now reaching the one-year anniversary of the death of my beloved spouse, Gayle. With the coming of this anniversary I fluctuate between dread at its approach and the desire for it to hurry up, get here and be past. I alternately drag my feet through the days or run faster to get through them. I am torn between wanting this first year to be behind me and not wanting to get any farther away from the time when she was alive.

With the passing of this year however comes some perspective. This year was marked by many smaller divisions of time: the first week; the first month; the forty-ninth day; the third month; the sixth and ninth month anniversaries of her death were all significant demarcations of time for me. Other passages were important too such as; *my* first birthday without her, *her* first birthday without her, the first time I went back to our favorite restaurant, beach, or anywhere else that was special to us, our wedding anniversary, all the first holidays without her, and a myriad of others.

In addition to the loving support of friends and family, individual counseling, and my strong spiritual sense, I have been helped immensely by the various rituals/ceremonies/services I have created, adapted or borrowed. Having a way to formalize and recognize my mourning with outward manifestations has been a truly sustaining practice. Though there are a few accepted grieving practices or rituals common to all (such as memorials and funerals), I have often found the culture at large to be oblivious to grief, in denial of loss and afraid of emotions. Perhaps it is the fear of death or loss itself. Despite this it has been invaluable for me to keep talking about it, crying about it and making special all those markers of time and events that stir my grief. This recognition and expression of grief also allows its release.

The previously common practice of a widow wearing black is now rarely seen and since I felt this was too much for me, I decided instead to wear a black

mourning armband for a year and a day. This would signify my mourning state for all to see, even when I was simply doing the shopping or laughing with a friend. To me it was a sign of respect for Gayle and for my grief.

In the first four months my grief was so profound that I could only relate as a person in mourning. Anything else seemed quite beside the point, day to day conversations seemed trivial and without substance. At that time the armband served as a kind of shield and I expected that it would alert people around me to my state. What I found was that in an entire year of wearing it only a handful of people have mentioned or asked about it. This has been a surprising education for me about the discomfort and avoidance, or perhaps ignorance of so many when it comes to things of death.

Many religions have their own ways of helping the mourner. Jews recognize specific periods for mourning, saying special prayers for the dead. So do Buddhists and Moslems and many other religions. It was good to look into several and apply the aspects that fit for me. It was important not to let the formality or informality of any tradition or ritual dictate the ways I adapted it for myself.

When Gayle first died my brother-in-law lit a candle in the house and kept it going. This was strongly symbolic of her spirit being kept alight and present. I kept a flame burning 24 hours for seven days. On that first week anniversary of her death I started a specific ritual. At the hour before her death I turned off the phones in the house, lit a special black candle, placed the urn with her ashes, her picture and some special objects on the couch where she died. I smudged the area with sage and sat meditating and crying for the next couple of hours. According to the Tibetans the spirit of the deceased lingers for seven weeks after death and on the forty-ninth day re-lives their death experience again to learn more of their life's lessons and about letting go.

I did this meditation ritual each week for seven weeks at the hour of her death. Several times her spirit visited me; each time *I* experienced her death over again (even though I wasn't there when she died). It was very intense and painful but it seemed to help me come to grip with the reality of her sudden and unexpected passing. As time passed I added some other elements to this ritual: calling on the spirits of the four directions and four elements, calling for (or praying for) particular help with different aspects of my personal despair. I did this again at three months and nine months, finding that at each juncture some significant shift occurred in my process of grief.

On our 16th wedding anniversary I went to a special pond that Gayle loved and made an altar of stones and special symbols in the sandy shore. I blew smoke to the four directions and cast a circle. I gathered a stone for each of years we were together and placed them one by one in a circle, saying out loud memories of that year, both good and bad, setting the 16th in the center of the circle to represent that part of the year without her. I then threw a crystal heart out as far as I could into the pond. This ritual had a deep healing effect on my sorrow and I found that a tremendous depression lifted the next day.

On her birthday I had a “birthday party” with a few friends. We watched videos of Gayle and reminisced, we had cake and cried some more. On Samhain eve (Halloween) when the veil is the thinnest between the worlds I laid out food and created alters for special people who have died (as in the Mexican tradition for the Day of the Dead). I lit many candles and read poetry out loud; I meditated on each person and prayed for special dreams or visions. On the one year anniversary this month again I plan to do a personal ritual and to place her ashes in a stone sculpture urn made especially for her.

Soon after her death I started writing letters to her. At first I couldn’t function well enough to actually write so I dictated my letters into a tape recorder. I wrote (or spoke) every night, now it is less often. This practice helped me pour out my thoughts, sorrow, anger and despair and share with her all the things she was missing. I had been so used to telling her all the goings on in my daily life, my inner thoughts and process that I needed to keep doing it, even symbolically. Writing each night helped me feel like I had a way of maintaining some linear order to life, some continuity, while all around and inside of me felt like undifferentiated chaos. In the last three months I’ve written a few grieving poems and these too help with the healing.

Other things I’ve done have included: finding and creating beautiful boxes to put her special letters and possessions in; wearing her clothes; making up picture albums of our photos; keeping her pillow separate and using it for comfort; donating a memorial bench to her in Julliard Park; buying special frames for photos of her and keeping fresh flowers by her picture. I had our wedding rings soldered together and I wear them both, symbolizing an eternal connection. Doing these things are not “holding on too tight” or obsessing about the deceased. All of these things are normal expressions of grieving and dealing with of loss. These are all special rituals and practices used in times of need to take care of oneself and to recognize and validate what one is going through.

There are numerous ways to create ceremony and honor the dead as well as work through grief. Since there is no way of avoiding grief (that doesn't come back to haunt you), I found that moving at one's own pace straight through the middle of it seems the best course. This would be true no matter how large or small the loss. The grieving rituals can be small gestures or large events, daily practices or one-time happenings.

I've shared here some of the rituals and practices that have helped me. The following are some others I know of. Picking out a headstone or an urn and finding the place (or places) for the remains to be located is a common one. If you are not the holder of the remains or not close enough to the grave to visit as often as you'd like it might be important to create your own memorial spot, planting a special garden or creating your own memorial marker, bench or altar. Any actual physical location one can visit that has a special connection with the deceased can be comforting. Speaking or writing to the deceased and encouraging children to do so by creating a special box to put those letters or messages in is healing and a bit magical. Some cemeteries (but not many) allow the taping of letters onto tombs or headstones. Creating art, dance, music, writing, picture books, collages, scrapbooks, videos, etc. to honor the deceased helps move through grief while staying connected to the person who is gone.

No one else should tell you how long to grieve or how to grieve. It is most important to do what feels right to you in each moment, even if that changes frequently. It's OK to experience the full range of grief. Though I would never have chosen this experience of loss and pain, though it has seemed unbearable many times, I feel a certain depth of soul for continuing to walk my own path of grief.

*Help us to be the always hopeful
gardeners of the spirit
who know that without darkness
nothing comes to birth
as without light
nothing flowers.*

—May Sarton