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# Along The Way

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# The Healing Potential of Grief

By John Kennedy Saynor

Perhaps it seems strange for you to think about grief as potentially healing. Most people experience grief as a devastating blow to an otherwise organized life full of hopes and dreams. However, like most things in life, there is more than one way to look at grief and its effect on our lives. I would like to suggest that grief has a way of bringing healing rather than devastation to our lives.

Before I go any further, I want to acknowledge that you, as a grieving person, didn't ask for this change. It wasn't something you wanted, and probably wasn't something for which you were very well prepared. If this is the first time someone close to you has died, then you don't have any past experience to draw from.

Having said that, your response to what has happened to you is what will make the difference for your future. You can allow this death and the grief you experience to devastate your life or you may allow this event to be one of the most significant learning and growing experiences you have known.

Now, I would like to talk about healing in four dimensions of our life:

- Relationships
- Self-image
- Spirituality
- Our view of life

## Healing of Relationships

A death in the family almost always changes the dynamics of a family or group of friends. Recently a woman said to me, "This past weekend my three children and I spent the weekend together. It is the first time in years this has happened. I realized that our relationship is different now that my husband is dead." For her, it was a positive experience. Of course she would rather have her husband back, but it wasn't to be. A new relationship with her children was developing.



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What is possible?  
What is holding me back?  
What will help me move on?*

In my counselling, I have seen family dynamics change for the better and for the worse after the death of a family member. Most often, the one who has died contributes to the harmonious way in which the family functions. However, it is also true that at times the one who has died is responsible for tension in the family.

Many families have skeletons in the closet. You know what they are: the alcoholic aunt or the grandfather who was a bootlegger. These skeletons cause fractured or broken relationships. When a family is willing to openly discuss the skeletons, then tensions can be relieved and relationships healed.

One of the greatest hindrances to healing relationships is the inability to forgive others. Grudges and misunderstandings often go on for years. In fact, sometimes people forget what the problem is, it is so long since it happened. Grudges are passed on from generation to generation in families. Children are often taught to dislike family members for something that happened before they were born!

Forgiveness is a very important aspect of healing. My bishop used to say, "Leave it where Jesus flung it!" In other words, if God can forgive, then so should we. It is important to let the past go and move on to new things. This is a new era for the family and has the potential of being a new beginning.

### **Healing of Self-Image**

When we speak of the healing of our self-image, we are talking about changing the way we look at ourselves. Who am I? What do I want to do? What is possible? What is holding me back? What will help me move on?

When someone close to us dies, we either consciously or subconsciously ask these questions. I think it is helpful to ask them deliberately.

In healing your own self-image it helps to understand what it is that has made you the person you are. What gifts have you been given by your family, your friends or your spouse? Having an honest understanding of your own potential is important when we talk about healing our self-image.

Our self-image is often marred by how we amplify our limitations, by some of the mistakes we may have made and by limitations imposed on us by our family, society or church. One way to begin healing this negative perception of yourself is to sit down and list your abilities and gifts. You may be surprised at how long the list is.

In the previous section, I talked about forgiveness. It is equally important to forgive ourselves. We are hard on ourselves for things we did or didn't do, for things we did or didn't say, or for the weaknesses we think we have. The death of your loved one is a turning point in your life. Let all of the past that may be hindering you go and allow yourself to be free to reinvent your life.

Healing your self-image is about moving from limitations to possibilities. As the dark clouds of your grief begin to recede, you will have days of sunshine and brightness that allow you to see to the future and renew your vision of what is possible for you.



## Healing Your Spiritual Life

Talk about “spirituality” can be vague at best. A Jesuit priest at a workshop I attended gave this definition of spirituality. “Spirituality has to do with the relationship between a human being and God (however God is understood) in real-life situations. Spirituality is understood to be in motion: changing, growing, developing.” This definition allows for a freedom that true spirituality brings.

For me a healthy spirituality is one that is growing and changing. Every experience of life leads us to a new understanding of the spiritual aspect of our life. At times you may have difficulty putting it into words. Perhaps you just stand in awe at what has happened to you and what is happening to you. Don't be afraid to question your unquestioned belief system.

This is a huge subject, but let me try to elaborate a little. Our spirituality is often hindered by our culture. Think about it with me if you will. Most of us begin our spiritual journey with our parents in our parents' church. Even people who have long since stopped going to church turn to their “family church” for weddings, funerals, etc. Our spirituality is often formed in these communities and is moulded by the music, language and ritual of our church. When people stop attending church they often don't take the time to develop new language or symbols for their evolving spirituality. It is at this place that people find themselves in a spiritual desert thinking themselves abandoned by God and not worthy of God's favour.

This leads me to the next point. Our spirituality is often hindered by how we understand God. Many of us are raised to think of God as a celestial bully who watches for us to step out of line and then punish us. People often say to me, “I don't know why God has done this to me!” Personally, I believe that is a misguided understanding of God. You can no more thrive spiritually with that kind of God in your life than a child can thrive with an abusive parent.

Finally, our spirituality is affected by our own inability to have faith. I don't mean the faith of your parents or your church, I mean your own faith. It is about taking risks. It is about moving in a direction in your life that you have a gut feeling is the right way to go, but are scared to death about going there. That is how many people who are bereaved really feel. They think God will lead them, when in actual fact, God has equipped us to go. You and I are equipped to take this journey and to move on to something new. When Abraham, who was the founder of the Jewish nation, left home to make a new life, we are told, “By faith, Abraham went out, not knowing where he was going.”

In a very real way, you as a bereaved person are called to go out not knowing where you are going. Perhaps this is the time for the big spiritual adventure of your life.

## Healing Your View of Life

When Bill Clinton, former president of the U.S., was asked about how tragedy affected his life, he responded this way: “I had this very idealized image of my father, which is another big part

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of my life. You know, that I lived with this notion that my father, who died before I was born, had been deprived of his full measure of years. And I had to have a big life; I had to have an important life because I was almost living for both of us." Even though Bill Clinton didn't know his father, the death of his father had a profound influence on him and affected how he lived his life.

My own father died when he was 40 years old. I was 14. At the conclusion of his funeral, I was so impressed with how good the funeral directors had been, I decided to become a funeral director. The rest is history. My father's death was the main factor that would determine my life's work. Now that I am over 60, I appreciate every day. I savour life. When I hear people complain about getting older, I smile because in our family it is a privilege to get older.

Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote this in his book, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*: "I believe that it is not dying that people are afraid of. Something else, something more unsettling and more tragic than dying frightens us. We are afraid of never having lived, of coming to the end of our days with the sense that we were never really alive, that we never figured out what life was for."

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I would be telling my husband to move on with his life. That is what he would tell me, I know. I'm moving on with my life. I still have things to do."

I think that is a very healthy place to arrive at. This is about healing your view of life. She had a good marriage. They had their plans and their hopes. Unfortunately they were not to be. But there are new plans and hopes for the part of her life that remains. It is a new way of looking at life and at what has brought her to this point.

I know that there are people who are reading this who are at various stages in their journey through grief. Don't be discouraged if this article seems overwhelming to you. Be patient with yourself and the process. Give yourself time to come to this place, one day at a time, one bit of growing and healing at a time.

If you have been bereaved for some time and are wondering how to move on, I hope this will be a help to you. Don't let anything or anyone hold you back. Move on and let your new life pay tribute to the one you loved who has died.

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