

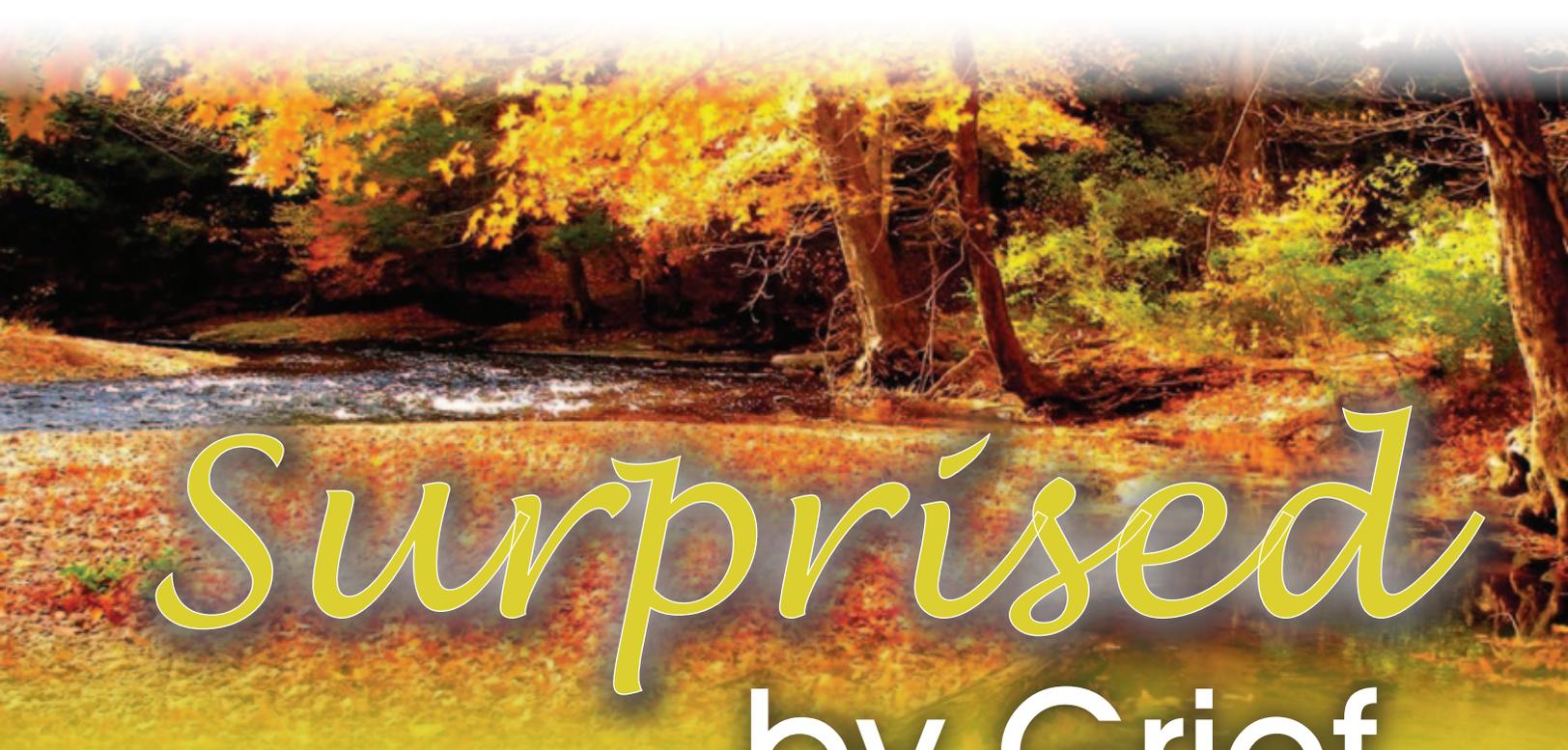
Caring for families

Along The Way

Helping you understand your
journey through grief.

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Surprised by Grief

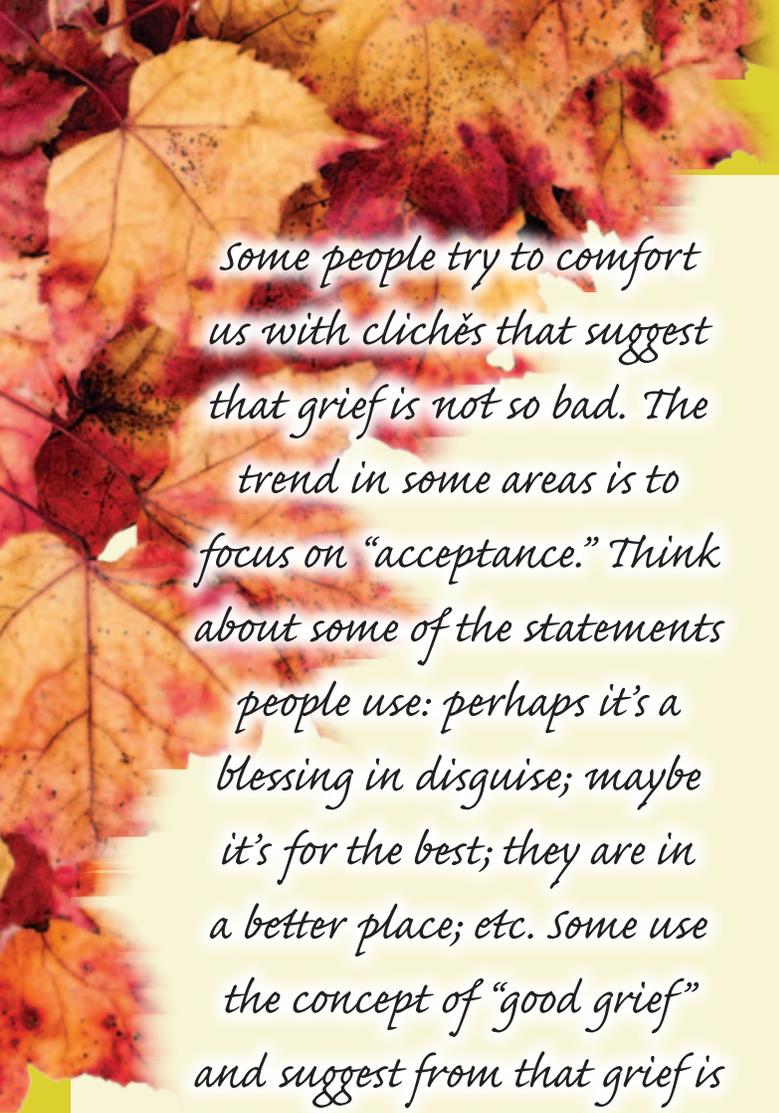
by Dr. Bill Webster

I was shocked that something like this could happen to me ... things like this happen to other people, not to us. It just didn't make any sense. "Why me ... why her ... why us?" That's the problem with grief. It just seemed unbelievable.

When someone dies, you find yourself struggling with many unexpected issues. When my wife died, I was surprised by three major things.

The first surprise was that even though I was confronted by the inescapable reality, there was just a sense of disbelief that this could really be happening. I remember standing in the hospital emergency room, Carolyn lying lifeless there on the bed where the doctors had tried unsuccessfully to revive her after the heart attack, and thinking, "No, this can't be happening." It felt like I was having a bad dream. It just didn't seem real. I was shocked that something like this could happen to me ... things like this happen to other people, not to us. It just didn't make any sense. "Why me ... why her ... why us?" That's the problem with grief. It just seemed unbelievable.

I remember going through that day and the days that followed in a fog. I just couldn't believe that Carolyn had died. I kept waiting for the phone to ring and for someone to tell me it was all a big



Some people try to comfort us with clichés that suggest that grief is not so bad. The trend in some areas is to focus on “acceptance.” Think about some of the statements people use: perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise; maybe it’s for the best; they are in a better place; etc. Some use the concept of “good grief” and suggest from that grief is somehow a positive or good thing. But let’s think again.

mistake. I kept hoping I would wake up and realize this was just a nightmare. I remember people coming to the funeral, and let me tell you, all of them were upset, many crying. Now, do you know why they were emotional? When they heard that Carolyn had died, they believed it. But I still couldn’t believe it. So there I was, comforting the very people who were there to comfort me. And when people saw that, they patted me on the back and told me how wonderfully I was coping. I was doing so well, really handling it, I was so strong. But in fact I wasn’t strong, I was numb. That’s the problem with grief. People often confuse numbness with strength.

Second, I was bowled over by how intense my grief reactions would be and how long it seemed to take, as some would say, to “get over it.” We get through the days of the funeral and people think we are doing well, but a little ways down the road, the numbness wears off and we can experience an explosion of emotions in reaction to our loss. Sometimes a few weeks after the death, we may feel we are getting worse not better. Some of my behaviours and reactions seemed uncharacteristic and strange –

to me as well as to others. I found I couldn’t concentrate, I was forgetful, I was anxious and worried over things that normally I would have just taken in stride. Things I would have done before and not given a second thought to, suddenly became like herculean labours. That’s the problem with grief ... sometimes it’s when people think someone should be getting it together, that the grieving person feels like they are falling apart.

And thirdly, I was surprised by some people’s reactions. People mean well; they are sincere and well intentioned, and they want to help. But some things don’t help.

Some people try to comfort us with clichés that suggest that grief is not so bad. The trend in some areas is to focus on “acceptance.” Think about some of the statements people use: perhaps it’s a blessing in disguise; maybe it’s for the best; they are in a better place; etc. Some use the concept of “good grief” and suggest from that grief is somehow a positive or good thing. But let’s think again. Going to the dentist to have an aching tooth filled may be a good thing, but it is not something we are usually thrilled about or look forward to. It is necessary but not enjoyable. I believe we should think of “good grief” in the same way. To grieve is good, but we are rarely happy about it. Grief is usually an unwelcome experience. Some talk about grief as a “learning experience” and certainly we would all like to think that there will be a meaning and a purpose in life’s most difficult challenges, but it is fair to say that the grieving person finds it difficult if not impossible to see much meaning right now. While some of the statements people use are intended to try to bring some meaning to the situation, more than likely, the grieving person feels that nothing makes sense.

The problem with grief is that it can turn our whole world upside down. But other people often don’t realize the intensity of what we are going through. It is hard to see it as a “blessing” or as “being for the best” ... it feels like the worst thing that could happen.

Grief in itself does not feel good. Grief is a reaction to a loss, which is something we rarely enjoy or feel positively about. It may be good to grieve ... I certainly believe it is; and yes, good may come out of the grief; but it nonetheless remains an unwelcome and unwanted intruder in the lives of those experiencing it.

“I didn’t want to hear that this was for the best, or a blessing, or God’s will, because this was not what I wanted. I didn’t appreciate people telling me she was in a better place, because in my mind, what was wrong with this place? And besides, I wasn’t in a better place; I was in a pretty miserable and rotten place.”

Grief hurts. We have, I fear, lost the reality of this in a society that wants everything to “have meaning” and be “a positive.” Grief is an inescapable part of the human experience, because loss is inevitable. But you don’t have to like it! I am probably meeting you in a place where you’d rather not be. And that is fair enough. We have every right to protest the “why?” of loss. Grief is in fact a protest against something we don’t like, probably didn’t want or wish for, and, frankly, doubtlessly wish we could change.



The Rest of Your Life

“When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

by Dr. Bill Webster

It was Yogi Berra, the famous baseball manager and sage, who reportedly said, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it.”

Many of the people I meet in my work find themselves at a fork in the road. For some, it’s the death of a loved one; for many, it’s a change in their circumstances or lifestyle; for others, it’s one of these unavoidable crossroads that life incessantly throws at us. Loss is never easy. Change is rarely welcomed. Yet both are inescapable in a life where change is inevitable.

The cliché, “what are you doing for the rest of your life?” can be a bitter pill to swallow for many people. For if they were honest, what they would like to do for the rest of their life, and what they can or have to do might be dramatically different. Many would like to continue doing exactly what they have been doing for the rest of their life. But circumstances or situations have changed, and they find themselves struggling to come to terms with a “rest of your life” that they would not have chosen, asked for or even contemplated.

I think a lot about my grandfather, even though he died 35 years ago. He saw his share of changes in his 99 years of life, facing the dawn of a new century as a young man, and observing the advances that occurred throughout the 20th century. I can still hear him say at the end of the day, “Well Bill, that’s one day more and one day less.” It’s not that he was a pessimist. I think he had really learned to come to terms with his mortality. For it is when we understand the fact that life is short that we really appreciate the wonder of it.

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Have you noticed how people facing an uncertain future don't have as many regrets for the things they have done as about things they regret not having done? Nadine Stair was 85 years old when she composed what she might do if she had her life to live over. She writes: "I would take fewer things seriously. I would take more chances. I would climb more mountains and swim more rivers. I would eat more ice cream and less beans. You see I'm one of those people who lived sensibly and sanely hour after hour, day after day. I would never go anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a raincoat and a parachute. If I had to do it again I would travel lighter. I would ride more merry-go-rounds. I would pick more daisies. I would stop to smell the roses."

How sad it is to see people trying to frantically cram all the living that they can into the short time they realize is left to them. All the things they wanted to do, all the places they wanted to see, all the words that have been left unsaid. All the things that they figured they had lots of time to do, put off 'til later or left for a "better time."

These "maybe another time" moments are the rest of your life. Suddenly, it dawns on people how precious is their time and how much more they really want to live it. Antoine de Saint-Exupéry once said, "Oh to reach the point of death and realize you have never really lived." For in this uncertain world of ours, the rest of my life is today. And then if I have a tomorrow, that will be another gift, another opportunity

to live, to love, to learn. As the psalmist wrote: "Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

Yet, sometimes "the rest of your life" life takes us in unexpected directions and we wonder where we are going to end up. Often, the changes and losses of life leave us feeling, well, lost. Loss can be devastating but it doesn't have to be a dead-end street. Perhaps in your own situation it seems to you right now that you are not making any progress at all; you are stuck. You may be at a crossroads in your life. The way ahead for you may be difficult. You may wonder what to do with the rest of your life, or even if you want it. But you can find the resources to help you to move ahead and find the key to life and living again.

David Livingston, when asked where he wanted to go to serve as a missionary, stated, "I am willing to go anywhere provided it be forward."

Now that's an attitude that will guarantee progress no matter what forks appear in the road. It is a wonderful insight to realize, whatever your age or situation, that it's never too late to make the most of life. But choose carefully the direction you want to go, for this is the rest of your life.

Dr. Bill Webster is a grief counsellor, author, TV host and increasingly well-known international speaker. He brings a unique blend of personal experience, academic education and many years of practical application to his work. Visit his innovative website at www.GriefJourney.com.

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