

NO TIMELINE FOR GRIEF

By Ann B. Faison

A common mistake people make with grief is to try and determine when it should be finished. Completed. Done. In our convenience-driven culture, grief has become something of an *inconvenience*, approached as a difficult period to *get* through, rather than an emotional one to *go* through.

There is a lot of talk about grief these days in books and magazines about the right way to do it, or about how there is no right way. Ruth Konigsberg has written a book called, *"The Truth About Grief"* in which she talks about "the new science of grief" and how it shows that we don't need to do anything special to go through it. Her recent Op Ed piece in the *New York Times* cited a large scale study that proves older widows get through the grieving process much sooner than was commonly thought. A flurry of letters to the editor were published in response, strongly disagreeing with Konigsberg's theories and her attempt to measure the grieving process by how well a person functions in day-to-day life. I am not alone in thinking that functionality is not the point.

Sure, grief will put a hitch in a person's ability to function at the same level they are used to at first, and maybe for some time. A mother who loses a child may need to stay in bed for a year. On the other hand an elderly widow may take comfort in her routines and not slow down at all. Or the opposite could be true. The widow may need to spend a year in bed and the mother may need to stick to routines. Grief is not predictable. I have little use for scientific studies that try to quantify the grief process. The professionals who work with bereaved patients every day know that expecting grief to go a certain way or fit a prescribed model does not serve a positive outcome for the bereft.

Yes, there are models for grief that can help the grief specialist or the bereaved person to identify their grief process as normal. But the favored model as outlined by J. W. Worden¹ in grief support, has no timeline or prescribed outcome. It identifies stages (or

¹ Worden, J.W. (2008). "Grief counseling and grief therapy: A handbook for the mental health practitioner (4th edition)." New York: Springer

Worden's term: tasks), but has them in no order. And as those of us who study grief know, those stages can all occur inside of a day.

"Aren't you over that by now?" is the general cultural response many face as they struggle to live with grief. In fact, there is no timeline for grieving. The keys to grief are patience and permission. The more of each that we give ourselves, the better off we will be.

As an artist, my approach has always been to explore. I explore feelings the same way I explore colors, lines or words on a page. This has served me well in dealing with my grief. It has allowed me to look at it like a project that I am working on. Something I take responsibility for and look forward to seeing how it will come out. And in my opinion, some grief may last a lifetime. It may become integrated into the personality in a way that is comfortable. I like Patti Smith's description, given in an interview with Terry Gross on Fresh Air in 2010:

"I think that the idea that time heals all wounds is not really true. Our wounds aren't ever really healed, we just learn to walk with them. We learn that some days we're gonna feel intense pain all over again and we just have to say "Okay, I know you, ha. You can come along with me today."

Grief is something we all must handle over and over in our lifetimes. It is really just the painful reaction to loss. We will grieve other losses besides death: A limb, a community, a marriage, a job, a friend...anything we have come to depend on in our lives will be difficult to lose. The better we are at acknowledging our feelings and giving ourselves time to honor them, the better we can learn to feel through them.

Why? Why not let feelings stay buried? Why dig up old stories? Pour salt on the wounds? Because grief is not just something to survive or manage or get through. It really is an opportunity to know ourselves.

In my own experience of working with grief creatively, I find that writing or drawing or anything I do in a state of sadness will allow the feeling to shift. If I let pain lie dormant, it does not disappear. Instead it gets murkier and commits slow destructive change. Anger builds. Patience disappears. I may even develop chronic somatic conditions.

If I can get close to my grief, and really open to it, that is when it amazes me. A dead person's spirit is suddenly present. Clarity arrives. Love floods my heart. Anything can happen. In combination with fear, grief can be isolating. But relaxing into it, we

may find that the relationship to the missing person is still strong enough to support our needs. Love doesn't die. And we learn compassion. We learn to ask for help. And we learn to help others in new ways.

But this kind of processing does not happen quickly or efficiently. In fact the only way it happens is if we are patient and allow ourselves to grieve fully and completely and for as long as it takes. For some that will be forever. The more we repress grief, or tell ourselves we need to be done by a certain point in time, the more it slows us down. And if we can open to it, and *relax into* it, the more grief becomes this interesting place to explore and find ourselves, bigger and better than we were before.