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The Myth of Closure

Talk for Growing thru Grief – January 9, 2018

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A couple of years ago I was visiting my 97-year-old mother and the conversation turned to significant people in our lives. She got a wistful look in her eyes, and she said, "My mother died fifty-five years ago, and not a day goes by I don't think about her. And I miss her." My frail little mother died in June and I know exactly what she meant. Not a day goes by I don't think about her, and I miss her.

I have known a couple up in their 80's still grieving the death of an infant son. A 90-year-old woman burst into tears after a Silver Sneakers session when I asked her how she was doing. I asked what was behind the tears if she didn't mind sharing. She said, "My 21 year-old brother was killed on this day during World War II." These experiences launched a period of reflection that led me to the title of my presentation today: "The Myth of Closure."

I chose the word myth, not in the definition of a story but in the sense of a popular belief that has grown up around the ideals or institutions of a society, a kind of notion or worldview that may be unfounded, unverifiable, even untrue. The word closure means ending, closed up like a pocket zipped tight so nothing can get out or get in. I believe the idea of closure after the loss of a loved one, zipped up tight, is not helpful nor is it desirable in our journey in grief. It's a myth.

In our United States culture, the expected and valued goals are to fix, cure, win and solve. Living with loss is discouraged. You are supposed to get over it and do so quickly. The goal is to detach emotionally, to move on with your grief. As we in this program know, the reality of grief is far different from what the outside world thinks. My message to you is you don't need to move on. You are in pain. What has happened to you hurts. You don't need to be fixed. The loss you've had cannot be erased and made right. What you need is someone to see your pain and acknowledge it while you stand in horror at the hole in your heart. Everything is different now.

Intelligent, well-meaning people start trying to cheer you up, trying to take away your pain: "He's in a better place," "She wouldn't want you to be sad." "You are young and talented and you'll find a new partner," "Everything happens for a reason," "You'll find a way to use your pain for some good." Etc., etc. Platitudes! This kind of cheerleading only makes you feel worse. Grief feels bad but that doesn't mean it is bad. You feel crazy. Yesterday I felt crazy but that doesn't mean you and I are crazy. Grief is hard. Love is hard. The truth is we need to tell the truth – the truth about our loss, our lost lives. I have heard many times in our sessions that what the outside world believes and what you know to be true is often one of the hardest aspects of grief. Family and friends, co-workers and neighbors simply want your pain (and therefore, their pain) to go away, but there it is - that pain howling and raw and real. I believe our culture needs a big shift somehow. We don't need grieving people to feel shamed, shunned, and avoided. We need to give them a listening ear, a caring space to be who they are, where they are, feeling whatever they are feeling, speaking about and through their tears.

Grief is not an illness, it is not something to be glossed over. The best intentions to comfort, to make it go away, can backfire when what we need is validation. When someone tries to comfort you by telling their own story of suffering and loss, they intend to connect. But what happens is the focus shifts away from you. Your reality is dismissed which is exactly the opposite of what they meant to do. We are never in the business of “my grief is worse than yours.” Every loss is valid. Every loss is not the same. Every story needs to be told and every loss needs to be heard and acknowledged. True comfort comes in acknowledging the pain, not in trying to erase it. Life-changing events change us. Loss gets integrated, not overcome. Grief is not an experience to be solved; it’s an experience to be carried. The work here and a vision of the Growing thru Grief program is to offer a space where those who mourn the loss of a loved one may find – and receive – support and comfort that helps you live with your reality. Companionship, not correction, is what we hope will help you find your own true path inside your loss.

The stages of grief model developed by Kubler-Ross suggests that there is an orderly, predictable pattern to go through as you grieve, but that is misleading. In our six-week study William Holloman makes a corrective to any linear notion of the grief process. Grief is not tidy, or predictable. It is unique to each person and to each loss. Those of us who have had multiple losses will whisper “Amen” to that; it is unique to each loss. Despite what many in our culture believe, there is no road map. Each person has to bravely carry his/her own story of what cannot be fixed. What has happened to you has hurt, has broken your heart and changed your world forever. I am reminded of a favorite little story from my book, *Not Alone; Encouragement for Caregivers*.

A water bearer in India had two large pots that hung on the end of a pole that he carried across his neck. One pot was perfect and always delivered a full portion of water at the end of the long walk from the stream to the master’s house. The other pot had a crack in it and arrived at the house half full.

The perfect pot was quite proud of its accomplishments, perfect to the purpose for which it was made. The poor cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfection and miserable about only doing half of what it was made to do.

For two years, the water bearer daily delivered only one and a half pots of water. The cracked pot felt like a bitter failure and one day told the bearer, “I am ashamed of myself, and want to apologize to you.”

“Why?” asked the bearer. “What are you ashamed of?”

“Because of my flaws you have to work harder, and you don’t get full value from your efforts,” lamented the pot.

The water bearer said, “As we return to the master’s house, I want you to notice the flowers along the path.”

As they went up the hill, the old cracked pot observed lovely, colorful wild flowers on the side of the path. But it still felt bad because it had leaked out half of its load. Again the old pot apologized for its failure.

The bearer said, “Did you notice there were flowers only on your side of the path? I have always known about your flaw and I planted flower seeds on your side. Every day when we walked back

from the stream, you've watered them. For two years, I have picked flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, he would not have this beauty to grace his home." (pp. 106-107)

We have been cracked open by the loss of our loved one. We are now leaky pots with a story we need to share for each other; we need to do this with each other because pain happens. Loss and grief happen. In telling and listening we can teach our culture how to simply show up and be present to what cannot be changed, to honor and respect cracked, leaky pots.

I want to share with you another brief little story that addresses the issue of time. This story also appears in *Not Alone* and is cited with permission from Anthony de Mello's book, *One Minute Wisdom*.

The Master always left you to grow at your own pace. He was never know to "push." He explained this with the following parable:

"A man once saw a butterfly struggling to emerge from its cocoon, too slowly for his taste, so he began to blow on it gently. The warmth of his breath speeded up the process all right. But what emerged was not a butterfly but a creature with mangled wings.

"In growth," the Master concluded, "you cannot speed the process up." (p. 313)

I want to add, "In grief, you cannot speed the process up."

I tell you these two little stories not to wrap up your pain in colorful flowers and butterflies. My intent is to urge you to stay close to your heart and carve out your own path using patience and self-compassion. Be gentle with each other's hearts (those of family members, brothers, sisters, children and co-workers and beyond). Be gentle with your own heart. Your way thru grief will be made by you in ways that are unique to your mind, your heart, your life context, your timetable. Your journey is a work in progress and you do not need to hurry. There is no need for your story of love and loss to end, to be tidied up and put away. It simply needs to be carried. I repeat, it simply needs to be carried. You don't need to recover or return to an old "Normal." My wish for you is a softer grief that is not about moving on but moving with – an integration of all that has gone before and all that you are being asked to live with today and going forward one day at a time.

Read quotes and questions for small group discussion.

“Grief is a natural process; it has an intelligence all its own. It will shift and change on its own. When we support the natural process of grief, rather than try to push it or rush it or clean it up, it gets softer. Your job is to tend to yourself as best you can.”

“In your own ways, and in your own time, you will find ways to stitch this experience into your life. It will change you, yes....It’s part of you. [The] aim is integration.”

It’s OK That You’re Not OK by Megan Devine

What does it feel like to hear that closure is a myth? Helpful? Yes? No? Matches your experience?

Do you think of your grief as a work in progress with no need to be finished, only to be carried? Is grief without end a scary thought? Comforting idea?

If you created your own rules of self-care, what would they include?