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Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment



Learning from Suffering, Grief and Loss by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

"Tears water our growth."
— William Shakespeare



One of the Buddha's foundational teachings is that *life contains suffering*.

Months after the passing of her beloved husband, Erica discovered that her own health was failing. In shock, and often brought to tears by thoughts of her young children's future — a future she might not be a part of — she became increasingly depressed, even embittered: *Is grief the price we must pay for love?* Nearly pushed to the end of her rope, Erica made an important decision: She would use whatever time she had left to build a positive legacy, including good memories for her children, even though she might not be around to witness the joy of their lives. She would focus on changing her life-long pattern of limiting herself and try to live more fully. It would be the best possible gift she could give her kids.



Most of us, like Erica, have been deeply affected by the death of someone important to us. Even though we know that death is part of the life process, coping with it is still daunting. How many of us actually feel ready to say goodbye to those we love when the time comes? Some griever find comfort in the belief that there is life after death — so we'll meet again. Others try to escape their pain and sadness by retreating from life or do the opposite and desperately seek reconnection by throwing themselves into a new relationship too soon. Others may seek solace in chemicals. These coping actions usually don't work because they don't allow the time for the griever to discover an important lesson: *Love never dies*. Even the deepest losses can reveal moments of meaning and beauty and can expose the seeds of an emerging

new life. As Leo Buscaglia states, “Death is a challenge. It tells us not to waste time . . . It tells us to tell each other right now that we love each other.”

Death and dying are often handled differently in other cultures. In the Hispanic tradition, there is a saying that if death sits down beside you, you are blessed because it is only from this experience that we learn to appreciate the preciousness of life. *Dia Del Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), dates back to the Aztecs who had a month-long celebration of death to honor *Mictecacihuatl*, the goddess of the underworld. Today, Hispanic families hold vigils, and bring offerings to the deceased. The spirits are thought to bless those who honor the dead. Ancient fertility cults held fertility rites in the spring that resulted not only in the flourishing of crops but in the flourishing of new life.

An experience of suffering, of grief and loss, can be followed by personal growth and development. Each of us is on a personal journey toward freedom from suffering. The world’s religions and spiritual observances offer differing approaches to alleviate suffering but we, like the seeds buried in the earth, grow in the earth’s dark, fertile soil. Like the seasons, after winter comes spring, a time for moving past the rich, fertile soil of suffering toward bearing the fruit of that personal growth experience: allowing you to know yourself more deeply. Each day brings the opportunity to transform yourself on a physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual level. It is a lifelong process that often that involves developing new activities, practices, rituals, or observances that enhance your quality of life.

And how you feel and what you do each day really matters. What you plant, grows. If you are gardening and you plant apple seeds, you certainly would not expect an orange tree to grow. Similarly, if you are often thinking negative thoughts, feeding your body processed, unnatural foods, and drowning out the intuitive hints you receive, how can you expect to be living the life of your dreams?

In *The Red Shoes*, Clarissa Pincola Estes weaves a beautiful story about death. She informs us that, “When death sits down beside us, we are blessed.” Why, because sitting next to, being a part of the process, holding someone’s hand as they move into another realm, this sacred moment in life that our sanitized culture ignores like the plague, is what also informs us about the sanctity of life. It puts us in touch with the sacredness, the blessings, the limits and the unlimited potential of life energy, of loving, that leads to change and inner spiritual growth.

Grief and Loss into Wisdom and Healing

When we are faced with the death of a loved one, as in Erica’s case, we are faced with our *own* impending death. The hardest feeling to overcome is our *anger* over the idea that we may never have allowed ourselves to live fully (death of “the self”), or, as in the case of a loved-one dying, that we may have inadvertently missed something about their illness, an early symptom perhaps, that allowed them to die. As Erica and others have learned, it’s important to become proactive in banishing these kinds of ghosts that can haunt you. One you are blessed with the insight that you’ve been holding yourself back from living fully — most likely as the result of being put down or minimized by your parents during your early life — now is the time to challenge yourself to push beyond that limitation. If your “inner fire” was somehow smothered, and if your inner dialogues are all about not being “perfect enough,” then start to come up with a new inner “language” that supports your emerging sense of *Self* (which also happens to make you more attuned to others). The sentence, “*I am*,” is derived from developing your own value system rather than being burdened with the leftover values of other people. That’s just “stale bread”—and it hasn’t been properly nourishing you for years!

Beyond Stale Bread

Here’s a suggestion to get you started on developing a new, more positive stance when the time seems right to do so. Instead of thinking along the lines of, *Is grief the price we must pay for love?*, think more along the lines of what gifts can come from coping with grief and loss in a more proactive way, which is a positive legacy to leave behind. For example, did you learn how to take an action that stretched your previous self-limitations? Did you act courageously in some situation? Take the risk of being real? Do you more often do your personal best? In other words, have you been living more fully at last?” Despite loss and grief, this proves that you really can awaken that

enlivened sense of inner life again! Many blessings as we enter each new season of the year! May it be a time of your own renewal!

“It’s a Life Happening,” so let us celebrate life.

Schedule an appointment to work on your own struggles in individual, couples, or group therapy. Please call:
Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.; www.drgelt.com; 818.501.4123

Thank you for your support!

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