



Good Grief

By Eric Ehrke, LCSW, LMFT

In 1969 Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote her groundbreaking book, *On Death and Dying*, which provided five stages of the grieving process. I would venture a guess everyone reading this article has heard about her stages...*denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance*. Her co-author, David Kessler added *finding meaning* as a sixth stage in his book. These stages quickly provided a conceptual framework about every form of grief. However, it is important to remember grieving is not a linear process and everyone processes loss in unique ways. Reaching a state of acceptance and finding meaning around a significant loss mystifies many. Since this pandemic continues to create loss for everyone, this article will provide some practical suggestions.

"Acceptance is not about liking a situation. It is about acknowledging all that has been lost and learning to live with that loss." – **Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and David Kessler**

Emotions are like butterflies. Have you ever gone to a butterfly exhibit and had one land on you? They land on people who aren't trying to get them to land and accept

them with enthusiastic wonder. Butterflies and emotions come and go no matter what you do. Grabbing at butterflies makes them leave. Denial, which pushes feelings away, creates internal emotional logjams. Einstein was right, energy doesn't disappear, it just moves from one form to another. Accepting loss and finding meaning is an art. So we need to learn not only how a butterfly can find peace on your finger, but also how an emotion can find peace in your heart.

The amount of pain felt is directly proportional to your love lost. So, accept your anger and depression as a normal reaction to loss. If you didn't care for what you lost, you won't mind losing it. Or as Bob Dylan brilliantly sang in his song, *Like a Rolling Stone...* "if you ain't got nothin', you got nothin' to lose." When your heart breaks, that's when losing matters.

Grieving is an inside job. Don't blame, bargain or pushback at others to ease your pain. Getting lost on an endless stream of tears, sorrow and hopelessness creates more internal emotional logjams. In *Man's Search for Meaning*, Victor Frankel, who survived the Holocaust in Auschwitz said you will never know the Divine's plan...so let bargaining go. As a psychiatrist who organized suicide prevention groups in the death-camp, he noticed those that felt abandoned by their god succumbed and perished much quicker. He taught the millions, who have read his book how to respond to loss, accept the new reality and find meaning...are the *only* things that matter.

"For the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth - that Love is the ultimate and highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: The salvation of man is through love and in love."

— Viktor E. Frankl, **Man's Search for Meaning**

Unprocessed emotional logjams are like a tangled fishing line. If you yank on a tangled fishing line, it will just tangle more. One must gently tug on each loose end to see which one moves a little. When it eventually tightens, move onto the next loop of the line until each loop is coaxed into loosening its grip with love and understanding. Eventually, after each loop and/or emotion is understood and processed this way, then the whole fishing line relaxes and releases. This process is the same way a human heart heals after a significant loss. The following story about what I learned from my father's death over thirty years ago helped me eventually accept, find meaning and teach others about loss since then.

My father had a significant stroke that left him in a coma in 1989. Brain dead, he was kept alive only through life support. Our family knew his wishes were to be taken off life support under these circumstances. We told the ethics committee at the hospital of his wishes. First they withdrew his breathing ventilator, then food and eventually all fluids. The doctor's thought he would die immediately, then each of their predictions as they withdrew food and water were wrong. I drove to the hospital to say my last goodbye to my father for seventeen heart wrenching days. I was a wreck and depressed afterwards. It felt like I was carrying a weight that would never lift.

A few weeks afterwards, I flew to Washington DC to get trained how to lead groups to express unresolved trauma and release emotional logjams. Professionals must do their own work life in front of their peer group to viscerally learn how true healing works. When it was my turn to work, the facilitator made me explore all of my private emotions during those seventeen days. One of the loops of my fishing line tangle was the fact that I voted to let my father die even though I loved him dearly. Another loop of my entanglement was the fact that one day I wished he would die already...because I couldn't bear the suffering anymore. Then another loop was then created because another part of me judged myself harshly for being an ungrateful self-centered son. I felt guilty for every emotion I had during those seventeen days. I had to learn to love and embrace my imperfect moods, as my dad would have done

without conditions. When I learned to accept my emotions, meaning to my suffering followed. Then a hundred pounds of pain left my heart. I felt alive again to love and lose love again, because closing your heart is never a good option.

Suffering brings the worst and best out of everyone. We see this everyday with this pandemic. When my wife spent seventeen days in the same hospital where my dad died during the height of the pandemic last December, I couldn't visit her. It was rough, but the lessons learned about good grief, tangled fishing lines and the wise people who have suffered and taught me lessons throughout my life were invaluable.

"It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual."

— Viktor E. Frankl, **Man's Search for Meaning**

©October2021 Eric Ehrke LCSW, LMFT is a psychotherapist at Ommani. He sees clients on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays. Zoom, Skype, or telephonic services are offered. Call our office at 262.695.5311 to schedule an appointment.