Introduction

The goal is not to get over the death. The goal is to to reconcile with the unchangeable loss and integrate it into your life.

—Harold Ivan Smith

As a ten-year-old child, I had a pet parakeet named Happy. I taught Happy to say several words, pluck a piece of cracker from between my lips on the fly, and land on one of my shoes for a ride. We had a regular routine and often performed for the family.

One day, a man was hired to steam the wallpaper from our dining room walls. As he put a huge metal plate to the wall, condensed water from the steam ran down his arms and onto the floor. From watching him, I understood why he was wearing rubber boots.

I remained fascinated by the whole process until I saw Happy fly past me and land on one of the man's boots. The ride didn't go as Happy expected. As the parakeet slipped off the wet boot, the man's next step ended Happy's life. Wailing, I ran into the dining room and picked up Happy's lifeless body from the wet floor.

I have no memory of the rest of the day. But the following day, my mother told me to put on my coat because we were going to buy a new bird. I was too numb to object.

I remember standing in front of the big cage of birds at Woolworth's and refusing to pick another bird. Finally, my mother asked if I thought it would be a good idea to buy a green parakeet this time instead of a blue one, and I nodded in agreement.

Unwilling to give up Happy, I named the new bird Happy Two.

Not long after I watched my mother start her typical Saturday cleaning by unhooking the bird cage and heading for the back yard with Happy Two swinging wildly on his perch. I rushed to the kitchen window and standing on my tiptoes, I watched her rap the sides of the cage to loosen bird seed and feathers. What was she thinking? The bird was still in the cage and the bottom was gone!

Sure enough, within seconds, Happy Two took a nosedive down through the bottomless cage and flew into a nearby tree. My mother stood paralyzed, staring into the air, and then slowly turned to see me standing at the kitchen window.

I immediately joined her and together we shouted for Happy Two to come back, but as we called his name, I think we were both relieved that he was gone. Now we wouldn't have to pretend that Happy's death could be easily fixed.

Even though I had attended countless rural funerals and played under open caskets in parlors with other children as a toddler, Happy was mine. He belonged to me. Therefore his demise was a palpable rite of passage. I now understood that life would not be a string of untarnished pleasure and pretending not to be sad was hard work and useless. However, the most significant lesson was that in spite of the tragedy, I had the capacity to recover.

From childhood forward, loss brings each of us to sorrow's door and asks us to enter what Parker Palmer terms "the tragic gap"[1]—that place of tension between the dark down and in reality and the up and out possibility that something worthy will emerge.

Palmer acknowledges how difficult it is to stand off-balance

in the tragic gap. Some of us don't understand its value and try to ignore the gap; some of us fear we will be consumed by it and try to escape into a busy calendar. Neither resolves our grief. Sooner or later we must mourn until we can gather our wits about us and decide it is time to come up and out into the world once again.

Seeking permission to come up and out

Years ago, I spent a week with the late Lou Tice, who founded the Pacific Institute. I was intrigued by his comments about how we are conditioned to depend upon an outside authority to give us permission to move forward.

Specifically, he spoke of how our educational system raises children to wait for permission before advancing. As adults, society often requires us to take an oath before we can be qualified to enter the military or become a policeman, fireman, physician, lawyer, or join certain organizations.

In this book, I encourage you to challenge the unconscious mindset that tells you that you are unqualified until you are told you are qualified by someone else. I urge you to not get caught up in seeking consensus from others. Instead I prod you to commence the process and remember that the line between being unqualified and qualified is not an entrance with a door and doorman but, rather, a porous state of mind to be explored. Count on the fact that as you read this book your head will clear, and you will get a grip on who you want to become.

How this book came about

For years I facilitated hospice grief support groups including spousal/partner loss. As the first-year partner loss groups ended, I was asked repeatedly about a second-year program. There wasn't one, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized that there should be. Yes, the first-year group had helped

members work through their fresh grief, but the questions that began to surface at the end of the year had not been answered: What's going to happen to me? Do I settle for what little I have left? If not, how do I start over?

It was clear that Medicare's mandated year of bereavement support had not provided members with what they would need to move into the often more daunting second year after loss.

In 2001, the Director of Bereavement at Hospice of the Valley in San Jose, California, gave me the green light and a second-year class was posted in the newsletter. The following fall we had more people than we had chairs.

The class was designed to break the overwhelming task of starting over into manageable parts. As each session built upon the last, members came to understand what would happen if they did nothing. As the year progressed, the men and women relaxed into the process and started to define their options.

The material that I prepared for those partner loss classes has made its way into this book, including the probing questions and exercises I call TR•***ACTION***s. If you are inclined to skip over what may take a few minutes to complete, please don't. Those who have kept in touch with me over the years have said, almost without exception, that learning more about what motivated their thoughts and actions was critical in helping them manage their anxiety as they defined their future.

To help support your journey of discovery, I have also included the voices of many who have done the work by providing between-chapters sidebars of class members' comments.

It has been my privilege to watch hundreds of people from different economic and ethnic backgrounds lean into their discomfort, find the courage to stretch beyond what they thought they could tolerate, and blossom in ways they would never have predicted. It is my wish that this book will help you do the same.

Notes

1. Palmer, Parker (1999). An Active Life. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 66.

CHAPTER ONE

The Chapter That Can't Be Skipped

Grief and loss accumulate like possessions.
—Stefan Kanfer

Accepting loss as a constant in life

If you have read any of the grief and loss literature, you have been reminded that your experience of loss started the day you moved from womb to breast, to bottle to glass. In fact, your childhood can be defined as a never-ending process of yearning for the familiar while eagerly opening up to the new. As you mature, however, your losses become more sobering and difficult to resolve.

Judith Viorst explains it well in her book, *Necessary Losses*, when she says,

> *…[W]e lose not only through death but also by leaving and being left, by changing and letting go and moving on. And our losses include not only our separations and departures from those we love, but our conscious and unconscious losses of romantic dreams, impossible expectations, illusions of freedom and power, illusions of safety and the loss of our own younger self.*[1]

The loss of your mate is especially complex to manage because the two of you functioned as a couple for so long. You are

not only dealing with the loss of your partner, but also the loss of your sense of self that was constructed through your interactions. If you are no longer someone's spouse or partner, then who are you?

Michael Miller[2] refers to the process of finding yourself as intimate terrorism. Your relationship has been blown apart, and you are left to sift through the emotional debris and extract the "I" from your vanishing "we." Understandably, your wounds are deep, and integrating the scar tissue takes some doing, as it should.

The incredible power of absence

As you struggle to redefine yourself as a single person, you may find that your partner's presence is actually heightened.

Author William Bridges contrasted the intense feeling of absence after his wife's death with how little he felt when she was alive and away for extended periods.

> *Now her absence was palpable. It was a tangible fact that she wasn't there, and that fact made her emotional presence very powerful. It was less that I had feelings or thoughts about her than that I perceived her in absentia. It was as though there was always nearby, a shape cut out of space, an empty silhouette of nothingness shaped exactly like her.*[3]

Bridges describes his continual attempts to reconnect as a time of feeling flimsy — a beautiful description of being without while learning to create a continuing bond.

The value of maintaining a continuing bond

It was once thought that people should strive to reach a definitive end to their grieving, often referred to as "closure." Research has since dispelled the concept as unrealistic and not

even desirable. In fact, studies show that the most successful transitions take place when surviving partners maintain a bond with the deceased. It has also been determined that maintaining a continuing bond with the deceased does not detract from the success of a relationship with a new partner.[4]

One way to maintain a sense of continuity is to occasionally set aside some private time for looking at photographs, letters, cards, and small gifts the two of you exchanged. This quiet time will not only give you an opportunity to remember your loved one but — equally important — you can remember yourself as well. When there's suddenly no physical trace of your life partner, your own history can feel like it's been erased as well.[5]

Making a conscious decision to move forward

A few years ago, Father Gregory Boyle was interviewed by Terry Gross on National Public Radio's Fresh Air[6]. As I listened to this poignant interview, I found a parallel to what we do for another when we listen to someone for whom love has departed.

Boyle had been working with gang members in East Los Angeles for over 30 years. He buried more than 120 young people as a result of gang violence and witnessed the intense grief of family members mourning their murdered young men.

During the interview, Boyle emphasized that gang allegiance is driven by a need to feel connected to others. In an attempt to give these young people a sense of belonging to a larger world, Boyle tells the young men in detention that their lives are not taking place in a hole but in a tunnel. And they must trust that there is an opening at the end to the tunnel — one that will lead to a rewarding life and loving people.

Interestingly, Boyle doesn't see himself as a man of religion. Instead, he views himself as a man who "spends time listening to those for whom love has yet to arrive." In his willingness to lis-

ten, he believes he conveys more spiritual reality than if he were whispering religious doctrine.

Interviewer Terry Gross revealed that Boyle was diagnosed with leukemia the previous April but that it was in remission. She asked him if he prayed to live. Boyle answered that, centuries ago, desert monks prayed using the word "today," when they were despondent. In repeating "today," they remained present to access what was spiritually magnificent about the moment. Boyle said he also made "today" his constant prayer and found no need to pray for anything more.

Near the end of the interview, Boyle spoke of one particular young man and his dream. The boy had recounted how he was locked in a dark room with Boyle, who sat shining a flashlight beam onto the light switch on the wall. The young man knew that Boyle would never get up and flip the switch — that it would be up to him. Finally, the young man in the dream got up, walked over, and turned on the light. As he looked around the lighted room, he started to sob because it felt so much better than being in the dark.

We are not told exactly what took place in this young man's life, but a great deal of loss had to have transpired to lead him to his current circumstance. His dream, however, signaled a shift in the legacy of loss that he would pass to his children. By living in the light of "today," the young man came to understand that he could transcend the pain of his past and have a powerful legacy to carry forward.

What legacy of loss did you inherit and what will you pass on?

No child escapes inheriting positive and negative family legacies. Some stories are openly shared from adult to child, one generation to another. Some are never told because the emotional pain is intolerable and the story becomes taboo. Even though the

unmentionable event may remain undefined, later generations nonetheless live with the "fallout" of the hidden legacy. In effect, they "remember" what they didn't experience — directly or in`directly.

Psychoanalyst and author Prophecy Coles talks in her book, *Uninvited Guests from Our Unremembered Past*, about intergenerational history: she says we must explore the uninvited guests we know so little about and in doing so, we can begin to "understand the history of our families' ideas."[7]

As you absorb what Coles is saying, I invite you to examine the ideas of loss that you inherited, especially if you are having difficulty resolving your grief. By investigating what took place ancestrally, you may see a family pattern. If so, is it a pattern you wish to adopt? Further, is it a pattern you wish to pass on to your loved ones?

I was not told of my family's repeated experiences with untimely death and unresolved grief over spouse and child loss until I was in my late 40s. Subsequently, I came to understand how the unresolved grief had negatively affected the attitudes and life strategies of three generations of women in my family. The point is not to tell a sad story. Rather it's to make you aware of how unresolved grief is passed on unconsciously and nonverbally via metaphor, tone of voice, and body language.

To help you understand the legacy of loss that you are currently transmitting to others, ask yourself these questions:

- How am I teaching others to view death and cope with emotional injury?
- Am I actively working to resolve my grief, or am I allowing it to manfest as callousness and self-protection?
- What legacy of loss do I want to leave behind? Would a worthy legacy be that, despite the anguish, a person can find the

strength to grow in the shadow of loss and live a rich and fulfilling life?

TR•*ACTION*

As you move through the book, stop when you experience resistance. Ask yourself whether the resistance comes from everyday procrastination, fear, or a family legacy of moving away from risk. Gauge how the resistance will affect your future and, ultimately, the future of loved ones who are observing you.

Yes, life is messy. Yes, rebuilding your life is unsettling, uncomfortable, and infused with fear. And, because you are human, you will continue to feel inadequate — often. But I challenge you to accept the fact that you are overestimating what threatens your sense of emotional safety.

You are standing in the middle of an intersection. For now, pick a direction, any direction, so that you can yield to the truth: you are more resilient and capable than you think.

Fran's reflections on life after the death of her husband from a heart attack

After Bill died, I didn't think I would ever feel settled again. I had children at home and so I buried my own needs. The biggest hurdle was accepting the fact that I needed help. It took me five years to get into counseling. Too long. By that time I was physically ill. It was difficult to accept that I wasn't weak and incapable because I needed help.

Much to my surprise, I have become an amazingly resourceful person and have embraced life with positive energy. When I look back over the past few years, I realize my mistake was in trying to schedule my grief between work and other responsibilities. I treated it like an activity versus a state of mind that needed attention.

Notes

1. Palmer, Parker (1999). *An Active Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. p. 66.
2. Miller, Michael (1996) *Intimate Terrorism*. New York: W. W. Norton.
3. Bridges, William (2001). *The Way of Transition: Embracing life's most difficult moments*. Da Capo Press.
4. Klass, D., Silverman, P. R., and Nickeman, S. (1996). *Continuing Bonds.* Washington, D.C.: Taylor and Francis.
5. Belk, R. W. (1988). *Possessions and the extended self.* Journal of Consumer Research, 15, 139–168.
6. National Public Radio: 2010 Program: Fresh Air interview with Father Gregory Boyle.
7. Coles, Prophecy. (2011) *Uninvited Guests from Our Unremembered Past: an exploration of the unconscious transmission of trauma across the generations.* London: Karnac Books.