

The Best Medicine

My brother-in-law's passing was immensely sad, completely unexpected, and quite tragic, yet at his wake service, it wasn't so much the sound of crying (there certainly was that) as much as laughter that emanated from the corners of Thomson Funeral Home. He was a very funny guy. My last words to him, as I knelt before his casket with eyes full of tears were, "Thanks for the laughs." He kept me belly laughing since I was ten years old, and that was not forgotten in his death. It was one of his greatest gifts that he shared generously with everyone who knew him.

Of course there were tears. We all know that crying is necessary and helpful as we grieve. We need to release all the pent-up emotion, pain, confusion, questions, doubts, fears, and sadness. It needs to come out. Crying serves us well. As does laughter.

Recently a new volunteer was on her first night as our front office caregiver, and I noticed, as she walked down the hall, that she suddenly stopped as a guffaw of roaring laughter resounded from one of our groups in session. I asked her, "You didn't expect to hear that at a grief center did you?" She nodded a resounding no.

Unlike most other animals, nature has given us the ability to release the overwhelming feelings that can emerge from grief and loss. When we release these feelings, we are mourning. We're getting it out (*much like when there are toxins in our bodies and we vomit – pardon the gross analogy*). And it is mourning, -getting it out somehow, in some way, that heals our grief. Writing, talking, crying, sobbing, and even laughing at times for some of us, all offer us the release we so desperately need.

Having officiated at funerals for over 30 years, I've noticed that the role of humor in grief can be a cultural thing, and that certain cultures adopt humor more readily than others. Now that I do funerals for people of many faiths, and I lead support groups with people of all faiths or no faith at all, I get to observe an even broader spectrum. Since I come from an Irish background, it is very clear that humor is in fact a tool in our toolbox for grief survival. The oppressive past of the Irish people may have something to do with our development of humor as an effective means to navigate the difficult and confusing emotions that accompany loss.

It is not unusual, in fact quite universal for many of us to feel like we will never laugh again. This is usually in the throes of early, raw grief when it is unimaginable to ever have a glimpse of joy or laughter again. I remember, on the first night of a newly forming group, after I shared that grief doesn't really go away but usually softens over time, someone yelled at me, "You're full of shit!" My response was laughter, because I truly understand how unbelievable this may feel. But in my experience, and I have a lot of it, I have found that I am in fact not full of it.

It is confusing. And it's all ok. Whether we are crying or laughing, or numb, or withdrawn, it's where we are, and exactly where we need to be. Let's not judge our feelings and emotions and try not to let anyone else judge us either.

I don't know if laughter is the *best* medicine for grief, but it's damn good medicine.

Kevin J. Keelen
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