

June 14, 2020

Dear Friends,

As you may know by now my family lost yet another beloved member last week. It really is kind of surreal and I find myself struggling to articulate how it all feels. My brother in law, Jack O'Keefe who was only 69, was a truly good husband to my sister Colleen and father to my three nieces. This loss was so unexpected and sudden, they are still reeling from the shock. Even as things are relaxing a bit with social distancing restrictions, it is still a very bizarre time to lose somebody and try to ritualize that loss in a meaningful way, which is why we have waited so long to celebrate his funeral this coming week. I confess that I look up into the sky and say "really" quite often. With each and every loss in my life, however, I am reminded why I have chosen to do what I do and that I am never truly alone on this journey. I want to thank so many of you for extending your thoughts and prayers to my family once again and I apologize that I will be missing our zoom groups this week. I am sure you all understand, - you all 'get' grief. Instead of writing a new reflection this week, I have taken some "highlights" from some past reflections that speak to me at this difficult time and I hope they will speak freshly again to you as well. I will also be sharing a beautiful poem which a dear friend sent to me this week. She is also someone who 'gets' grief, as you will see from the poem which she sent to me written by Mark Rickerby.

From April 8, 2020- ***Making the best of it***

In reflection about her cancer, Gilda Radner once said, "I wanted a perfect ending. Now I've learned, the hard way, that some poems don't rhyme, and some stories don't have a clear beginning, middle and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next." This is a wonderful manifesto for our current time!

I'm finding that my goal every day is "making the best of it." Right now if we allow ourselves to be ok with our feelings, whatever they may be, and then try to make the best of the situation in which we are ensconced, that is about the best we can do. Pardon the redundancy there. If we are hopefully at least trying out some of the 'tools' that are helpful, i.e., meditation, exercise, keeping in touch via social media or phone, walking, journaling, resting, practicing mindfulness, etc. then we are in fact making the best of it. The only way to make the best of grief is to somehow find ways to embrace it rather than fight it or deny it or try to run away from it. "It" isn't going anywhere. And because we are forced to live with the pain of grief, and now we are also being forced to live with this pathogen in our midst, I think it is a good goal to try in whatever ways possible to make the best of it.

One of the tools not often mentioned that I believe helps enormously in the healing of grief is laughter, and it is proving to be good medicine for me while on this journey. I am fortunate to be from a family that has deep rooted wit; humor has been a tool for us to deal with hardships for many generations. I think it may go back to the potato famine in Ireland, but don't quote me on that. It is a humor that does not think loss or tragedy is in any way funny, rather it is a response (often a knee jerk, almost involuntary response) regarding a situation over which we have little or no control, over the inevitable and almost surreal circumstances in which we find ourselves living. (My brother in law Jack was an extremely funny guy!) When I am in contact with family members or high school and college

friends, I am noticing how prevalent and almost mandatory humor has become. I guess it has always been that way, but I am appreciating it now perhaps more than ever. Hey, we're all trying to make the best of it. I hope you do as well.

From March 26, 2020- ***A New Contentment***

One of the most practical and helpful aspects of our support groups at Stephy's Place is when people share what they find most helpful, or not, in the experience of grief and mourning. Often this opens us up to try different coping skills that perhaps we had never thought about before. During this most difficult time, I have found some things most helpful that are pretty much getting me through this. The first is a shift in perspective which has pretty much been forced by this situation, but it is a positive shift for me and I find it most helpful. The shift that I am experiencing is about finding new contentment. In his book, "Perspective," the psychologist Robert Wicks, he says, "contentment is not the fulfillment of what you want but the realization of what you already have." Sometimes, quite often actually, grief can make us so fixated on what we do not have that we tend to forget, at least for a while, what we do have or what we did have. I think it's very important to try to be in touch with what and who we have and have had in our lives. We cannot allow grief to steal these most precious treasures from us. As I hear about the suffering here and in other countries and the struggles so many people are enduring, I can't help but to feel blessed, lucky, and grateful for what I do have. Right now we need to be grateful for our homes, which have become our bubbles for survival. While 'stuck' in our homes it is a good time to take inventory of all the things and memories that have been created; these memories are our greatest treasures for sure. And although we do not have the people we loved so dearly who have died, perhaps we can let our broken hearts be grateful for having had them, having known them, having shared some of our life with them and they with us. There are still other people in our lives that perhaps we have neglected because of our deep sorrow and pain, maybe this is a good time to start to reach out to them and allow our perspective to change regarding their presence in our lives. Even if they are not living under our roof and we are separated right now, thanks to technology we can still be in touch.

A few months ago someone in one of my groups mentioned that he had heard from a friend who he had lost touch with long ago. I think they were friends in childhood and beyond. This person mentioned that at first he wondered why this old friend was reaching out after all these years? He was dreading the conversation. He hesitated, in his grief, to respond because he didn't feel he had the energy to talk about anything. But when the friend finally got in touch, all he wanted to share was that he was very grateful for having had this man as a friend and that he wanted him to know that. He basically said, "I just wanted to thank you for being my friend." This was a wow experience, completely unexpected and quite healing for the participant in our group. His perspective had changed in one conversation.

The contentment that I am experiencing now during this time has been brought about by two things which we often talk about in group and they are gratitude and mindfulness. Gratitude helps us gain a healthier perspective by getting us out of ourselves; being focused inordinately on self does not lead to greater happiness, in fact it is a black hole that can lead to deeper loneliness, despair and isolation.

Gratitude is essential in our healing of grief, in our becoming, and in our survival of this particular pandemic. Gratitude can definitely lead to contentment, it has for me.

The other helpful tool, or skill or whatever you want to call it is mindfulness. When I mention mindfulness all I am talking about is allowing ourselves to be present to the present, trying to keep our brains out of the future that does not exist or a past that is haunting or painful. If we are ok right here and right now I think it's important to allow ourselves to be ok, to find contentment in the right here right now. Sometimes this is very difficult, especially in early grief, as feelings of guilt or even despair can creep right into our momentary contentment seeking to destroy it. But we must resist these waves of guilt and what I call 'stinkin thinkin.' Being present to the present means taking inventory of the now; allow yourself to be ok in the now, give yourself permission to find contentment in the now. This takes a bit of practice, and a lot of breathing. Each day I sit for ten or fifteen minutes to be mindful, to breathe and find serenity in the now. Quite often I stay in it much longer. I find myself utilizing it throughout these days of isolation, and it is incredibly helpful.

I hope some of what I shared will be helpful to you as it is helpful to me. I hope you are staying healthy and that you can find some contentment during this uniquely challenging time.

How We Survive

by Mark Rickerby

If we are fortunate, we are given a warning.

If not, there is only the sudden horror,

the wrench of being torn apart; of being reminded

that nothing is permanent,

not even the ones we love,

the ones our lives revolve around.

Life is a fragile affair.

We are all dancing on the edge of a precipice,

a dizzying cliff so high we can't see the bottom.

One by one, we lose those we love most

into the dark ravine.

So we must cherish them without reservation.

Now. Today. This minute.

We will lose them or they will lose us someday.

This is certain.

There is no time for bickering.

And their loss will leave a great pit in our hearts;

a pit we struggle to avoid during the day

and fall into at night.

Some, unable to accept this loss,

unable to determine the worth of life without them,

jump into that black pit spiritually or physically,

hoping to find them there.

And some survive

the shock, the denial, the horror,

the bargaining, the barren, empty aching,

the unanswered prayers, the sleepless nights

when their breath is crushed under the weight of silence and all that it means.

Somehow, some survive all that and,

like a flower opening after a storm,

they slowly begin to remember

the one they lost in a different way...

The laughter,

the irrepressible spirit, the generous heart,
the way their smile made them feel,
the encouragement they gave
even as their own dreams were dying.

And in time, they fill the pit with other memories
the only memories that really matter.

We will still cry.

We will always cry.

But with loving reflection more than hopeless longing.

And that is how we survive.

That is how the story should end.

That is how they would want it to be.