

Welcome



*Understanding Your Grief:
One Day at a Time*

presented by



Curlew Hills
MEMORY GARDENS

featuring

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T.

Author—Educator—Grief Counselor

The Capacity to Love The Reason We Grieve

By Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

“Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy, but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving... the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.”—Henri Nouwen

“All you need is love,” famously sang the Beatles. I couldn’t agree more. We come into the world yearning to give and receive love. Authentic love is God’s greatest gift to us as human beings. Love is the one human experience that invites us to feel beautifully connected and forces us to acknowledge that meaning and purpose are anchored not in isolation and aloneness, but in union and togetherness.

What higher purpose is there in life but to give and receive love? Love is the essence of a life of abundance and joy. No matter what life brings our way, love is our highest goal, our most passionate quest. Yes, we have a tremendous need for love—love that captures our hearts and nourishes our spirits.

In fact, our capacity to give and receive love is what ultimately defines us. Nothing we have “accomplished” in our lifetime matters as much as the way we have loved one another.

Yet love inevitably leads to grief. You see, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin. One does not—and cannot—exist without the other. People sometimes say that grief is the price we pay for the joy of having loved. This also means that grief is not a universal experience. Grief is predicated on our capacity to give and receive love. Some people choose not to love and so never grieve. If we allow ourselves the grace that comes with love, however, we must allow ourselves the grace that is required to mourn.

The experience of grief is only felt when someone of great value, purpose, and meaning has been a part of your life. To mourn your loss is required if you are to befriend the love you have been granted. To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is life-sustaining and life-giving, and it ultimately leads you back to love again. In this way, love is both the cause and the antidote. Just as our greatest gift from God is our capacity to give and receive love, it is a great gift that we can openly mourn our life losses.

It is important to understand that grief and mourning are not the same thing, however. Grief is the constellation of thoughts and feelings we have when

someone we love dies. We can think of it as the container. It holds our thoughts, feelings, and images of our experience when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Mourning is taking the grief we have on the inside and expressing it outside of ourselves.

Making the choice not just to grieve, but to authentically mourn, provides us the courage to live through the pain of loss and be transformed by it. How ironic that to ultimately go on to live well and love well we must allow ourselves to mourn well. You have loved from the outside in, and now you must learn to mourn from the inside out. *

About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado’s School of Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Loving from the Outside In*, *Mourning from the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.

Love and Grief

Living as You Were Meant to Live

By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

"We are all mirrors unto one another. Look into me and you will find something of yourself as I will of you."

WALTER RINDER

Love is a sacred partnership of communion with another human being. You take each other in, and even when you are apart, you are together. Wherever you go, you carry the person inside you. Communion means the sharing or exchanging of intimate thoughts and feelings, especially on a spiritual level. When two people love one another, they are connected. They are entwined.

Communion of Lives

The word "communion" comes from the Old French *comuner*, which means "to hold in common." Note that this is different than "to have in common." You may have very little in common with another person, yet love them wholeheartedly. Instead, you hold things in common—that is, you consciously choose to share one another's lives, hopes, and dreams. You hold her heart, and she holds yours.

The absence of the person you love wounds your spirit, creates downward movement in your psyche, and transforms your heart.

This experience of taking another person inside your heart is beyond definition and defies analysis. It is part of the mystery of love. Love has its own way with us. It knocks on our hearts and invites itself in. It cannot be seen, but we realize it has happened. It cannot be touched, yet we feel it.

Communion of Grief

When someone we love dies, then, we feel a gaping hole inside us. I have companioned hundreds of mourners who have said to me, "When she died, I felt like part of me died, too." In what can feel like a very physical sense, something that was inside us now seems missing. We don't mourn those who die from the outside in; we mourn them from the inside out.

The absence of the person you love wounds your spirit, creates downward movement in your psyche, and transforms your heart. Yet even though you feel there is now a hole inside you, you will also come to know (if you haven't already) that those you love continue to live on in your heart. You remain in communion with those you love forever and are inextricably connected to them for eternity.

Yes, you will grieve the person's absence and need to express your feelings of grief. You must mourn. You must commune with your grief and take it into your heart, embracing your many thoughts and feelings. When you allow yourself to fully mourn, over time and with the support of others who care about you, you will come to find that the person you lost does indeed still live inside you.

Love abides in communion—during life and after death. And mourning is communion with your grief. With communion comes understanding, meaning, and a life of richness.



Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

“Accept the things to which fate binds you, and love the people with whom fate brings you together, but do so with all your heart.”

MARCUS AURELIUS

When you love another person, it can feel like one plus one equals three.

I'm sure you've heard the saying, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Love is like that. Two people can come together and form a partnership that enables each person to be “more” in so many ways.

Here's another way to think about this idea: Love is like an orchestra. You may be a clarinet—a strong, fine wind instrument all by yourself. But when you surround yourself with other instruments, each of which does the work of carrying its own part and practicing its own music, together as a group you can blow the doors off the place.

I much prefer this expansive concept of love over the long-held reductionist belief that two become one. If two become one, both participants in the relationship are diminished. Conversely, what truly feeds the soul of a loving relationship is expansion, mutual-nurturance, and growth.

Without doubt, being part of a synergistic, two-makes-three relationship requires a conscious commitment. Did your relationship with the person who died feel enhancing or diminishing? In synergistic relationships, there has to be space and encouragement to be real and authentic. Were you empowered to be your true self or disempowered to be something you were not? Did your two make three, or did your two make you less than one? If your two made less than one, perhaps you are now faced with mourning what you never had but wished you did. How human is that?

If, on the other hand, your relationship with the person who died made you greater than the sum of your parts, what happens now that one of you is gone?

When you trust in the process of grief and you surrender to the mystery, you will find that mourning, like love, is also greater than the sum of its parts.

You may feel diminished. You may feel empty. You may feel less than whole. Your self-identity may even seem to shrink as you struggle with your changing roles. If you are no longer a wife (or a mother or a sister or a daughter), what are you? If you are no longer a husband (or a father or a brother or a son), what are you?

The experience of mourning can feel piecemeal—a cry here, a burst of anger there; a deep sadness today, a crush of guilt tomorrow. You might feel a sense of disorientation from the scattered and ever-changing nature of your grief.

But when you trust in the process of grief and you surrender to the mystery, you will find that mourning, like love, is also greater than the sum of its parts. Leaning into your grief and always erring on the side of expressing rather than inhibiting or ignoring your thoughts and feelings—no matter how random and disjointed they might seem some days—will bring you to a place of transformation. You will not just be different from the person you were before the death. You will be greater. Your experience of love and grief will create a changed you, a you who has not only survived but who has learned to thrive again in a new form and in a new way.

And just as love connects you to others, so should grief. You need the listening ears and open hearts of others as you express your thoughts and feelings about the death. You need the support of others as you mourn.

Yes, love and grief are both greater than the sum of their parts. The lesson I take from this is that whenever you engage fully and openly in life, experiencing both the joys and the sorrows head-on, you are living the life you were meant to live. *



About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, best-selling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Loving from the Outside In*, *Mourning from the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.

The Journey Through Grief

The Mourner's Six Reconciliation Needs

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

The death of someone loved changes our lives forever. And the movement from “before” to “after” is almost always a long, painful journey. From my own experiences with loss as well as those of the thousands of grieving people I have worked with over the years, I have learned that if we are to heal we cannot skirt the outside edges of our grief. Instead, we must journey all through it, sometimes meandering the side roads, sometimes plowing directly into its raw center.

I have also learned that the journey requires mourning. There is an important difference, you see. Grief is what you think and feel on the inside after someone you love dies. Mourning is the outward expression of those thoughts and feelings. To mourn is to be an active participant in our grief journey. We all grieve when someone we love dies, but if we are to heal, we must also mourn.

There are six “yield signs” you are likely to encounter on your journey through grief—what I call the “reconciliation needs of mourning.” For while your grief journey will be an intensely personal, unique experience, all mourners must yield to this set of basic needs if they are to heal.



Need 1. Acknowledging the reality of the death.

This first need of mourning involves gently confronting the reality that someone you care about will never physically come back into your life again.

Whether the death was sudden or anticipated, acknowledging the full reality of the loss may occur over weeks and months. To survive, you may try to push away the reality of the death at times. You may discover yourself replaying events surrounding the death and confronting memories, both good and bad. This replay is a vital part of this need of mourning. It's as if each time you talk it out, the event is a little more real.

Remember—this first need of mourning, like the other five that follow, may intermittently require your attention for months. Be patient and compassionate with yourself as you work on each of them.

Need 2. Embracing the pain of the loss.

This need of mourning requires us to embrace the pain of our loss—something we naturally don't want to do. It is easier to avoid, repress, or deny the pain of grief than it is to confront it, yet it is in confronting our pain that we learn to reconcile ourselves to it.

You will probably discover that you need to “dose” yourself in embracing your pain. In other words, you cannot (nor should you try to) overload yourself with the hurt all at one time. Sometimes you may need to distract yourself from the pain of death, while at other times you will need to create a safe place to move toward it.

Unfortunately, our culture tends to encourage the denial of pain. If you openly express your feelings of grief, misinformed friends may advise you to “carry on” or “keep your chin up.” If, on the other hand, you remain “strong” and “in control,” you may be congratulated for “doing well” with your grief. Actually, doing well with your grief means becoming well acquainted with your pain.

Need 3. Remembering the person who died.

Do you have any kind of relationship with someone when they die? Of course. You have a relationship of memory. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship, and objects that link you to the person who died

(such as photos, souvenirs, etc.) are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship. This need of mourning involves allowing and encouraging yourself to pursue this relationship.

But some people may try to take your memories away. Trying to be helpful, they encourage you to take down all the photos of the person who died. They tell you to keep busy or even to move out of your house. But in my experience, remembering the past makes hoping for the future possible. Your future will become open to new experiences only to the extent that you embrace the past.

Need 4. Developing a new self-identity.

Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a “wife” or “husband” to a “widow” or “widower.” You may have gone from being a “parent” to a “bereaved parent.” The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed.

A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. After all, someone still has to take out the garbage, someone still has to buy the groceries. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by the person who died. This can be very hard work and can leave you feeling very drained.

You may occasionally feel child-like as you struggle with your changing identity. You may feel a temporarily heightened dependence on others as well as feelings of helplessness, frustration, inadequacy, and fear.

Need 5. Searching for meaning.

When someone you love dies, you naturally question the meaning and purpose of life. You probably will question your philosophy of life and explore religious and spiritual values as you work on this need. You may discover yourself searching for meaning in your continued living as you ask “How?” and “Why?” questions.

“How could God let this happen?” “Why did this happen now, in this way?” The death reminds you of your lack of control. It can leave you feeling powerless.

The person who died was a part of you. This death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well. At times, overwhelming sadness and loneliness may be your constant companions. You may feel that when this person died, part of you died with him or her. And now you are faced with finding some meaning in going on with your life even though you may often feel so empty.

This death also calls for you to confront your own spirituality. You may doubt your faith and have spiritual conflicts and questions racing through your head and heart. This is normal and part of your journey toward renewed living.

Need 6. Receiving ongoing support from others.

The quality and quantity of understanding support you get during your grief journey will have a major influence on your capacity to heal. You cannot—nor should you try to—do this alone. Drawing on the experiences and encouragement of friends, fellow mourners or professional counselors is not a weakness but a healthy human need. And because mourning is a process that takes place over time, this support must be available months and even years after the death of someone in your life.

Unfortunately, because our society places so much value on the ability to “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” and “keep busy,” many mourners are abandoned shortly after the event of the death. “It’s over and done with” and “It’s time to get on with your life” are the types of messages directed at mourners that still dominate. Obviously, these messages encourage you to deny or repress your grief rather than express it.

To be truly helpful, the people in your support system must appreciate the impact this death has had on you. They must understand that in order to heal, you must be allowed—even encouraged—to mourn long after the death. And they must encourage you to see mourning not as an enemy to be vanquished but as a necessity to be experienced as a result of having loved.

Reconciling Your Grief

You may have heard—indeed you may believe—that your grief journey’s end will come when you resolve, or recover from, your grief. But your journey will never end. People do not “get over” grief.

Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as the mourner works to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of death and a capacity to become reinvested in the activities of living.

In reconciliation, the sharp, ever present pain of grief gives rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person who died will never be forgotten, yet knowing that your life can and will move forward.



The Mourner's Bill of Rights

Though you should reach out to others as you do the work of mourning, you should not feel obligated to accept the unhelpful responses you may receive from some people. You are the one who is grieving, and as such, you have certain “rights” no one should try to take away from you.

The following list is intended both to empower you to heal and to decide how others can and cannot help. This is not to discourage you from reaching out to others for help, but rather to assist you in distinguishing useful responses from hurtful ones.

1. You have the right to experience your own unique grief. No one else will grieve in the exact same way you do. So, when you turn to others for help, don't allow them to tell you what you should or should not be feeling.
2. You have the right to talk about your grief. Talking about your grief will help you heal. Seek out others who will allow you to talk as much as you want about your grief. If at times you do not feel like talking, you also have the right to be silent.
3. You have the right to feel a multitude of emotions. Confusion, disorientation, fear, guilt, and relief are just a few of the emotions you might feel as part of your grief journey. Others may try to tell you that feeling angry, for example, is wrong. Don't take these judgmental responses to heart. Instead, find listeners who will accept your feelings without conditions.
4. You have the right to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits. Your feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you feeling fatigued. Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. And don't allow others to push you into doing things you don't feel ready to do.
5. You have the right to experience “griefbursts”. Sometimes, out of nowhere, a powerful surge of grief may overcome you. This can be frightening, but it is normal and natural. Find someone who understands and will let you talk it out.
6. You have the right to make use of ritual. The funeral ritual does more than acknowledge the death of someone loved. It helps provide you with the support of caring people. More importantly, the funeral is a way for you to mourn. If others tell you the funeral or other healing rituals such as these are silly or unnecessary, don't listen.
7. You have the right to embrace your spirituality. If faith is a part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you feel angry at God, find someone to talk with who won't be critical of your feelings of hurt and abandonment.
8. You have the right to search for meaning. You may find yourself asking, “Why did he or she die? Why this way? Why now?” Some of your questions may have answers, but some may not. And watch out for the clichéd responses some people may give you. Comments like, “It was God's will” or “Think of what you have to be thankful for” are not helpful and you do not have to accept them.
9. You have the right to treasure your memories. Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of someone loved. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring your memories, find others with whom you can share them.
10. You have the right to move toward your grief and heal. Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself and avoid people who are impatient and intolerant with you. Neither you nor those around you must forget that the death of someone loved changes your life forever.

Seek Reconciliation, NOT Resolution

Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T., www.centerforloss.com

How do you ever find your way out of the wilderness of your grief? You don't have time to dwell there forever, do you? The good news is that no, you don't have to dwell there forever. If you follow the trail markers on your journey through the wilderness, you will find your way out. But just as with any significant experience in your life, the wilderness will always live inside of you and be a part of who you are.

A number of psychological models describing grief refer to "resolution," "recovery," "reestablishment," or "reorganization" as being the destination of your grief journey. You may have heard—indeed you may believe—that your grief journey's end will come when you resolve, or recover from, your grief.

But you may also be coming to understand one of the fundamental truths of grief: Your journey will never truly end. People do not "get over" grief. My personal and professional experience tells me that a total return to "normalcy" after the death of someone loved is not possible; we are all forever changed by the experience of grief.

Reconciliation is a term I find more appropriate for what occurs as you work to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence, an ability to fully acknowledge the reality of the death and a capacity to become re-involved in the activities of the living. There is also an acknowledgement that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life.

As the experience of reconciliation unfolds, you will recognize that life is, and will continue to be, different without the presence of the person who died. Changing the relationship with the person who died from one of presence to one of memory and redirecting one's energy and initiative toward the future often takes longer—and involves more hard work—than most people are aware.

Mourning never really ends. Only, as time goes on, it erupts less frequently.

We, as human beings, never resolve our grief, but instead become reconciled to it.

We come to reconciliation in our grief journey when the full reality of the death becomes a part of us. Beyond an intellectual working through the death, there is also an emotional and spiritual working through. What had been understood at the "head" level is now understood at the "heart" level.

Keep in mind that reconciliation doesn't just happen. You reach it through deliberate mourning, by

- talking it out.
- writing it out.
- crying it out.
- thinking it out.
- playing it out.
- painting (or sculpting, etc.) it out.
- dancing it out.
- etcetera!

To experience reconciliation requires that you descend, not transcend. You don't get to go around or above your grief. You must go through it. And while you are going through it, you must express it if you are to reconcile yourself to it.

You will find that as you achieve reconciliation, the sharp, ever-present pain of grief will give rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person you have given love to and received love from will never be forgotten. The unfolding of this journey is not intended to create a return to an "old normal" but the discovery of a "new normal."

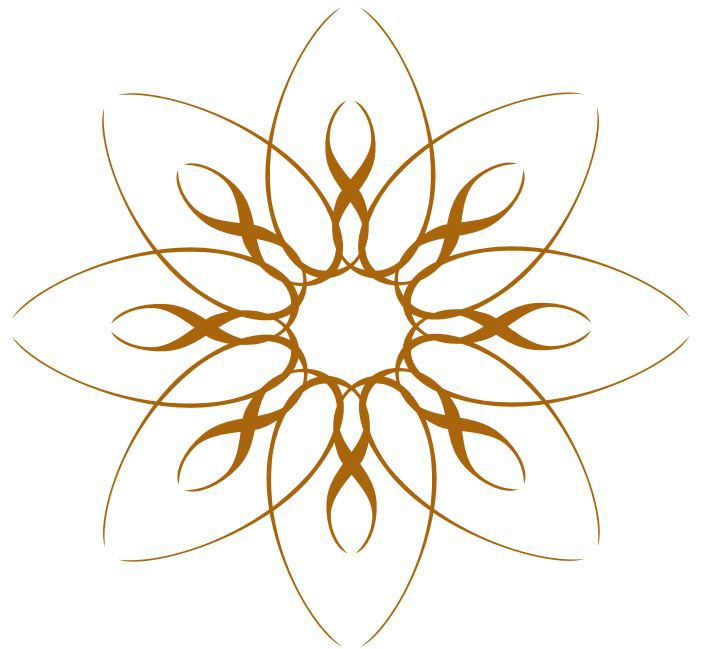
To help explore where you are in your movement toward reconciliation, the following criteria that suggest healing may be helpful. You don't have to meet each of these criteria for healing to be taking place. Again, remember that reconciliation is an ongoing process. If you are early in the work of mourning, you may not meet any of these criteria, but this list will give you a way to monitor your movement toward healing.

As you embrace your grief and do the work of mourning, you can and will be able to demonstrate the majority of the following:

- A recognition of the reality and finality of the death.
- A return to stable eating and sleeping patterns.
- A renewed sense of release from the person who has died. You will have thoughts about the person, but you will not be preoccupied by these thoughts.
- The capacity to enjoy experiences in life that are normally enjoyable.
- The establishment of new and healthy relationships.
- The capacity to live a full life without feelings of guilt or lack of self-respect.
- The drive to organize and plan your life toward the future.
- The serenity to become comfortable with the way things are rather than attempting to make things as they were.
- The versatility to welcome more change in your life.
- The awareness that you have allowed yourself to fully grieve and you have survived.
- The awareness that you do not “get over” your grief; instead, you have a new reality, meaning, and purpose in your life.
- The acquaintance of new parts of yourself that you have discovered in your grief journey.
- The adjustment to new role changes that have resulted from the loss of the relationship.
- The acknowledgement that the pain of loss is an inherent part of life resulting from the ability to give and receive love.

Reconciliation emerges much in the way grass grows. Usually we don't check our lawns daily to see if the grass is growing, but it does grow and soon we come to realize it's time to mow the grass again. Likewise, we don't look at ourselves each day as mourners to see how we are healing. Yet we do come to realize, over the course of months and years, that we have come a long way. We have taken some important steps toward reconciliation.

Usually there is not one great moment of “arrival,” but subtle changes and small advancements. It's helpful to have gratitude for even very small advancements. If you



are beginning to taste your food again, be thankful. If you mustered the energy to meet your friend for lunch, be grateful. If you finally got a good night's sleep, rejoice.

One of my greatest teachers, C.S. Lewis, wrote in *A Grief Observed* about his grief symptoms as they eased in this journey to reconciliation:

“There was no sudden, striking, and emotional transition. Like the warming of a room or the coming of daylight, when you first notice them they have already been going on for some time.”

Of course, you will take some steps backward from time to time, but that is to be expected. Keep believing in yourself. Set your intention to reconcile your grief and have hope that you can and will come to live and love again.

Movement toward your healing can be very draining and exhausting. As different as it might be, seek out people who give you hope for your healing. Permitting yourself to have hope is central to achieving reconciliation.

Realistically, even though you have hope for your healing, you should not expect it to happen overnight. Many grieving people think that it should and, as a result, experience a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem that leaves them questioning their capacity to heal. If this is the situation for you, keep in mind that you are not alone.

You may find that a helpful procedure is to take inventory of your own timetable expectations for reconciliation. Ask yourself questions like, “Am I expecting myself to

heal more quickly than is humanly possible? Have I mistakenly given myself a specific deadline for when I should be ‘over’ my grief?” Recognize that you may be hindering your own healing by expecting too much of yourself. Take your healing one day at a time. It will ultimately allow you to move toward and rediscover continued meaning in your life.

One valuable way to embrace your healing is to journal. Write down your thoughts and feelings and you will be amazed at how it helps you embrace your grief. Having your experiences to reflect on in writing can also help you see the changes that are taking place in you as you do the work of mourning.

You can’t control death or ignore your human need to mourn when it impacts your life. You do have, however, the choice to help yourself heal. Embracing the pain of your grief is probably one of the hardest jobs you will ever do. As you do this work, surround yourself with compassionate, loving people who are willing to “walk with” you.

The hope that comes from the journey through grief is life. The most important word in the previous sentence is *through*. As you do the work of mourning, you do not remain where you are.

I think about the man I was honored to companion following the tragic death of his seven-year-old son, Adam, in a car accident. He was heartbroken. His soul was darkened. He had to come to know the deepest despair. Yet, he discovered that if he were to ever live again, he would have to work through his grief. So,

he adopted the mantra, “Work on!” In his process of conscious intention-setting, he decided to believe that even the most heart-wrenching loss can be survived. Perhaps refusing to give in to despair is the greatest act of hope and faith.

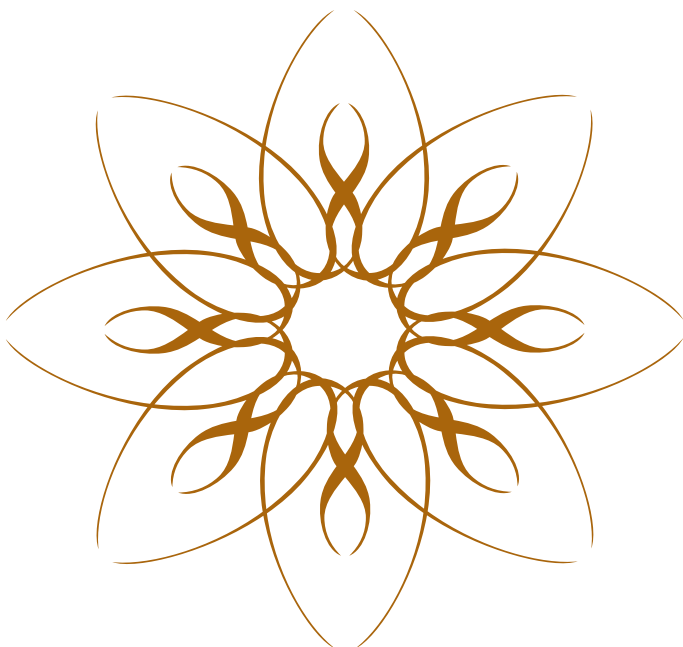
Yes, you go to the wilderness, you cry out in the depths of your despair. Darkness may seem to surround you. But rising up within you is the profound awareness that the pain of the grief is a sign of having given and received love. And where the capacity to love and be loved has been before, it can be again. Choose life!

Living in the present moment of your grief is living with anticipation that you can and will go on to discover a continued life that has meaning and purpose. If you are in any way like me, maybe sometimes you lost hope and need to fall back on your faith.

Sometimes in my own grief journey, when hope seems absent, I open my heart—my well of reception—and find that it is faith that sustains me. Faith that is inspired by moments when I’m able to find what is good, what is sweet, what is tender in life, despite the deep, overwhelming wounds of my grief. It is the courage of the human spirit that chooses to live until we die that gives me faith. Life will continue and it will bring me back to hope. If you lose hope along your journey, I invite you to join me in falling back on faith.

Reflect on this: Living with hope is living in anticipation of what can be. Sometimes when you are in the wilderness of your grief, it’s easy to question your hope for the future. But living with faith is embracing what cannot be changed by our will, and knowing that life in all of its fullness is still good. Choose life!

In the religious traditions of Christianity and Judaism, hope is much more than “an expectation of a good that is yet to be.” Hope is confidence that God will be with you in your grief and, most importantly, that life continues after death. Hope is trust in God even when everything seems hopeless. Hope is the assurance that God has the last word, and that that word is LIFE—even as you confront the realities of the death of someone you have loved. Choose life!





The Critical Importance of Seeking Support: *Learning From The Geese*

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If there is ever a time in life when we need others to support and nurture us, it's when someone we love dies. In many ways, "grief work" is the most difficult work we will ever do. And hard work is less burdensome when others lend a hand.

Sharing the devastation that results from the death of someone precious won't make the hurt go away, but it does make it more bearable. In reflecting on this need to support each other during times of grief, we might be well served to observe the five natural instincts for support and companionship demonstrated by wild geese.

Observation One: When the flock is on a journey, the flapping of the wings of each individual goose results in an uplift for the bird that follows. By flying in a "V" formation, the entire flock achieves 71 percent greater flying range than if each bird flew alone.

Implication: When we are grieving the death of someone loved, we too are on a journey. Others who are grieving are on a similar journey, and we can all be uplifted by journeying together. No, you need not travel alone, nor should you try!

Observation Two: Whenever a goose falls out of formation, it experiences the drag and resistance of trying to fly alone. The goose then realizes it needs to get back into formation to take advantage of the collective lifting power of the flock.

Implication: Just as geese are well served to stay in formation with those on a similar journey, we as humans are better off if we accept the lifting power of those who go before us. We are grace-filled when we open ourselves to the support of our fellow travelers.

Observation Three: If any one goose has a problem, two other geese will always drop out of formation and follow the wayward goose to help support and protect it. They stay present to the goose that has special needs until it is able to continue the journey on its own.

Implication: If we humans can learn from the wisdom of geese, we will always companion each other in difficult times. Receiving help from others strengthens the bonds of compassion and love that help us survive when we are devastated by loss.

Observation Four: When the goose leading the flock gets tired and overwhelmed, it rotates back into the formation, and another goose flies at the point position.

Implication: No one person on a grief journey can lead the way all the time. At times, it is wise to acknowledge that you are tired and need others to care for you and protect you from the headwinds.

Observation Five: While flying in formation, the geese honk to each other as a form of encouragement and mutual support.

Implication: There are times in life when we all need encouragement from those around us to remind us of our interconnectedness. We must allow ourselves to rely on each other, otherwise, when we are in grief, we end up feeling totally alone and completely isolated.

Where To Turn For Help

"There is strength in numbers," one saying goes. Another echoes, "United we stand, divided we fall." This is a time in your life when you need to let other people in. You needn't let everyone in all the time, but I encourage you to make room for those you trust the most. Carefully chosen friends and family members whom you feel safe with can often be at the center of your support system.

Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings. Open your broken heart a little at a time to those people in your life who are compassionate and loving listeners. In an ideal world, this is your family and friends. If this is not true for you, my hope is that you will seek out other sources of support.

The darkness that grief brings into your life is a place from which you might be tempted to judge others, particularly their motivations. True, they cannot feel your profound loss the way you do, so don't expect them to be able to. Except in cases where there is evidence that you can't trust someone's intentions, try to be open to letting others be of support to you. Remember—you are doing the best you can, from moment to moment, from day to day.

You may also find comfort in talking to a minister or other religious leader. When someone loved dies, it is natural for you to feel ambivalent about your faith and question the very meaning of life. A clergy member who responds with empathy to all of your feelings can be a valuable resource. Just be certain the clergyperson you look to for support is a good match for your unique needs.

A professional grief counselor may also be a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends and family members can't be: an objective listener. A counselor's office can be a place of sanctuary where you are able to give voice to those feelings you may be afraid to express elsewhere. As with everything else in this overwhelming grief journey, counseling is an intensely personal choice. However, when you find the right counselor, you may well have found a safe haven in which to experience the terrifying jumble of feelings impacting you.

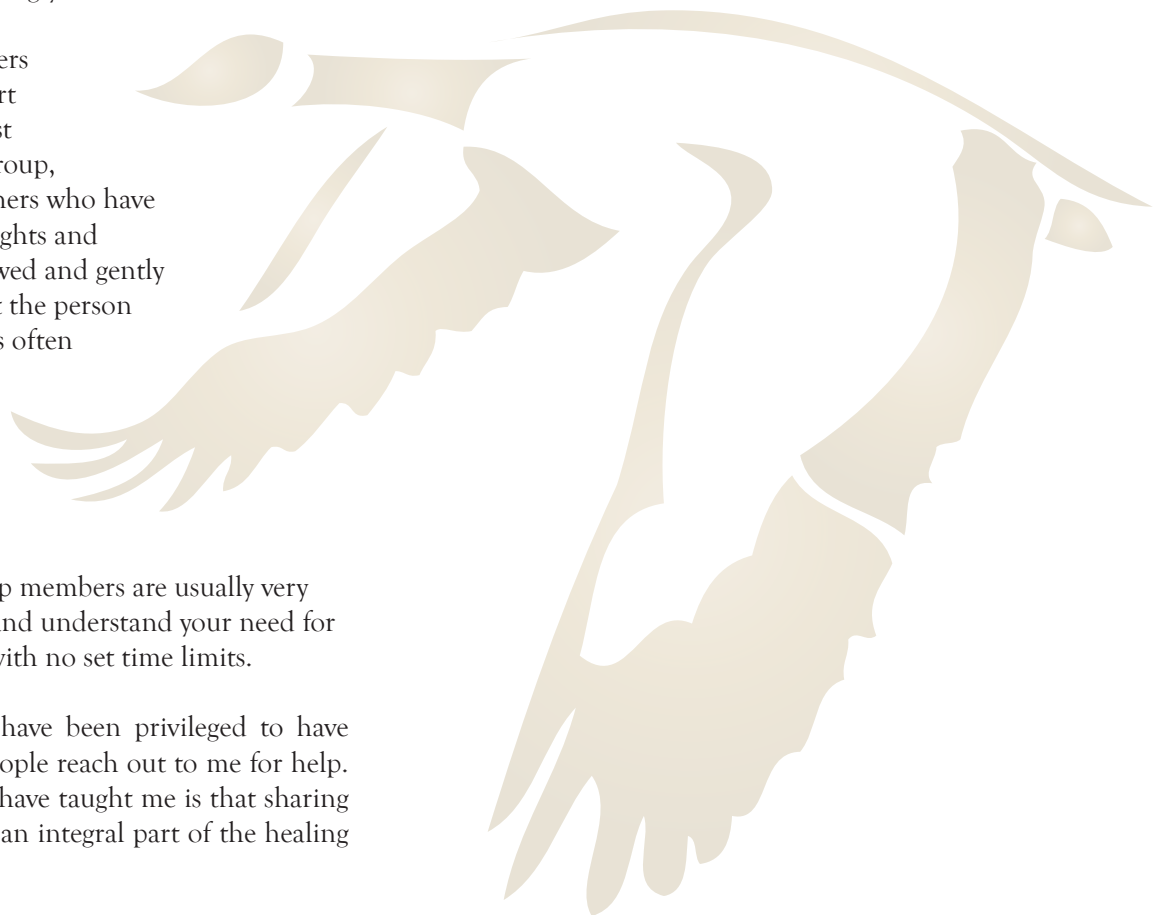
Not all but many mourners discover that grief support groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about the person who died as much and as often as you like. In these groups, each person can share his or her unique grief experience in a nonthreatening, safe atmosphere. Fellow group members are usually very patient with each other and understand your need for compassionate support with no set time limits.

As a grief counselor, I have been privileged to have thousands of grieving people reach out to me for help. Among the lessons they have taught me is that sharing their grief with others is an integral part of the healing

process. Perhaps it is helpful to remember that, by definition, mourning means “the shared response to loss.”

Remember, help comes in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it. I hope this article has helped you understand the importance of reaching out for help during this time in your life. Please don't try to confront your grief alone. Wrap your arms around yourself, but also open your arms to the loving support that wants to embrace you. You need and deserve companions—friends, relatives, counselors, and others who have experienced similar losses—who will walk with you as you make the difficult journey through grief.

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado Medical School's Department of Family Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many compassionate, bestselling books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love well and live well, including “Understanding Your Grief,” “The Mourner's Book of Hope,” and “Healing Your Traumatized Heart.” Visit www.centerforloss.com to learn more about the natural and necessary process of grief and mourning and to order Dr. Wolfelt's books.



The Writings of Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D., C.T.

Resources For the Adult Mourner

Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart
Understanding Your Grief Journal
Understanding Your Suicide Grief
Understanding Your Suicide Grief Journal
Living in the Shadow of the Ghosts of Grief: Step into the Light
Eight Critical Questions for Mourners... And the Answers That Will Help You Heal
The Wilderness of Grief: Finding Your Way (Also available in audiobook)
The Wilderness of Suicide Grief: Finding Your Way
The Journey Through Grief: Reflections on Healing
Loving from the Outside In, Mourning from the Inside Out
The Mourner's Book of Hope
The Mourner's Book of Courage
The Mourner's Book of Faith
Grief One Day at a Time: 365 Meditations to Help You Heal After Loss
One Mindful Day at a Time: 365 Meditations for Living in the Now
First Aid for Broken Hearts

When Your Soulmate Dies: A Guide Through Heroic Mourning
The Paradoxes of Mourning: Healing Your Grief with Three Forgotten Truths
Healing Your Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Soul
Healing Your Grieving Body
Healing A Friend's Grieving Heart
Healing A Grandparent's Grieving Heart
Healing A Spouse's Grieving Heart
Healing A Parent's Grieving Heart
Healing The Adult Child's Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Miscarriage
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth
Healing Your Traumatized Heart
Healing the Adult Sibling's Grieving Heart
Healing Your Grieving Heart After Stillbirth
Healing Your Grief About Aging
Healing Your Chronic Illness Grief
Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies: A Guide for Families
Transcending Divorce
Transcending Divorce Journal
The Wilderness of Divorce: Finding Your Way
Grief Day by Day: Simple Practices to Help Yourself Survive...and Thrive

Resources For & About Grieving Children and Teens

Healing a Child's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers
Healing Your Grieving Heart For Kids: 100 Practical Ideas
A Child's View of Grief (book or DVD available)
How I Feel - A Coloring Book for Grieving Children
How I Feel - A Coloring Book for Kids During and After Divorce
Sarah's Journey
Jeremy Goes to Camp Good Grief
Finding the Words: How to Talk with Children & Teens
Companioning the Grieving Child: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers

Companioning the Grieving Child Curriculum Book
Healing a Teen's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends & Caregivers
Healing Your Grieving Heart for Teens: 100 Practical Ideas
The Healing Your Grieving Heart Journal for Teens
A Teen's View of Grief (DVD)
Healing After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Kids
Healing A Child's Heart After Divorce: 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers

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Resources For Bereavement Caregivers

When Grief is Complicated: A Model for Therapists to Understand, Identify, and Companion Grievers Lost in the Wilderness of Complicated Grief
Reframing PTSD as Traumatic Grief: How Caregivers Can Companion Traumatized Grievers Through Catch-Up Mourning
Companioning You! A Soulful Guide to Caring for Yourself While You Care for the Dying and the Bereaved
Creating Meaningful Funeral Experiences: A Guide for Caregivers
Educating the Families You Serve About the "WHY" of the Funeral Workbook
Why We Have Had Funerals Since the Beginning of Time Brochures and Posters
Funeral Home Customer Service A-Z: Creating Exceptional Experiences for Today's Families

The Pocket Consultant for Funeral Service: Customer Service A-Z
A Tale of Two Funerals
Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning the Dying: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers
Companioning at a Time of Perinatal Loss
The Handbook for Companioning the Mourner: Eleven Essential Principles
Understanding Your Grief Support Group Guide
Understanding Your Suicide Grief Support Group Guide
Transcending Divorce Support Group Guide
Helping People with Developmental Disabilities Mourn
Caring For Donor Families: Before, During & After

Other Resources

When Your Pet Dies
Healing the Empty Nester's Grieving Heart
Healing a Friend or Loved One's Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Cancer Diagnosis
Healing After Job Loss: 100 Practical Ideas
Healing Your Holiday Grief: 100 Practical Ideas for Blending Mourning and Celebration During the Holiday Season
Healing Your Grief When Disaster Strikes
Healing Your Grieving Heart When Someone You Know has Alzheimer's
Healing Grief at Work: 100 Practical Ideas After Your Workplace is Touched by Loss

The PTSD Solution
Wolfelt's Grief Gardening Model Poster
The Depression of Grief: Coping with Your Sadness & Knowing When to Get Help
Afterwords... Helping You Heal (Available in English and Spanish)
Helping Series Brochures (42 Titles Available)
Wallet Cards: The Pet Lover's Code, The Mourner's Bill of Rights (English & Spanish,) My Grief Rights (Poster also available,) The Bereavement Caregiver's Self-Care Manifesto, Ten Freedoms for Creating Meaningful Funeral Ceremonies
Under Reconstruction Pin
Empathy Cards

Training Resources

The Center for Loss & Life Transition works towards its mission of "Helping People Help Others" by providing bereavement caregivers quality training in a four-day educational seminar format taught by Dr. Wolfelt. These courses have evolved out of a demand for concise yet comprehensive training in the growing field of death education and counseling. If you want to learn practical skills to "companion" people in grief or continue to enhance your bereavement skills, our educational seminars are perfect for you. These courses are held in Fort Collins, CO or Scottsdale, AZ.

Request a free Companion Press Publications or Center for Loss Educational Seminars catalog or order publications online:

(970) 226-6050 info@centerforloss.com www.centerforloss.com

Workshop Evaluation

Title:

Importance of the information presented:

1	2	3
not important	somewhat important	very important

Overall, the workshop was:

1	2	3
not important	somewhat important	very important

The most valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

The least valuable aspect of this workshop for me was:

How did you learn about this workshop?

Comments:

Please return this form to: