



THE CARE COURIER

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Finding Meaning and Purpose in Pain, Grief, and Loss

By Dr. Eleora Han, published at www.eleorahan.com/blog December 26, 2018

It's different for everyone, but for me, grief was like walking through the valley of a shadow of death: a place where I walked and walked with seemingly no hope — just darkness and shadows and the faintest of light.

Death, divorce, separation, and loss are among the most stressful events in life. These events cause some individuals to become more hardened and embittered, whereas others go through the same events and come out stronger, wiser — more beautiful for it.

What contributes to this difference?

The answer lies in so many things — for instance, finding support, allowing yourself to grieve and to live and move and breathe in it for a while, and working on accepting the reality of what is.

But more than anything, I think it is knowing that there is a greater purpose to your pain. It might be beyond what you can immediately understand, but one day you will know it. The work in your grief then, is to begin to uncover and to create greater meaning of from the pain and what it means for your life.

So how do you do this?

For me, prior to loss I was very caught up in thinking about the future that I was never really fully present. Loss taught me an important lesson: that life is finite —to savor time with loved ones and to be present in the moment. So to develop your own personal meaning through loss, ask yourself what the lesson in it might be. Doing this will help you deepen your understanding of yourself and guide you more fully toward the person you want to become though this experiences, and the life you want to live

Sometimes connecting with spirituality can help with finding meaning and purpose in loss. As humans, we are so much more than our mind and body, but also spirit. Spirituality is different than religion — its understanding that we are all connected to each other deeply. Its understanding that there is a larger picture at work in our lives and that it may be beyond our own understanding. It is connecting with love, gratitude, joy, peace, and hope, and that these are the very things that can sustain us and allow us to make contact with pain in a way where we are moved to become more whole.

Another way to deeply process your grief is to contribute to others who are going through loss, suffering or in pain. Is there a way you can take what you have been through and walk with others going through similar experiences? Is there a way you can take your grief and somehow use it to help others?

Two years ago I had a set of Adirondack chairs installed at a park in memory of my loss. It was placed in our favorite section of the park. I had the plaque inscribed with the following:

'A place to savor the present moment with your loved one.'

Sometimes I go back to visit the chairs, and each time I do, I see the families and couples spending time in them and I'm reminded that something greater is at work here, that through the pain there can be joy, and somehow, through heart-break, love again.



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Please feel free to bring a friend — All groups are free and open to the public!
WEATHER ALERT: If schools or businesses are closed, the meeting is on ZOOM only.
IF YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS, OR NEED THE ZOOM LINK, PLEASE CALL JANELLE 319-223-3146.

(All meetings are available via ZOOM)

DATES: May 6
June 3

WHERE: Kearns Funeral Service
Please use "Community Room" door

TIMES: 5:00 PM — 6:30 PM

Pizza Night

DATES: April 8, 15, 22, 29
May 13, 20, 27
June 10, 17, 24

WHERE: Kearns Funeral Service
3145 Kimball Avenue, Waterloo
Please use "Community Room" door

TIMES: 5:00 PM-6:30 PM

Afternoon & Evening Grief Support Groups



JOIN US every Thursday!
2021 Continuous Care Support Groups

Want to be on our mailing list? Give us a call, and we can add you to our quarterly newsletter list.



Continuous Care
1519 West Fourth Street
Waterloo, IA 50702

Finding Purpose After Loss

By griefic at www.griefincommon.com

Finding purpose...what a very big and very grand idea, and one that we may not spend a lot of time exploring prior to loss. Perhaps because when life is "good" our purpose is pretty clear. While it may not be glamorous, or something worthy of history remembering our name, most people are finding purpose in their day-to-day lives, even if they're not looking for it. Going to work, raising a family, finding involvement within church and community, even a hobby or past time can plan our days and fill our lives and give us direction, along with the "why" we're getting up and out of bed each day.

When writing about loss, it's always a good idea to be mindful of how different grievers can be. Different backgrounds, different supports, different styles of coping. What's also very different is how far along in their grieving someone may be, and how ready they are to accept help and ideas as they're offered. In the beginning, with the shock and numbness of loss it can be hard to see beyond the thick fog of grief and immediate pain.

This writing is for those who may be a little further along. The timeline doesn't matter so much as the feeling. And when a griever gets there, they'll know it. While always sad in some way, always missing their loved one and always grieving, there does come a time for most when they feel ready for the next step.

The problem is knowing what that next step is.

Sure, work and family and other commitments will still be there, but trying to step back into the same old life just won't work for most. With this very special person gone, nothing quite looks the same, and we feel very different along with it.

Finding purpose can be a very healthy and positive step in the right direction for a griever. In his book, "Man's Search for Meaning", Viktor Frankl talks about the happiness we all think we're looking for. In the foreword for this book, Howard S. Kushner writes, "Life is not primarily a quest for pleasure...but a quest for meaning." According to him, Frankl's three possible sources of meaning are, "in work, in love, and in courage during difficult times".

It reminds me of what a widow once said to me. When I asked how she was coping after the loss of her spouse she told me that everyone needs, "someone to love, something to do, and something to look forward to". Focusing on what she had and finding purpose were the only things getting her through the difficult days of grief.

So maybe a goal to be happy again after loss doesn't sound realistic, but what about finding purpose? As potentially idealistic as it may sound, it may be as simple as asking, "what's going to get me out of bed today?"

It's not easy. Some may ask, what purpose could there possibly be, and what else could ever be worthy of the time and attention once put into a person loved and lost, and how could it ever provide the same satisfaction or fulfillment once found in being a parent, partner, child, sibling, friend or grandchild?

And so here's the challenge.

First, decide that you actually want to move forward and that you're ready to see what might come next. Like a lot of things, this first step is the hardest. While most people would say they're tired of being sad all the time and they're ready for a change, most would be surprised to know how hard moving forward can be. And it's not always for the reasons you'd think.

For some, moving forward may feel like leaving their loved one in the past. It may feel disloyal, or some grievers may worry if they're not actively grieving it means they're not actively expressing their love either. The dark place of grief can become a surprisingly comfortable and familiar place to be. Moving beyond it can feel like a step into the unknown. That unknown could be a place filled with disappointment, or rejection. Or perhaps taking that step is simply more work or energy than a griever actually feels they have to give.

So again, the first and most important step? Deciding that you are ready to find purpose and look ahead. It doesn't have to mean running onto a diving board and jumping into a pool at full

speed. Maybe it's the step we take off our chair. The slow walk around the edge of the pool as we try to gauge the temperature. Maybe it's kneeling down and reaching our hand in first, just to get the feel of what it may be like.

When you think you may be ready (and remember, there's no right or wrong answer to when this is) then the real work begins. This can be a wonderful time of reflection and research. A chance to search for what's out there, to talk to other people and find out...how are they spending their time? What is meaningful to them and how are they finding purpose?

It can be a chance to do the thing you always wanted to do and never had time for. It can be the cause that you always believed in, or it can be helping people who have suffered in ways you can relate to.

Because in the end, that's the best advice I can give. To really truly find purpose, and to make the next step forward in life there's one thing I think helps more than anything else...

Get out of your own head.

I don't have to tell you what a really difficult place that can be, especially after loss. Getting out of our own head and finding a way to help others can be one of the most meaningful and productive things a griever (or anyone for that matter) can do. By taking the focus off ourselves and turning it to someone or something else where there's a need will be one of the most soothing and healing ways we could spend our time.

And be certain that your next step isn't to come up with all the reasons you can't help. There is time for the things that matter to us. There are ways to do the things that we care about. Even being homebound doesn't restrict us. If you are able to read this blog it means you have access to a smartphone or a computer. A phone and a computer are probably 2 of the most powerful tools we can have in reaching out to others today, but only when we decide we truly want to and that we're ready, can we do it.

Spend some time today thinking about finding purpose and what comes next. If you don't necessarily have interests of your own, that's okay. A lot of caregivers have spent many years putting their wants and needs aside. Not knowing what you want is something so many people who have cared for a loved one can relate to. So think about your loved one. What was meaningful to them? Can you feel closer to them by finding a way to honor them or by being part of something they cared about or belonged to?

I met a woman who had recently lost her spouse after years of caring for him. She had no idea what to do with herself, but she knew she was ready to move forward with her life. Her husband had been a volunteer fireman for many years, and as she visited with some of his friends, and they shared old stories, it occurred to her – she could volunteer with the fire department too. And that's just what she did. No, she didn't participate in the very physical and dangerous way he might have, but she did get herself out in the community for every fundraiser and every special event they held. It allowed her to not only find some meaning for herself, but it got her out of bed, out of the house and kept her busy while staying alongside those people who knew him best. Volunteering for the fire department is the last thing she would have ever pictured for herself prior to her loss, but once her husband was gone it became the perfect fit. She tells me all the time that the fire department she works with has saved many people...and she considers herself one of them.

Remember – we may never get answers for all the "why's" of loss...why it happened, why now, why him/her? But we can find meaning in what comes next by creating meaning and finding purpose in our lives.



Nurturing Hope in Difficult Times

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.,

Published at CenterforLoss.com

"Hope is the pillar that holds up the world." —Pliny the Elder

The caller to the Center for Loss asked a question that is on the hearts of many right now: "Are we going to get through this?"

It became obvious as the conversation continued that she was experiencing feelings of grief and in search of borrowing some much-needed hope. As I hung up the phone after 20 minutes, I found myself yearning to write about hope, because, especially during difficult times like these, it is indeed the pillar that holds up the world.

As director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, I advocate for our human need to acknowledge and embrace our darker emotions. Our culture usually isn't so good at honoring loss and supporting others who are grieving, even though they are essential parts of our lives. Instead, to our detriment, we tend to focus almost exclusively on the happy and the distracting and the fun.

It's a question of balance. We need both, you see. We need to honor the light and the dark, the happy and the sad—and everything in between—because all of it belongs. All of it is authentic. And whatever is authentic is normal and necessary.

Usually we're out of balance because we choose to shine our awareness only on the "good stuff." But right now, in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic, we're at risk for the balance tipping too far the other way, in the direction of fear and despair.

Yes, in difficult times, we must remember to hope.

What is hope? It's an expectation of a good that is yet to be. It is an inner knowing that the future holds positive things. It is trust that no matter the current circumstances, the days to come will reveal happiness. It's forward-looking—yet experienced in the now.

Like mourning, nurturing hope is active. It's something we can do. Let's look at what we can do to embrace hope even as we are experiencing the many losses caused by this pandemic.

Practice mindfulness

As I write this, most of us in North America are sheltering in place. Though our normal lives have been completely disrupted and we may be experiencing very real personal losses (sick friends and family members, financial jeopardy, lost connections with loved ones, to name just a few), many of us are also, in this moment, safe and comfortable.

Practicing mindfulness means learning to be present to our immediate surroundings right now. As I write this, the sun peeks out from billowy clouds in a denim-blue sky. I see spring crocuses blooming. My dogs sleep at my feet. Whenever I am mindful of the present moment, I find gratitude, and gratitude helps me access hope, which we might think of as gratitude for what is to come.

Being mindful in the now also helps me build relationships with the people I care about. In the now I can share quality time with my wife, and even though I can't visit them in person, I can also spend time each day on video calls with my children and friends. The more I can use this time to strengthen relationships with my dear ones, the more hope I will have for the future gatherings we will share.

Relinquish the illusion of control

There's a fine line between a) informing ourselves about the pandemic and steps we can take to keep ourselves and others safe, and b) overconsuming information (and misinformation), causing undue stress and even despair.

In this information age, we have limitless content at our fingertips. We could read, watch, and listen to new information about COVID-19 for many hours a day and still never be "caught up." It makes sense that we might be tempted to overconsume information in an effort to feel in control of what

is happening. The trouble is, we as individuals can't control this epidemic, and we can't even fully control what happens to us and our loved ones.

Relinquishing the illusion of control can lessen our anxiety and help us to build trust in our own capacity to cope with whatever happens. If we work on mindfulness, we don't have to obsess and worry. Instead, we can learn to be OK with our lack of control and trust in our own resilience. When tomorrow comes, we will handle what comes tomorrow. Today we are only responsible for today.

Build hope

If we believe that our futures will include moments of joy, love, and meaning, we already have within us that spark of hope. We can grow that spark into a flame by intentionally building hope into each day.

How do we build hope during difficult times? Here are a few ways:

- By taking part in activities we care about to the extent that we can while sheltering in place
- By engaging in spiritual practices
- By making a collage of words or pictures that symbolize hope in our mind and heart
- By intentionally imagining the futures we desire
- By making future plans that excite us and that we know we will enjoy
- By helping others
- By staying in close contact with the people we care about, ideally through video and phone calls
- By taking care of our bodies, our minds, our hearts, our social connections, and our souls

Consciously Choose Hope

Please understand that hope is not something that will just passively float into your life. Instead, hope will enter when you create ways to consciously bring it into your day. Despite these challenging times, the door you open to hope each and every day will dramatically influence the quality of your life.

Consciously choosing hope means deliberately focusing on it—paying attention to it, inviting it into a given moment, and letting yourself feel it as it enters. Be creative with how you give attention to hope and invite it in. Moment by moment, choose hope over fear. Choose hope instead of despair. If you start feeling hopeless, act with intention to bring hope to that moment.

If hope feels out of reach right now, consider borrowing a little to get you through. When you cannot muster the energy to cultivate it yourself, it's possible to receive hope from others. It's appropriate in times like these to turn to people who have hope to lend.

How do you know someone is hope-filled? Look for friends and family members who have a hopeful outlook on life. They are people who have a positive energy when they are in your presence, and they make you smile when you simply hear their voice. They are also usually caring, nonjudgmental listeners. The energy they radiate can anchor you right now. Remember—hope is a renewable resource. Borrow it now, and know that in the future, when the time is right, you can pay it forward to someone else in need.

In the words of Victor Frankl, I remind you, "Everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way." As you choose your own way during these challenging times, I invite you to nurture hope and to be grateful for your life each and every day.

