A Personal Journey through the Grief and Healing Process with Virginia Satir, Dr. E. Kubler-Ross, and J. William Worden

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Abstract

This article explores the author's personal experience undergoing the process of grief, mourning, and healing after the death of her parents. The author then integrates the works of three clinical theorists who assist those who are dying or experience grief from the loss of a loved one. She begins with Virginia Satir's Process of Change. Next, she integrates Dr. Kubler-Ross' *Five Stages of Psychological Reactions* to examine the processes that the person who is dying goes through. Finally, she offers J. William Worden's *Four Tasks of Mourning* that supports one on the journey of healing while grieving a loss.

The author states: "I am aware that I am not through the full impact of accepting their death and embracing a new way of being in the world without

them. Since their deaths, however, I have taken a new direction in the field of counseling. I no longer am pursuing marriage and family therapy, but focusing on grief and loss. My spiritual beliefs about the world and about people have both deepened because of my search for answers around the meaning of life and death."

My Experiences with Loss and Grief

Four years ago this March my father died of cancer. Three years ago this March my mother died of cancer. The emotions I experienced were intense and ranged from numbness to anger to sadness to relief – sometimes all within moments of each other. The full range of emotions left me confused and at times frightened. I thought there would never be an end to the internal chaos I lived in and wondered how I was functioning in the world around me.

Along with the death of my parents these past four years were the death of my grandchild through miscarriage, the death of friends and other family, the loss of a daughter-in-law due to divorce, and the loss of a cherished lifestyle due to my husband's back surgery and disabilities. For the purpose of this paper, I will only be referring to the deaths of my parents when exploring the process of grief and healing, but I want to acknowledge that I have experienced multiple losses that together have impacted my life and changed who I am. Not only has it been a long four years of loss but it has also been a journey of healing through learning and self reflection.

Before the deaths of my parents, the Status Quo I lived in was comfortable. I had a good relationship with both of my parents and saw them on a regular basis. They lived in the country on ten acres in a house they built themselves. I lived on their property for a year when my daughter was a year old. I have many wonderful connections to and memories of "the hill." This pre-grief state was familiar and comfortable.

When my father died of cancer. my whole family system was put into chaos. He died just four weeks after his diagnosis. The cancer was the foreign element that shattered my mother's world and

put mine into a spiral of chaos. My sister and brothers quit speaking to me because my father had asked me to be the one to help my mother make decisions – even decisions about how he was to die. I am still haunted at times by the button I pushed hour after hour to give him morphine. The button was another foreign element in the midst of death. After he died my denial was strong, even though I was by his side when he died. I just could not believe he was gone. Staying in denial helped me to care for my mother the year after he was gone. The denial for me was not so much the denial that he was gone as much as it was a denial of my own feelings and grief. It was far easier to take charge and help than it was to fall apart and not be able to cope.

I didn't have the opportunity to work through the denial after the death of my father that first year. This should have been the time for me to explore the impact of his death on my life and begin the transformation from grief and loss to a new life without him. It was not to be. My siblings were no longer speaking to me and my mother was depressed and she wished herself dead in order to be with my father. She got her wish a year after my father's death when she too died of cancer. I was with her throughout her diagnosis and the three weeks following that led up to her death. Her denial was strong. We talked about death only once and she acknowledged that maybe she really did want to be with my father. I believe that she bargained with God because her faith was strong and she kept holding out some kind of invisible hope. I saw her depression the few days before her death. She spoke of past losses and lost dreams. She talked about her father who had died when she was younger. She didn't laugh as much and the sadness in her eyes was deep. The last night before she died she began to experience peace. I walked in to her hospital room to find a hose running through her nose and down to her stomach, but she looked beautiful. She seemed to glow from some kind of deep, inner peace. I was astonished to see her glow and commented to people around her about how beautiful she looked. I was greeted with disbelief from them, but I received a smile and a final kiss from my mother. I believe she was accepting

her death and was finally at peace. She was at peace and I was beginning the long, painful road of healing.

Satir's Work: an Overview of the Process of Change

Virginia Satir believed that change is natural and experienced consistently throughout our life time. To better understand change she developed six stages that people go through when experiencing   change. These stages are:

(1) Status Quo

(2) Introduction of a Foreign Element

(3) Chaos

(4) Integration

(5) Practice and

(6) New Status Quo.

Dr. John Banmen, who worked closely with Satir, had further developed her model after her death and added a seventh stage, "Transformation after Chaos." (Sayles, 2002).

Satir believed that change provided an opportunity for growth if the people embraced the possibilities within the change. When a foreign element enters people's lives there is chaos. The foreign element can be either a positive or a negative element, both resulting in some kind of change internally or externally. The stage of chaos challenges people at their core level of beliefs, expectations, feelings, and yearnings. When given the opportunity to acknowledge these deep aspects of the self, people can live more congruently and make new choices about the change that is going on around them. (Satir, Banmen, Gerber & Gamori, 1991) When people explore changes through their true self and not through the expectations and rules of others, change can happen. Feelings no longer have to be pushed down, unspoken yearnings can be spoken, beliefs and family rules can be challenged and reframed into more positive outlooks. Expectations about oneself and others can be transformed into

appreciation for what is possible instead of what is expected. Change then becomes integrated into people's lives and they can emotionally move forward in life with an acceptance of what has changed.

The following stages in Satir's Process of Change are here looked at through the lens of grief and loss:

1. Status Quo: A pre-grief state where established perceptions, expectations, and rules keep the family or individual in balance. The rules that keep this balance are both spoken and unspoken and come from individuals' family of origins, cultural, and societal beliefs and expectations.

2. Foreign Element: A part of the process of change where an influence from outside of the family system, such as a death, enters and disrupts the status quo. The change within the system due to a death challenges the established rules that have held the individual or family system in balance. The person moves into emotional chaos at all levels of the self.

3. Chaos: A state of confusion and mixed feelings due to an outside foreign element (death) that has disrupted the family system and the individual's internal world of perceptions, expectations, and yearnings. The familiar family rules and the once stable system are now challenged to interact differently; the result being intense emotions and confusion. The outcome of the impact is unknown during this time of confusion and new possibilities are not apparent to the family or individuals within the system.

4. Transformation: A transformational change is an internal shift in an individual's basic beliefs or understandings about themselves in relationship to a loss. Transformation within the change process, using the Satir model, is based on connecting people at the level of their yearnings, expectations, perceptions, and feelings (Satir, Banmen, Gerber, & Gamori,1991). The process of transforming old beliefs into new ones involves the person acknowledging and feeling emotions connected with these beliefs at a very deep

level and then getting in touch with the internal resources needed to validate and accept these newly discovered thoughts and feelings. This acknowledgement can be done through friendships, other family members, grief counsellors, therapists, or anyone willing to listen to and accept the person's experience of their loss.

5. Integration: The full awareness of what has changed is understood and felt. The family system or the individual now begins the process of making decisions about how to live life differently and then undertaking the task of practicing this new life. How this is received and reinforced by others will have either a positive or a negative impact on the family's or individual's ability to fully integrate the new beliefs about the impact of their loss.

6. Practice: The individual begins to practice the new beliefs and tries out new ways to live based upon the new decisions that have been made about the change. When the death of someone close has occurred, the individual must practice not only living life without someone, but living life as someone different themselves. This stage of practice takes time.

7. New Status Quo: The individual has accepted that the change (a death) has taken place, and has integrated this change into their internal world. They now living life differently based upon the new beliefs about these changes. Life is different at many levels for the family and the individual as new perceptions, expectations, and yearnings are experienced and the new status quo is lived. The context of life has changed at both an internal and an external level.

Although these stages are listed in order, the individual experiencing the death of someone may stay in Chaos for long periods of time and move into the other stages to try them out. Often, the pain of loss and all of the changes associated with the loss are so great that the individual continues to long to go back to the original status quo and may attempt to put life back in some kind of order as

it was before the death. The person finds it impossible to go back to the way things were. The context of their outside world has changed and the context of their internal world has changed. There are no choices about bringing the person back to life and no matter how much the person longs to be reconnected with the person who has died, the old status quo cannot be rebuilt. The individual is engulfed in chaos over and over again until there is a final acceptance that death has occurred. It is only when there is acceptance that the individual can move into transformation and begin to rebuild life in a new way.

Kubler-Ross' Five Stages of Psychological Reactions to Death

Dr. Kubler-Ross developed five stages the dying person goes through if given enough time before death. Her stages came from years of interacting with patients and their families who are going through the dying process. These stages are not gone through sequentially but rather experienced in a random order, depending upon what the dying person is struggling with in order to find a way to go on living while dying. (Kubler-Ross 1969)

1. Denial: Rejecting the news of impending death in order to pursue life
2. Anger: The emotions ranging from envy, anger, rage, and resentment about the realty that death is approaching.
3. Bargaining: An attempt to postpone death by making some kind of promise in exchange for more time to live.
4. Depression: When death can no longer be denied and the realization of what lies ahead is acknowledged.
5. Acceptance: Feelings have been expressed, bargaining is over, denial no longer offers the opportunity to pursue life, and so the dying person comes to a quiet resolve that the struggle is over and life is coming to an end. The dying person begins to detach from relationships and seeks quiet solitude while waiting for their life to end.

Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning:

     J. William Worden believes that people who are grieving the loss of someone can take an active role in their mourning. Unlike phases where people passively await for the next phase to arrive, Worden's tasks are undertaken intentionally and healing is pursued. Worden believes that "it is essential that the grieving person accomplish these tasks before mourning can be completed" (Worden, 2002). Without the completion of these tasks the person can become stuck in their mourning and develop physical, emotional, and mental problems. Often the mourner does not recognize that unfinished grief is at the core of their problems. Like Kubler-Ross' stages, Worden's tasks are not necessarily gone through in sequential order (Worden, 2002).

1. Accept the Reality of the Loss: It is important in this first task to put denial down and begin to look at the reality of what has happened. When denial can no longer be used to negate the feelings of loss, the task of accepting the loss must be faced. "Coming to an acceptance of the reality of the loss takes time since it involves not only an intellectual acceptance but also an emotional one" (Worden, 2002). It takes time to fully accept the loss and each person undertakes this task differently, depending upon their traditions, beliefs, and the support of others.

2. Working Through the Pain of Grief: This can be a difficult task to work through depending upon the societal beliefs in which the person is surrounded and internalized. The pain of fully recognizing the loss of someone can be intense and often others do not know what to do when someone is expressing their painful feelings. It is important in working through this task that the grieving person can find an accepting person with whom they can share their painful feelings. If this task is not completed the person may carry these painful feelings with them throughout life.

3. To Adjust to and Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing: This task is undertaken at three different levels for the person mourning.

    a) External adjustments: How the death affects the everyday functioning in the world. New tasks and responsibilities may have to be learned by the person mourning. What was once done by someone else is now the responsibility of the person left behind.

    b) Internal adjustments: How the death affects one's sense of self. The mourning person is thus challenged to develop a new sense of self without the identity of the person they lost. They must now look at their own life without the attachment to the other person. This task can be difficult for people who have based their identity on the person who has died. In order to complete this task the mourning person must now re-define who they are and take control of their own world without the help of the loved one.

    c) Spiritual adjustments: How the death affects one's beliefs, values, and assumptions about the world. "The bereaved person searches for meaning in the loss and its attendant life changes in order to make sense of it and to regain some control of his or her life" (Worden, 2002). Once the mourning person finds meaning in the loss, it becomes easier to complete the task of adjusting to life without their loved one.

4. To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on With Life: This task involves finding a way to stay connected to the deceased in a way that allows the person to go on living in a healthy way. If people do not accept the death and continue to hold on to the relationship in the same way they did before the person died, they do not allow the completion of this task. A new relationship

with the deceased must be formed in a way that allows the person to acknowledge their history together, their continued love for the person, and their memories of the loved one.

Satir and Kubler-Ross

Satir's work and Kubler-Ross' work can easily be integrated together when working with someone who is going through the process of dying. Satir and Kubler-Ross' work both explain the psychological process that a dying person can go through if given enough time after being faced with death. I will look at Kubler-Ross' Five Stages and use my parents' deaths to illustrate the similarities between Kubler-Ross' work and Satir's work.

Kubler-Ross' Five Stages

1. Denial: Denial kept both of my parents moving forward through the few weeks they had left after their diagnosis of cancer. The use of denial kept my parents in the status quo they were familiar with. There wasn't time for either of my parents to fully grasp the depth of their illnesses. Without denial to keep them in the status quo of what they knew I don't believe they could have gotten through their last days with any enjoyment. Both of my parents were talking, laughing, and enjoying life as much as they could up until the reality of what was happening to them could no longer be denied. The Foreign Element of illness and the possibility of death put my parents into emotional chaos. Their various beliefs- about their health, their expectations that the doctors could heal them, and their perceptions about themselves as being able to live longer- were all challenged.

2. Anger: I saw my parents' anger on the occasions that they could no longer hold on to denial. The emotional Chaos was clear. My father became moody and demanding. A year later, when my mother was dying, I saw her frustrated and short tempered. The emotional

pain was seen clearly in their eyes.

3. Bargaining: Bargaining is most often done alone between the dying person and their God. Since both of my parents were strong in their religion, I quite believe that they tried to bargain for more time. In Satir's process of change, bargaining can be seen as an attempt to move back to the status quo. More time would have meant my parents would have been able to continue living the life they has built over the past fifty years together.

4. Depression: This is another emotion felt in Chaos. I didn't see my father's depression because I was not able to spend as much time with him the few weeks leading up to his death. I did see it in my mother. She became quiet and withdrawn, often crying and talking about how she couldn't go on living anymore, while at the same time looking to the doctors for answers of healing. Her internal chaos was clear to me, but very confusing to her. She talked and I listened to whatever was on her mind. No longer held by the rules of her religion or the rules of how to be a "proper military wife" she talked more openly and honestly than I had ever heard her before. I believe this helped her to finally move into transformation and acceptance when it was time.

5. Acceptance: Kuber-Ross places the final process of dying into a single stage. Once the dying person accepts death, the person begins to detach from the world. Satir's process breaks this stage down into three different stages: transformation, integration, and practice. Transformation took place for my parents during the last 24 hours of their lives when they were in hospital beds and no longer able to deny that they were going to get better. This transformation became obvious to me when both my father and my mother began talking about close family members that had died before them. My father spoke to us for the first time about his brother's suicide. My mother talked about how much I would have loved her

father had he lived longer. By their openly speaking about thoughts they had never spoken to me before, it told me they knew their death was coming. This transformation was quickly integrated into their experience of dying. They no loner had to pretend that they were going to get better. They understood they were going to die and they were at peace being with just their children around them. They were practicing a new way of being in relationship with us. They no longer spoke of things in the past, but just lay in our presence while they died.

These final stages of acceptance/transformation/integration/ practice came almost at once for my parents. There was little time for them to process what was going on, because the time between their diagnosis and death was but a few weeks; however, I do believe they both came to a deep understanding and acceptance of their deaths.

Satir and Worden

Worden and Satir are similar in that they both believe that people can make choices about their lives that lead to growth and fulfillment. Worden does not believe that the mourning process has to be passive, but rather a process in which people can actively engage in the mourning process to heal from the loss. Satir also believes that people can engage in their own process to make choices about change and heal what has been wounded. Satir worked with people's unfinished business and the impact that it had on the person in their present life. Worden and Satir both believed that if people heal present losses that they will better be able to move forward in their growth and development. I will now describe the similarities between Worden's "Four Tasks of Mourning" and "Satir's Process of Change."

Worden's Four Tasks of Mourning

1. Accept the Reality of the Loss: In Satir's Process of Change this acceptance comes after the person can no

longer stay in denial to try deal with their loss. The mourning person is in confusion trying to figure out what to do without the deceased person. It was not until the death of my mother that I began the process of accepting of the reality of both of my parents' deaths. I reasoned in my head that because I watched them die that I would not be able to deny their deaths. I was surprised to find myself in denial time and time again. Many times I picked up the phone to call them and at times I thought about inviting them to an event. I was constantly searching for what was lost – I was in complete denial at one level, but clear on another level that they were gone. It wasn't until this denial let up before I could begin to accept their deaths. It was then that the emotions flooded in and I found myself engulfed in chaos.

2. To Work Through the Pain of Grief: Getting through the painful emotions connected with my loss helped me accept that my parents were really gone. I talked to my husband, I wrote in my journal, I cried, I cried some more, I talked to my parents, I talked to my sister, I talked to myself – all in an attempt to figure out what life would be like by accepting their deaths. I moved between occasional denial and occasional understanding. I was constantly confused. I lost things, I forgot things, I couldn't track conversations, and I moved through my day without feeling. I was numb sometimes and at other times so full of pain that I wondered why others didn't see it. As each day passed I worked to understand the pain of loss and longed to move forward. In Satir's Process of Change this would be the stage of chaos because of the constant confusion of emotions that I lived in.

3. To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing:
The Adjustment tasks are found in the integration and practice of Satir's Process of Change. After accepting the

loss and working through the emotional pain in chaos, the adjustment to life comes by practicing new ways of living and perceiving the world.

    a) The external adjustment of missing my parents seemed to me the easiest of the three parts to this task. I emotionally missed the physical presence of my parents, but I did not have to learn new responsibilities in order for my life to move forward. I missed going to their home, I missed seeing them, talking to them, laughing with them – all painful feelings to the physical losses.

    b) Internal Adjustment: This was by far the most difficult for me to adjust. My connection with my parents was stronger than I realized before their deaths. I was no longer a daughter. Some people asked me what it was like to be an orphan now that both parents were gone. I wasn't sure how to answer. I no longer had my parents to tell me life was going to be "OK" when things got difficult. I had to learn to rely only on myself for these reassurances. I had to pull away from my parents as a daughter in order to begin to adjust to my new relationship with them. I missed them but I could no longer relate to them as their little girl. Adjusting to the loss meant letting go of the last of the little girl I had once been. I am now the "mom" in the family and the next in line to eventually die.

    c) Spiritual Adjustment: Searching for meaning in death and moving forward to take charge of one's life can take time. It has taken me nearly three years to make any meaning of my parent's death. I am aware that I am not through the full impact of accepting their death and embracing a new way of being in the world without them. Since their deaths, I have taken a new direction in the field of

counseling. I no longer am pursuing marriage and family therapy, but focusing on grief and loss. My spiritual beliefs about the world and people have deepened because of my search for answers around the meaning of life and death. The experience of my parents' dying was as powerful as the births of my two children and I have wondered why. It was not until I read *Love Beyond Life* by Joel Martin and Patricia Romanowski (Martin, J., 1997) that I began to believe that there is more to life than birth and living each day on earth. My spiritual life is growing and flourishing in a way that would not have happened if my parents were still alive. I can now appreciate their lives and deaths more through the work that I did in the task of adjusting.

d) To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on With Life: How long it takes to get through this task depends upon the relationship between the deceased and the person still living. In the case of my mother, she was never able to work on this task when my father died. Her identity was too intertwined with his to be able to move on with life. I don't believe that had she lived, she would ever have been able to complete this task. I have been able to move forward because I have a separate life and identity away from my parents. I have actively sought out opportunities to reconnect with the world around me. This continues to be a challenge, but one that I am not afraid to engage in. This is the stage of the New Status Quo in Satir's Process of Change. I have accepted the death of my parents and I am adjusting to this new acceptance. I have a different relationship with them now. I can talk to them and think about them and smile. I am living

my life without them being physically here, but they are with me now in a different way. I'm not fully aware of what my relationship is with them yet. I am still healing and learning.

Summary

There are similarities between the work of Satir, Kubler-Ross, and Worden that can be used to help people work through the painful journey of loss. Kubler-Ross' work helps people understand their own death process, Worden helps people focus on tasks to work through when mourning. Satir presents the entire process of change as a way to help people understand that loss is a process that involves grieving what was and moving into integrating what life is now because of the loss. The Process of Change gives hope and possibilities to those moving through a loss to know that at the end of their grief work will be a new Status Quo - a new life full of opportunities waiting to be embraced.

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