

Grief (4 of 5) Rituals for Grief

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Grief is the topic for this week. Grief is something that should be respected.

There are many messages that we get from society: we should get over grief quickly; we should heal grief; we should somehow not have it and be free of it. I don't think that gives grief respect. Part of respecting grief is to not assume you know what is supposed to happen with it. Give it its due, its time, and be present for it. The greater the grief, the more it speaks to something central and important in our hearts, and in the depths of our being. It then becomes even more important to respect it.

Don't dismiss your grief even if it is much bigger than someone else's grief who is going through the same thing. Hold it carefully. Maybe it doesn't need to be

shared with people who are experiencing it differently. Respect your own experience.

Understanding that grief has to do with more things than meets the eye is a way to respect our grief. Be consciously aware of the feelings, the stories, the meanings, and the impact that the grief or loss has had. It has more roots and elements in our subconscious, and in the parts of our minds and hearts we don't regularly see. We are caring for the unseen within us as well. Grief touches ancient griefs we have had in unknown ways. It reignites or associates with them in some way or another.

One of the great modes of engaging with this larger field, larger ecology of ourselves beyond what we consciously think and know is to do rituals. Many religions have rituals. Some people don't like rituals because they seem like empty gestures, steps, and words that are just kind of done superficially. There is not any sincerity or authenticity to it. But in fact, rituals can be a kind of language expressing and speaking the language of the deep mind – the language of the deep heart. To say something in a ritualistic manner sometimes has a bigger impact.

For example, I meet with a friend and they do something nice and wonderful. Perhaps as a way of acknowledging it, I just kind of wave my hand and say,

“Well, that was nice.” Then we move on as if it was not a big thing.

But what if I make a little ritual around this? I tell my friend, “Wow, that was really nice.” I stop and say, “Wow, that was really good. I appreciated that.” I offer my presence and my attention to say it rather than saying it as an aside. It speaks to something deeper and fuller in me than saying something as an aside.

So a ritual is a way of saying something more fully – engaging, feeling, and participating in whatever is going on more fully. The more powerful the grief is, the more helpful or useful it can be to engage in a ritual.

There are many kinds of rituals to be done. Some grief rituals are funerals and memorial services. Some of the steps of a ritual can be done with writing. Some people like to journal. I am going to offer you five possible steps for a grief ritual. It could also be possible steps to journaling about grief.

In a ritual, it is often nice to find a space, a place, and a time that is appropriate for you – that is nice for you. Some rituals are done alone and are best done alone. You want to create a space and a time. If you are grieving the loss of something, bring an object that represents that grief or loss – a stone or a flower or something. If it is a person, maybe bring a picture. Then

engage in sitting and being with the object that represents the grief. Go through these different steps on different days.

One idea or suggestion might be to use five stones, one for each of the five steps in the ritual. Holding a stone and talking to the stone sometimes allows for something deeper to happen. I will sometimes talk out loud to myself when I am processing something really difficult. I find that talking out loud touches or evokes something very different for me than if I am just thinking about it and reviewing it in my mind. Talking to the stone might seem like a strange thing to do, but it is a means of giving some focus to what is being done in the ritual.

First write down, speak out loud or reflect on the impact the loss has had on you. The impact is different from the story. The impact is the impact of the event. You might want to review and talk a little bit about the event of the loss – not the story of what the loss means in your life and all its aspects, but what is the event? And then what was the impact of that particular event? You will get a chance later in this ritual to talk about the bigger impact it has had on you. When you first heard about it, what was that like for you? Write about this. Speak out loud about it. Reflect and think a little bit about it.

The next thing in the ritual is to say a little bit about the story. What is the bigger story of the loss? How does it fit into the story of your life? What are the different stories? What does the story have to do with different aspects of your life – your relational life, your personal life, your finances? How does it relate to your childhood? How does it relate to your sense of meaning and purpose, to your identity? Start telling the stories in different and creative ways.

There are two interesting ways to talk about how the bigger story of this fits into your life. Talk about the gifts that you received from what or whoever was lost. What are the positive aspects of it? Review the gifts. What are the gifts from the person who has died? What are the wonderful things that you remember? And then also what has been lost. Many things are lost, not just losing the person who has died but losing many of the things associated with that person. So the story of the losses acknowledges it in a fuller, more complete way.

Maybe use a different stone for the next step. This represents the feelings and emotions connected to grief. Begin unpacking all the different collections of emotions. It is surprising that sometimes with grief there are emotions that come along that others don't accept as appropriate. Sometimes it is the strong grieving and crying that other people have trouble with. Sometimes grief comes along with anger, and it seems

inappropriate to be angry. All emotions should be allowed. That is why a ritual that is safe and contained can allow you to bring forth whatever is happening. You don't have to feel held in check by the social messages of how grief is supposed to be.

There might be sadness, grief, laughter, joy, delight, and gratitude. Make room for many, many things. Assume there are many emotions and many feelings connected to a big loss. Have that stone or a journal to write in to try to bring forth all the emotions and feelings. What else is here? What else is here?

The next step of a ritual might be to express to a different stone or the same stone – gratitude. What is the gratitude you have for what it is you have lost? What gratitude remains after the loss? What gratitude would you like there to be? Maybe after the grief is somewhat faded, or if you ever imagine the grief ending – what would be the gratitude that you want to keep, stay with, and remember?

What is your aspiration for how to live your life after this grief? The bigger the grief, the more valuable it is to consider how this person's life, this event, or this thing that you lost will inspire you to live differently. How do you want to be changed in a beneficial way? To be changed beneficially by loss is a way of giving the loss a different meaning.

Sometimes terrible things happen to us. People go through war and horrible things happen. They lose their homes, their country, and all kinds of things. For that to only be experienced as negative does a disservice to the depth from which the grief is coming. Some of the things to ask are how you want to be changed for the better from this. Don't ask this at the beginning of the grief or the first time you do a ritual. This might be months down the line, but do ask, how do you want to be changed?

This last step is to liberate the holding – to release the way that you are holding on to the grief, the person, the event, the thing, and the attachment you have to it. It is not the same thing as giving up or letting go of the person or the thing. At some point when you are ready, you want to let go of the holding you have.

This is where you take a stone that you have had in the ritual and you might bury it someplace. I have thrown stones that have been part of this kind of ritual into the ocean or a lake. You are representing – the ritual is representing – letting go, being done with, or leaving behind the loss. I like the idea that the ocean knows how to be with the grief, and knows how to be with the holding. I am offering it something that it can hold and be with respectfully.

So my suggestion is to engage in a conscious process of full acknowledgment, full presence, and full expression of what your grief is about and what is going on for you. It is a ritual that can be done very well alone, or with a trusted friend, or a spiritual teacher. Hopefully, you will experience this as a deep way of respecting the value and importance of grief in our life.

So thank you for this. We have one more day, and we'll see what I talk about tomorrow. It is a huge, huge topic. I can't cover everything, so I am kind of talking about what is in my heart and my mind. Hopefully, that is appropriate for you.