

Feel Better in the Mourning

Chapter Thirteen: Tough Times (Abridged Version)

~ We Want Relief and We Want it NOW! ~

Every day and every moment after someone has died can feel like a tough time. Day may blend into night and it all feels dark, difficult and dreadful. Your sense of humor may have vanished; the ability to have fun or enjoy life may have temporarily disappeared. That recurring question, "What can I do to get some relief from this sadness?" may remain as well. These tough times stink.

Whether a result of the passage of time or other actions taken (or not taken, in some cases), there usually comes a moment when we start to experience some relief. You may want to throw things at me and call me a liar but your misery really is likely to get downgraded from full-time to part-time status at some point. There is no magical number indicating how many years, months or weeks this might take. It varies from one person to the next, and is influenced by factors such as how the person died, the significance of the deceased to you, and the quality of that relationship at the time of death, to name a few. Some people start to feel better in three months and others remain quite miserable for several months to several years. It is also possible to feel better and then after some period of time, take a turn for the worse again.

The factor that seems most consistently central in determining how long these sad and upset times last is your attitude. It can be an incredible challenge to embrace this loss, and your grief, as if it were an intriguing mansion that might even be haunted, with many rooms, closets, hallways, and secret hideaways to explore.

We're not all Harry Potter. He uses a delightful mix of curiosity, naiveté, and courage to navigate dark passages that would send many of us running for safe cover. Sometimes Harry's investigations get him into trouble or endanger his wellbeing; the risks can be dramatic and daunting. Harry Potter persists. He seeks truth, he seeks answers, and that which is revealed to him during his adventures is always important in his growth. It is no accident that he is assigned the position of Seeker in the captivating game of Quidditch. By encouraging you to be a seeker in a "game" that may feel more like Russian Roulette, I don't mean to suggest that this is simple. It can actually be downright perilous. Harry almost always had his two trusted friends, Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger as constant companions and cheerleaders. I have faith that your tough times will decrease. Do you? If you don't, try pondering some of these questions:

- Why don't I have faith that things will get better?
- Can I identify any attachment, odd as it might seem, to being overcome with grief?
- How might I cultivate my faith (not to be confused with religious faith, but the two may be inter-related)?
- Who might be a companion or cheerleader for me as I do this seeking?

- If I focus less on "when will I start feeling better" (the future) and more on "how am I feeling and what am I thinking right now" (the present), what might happen?
- Can I make this declaration? "I want to feel better and I am open to whatever timetable is in store for me to arrive at this desired destination."
- Do my behaviors and actions match up with my intention of feeling better?

When kids get injured or have an upset, the fairly primitive response is "Make it better NOW!" Parents and caregivers scramble to make it better NOW because they want that suffering to end as soon as possible. When we are mourning, it's as if we regress to that child-like state and hold high hopes that someone or something will make it better NOW. No such wizardry exists for this much more complex "Ow-y," as children often call it, called grief. It makes complete sense that we'd seek that immediate fix; what doesn't make sense is to expect that there will be one! There is no Band-Aid that can permanently stop your crying or longing. The frustrating truth is that relief will come when it comes, and no sooner.

~ Clearing Up The Congestion ~

What happens when you get a really bad cold? Nasal congestion is a major annoyance. Like grief, this symptom clears up on its own schedule. You may or may not be able to influence that schedule by getting extra rest, drinking lots of liquids, using a vaporizer, taking Vitamin C or using decongestants. Rarely is there a spontaneous healing where you are stuffed-up one moment, then breathing clearly the next without any threat of subsequent congestion. Keep this in mind as you try to get relief from the tough times your grief has brought.

As grief loosens its stranglehold on our emotions and outlook, tough times may become less frequent or oppressive but they still occur. Have you ever had a relapse? Just when you thought your cold was clearing up, you find yourself back in bed with all of the same annoying symptoms. Sometimes you even feel worse. Likewise, our deep mourning may return with a vengeance at both predictable and unpredictable times.

When can you predict a "relapse?" Christmas, Hannukah, or Kwanzaa the first year, or any subsequent year, after someone dies. The dreaded death anniversary ... particularly the first. Birthdays, holidays, subsequent funerals, graduations and weddings. These events on the calendar, which may be expected and anticipated with angst, evoke a flare-up of feelings ... particularly sadness. A dear friend, who lost her mother, father, a close friend, a colleague, and a brother within a five year span, once told me that she would like to go to sleep just before Thanksgiving and not wake up until the day after St. Valentine's Day. She knew she was in for some rough moments and wished she could hibernate to avoid them.

~ Be Prepared ~

What are the dates that you dread? Would you rather not think about this? If you are in your first year of grieving, every day may be so dreadful that it is hard to imagine one future day could be any worse than another. If your tough times have already become less permanent,

- How useful would it be to set aside a small amount of private time to commemorate this day with (the person who has died)?
- How can those of us who are gathering for this day acknowledge both the presence and absence of (the person who has died)?
- What kind of additional emotional support do I need as this day nears?

~ **Questions Without Answers?** ~

You needn't treat these questions like an essay test that must be turned in to a teacher in order to pass "the course." If you feel like journaling, let these questions be your springboard into a thoughtful exploration of what may lie ahead. These questions may raise even more questions for you. Try not to be overwhelmed by this; they may be the more important ones to be addressed. If this inquiry helps you prepare, in your own unique fashion, it has served its purpose. Design a ritual or remembrance that suits you. Hopefully, it will make the dreaded day less painful.

~ **There Is More Good News** ~

Being prepared can yield unexpected results. Sometimes, the outcome is much less difficult than you might have predicted. Hearing this good news, you might ask, "Well then why bother doing all of that dreading and preparing?" Because it is often this apprehensive and conscious anticipation that makes these rough days a little bit less difficult. Clients who have thought they were over their grief have found themselves in my office, days after a significant occasion, saying things like "I wish I hadn't been so cavalier in thinking that his birthday wouldn't affect me," or "This one took me completely by surprise and it slammed me." From those who have tried to prepare for trying times, I've heard things like "It was so much easier than I had expected," or "I actually had a really good day, even though part of it was sad." May you be pleasantly surprised by the fruits of your conscious planning!

~ **Could I Take a Holiday From the Holidays?** ~

This chapter could run the length of a book if each of the anticipated Difficult Days were addressed but dread of the holiday season in December is pretty universal. While the rest of the world seems to celebrate a joyous event spent with dear ones, there is an insidious undercurrent of grief, made obvious by someone's absence, that pulls us down into a sea of emotions. It is daunting to stay afloat or tread water especially when others seem to be frolicking in the surf like it's a carefree, sunny day in July. Ironically, it happens to be the darkest time of our seasons, and your mood may be similar. Walk into a party or celebration with its decorations and festive lights, and you might feel as out-of-sync as a clown would feel in a morgue. If the holidays were a difficult time when the deceased was still alive, this death may compound the misery.

Some people say they "can't pull off this charade," which occurs when the inner doesn't match the outer. If you are miserable on the inside while on the outside, you're still going through the motions to decorate a Christmas tree, light the candles on the Menorrah or purchase a bottle of champagne to uncork at midnight on New Year's Eve, it might feel like a charade. Furthermore, there is societal pressure to have a cheery or upbeat disposition for holiday times. This creates immense dissonance when what you feel inside is sorrow or despair.

You don't have to do this charade if it is tearing you up inside, or if it just doesn't feel right. I've known people who have "cancelled" Christmas for a year. Others have taken a trip to another part of the world where those special holidays hold much less significance. You do not have to do what you don't want to do, unless doing it feels necessary to your ongoing healing.

You are very likely to encounter resistance. Others will insist that you carry on with "the tradition," whatever that may be, despite the fact that someone very significant is gone. You'll hear things like, "What do you mean, you're not coming home?" or "I can't believe you wouldn't want to be with us on such a special day," or "Don't you think (the person who has died) would expect you to pull it together and show up for the rest of your family?" Others will not understand what you are doing; you may even be accused of avoiding the inevitable. It can be incredibly disquieting to sift through other people's feedback and opinions and listen to the wisest voice of all: the one inside you. Trust that what your insides are telling you to do in any given year is more than likely what's right for the situation. If it's not right, guess what? You'll get to craft a different plan 364 days later!

~ One Year Later ~

Unless you were a child when you first lost someone, the word "anniversary" was usually preceded by the word "Happy." Your parents or your grandparents had one day every year when they would remember a ceremony that solidified their union and celebrated their love. Most of us learned that anniversaries were good times. And then someone dear to you dies. One year later, a different kind of anniversary takes place. Coincidentally, there is a misguided expectation that most grievors will feel better by the one year anniversary of a death. This supposed "wisdom" offered up by others sets up an internal "should" voice telling you things like "You should be feeling better," or "You should be over this by now," or "You shouldn't still be crying." These expectations are both unnecessary and counterproductive.

~ Devising a Plan ~

Most people report that the first anniversary of death was the hardest, but this may not be true for you. I've heard stories about the first, second, and on through the eighth, ninth and tenth anniversaries being painless and then Wham!, something happens, someone else dies, or a new awareness arises such that the eleventh anniversary is as hard, if not worse than another person's first.

Many variables contribute to how the anniversary of a death will impact you. For example, if you were present when someone died, you are more likely to have a tough time on the anniversary of that death than someone who was miles away. You're more likely to struggle

one, two or five years later if the person who died was a close family member or partner. Even these illustrations, however, have their exceptions!

More often than not, the only advantageous edge you can give yourself is to . . . be prepared. Just giving yourself the time and space to think of some options is a precious gift you can give yourself.

~ When You Least Expect It ~

Carrying a First Aid Kit on a backpack trip helps you prepare for most injuries or illnesses that might arise while in the wilderness. What happens if you are hiking along a lovely wooded trail, enjoying yourself immensely, and all of a sudden you step on an underground bee's nest? Instantly, the serenity of the moment is lost, you have multiple bee stings, and you want to run for cover. But where can you go that the bees won't follow you? And what if it turns out that you are allergic to bee stings and are in grave danger? Your First Aid Kit may be as useless as snowshoes in the desert! This is what it can feel like when tough times of the *unexpected* variety descend upon you. Mourners have described these unanticipated moments as follows:

"I felt so vulnerable, so fragile."

"I couldn't believe it hit me so hard."

"I found myself sobbing like I did the day after he died."

"It blew me away; I felt so utterly out-of-control with my emotions."

"I thought I was done with my grief. Guess what? I was wrong."

Janet Childs, a gifted counselor at the Center for Living with Dying in San Jose, California, refers to these surprising occasions as emotional landmines. Occuring when we least expect them, they wreak havoc. If a soldier steps on a landmine placed by the opposition, forward movement is prevented and major injuries can be crippling, if not fatal. If we "step" on an emotional landmine, our forward movement may be prevented, too. While not physically injured, we may feel crippled by the powerful surge of feelings or memories that emerge. The temporary "disability" can range from momentary to lasting, upsetting to devastating, and sweet to bitter. That which triggers the unpredictable reaction can be surprising, too.

~ Identifying the Triggers ~

What is it that has set you off recently? Do you think you can predict what will trigger an upset in the future? For some, there are obvious items that will provoke a reaction . . . a wedding photo, a piece of jewelry, a favorite restaurant, a certain song or musician. You might be able to avoid these; you might not. Beyond the obvious, there is, quite literally, everything else. We just can't know what sight, sound, smell, taste or touch will hit a nerve or bring back a memory on any given day.

Having been raised in a household of sports fans, I follow many teams. The radio/TV announcer who provides the play-by-play account of the San Francisco Giants' baseball games is

Jon Miller. There are days when I can listen to him, or catch a glimpse of him when he's on television and absolutely nothing happens. At other times, there is a spooky resemblance between Jon Miller and my brother, Nick. Sometimes it's a particular tone of voice, a specific pronunciation of a word, the shape of his face, or the profile of his chin. Sometimes it's Jon Miller's delightful sense of humor or his obvious love of the game. Any one or a combination of these examples can deliver such an unwitting reminder of my brother that it sometimes gives me the goosebumps. Sometimes, I like it. A warmth stirs inside. Sometimes, it's just too much. I feel overcome by a hunger that no food could satisfy. There I am, sated by watching my favorite National League team play my favorite spectator sport, and yet feeling profoundly "hungry."

~ The Inevitability of Triggers ~

Triggers elicit reactions that may make you may want to flee. This is not a bad option especially if you can remember that it's not your only option. There is no way that I would flee from baseball or from Jon Miller as long as he announces the Giants' ballgames. I have learned to greet the intermittent grief responses with open arms and am not debilitated by what happens. If you are, it makes sense that you would want to find ways to control your exposure to the song, object, symbol, person ... or whatever it is that is upsetting you. Just remember that we can't always be prepared for the moments when waves of uncomfortable feelings will arise. We can only prepare for the inevitability of their uninvited appearance. Furthermore, we can build our capacity to surrender to the powerful emotions when they surface. Surrender, in this context, does not mean giving up, or giving in. Surrender means allowing a natural unfolding to occur; it is the opposite of resistance.

~ Through the Seasons ~

There is no season when we can be entirely exempt from tough times. Whether it is the dreaded days or the moody moments or both, this is just part of the process.

If you were diagnosed with diabetes, part of the process for the remainder of your life would be monitoring your insulin levels. If you "have" grief, part of *your* process is that for the rest of your life, you need a self-care package for the tough times in any season. Some of the tough times can be predicted; others can't. You can fight this truth or you can surrender to it. The choice is yours. My wish for you is that the tough times you are experiencing are not of the "24/7" variety. While they may be part of the process, it sure is helpful when relief arrives. Have faith that it will.

Feel Better Suggestions:

- ❖ There once was a memorable commercial on television that asked the viewer, "How do you spell relief?" Pretend you work for an ad agency and you've been asked to promote a product that is designed to give relief from grief. Give this product a marketable name and write a commercial or compose a memorable jingle.
- ❖ If you don't already have one, either buy or create a Book of Days. Traditionally, these are organized by month, and used to help us remember happy occasions such as

- Aunt Ruth's birthday, Mom and Dad's wedding anniversary, and your first date with your partner. To prepare for difficult days ahead, review the happy dates and ask yourself if they are going to be hard for you in the coming year. Also, add any significant dates that are unhappy anniversaries ... in particular, the date that your beloved died. This book will help you stay conscious of trying times ahead.
- ❖ Jot down whatever timelines or deadlines you have rattling around in your head. For example: "You'll feel better in one year," or "After six months, you'll want to start dating again," or "You shouldn't be crying like this; it's already been three months!" Now, compose an affirmation (or two or three) that will help you let go of unrealistic expectations (either yours or others') about when you should be experiencing relief from your tough times. Here are some examples:
 - I trust the unique timetable of my healing journey.
 - The timing of my tears and despair is absolutely perfect.
 - My heart will open to someone new when the time is right for me.
 - ❖ You are the inventor of the First Aid Kit for Emotional Landmines. You get to decide what items will be included in the Kit. You can also write an instruction manual, if you feel like it. You needn't make this a somber exercise; you might want to throw in your own flavor of humor or irony. It's up to you.
 - ❖ Go back to the brief list of questions in the Be Prepared section of this chapter (pages 3-4). Take these questions or any others that arise from them, to your journal and see what words land on the page. Try not to make this an outcome-oriented exercise. If specific ideas for a ritual of remembrance come to you, consider it a lovely bonus. Congratulate yourself for just being willing to ponder these questions.
 - ❖ You are Bart Simpson at the beginning of a new episode of FoxTV's "The Simpson's," standing at the blackboard in Ms. Crabapple's classroom. You must write one sentence (and then repeat it ad nauseum) that will encapsulate your powerlessness over unexpected emotional landmines. Feel free to compete with Bart's sarcasm or irony if you'd like.