

# **THE NEW TERRAIN OF GRIEF: EXPLORING WITH AN OPEN HEART**

*by E. Kimball (Kim) Milling*

In the days after my wife, Kay, died I literally didn't know what was happening to me. I was in shock, emotions dulled, acting mechanically. Life had a terrible disjointed quality about it. I was in disbelief. Surely this was not real.

I was in wonder and awe at who Kay had been and what she had done. I was lonely. I needed someone to cuddle with. I felt lost and didn't know what to do. I was angry with some of her friends and alternative therapists who had given her false hope of a long life and thus deprived us of the opportunity to face death together openly and realistically.

And too, I felt a strange sense of liberation for I was now free to live my life as I wished without many of the encumbrances of the past. But, then, I also felt guilt as I realized all the ways I could have loved her more. I was aggravated at her that her employment history had been erratic and she had left me in debt. I feared growing old and dying alone. In short, I was confused, bewildered, full of contradictions, and I wanted this whole sad emotional quagmire to be over with as soon as possible so that I could move on with my life.

My observation about this is that one doesn't anticipate or understand the complexity of grief emotions. Nor can one simply dispose of grief quickly by willpower. The distressing forces of grief must be faced and experienced in all of their terrible depth and fright. My lesson learned is that you don't have a choice about the emotions of grief. They come at you unpredictably, willy-nilly, with surprising force, causing you a depth of despair and anguish that must be lived through. It takes courage to walk through the valley of the shadow of death.

As I began my grief journey after Kay died, I was in new emotional and intellectual territory and I had much to learn. Basically, I discovered that I must approach the death of my beloved and my grief for her courageously and creatively – with an open heart.

## **At the Bedside**

One of my early lessons about death and dying comes from being with Kay as she approached her last days. Kay experienced the gamut of emotions dealing with her death

that were identified by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Several weeks before she died, when it seemed apparent that she could not survive the cancer, Kay stated that she didn't wish to talk much any more because, as she said, "I need to go deep inside myself." When she emerged she was amazingly serene. She had let go of her past and her future and now lived tranquilly in the present, focused on giving and receiving love from family members and friends. One of her last comments was that she didn't mind dying; her only regret was that she would not be able to see Jacob, our son, graduation from college.

Let me make an observation here: The dying are free to live in the present moment, accepting life's limitations; they are liberated from fretting about the past for it is gone and beyond their control, and they are likewise emancipated from the future for they knew that it shall not be. For me, this teaches an important lesson: We the survivors are called upon to live in like manner. The present is it! We too cannot change the past nor can we be assured of our futures. We are well advised to accept these limitations. This is a lesson from the dying for us the living.

### **Grief Work**

Even after the trauma of accepting the death of a loved one and the pain of initial grief there is more. Yes, there is more. You cannot change that a loved one has died, nor can you change the flood of uncontrolled emotions you have experienced, but you can, indeed you must, accept the fact that you have "grief work" to do. You are essentially the product of your choices. If you choose to ignore your sadness, if you move on as if nothing has happened, you are choosing to deny the power of grief and it will come back to poison your future.

The death of a loved one changes your life profoundly. It is up to you to decide how you will deal with it, how you will live from this point on. An observation: Those of us who are survivors have a responsibility to ourselves and to the memory of our loved ones. We are challenged to grieve, not only courageously, but also creatively. By that I mean that we must seize with determination and inventiveness the opportunities available to us to make life whole and good again. These possibilities will vary for each of us as we discover and explore that which heals and nurtures us.

I learned that grief work often requires the development of new skills and attitudes. For instance, I journaled about my experiences and my emotions. Often I then

shared these reflections with family members and friends, something that was unthinkable previously. I learned that I needed to hug, to have physical contact, to reach out for support, and to accept words of sympathy and invitations for fellowship. I sought guidance and companionship from others. I read numerous books on grief and I attended bereavement support groups at Hospicare. When someone asked about how I was doing, I often told them, usually to their surprise, and mine as well.

And, I learned to listen – listen to Kay in her last days, and to myself in the days after she passed away. I learned the value of paying attention to my own inner thoughts and the tugs of my heart. To use current parlance, I strove to live mindfully. As is true for many men, none of this was familiar turf for me. Kay had always been the outgoing and social one, aware of her feeling and expressing her opinions. (God, was she free about expressing her opinions. Constantly doing so!) On the other hand, I had been content to be easy going, reserved, steadfastly ignoring my feelings and slow to comment or complain. After Kay's death I began to allow myself to open my heart to a wider range of emotions and find ways to express them. Friends even told me that Kay must be pleased that I was becoming so forthcoming. In fact, I found myself occasionally being rather proud of my new touchy-feely persona.

### **Turning Points of Grief**

Traveling along a bereavement journey means encountering persistent deep feelings and sad tasks that stand in the way of feeling happy again and that detach us from a meaningful and vigorous life. I have observed that most of these momentous obstacles can, and indeed, must be overcome; otherwise we become stuck in our grief, unable to move on. The lesson to be learned is that many of these turning points take particular effort. Listen to your heart and it will tell you of remaining issues that are causing you suffering, pain, and grief. You must listen to that inner voice, muster the strength to creatively design what I call “grief-resolving projects,” and then act, as Thoreau would have said, “with deliberation.”

There were three such intentional activities in my bereavement experience that became turning points for me.

(1) During the first year after Kay died, I kept repeating again and again and again, to the point of distraction, my memories of Kay and her death. To address the

haunting presence of these nagging, confused, fragments of thoughts, I painfully wrote an account of Kay's life and death. I even included a summary of her medical records as an attachment. When completed I bound these all together into a little booklet. Once done, I was able to let go of the necessity of constantly retelling her story. What a blessed freedom that was.

(2) Another turning point occurred on the second anniversary of Kay's passing. I decided that something special was needed to honor and note the occasion. So, in the presence of my Hospicare bereavement counselor and with tears in my eyes, I took one of my favorite photographs of Kay in my trembling hand. (This is it! She was beautiful, wasn't she?) I looked at her image and spoke as if she were there alive with me once again, and I said out loud to her, "Kay, I'm sorry that I didn't love you as much as I wish I had and that I was not fully the man that I believe you wanted me to be. Forgive me, My Darling Kay." I then went on, "Kay, I forgive you for not always living up to my expectations of you and for the stresses that you caused me. Kay, thank you for your love, your understanding, your encouragement, your companionship over the years. Kay, I love you, and I always will. Kay, goodbye. I miss you. I will honor your memory for as long as I live." That said, I cried briefly, took the photo home, put it away with my other Kay memorabilia. I now mark that event as the beginning of my way out of the valley of the shadow of death.

(3) Another turning point for me occurred only last fall, on the third anniversary of Kay's death. I had a weeklong celebration, if you will, of "letting go of Kay and grief." The most significant aspect was going to the main office of the credit union and putting her wedding ring, along with mine, some photographs, a few special pieces of her jewelry and a favorite scarf into a safe deposit box beyond the worry of fire or thief. As I solemnly slide the box back into that little vault and silently, but firmly, closed the cold, steel, double-locked door, I felt a powerful sense of completion and closure, mingled with sadness and contentment. With tears in my eyes, I know that Kay's life was over, and my life would never be the same again.

### **Moving Beyond Grief**

Now, guess what! In the goodness and wonder of creation, there is life beyond grief. I'm not sure what the right word is: letting go, moving on, re-entering life, healing, recovery, renewal, redefining who I am? No word seems quite right or comprehensive

enough. But this I know, we have an amazing human capacity for resilience no matter what the tragedy. For ultimately, we need to “fear no evil.” We can affirm that life can go on purposefully and joyfully without dishonoring the memory of our deceased loved ones.

Like the other stages of grief, this final aspect of the bereavement process also calls for courage, creativity and an open heart. There is a lesson here: If you do your grief work, you will discover that moving beyond grief can be a blessed time in which you have the opportunity to expand and enrich your life. You do this by assuming responsibility for self-discovery, by seeking new adventures and relationships, and by learning to live and love afresh. As audacious as it may sound, it can be a wonderfully exciting time, full of surprises, delights, and even heartwarming contentment and sensations of well-being.

### **From Grief to Love**

In conclusion, I have this simple observation: The rules for healthy dying and grieving also apply to full and happy living. The lesson of the day is simply stated: It’s all about love.

For we come into life with nothing, except the love that surrounds us. We leave life with nothing, except the love that surrounds us. That is what life is all about, nothing, except the love that we receive and give with an open heart. That is our purpose and that is the source of our life’s meaning.

*Kim Milling’s wife, Kay, died in November 2005. He wrote this account about three and a half years after her death. Kim started journaling soon after Kay’s death and used the process as a way of expressing feelings that he had previously not shared. He still attends and helps facilitate grief groups at Hospicare.*