

The Gift of Loss, the Gift of Love: The Heroic Journey After Loss of A Loved One

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"The sun will rise tomorrow" from Castaway
"Tomorrow is another day." from Gone with the Wind
"It is always darkest before the dawn." - Unknown
"The sun will come out tomorrow..." from Annie
"The dark night of the Soul." St. John of the Cross
"My God, My God, Why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus of Nazareth

It's probably safe to say we have all experienced darkness in our lives. Darkness comes in many forms - physically, emotionally and spiritually. There are a multitude of quotes and works of art based on the idea of lightness and darkness. Darkness is something often bringing a sense of fear, loneliness and trepidation and lightness is often associated with hope. Why do we tend to have a different view of the world at those two times of the a twenty-four hour period?

When leaving a brightly lit area and venture into the night, we may feel hesitant and cautiousness or uncertainty. If thrown suddenly into darkness, we are experience fear, panic, disorientation. Dread may occur when the light doesn't immediately return.

We eventually become more acclimated to the absence of light, slowly beginning to find our bearings. Familiar landmarks appear as we adapt to a different way to orient ourselves. Listening to sounds or reaching out to find a familiar anchor or and become aware of tiny amounts of light. Our halting steps forward interspersed by vulnerability. When the light of morning comes, life can begin to feel more manageable. As the rhythm between day and night are a part of the Laws of Nature, the rhythm with grief also holds the Laws of the Darkness.

What the Night beholds will become clearer as we become less afraid. The phrase "Dark Night of the Soul," that St. John of the Cross coined, promises that our Night brings us spiritual gifts we may not notice or accept at other times in our lives. There are gifts hidden in the darkness of grief, yet it is natural to we get caught up believing that the extraordinary pain of our current life events will never change. According to the rules of nature, things can't NOT change. Nothing can remain static. Light always follows darkness because it is the way Source (God; Higher Power; Spirit) made it. Even the love we have the our cherished person has died, even changes.

The darkness of grief is common during the time of integrating the loss into our life narratives. In the past several months, many of whom I am closest have had profound experiences with a loved one dying. Whether the loss came as a shock or had been expected for years, it can shake us at our very core. Sometimes we hear words like "closure" associated with grieving and I believe the concept of "closure" was coined by someone who was simply impatient and uncomfortable with someone's grief process. There is no "closure" after the loss of a loved one. There is, however, "integration." We begin to integrate the reality that our loved one is in a different form. Even if someone does not have a spiritual tradition, science certainly supports this view.



"Energy cannot be created or destroyed, it can only be changed from one form to another."

Albert Einstein

The more we integrate our loss, the more appears to be "closure" to the outside world. Rather than "getting over it," love remains and often matures and deepens as time passes. Relationships don't die just because someone's body is no longer in the form we remember. Part of the integration and transition is the process of legacy. How do we honor the legacy of our loved ones life? If he or she has a rich legacy, an intentional legacy, their essence will live on. How do we transition from the darkest time of grief to the legacy time? We have to find a source of light.

During the most intense days of grief, we begin – little by little - to find moments of “night vision.” How do you reorient yourself? What becomes the light that grounds you? Maybe it is your faith, although faith is sometimes bruised early in the grief process. Is the light the love that remains? Perhaps it is the Mystical (* unexplained.....) experiences of sensing our loved ones presence.

Just as we open the eyes and the drapes to let the light in, we must open our hearts to love others. We may open our soul to forgive others and self. We open our arms to embrace others in need. We open our clinched fist to offer a hand. We open our minds and heart to not judge others. We open our wallet to give to others, during times of need. We open our mouth with gratitude and kindness to others. When we open our lives again, will be filled with true light, a light that can never be taken from us.

During times of grieving, waves of loss come crashing to shore, one after another, often like a tsunami which carries the life as we know it out to sea, making us aware of the fragility of life. The fruit of that painful experience is the wisdom of what is most important and the power that love has to transform us.

March is a month that especially holds the tender memories of several of my loves ones' dying. Although the acute stage of grief is long past, I have found the seven week period between February 1st and the third week of March to be a time of reflection, living with intention of love, remembering and honoring the legacy of those loved ones. Their legacy is what keeps their light lit for all. After nearly thirty years for some, they feel more alive to me today because I make a conscious effort to honor their love and legacy.

The author, Pauline Boss, wrote “Resiliency erodes as rituals and celebrations are cancelled.” How do we move beyond the Corporate America view of grief (i.e. – two bereavement days only...if lucky) to integrate and mourn the loss, to find the sweet hanging fruit which can eventually come to those who have grieved?

Many of us have known the shock and numbness of an unexpected and tragic loss. After the numbness begins to leave, the reality of the loss increases a pain that already seemed unbearable. Grief breaks us open to what is important in life. Priorities often fall into place, often times appears too late for the loved one who seems to be missing, but not too late for the loved ones still present.

The beauty of the stars - sometimes shooting across the sky - millions of miles away, is a sight we cannot see with the naked eye during times of light. We are reminded that stars are always present, even though we cannot see them. By befriending the darkness, we can also

find the stillness - not always welcomed - that we may never have noticed before. During the Night we hear things, sometimes frightening, sometimes beautiful and peaceful, that the noise of day does not allow us to hear.

As a young child, a wise person took me by the hand after I cried out in the darkness after a frightening experience. I felt sure someone was trying to get into my room from outside. The firm hold and gentle voice of my father (Father), began calming my fears and aloneness. As he told me there was nothing to be afraid of (Be not afraid, for I am with thee), he took me out the front door of the house, and showed me my bedroom window. There we discovered the culprit. A paracantha bush was blowing in the wind of a passing summer storm and scratching on the screen of my window.

As darkness progresses, we may still yearn for the light of day, but we will no longer be terrified that we won't survive the Night. As surely as night follows day, day also follows night. This is the rhythm of our existence.

One of my favorite authors, John O'Donohue, says: "Listen to the night and be open to learning what the night wants to show you." Take hold of someone's outstretched hand, befriend the stars and marvel that they never leave us.

Our lives are forever changed during the Night, not just in painful ways, but also in beautiful ways. After the loss of my parents, I discovered we are each charged with the responsibility of parenting (meaning "to bring forth") and caring for those around us by having an open heart, whether we have the official role of parenting or not. As we help to "bring forth" one another during our times of difficulty and when we do we all can experience transfiguration. This is what God has asked us to do for one another.

"Transfiguration is when something changes so much it is actually more fully itself than ever and it is irradiated with beauty." (John O'Donohue)

This is what occurs during the Night, for it is the wisdom and rhythm of Spirit.

May all of those who are in the night of grief eventually find sweet memories to warm your heart and remember the stars are forever with us.



**In loving memory of my parents,
Norman and Melba Bradley and the many others that I love who has transitioned into
another form. Their energy remains.**