
CHANGING THE LANGUAGE OF GRIEF: A NEW CENTURY'S CHALLENGE

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We need to create a new language for grief ... a language that speaks honestly of grief's pain and crushing despair. We need a language that speaks of the painful promise and of the hope that is cast by the memory of love given and received. We need to create a language of HOPE, not a language of grief.

Perhaps we can create a language where DENIAL is merely a river in Egypt and not a statement of despair or criticism. Denial is such a harsh and inaccurate word. It does not belong in the language of HOPE.

When we are faced with difficult steps on our journey, we sometimes wish to postpone our progress. We want to sidestep the painful step. Perhaps we are not yet ready to deal with reality or perhaps we feel afraid, unsupported, unskilled or unprepared to face the unfolding of a new life. "I WON'T deal with it!" "I CAN'T cope with it!" "I DON'T WANT TO face it." Words that each of us has echoed again and again as we traveled the path of grief. And so, instead of facing "IT" (whatever "it" may be), we wish to move it to the side, placing it just out of our line of sight, slightly out of focus. For a time, sometimes, a loooooong time, we can keep whatever we do not wish to deal with, out of focus. We can postpone reality, for a little while. It is easier to pretend, for a time, that my child is away at camp or my spouse is on a long business trip instead of facing the bitter reality of death. And yet, I KNOW what it is that I am pretending. How could I ever forget?

I would like to replace the word DENIAL with the word POSTPONEMENT. It is a more honest word. It accurately describes exactly what we do with a reality we are not quite ready to experience. We simply move that reality to the side, keeping it slightly out of focus, holding it there until we are no longer able to keep there, or until we feel "ready" to tackle the new reality. Before you can deny anything, you first have to acknowledge it and once you acknowledge it, you can postpone it until you are ready or able to cope. It takes a lot of energy to keep things out of focus for very long and so eventually, most of us run out of energy to keep things in FANTASY LAND. Slowly we bring whatever painful reality we must face back into focus and we begin the healing task of coping. DENIAL is a river in Egypt. It is NOT a lack of coping, but rather an accurate and creative way of POSTPONING, until I feel more secure, more skilled, more supported. Spring does follow winter and just as the daffodils rise to greet a new season, I, too, will move from postponement to acknowledgment and then to action. I, too, will, face my despair and my grief, in my own time. So, as we exchange the word DENIAL for the word POSTPONEMENT, let's forever ban the word LOST. We use that word to describe everything that changes. "I LOST my child." "I LOST my job." "I LOST my spouse, my car, everything!" We lose THINGS: car keys, houses, jobs, but never, never, do we lose people! They DIE or LEAVE, but we do not LOSE them or the love we shared. Our loved ones have DIED, but they are forever and always a living and loving PART OF WHO WE ARE! We CANNOT LOSE their love!

As long as we are changing the language, let's think about replacing ACCEPTANCE with ACKNOWLEDGMENT. Acceptance, to me, means agree with and I will NEVER AGREE with what has happened to me! But I can work towards ACKNOWLEDGMENT of what has happened. As I begin to feel safer, more supported, more knowledgeable about the grief process and feel more skilled at grieving, I can allow whatever I have cast into POSTPONEMENT to resurface and begin then to resolve my grief. We can change the words we use. Let's make up a new language ... A LANGUAGE OF HOPE! Move away from ACCEPTANCE and run towards ACKNOWLEDGMENT! And then, perhaps we can change one more word in the language of grief. Can we get rid of the word RECOVERY and use HEALING instead? RECOVERY is a medical model word, designed to describe broken bones, not hearts. We recover from a broken arm or the chicken pox. We don't GET OVER the death of someone we love. We get THROUGH IT, one moment, one hour, one day, one hurt at a time. HEALING is a HOPEFUL WORD.

There's only one more word I'd like to banish from the world of grief and bereavement. Let's get rid of CLOSURE, too. There is no such thing as closure in grief. The only thing that closes at the funeral or the cemetery is the casket! Perhaps we can speak of closing a chapter in our life just as our loved one closes a chapter in his life, but the idea of ending a relationship just because death "got in the way", is rather silly. YOU DON'T STOP LOVING SOMEONE JUST BECAUSE THEY DIED! WE WILL CONTINUE TO LOVE FOREVER. Those who have gone leave their footprints on our heart; indeed, our soul. THEY ARE FOREVER THREADS IN OUR FABRIC, MEMORIES IN OUR HEART, LOVE IN OUR BEING. THEY ARE NOW AND ALWAYS WILL BE A LIVING AND LOVING PART OF WHO WE ARE!

Yes, in this new century, we do need a new language. We are diminished by grief, replenished by love, held by hope. I want a language that reflects that hope, a language that reminds me of the coming spring and of the waiting dawn. I want a language that speaks to me of JOY REMEMBERED, OF LOVE GIVEN AND RECEIVED, OF LIFE LIVED, not lost. Join me in creating a new language that more accurately portrays the journey of grief towards healing and hope. Healing doesn't happen at all once not does a language get changed quickly. Just as winter ebbs and flows and the other seasons rise and fall on the tides of our emotions, the words we speak will continue to dictate our journey. Yet, it seems more hopeful to speak of postponement instead of denial, acknowledgment instead of acceptance and healing instead of recovery. MAY LOVE BE WHAT YOU REMEMBER THE MOST!