

APPRECIATE *Your* TRANSFORMATION



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

The journey through grief is life-changing. When you leave the wilderness of your grief, you are not the same person you were when you entered. You have been through so much. How could you be the same?

Transformation literally means a change in form. Many mourners have said to me, “I have grown from this experience. I am a different person.” You are indeed different now. You have likely grown in your wisdom, in your understanding, in your compassion.

This growth resulted from something you would have preferred to avoid. Though grief can indeed transform into growth, neither you nor I would seek out the pain of loss in an effort to experience this growth. While I have come to believe that our greatest gifts often come from our wounds, these are not wounds we masochistically go looking for. When others offer untimely comments like, “You’ll grow from this,” your right to be hurt, angry or deeply sad is taken away from you. It’s as if these people are saying that you should be grateful for the death! Of course you’re not grateful (though you may feel relieved if the death followed a long period of suffering). You would rather the person were still alive and well.

But the person isn’t alive and well. He or she has died, you are grieving and, I hope, mourning, and you are probably finding yourself a changed and possibly better person. To understand how transformation in your grief occurs, let us explore some aspects of growth in grief.

Growth means change.

We as human beings are forever changed by the death of someone in our lives. You may discover you have developed new attitudes.

You may be more patient or more sensitive to the feelings and circumstances of others, especially those suffering from loss. You may have new insights that guide the way you live. You may have developed new skills – learning to balance your chequebook or cook a nice meal.

You are “new.” To the extent that you are different, you can say you have grown. Yes, growth means change.

Growth means a new inner balance with no end points.

While you may do your work of mourning in ways that help you recapture some sense of inner balance, it is a new inner balance. The word growth reflects that you do not reach some final end point in your grief journey.

Not any one of us totally completes the mourning process. People who think you “get over” grief are often striving to pull it together while at the same time feeling that something is missing.

You don’t return to a previous “inner balance” or “normal” but instead eventually achieve a new inner balance and a new normal.

Growth means exploring your assumptions about life.

A death invites you to look at your assumptions about life. Loss tends to transform your assumptions, values and priorities. What you may have thought of as being important – your nice house, your new car – may not matter any longer.

You may ask yourself, “Why did I waste my time on these things?” You may go through a transformation of your previously-held values. You may value material goods and status less. You may more strongly value relationships.

You may also find yourself questioning your religious and spiritual values. You might ask questions like, “How did God let this happen?” or “Why did this happen to our family?”

Exploring these questions is a long and arduous part of the grief journey, but can be life-affirming. Every loss calls for a new search for meaning, including a natural struggle with spiritual concerns, often transforming your vision of your God and your faith.

Growth means utilizing your potential.

The grief journey often challenges you to reconsider the importance of using your potential. In some ways, loss seems to free the potential within. Questions such as “Who am I? What am I meant to do with my life?” often naturally arise. Answering them inspires a hunt. You may find yourself searching for your very soul.

In part, seeking purpose means living inside the question, “Am I making a living doing the work I love to do?” Beyond that, it means being able to say, “Does my life really matter?” Rather than dragging you down, your grief may ultimately lift you up. Then it becomes up to you to embrace and creatively express your new-found potential.

Until you make peace with your purpose, you may not experience contentment in your life. Joy will come when you know in your heart that you are using your potential – in your work or in your free time or in your relationships with friends and family.

I believe grief’s call to “use your potential” is why many mourners go on to help others in grief.

Your Responsibility to Live

Paradoxically, it is in opening to your broken heart that you open yourself to fully living.

Sorrow is an inseparable dimension of our human experience.

We suffer after a loss because we are human. And in our suffering, we are transformed. While it hurts to suffer lost love, the alternative is apathy. Apathy literally means the inability to suffer, and it results in a lifestyle that avoids human relationships to avoid suffering.

Perhaps you have noticed some people die a long time before they stop breathing. They have no more promises to keep, no more people to love, no more places to go. It is as if the souls of these people have already died. Don’t let this happen to you. Choose life!

Yes, you have to do your work of mourning and discover how you are changed. You have to live not only for yourself, but for the precious person in your life who has died – to work on their unfinished business and to realize their unfinished dreams. You can do this only by living.

I truly believe those who have died live on through us – in our actions and our deeds. When we honour their unfinished contributions to the living world, our dead live on. When we dedicate ourselves to helping others who come to know grief, they live on.

What if the person who died could return to see what you are doing with your life? Would he or she like how you have been transformed? Would he be proud of you? Would she believe that her life and death brought meaning and purpose to your life? Or, would he see you dying before you are dead?

What if he or she could see that you have mourned but also gone on to help others in grief and sorrow? What if he could see that he left his love forever in your heart? What if she could see that you live your life with passion in testimony to her?

No matter how deep your grief or how anguished your soul, bereavement does not free you from your responsibility to live until you die. The gift of life is precious and fragile. Choose life!

About the Author

This article is an excerpt from Dr. Wolfelt’s book *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*. It is available for US\$14.95 at book stores or directly from Companion Press at the Center for Loss, (970) 226-6050 or www.centerforloss.com.