



THE *Spiritual*

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When someone we love dies, it is like a deep hole implodes inside of us and leaves us gasping for air. I have always said we mourn life losses from the inside out. To eventually catch our breath, we need to nurture ourselves physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially, and spiritually. In my experience, it is only when we are spiritually nurtured (inside and outside) that we discover the courage to mourn openly and honestly.

Spirituality INVITES US TO:

- Slow down and turn inward
- Feel deeply and believe passionately
- Get to know our authentic selves
- Celebrate diversity
- Open ourselves up to the mystery

Practicing spiritual self-care doesn't mean feeling sorry for ourselves. Rather, it means allowing ourselves to have the courage to pay attention to our special needs. It is in spiritually nurturing ourselves — allowing ourselves the time and loving attention we need to journey through our grief — that we find meaning in our continued living. That is why, if I could, I would encourage all of us in the midst of grief to put “nurture my spirit” first on our daily to-do lists.

THE *Mosaic World* WE LIVE IN

Our world has gotten much smaller religiously in the last 50 years. Eastern religions and spiritual practices arrived in the U.S. and Canada a little more than 150 years ago. Then, in the 1960s, we saw books, lectures, and workshops from folks like Thich Nhat Hanh and Ram Dass, who invited us westerners to

explore Eastern spiritual practices. This influx of Eastern traditions and practices brought new life to spirituality in North America.

While our differences still define us, our potential to borrow meaningful spiritual practices from each other unites us. The great equalizer — death — invites us to be enriched by learning from each other.

I recognize that spirituality and religiosity are not necessarily synonymous. In some people's lives, they overlap completely; their religious life is their spiritual life. Other people have a rich spiritual life with few or no ties to an organized religion. Obviously, each of us needs to define our own spirituality in the depths of our own hearts and minds. The paths we choose will be our own, discovered through self-examination, reflection, and spiritual transformation.

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PATH TO HEALING

THE “Switch”

Someone with wisdom once observed, “Spirituality is like a switch. Everybody has one; it’s just that not everyone has it turned on.” Sometimes, experiences of grief and loss turn off our switches. Sometimes our switches feel stuck, or worse yet, non-existent. Our “divine spark” — which gives our lives meaning and purpose — feels muted.

When my switch is turned on, even in the midst of grief, I can still befriend hope, and the most ordinary moment can feed my soul. Spirituality is anchored in faith — expecting goodness even in the worst of times, not fear — expecting the worst even in the best of times.

Spirituality reminds us that we can and will integrate losses into our lives, see the goodness in others, and know that there are many pathways to heaven.

THE Openness OF A CHILD

If we ever doubt our connection to spirituality and the world around us, we can try approaching life with the openness of a child: Embrace the pleasure of simple sights, smells, and sounds that greet our senses.

I truly believe that acknowledging our hearts are broken is the beginning of healing. As we experience the pain of loss — gently opening, acknowledging, and allowing — the suffering diminishes, but never completely vanishes. In fact, resisting the pain can potentially be more painful than the pain itself. As difficult as it is, we must relinquish ourselves to the pain of grief. As Helen Keller said, “The only way to the other side is through.”

Yet, going through the pain of loss is not in and of itself the goal in our grief journey. Instead, it is rediscovering life in ways that give us reason to get our feet out of bed and to make life matter. The death of someone precious to us is not something we will ever “overcome” or “let go of” — it doesn’t call out to be resolved or explained, but to be experienced.



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About the Author

Longtime TAPS supporter Dr. Alan Wolfelt serves as the director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is a member of the TAPS Advisory Board. He has written many books that help people mourn, including *Healing Your Grieving Heart After a Military Death* (coauthored with TAPS President Bonnie Carroll) and *Loving From the Outside In Mourning From the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit CenterForLoss.com to learn more about grief and order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.