

Sharing the Tears as Well as the Laughter

In January after the AATH Conference I had the privilege of staying with Eloise Cole for a few days. One day Eloise went to work and left me in her library. In the first publication I picked up I was immediately struck by one sentence. What was the experience of your first loss of a loved one? I fell way back into thought. Our concepts of grief and mourning are formed by these first experiences of the death of a friend or family member.

I was 23 when my father died. I was in Rome Italy on a Fulbright grant. The grant official said if I wanted to go home to the funeral, I would have to give up my grant. My dad wouldn't have liked me to give up the grant, so I stayed in Italy. (Jumbo jets were not in existence yet and the phones well - expensive at best) My mother didn't write for a month - she had the family to deal with. Essentially I was alone except for Karen a fellow Fulbright friend and new friend. She came over immediately and just said "I'm here for you." She let me talk or not talk -- she was just there. I will never forget her compassion. She was not afraid to be with me and there without judgement, advice, philosophy, or religion. She allowed me to be in my grief -- to cry, to laugh, to remember, to talk, to be guilty, to doubt. When was your first loss? And what was it like?

In our death phobic society, few of us are ever prepared to lose a loved one. As hospital clowns we will run into grieving parents and the death of children even daily. We have to pay attention to our own reactions so we can be empathetic with others. We need to have some resolution with our rivers of grief - familiar with the surrounding waters, and not afraid of the sharp stones of pain in our paths. Courage. Lots of courage. If we are not in touch with these feelings, fear can take over and overcome us or cause us to take inappropriate action.

We have discussed this in every newsletter. However, what impressed me when talking with Eloise is how stuck in cliches so many of us are in our society. Acceptable behaviors that cut off those who are grieving. Basically when we are afraid, we either avoid or use cliches to avoid feelings and/or reactive feelings to another's grief and mourning. It became so apparent to me when visiting with Eloise that I needed to be more conscious of how I respond to people who are experiencing loss.

"I'm so sorry for your loss"

This is the one I always use. Not anymore! Isn't this the standard polite phrase? But think about the following comments by Eloise.

I don't say "I am so sorry for your loss," because saying I am sorry is turning it back to me. I want to be there for those who grieve -- to listen and say "What's that like for you?" This lets the person know I am there to listen. It invites an honest response. For example, I met an acquaintance at the dog groomer and said "Hi, Linda, how is it going?" She responded, "Well, so, so" I said "That's sounds sort of tentative" (Inviting a response). She said "I'm burying Gerry today" (her only child). I responded "Oh wow! Linda" (with expression). I was right there with her. If I had said "I'm so sorry for your loss" It brings it back to me. They know that I am sorry. I don't have to say that. "I am so sorry" is a pat

phrase - it shuts off the channels of communication. When I say "how is that for you" It opens up the channels and that is what I want. It is genuine. For example in a hospital I could say, "The nurse asked me to pop in, she said you had a lot going on." It is a way of welcoming communications.

"It's all right"

Another cliché we hear all the time is "It's O.K." or usually delivered with a patronizing pat on the back. Who am I to say it's O.K. or it's all right? For the person who is experiencing loss "It's not OK" and it will be a good while before it is "all right" again. And how about this one. Did you ever think that when you hand someone a tissue, you might actually be communicating "Dry your tears and don't cry?"

"It takes time."

Some of us try to help by giving advice like "It takes time" or "She/he would have wanted you to be strong." Or "You're the man of the family now." (One eight-year-old child said quite sincerely with tears. "But I'm too young to go out and get a job.")

A habit Shobi's is working on changing is being careful not to share too much of my own experience. I always thought it would make it easier for the other person to share if they knew I had experienced something similar. But here again, it is taking it all back to me. (Don't tell me of your grief - it is too painful for me. Is this the message I'm giving?) These are like nervous responses. Often we are trying nervously to fill time. Silence is still communicating - it is being there.

At a workshop with Stephen Levine, he told of a time he was sitting with a dying 15 year old. He was praying for the boy's pain to stop when it seemed like a hand came in front of him and told him to stop -- that this was not an appropriate prayer. He realized he was questioning God's will. "Who am I to second guess God's way? Is stopping the process wrong?" So he changed the prayer to "May he receive the most out of this as possible." He went on to say, "Our need to fix people is often another way to avoid what they are feeling. What is needed is to be there and to listen - to soften and accept, not remove or move away from the pain."

So what can we do? How about offering your hand with the palm up, so the grieving person has the option of resting their hand in yours. This attitude invites sincere communication. To be genuine is very important, especially with children, but we must be prepared to listen to their pain. We may even share their tears. Here is a perfect time to soften the belly, match breathing and be present.

-- Shobi Dobi

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked. And the self same well from which your laughter rises was often times filled with your tears. And how else can it be? The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

— Kahlil Gibran