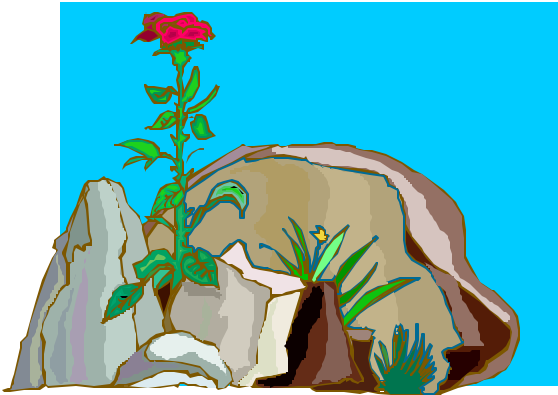


A Rock, A Wall, and True Grit

A lesson in “Grief Work”

by Nan Zastrow



Grief work—it’s the greatest challenge of good grief recovery. Anyone who has been through it can validate that it’s hard work—physically abusive, mentally demanding, and spiritually challenging. There is no other “work” that I have done that can compare to its intensity or its impact—except, perhaps, to compare it to constructing a rock wall. And I learned that both must be tackled one heavy rock at a time.

Last summer, after moving into a new home, the project of landscaping formed its dark cloud over us. My plan was to build a rock retaining wall about 3–4 high around two sides of the house—approximately 80 feet and then continued down the length of the driveway. This would be my “short-cut” to an enormous amount of lawn and yard work. My vision wasn’t clear, but I instinctively knew there was considerable work to be done.

I assured my husband, Gary, that I could handle the challenge ahead with just a little assistance from him. (It would give me something to do when he was keeping evening appointments.) When the dump truck carrying 15 ton of medium size boulders dropped its cargo in the front yard, I gulped and muttered to myself, “I shudda hired a professional with a Bobcat.” Days later, another truck dropped 2 ton of pea gravel. How in the world was I going to handle all that rock? Before me, I saw piles of dirt, a lot of hard work, and a bleak vision of what the big picture might be. I was acutely aware of my challenge: a rock, a wall, and mustering up true grit!

What I quickly discovered was, there is no such thing as a short cut. No matter what I decided to do, I had to get through the rubble before I could expect to feel good and relieved of his burden placed on me.

As I thought about my task (wishing the work was already over) I compared it to the hard tasks of grief work. In my journey through grief, I learned there is no such thing as a “short cut.” No matter what path I chose to take, I had to work through the rubble (problems) one situation at a time. After the first few months of seemingly “getting no where”, my true grit (determination to not let this beat me) kicked in. Building my rock wall reminded me of that anxious, special time in the process of grief.

We’ve all heard the cliché “time heals all wounds” and many a well-wisher has offered those words of condolence to the struggling griever. Unfortunately, “time” is not the healer...**action is**. When we allow our grief to overcome us by dwelling on our misfortune, we become drained of energy and the vitality of life. We may become withdrawn, sullen, helpless, and even bitter. Grief work offers us a choice. For those who take up the challenge, there is an achievable outcome of peace, hope, resilience, and spiritual growth.

Grief work requires being active in learning about the grief process and working through the invisible tasks of healing that lead to making you feel **ALIVE**¹ once again. There are five tasks of grief work that I can personally attest to:

- A**ccept the pain
- L**et Go
- I**nvest in hope
- V**alidate your loss
- E**nergize

ACCEPT the pain

Accepting the pain is, perhaps, the hardest and longest task of grief work. Like a rock, this is a hard and heavy choice. We have been conditioned in life to avoid pain and are resistant to accepting “things that hurt.” Sometimes it takes just as much energy to avoid the reality as it does to face it head on.

Grief work confronts the unbelievable and forces us to experience our pain by facing the reality. We avoid the unavoidable by telling others things are “okay”. We take out our frustration and anger on others i.e. the physician, a friend, law enforcement, and even our family support system. We believe that our suffering is greater than the suffering of others; and, therefore, discount problems others are dealing with unrelated to death.

Choosing to face the pain takes inner strength. This task took considerable time for Gary and me. Truth and fact are foreboding teachers. Some details of our loved ones’ death may be troubling. Sometimes we have to turn off the numbness and oblivion and experience heart-wrenching sobs. We look the unknown and fear in the face.

The ultimate task of accepting is realizing that your beloved will never come back. Then, we must make the choice to Let Go.

LET Go

Letting go is about “walls.” We build walls to protect ourselves from losing something precious to us. Instinctively, we hold on afraid we’ll forget our loved one—how they looked, how they acted and who they were. Nor do we want others to forget him or her.

Our emotions take the proverbially roller coast ride. One day they are up and the next moment they are down. Our emotions may seem controllable in an instance and spontaneous and uncontrollable at the next... a song, a television show, a smell, a piece of clothing or any small thing can trigger an emotional burst. We feel helpless when we realize that we can’t “fix” the pain. Sometimes we even feel that we are responsible for the loss and deserve to “hurt.”

When we finally accept the reality of loss, most of us have stumbled through every doubt possible. We put aside the “I shudda, woulda or coulda” restraints. We banish the idea of ever understanding “why?,” and we accept that we must live with the unknown. We dismiss the flashbacks or nightmares surrounding our loved one’s death and believe that he or she is okay. We give up the regrets of things we did or didn’t do or say. We put aside feelings of guilt about the death and accept that death may have been unavoidable, or long-suffering is over and it’s okay to feel relieved. Letting go means

giving up what little control you feel you have over the pain you are feeling. Letting go is not about forgetting, it's about releasing the burden grief places on us physically, spiritually, and emotionally.

For Gary and me, letting go required putting trust into the hands of a higher power, our God. We accepted that we couldn't change what had happened. All we could do was learn to cope with our loss. When we consciously made the decision to "let go", we gave ourselves permission to invest in the future and hope.

INVEST in Hope

Investing in hope is about true grit and the determination to live in spite of your loss. You are choosing to replace your sad emotions, frustrations, anger, and pain for a better quality of life. Grief work is composed of good days and bad days...and some just so-so days. When you have a "good day", you become optimistic that this burden of grief will pass. What you are feeling is hope. Know that this is what your loved one would want for you.

We found "hope" was about investing in relationships again, building new dreams, exploring new ideas, discovering a stronger foundation in our spiritual awareness, assessing our priorities, finding joy in small miracles, and living life to its fullest each day. We fully appreciate the "gifts" we are given. We became more compassionate to people and life around us. Hope builds a foundation that equips us to handle additional life challenges (i.e. job loss, aging parents, illness etc.) Coping becomes an adjusted way of life.

Once we focused on Hope, we were finally able to honor Chad's life in meaningful ways. It was now time to validate our loss.

VALIDATE Your Loss

After the emotional difficult tasks of grief work, there comes a time of soothing—a time to VALIDATE your experience and your loss. This is your reward for the hard work you did. You stand on the threshold of being ALIVE once again. It's a time when your new identity emerges. It's a time when you are more comfortable and can talk about your loss, your story, and your pain. It's a time to say "good-bye" (and I'll see you again someday!) in peaceful and meaningful ways. Now you strive to discover ways to validate the beauty, the life, and the love of the person who died.

The spirit of life emerges and encourages you to VALIDATE through ritual, social causes, journaling, writing poems, memorial gifts, creating memory books, ceremonies, and numerous other ways. For some, it's just a time to feel at peace through pleasant memories.

We chose to honor Chad's life through grief education. First, we educated ourselves and then we chose to share our experiences with others through groups, presentations, writing, and personal encounters with others. This resulted in a wonderful sense of peace and harmony. We felt ENERGIZED to give meaning to our experience and continue to achieve personal growth.

ENERGIZE

Energy is the source of Life...and it's a time to feel ALIVE again. The opportunity for personal growth is most clearly realized in this part of your grief work. It's time to live in the present moment, honor the past, and move forward to the future. You have evolved. It's a time when you can smile again, laugh with your friends, share your experience without intense emotional pain, and face the world with unrealized strength. You gain energy from self-reflection, in-depth thinking, helping others, and reprioritizing your life choices. You can attest to the powerfulness of working through your loss. Now you can remember your loved one for how they lived—not why they died.

The profound impact of loss was life changing for us—as it will be for you. Though it has been over a decade of “learning new lessons” and discovering new purpose, we remain deeply touched by the outcome of our grief work. We can finally say we feel ALIVE again.

Building my rock wall last summer was therapeutic. Like grief, the work is hard, the process is slow, and the initial vision—not too clear. Like grief, it took physical strength, mental concentration, and spiritual determination to achieve a “job well done.” In the end, I felt a great sense of accomplishment. I felt in tune with nature and God. Both grief work and my wall made me consider options, choose paths, ask for help, and give into human weakness. Both made me appreciate my hidden inner determination and strength. Looking back, I discovered that my wall isn't really a wall at all...it's a firm foundation of lessons learned, challenges met, and a renewed outlook on life. Like grief work, it became the test for getting me through life situations one day (or one rock) at a time.

(The four tasks of grief are a concept developed by Dr. J. W. Worden. ALIVE is my interpretation of five tasks of grief work based on my personal experiences.)