



# *Chasing the Shadow of Grief*

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“Moving forward, or remaining suspended, in good grief is neither right nor wrong. It just is.”

Nearly two decades, and still counting. Might we still be chasing the shadow of grief? Or is the shadow of grief a forever thing, one that will always be there no matter how we try to shed it?

I'm sure some friends and family wonder why Gary and I are still absorbed in the work of grief. They may wonder why we still attend grief conferences, facilitate grief support groups, talk and write about grief, and mingle with a group of friends who all have in common the death of a significant loved one. A few may be so bold as to suggest that we are long overdue for putting our grief behind us and moving on.

While attending a National Compassionate Friends Conference, I thought about this. Why is it that Gary and I are still so engaged in remembering our loss? I decided to challenge myself to determine if it was possible to still remember how grief felt in those early years. I also wanted to justify my tenacity for all the reasons why we do what we do.

Many people believe that after a year or two has passed, grief passes also. They tend to think that a bereaved person has put their emotions behind them and have moved forward to living normal lives. To an outsider, this may appear to be true, but as most bereaved persons will testify, every day is a continued act of healing. Significant loss sticks with us and though we may appear to have returned to our former activities, something inside has changed.

It's also true that many people successfully leave their grief behind and rejoin their lives as they left them. They find no need to continue the chase. Let's be clear on one point: this is perfectly acceptable and normal. Personally, I have determined that I'm just not one of them.

For the group of people who, like me, continue to “chase the shadow, this too can be perfectly acceptable and normal, providing there is continuous movement and improvement and one does not become stuck. By definition, we are not perpetual grievers. Instead, I believe that loss has touched our lives in a way that has changed us, and that challenges our deeper thoughts regarding the meaning and purpose of life. The sensitivity remaining after our losses continues to cause us to evaluate who we are and what we wish to become as a result of this slower transformation.

Moving forward, or remaining suspended, in good grief is neither right or wrong. It just is. It becomes what it is because of the personal experience. I believe, people respond to their grief experience in one of two ways:

- Grieve and Go
- Grieve and Grow

### “Grieve and Go” grievers

In regard to a specific grief experience, these grievers choose to move forward and bank the memory of their experience. (Note: A future experience may be different.) This kind of grief is typically of shorter duration. This grief accepts that death is a natural part of life, and it’s not necessary to revisit the loss experience, hang on to it, or even learn anything more from it. They have honored their relationship, said their good-byes, shed their tears and banked their memories. They keep with them the vivid memory of the person who died, and they cherish the good times and the warm stories. Their loved one becomes a treasured memory stored in their hearts and minds. Everything about their response is normal and natural.

### “Grieve and Grow” grievers

For those who grieve and grow, a specific experience with death has touched their lives in an extraordinary way. The person who died has become connected to their souls spiritually. The bereaved person carefully dissects every emotion and life-change resulting from the death. They reflect often on their personal relationship with the person who died and glean important clues about their lives and their destinies. They are ready to accept the death only when they have processed the events of this life and are fully ready to say good-bye. Then, they stop intense grieving, but begin a different kind of transformation. They want the life of the person who died to mean something of value to others and/or to themselves. They become engaged and challenged. Grieve and grow grievers typically adopt causes, champion survivors, create legacies, accomplish great feats through physical or mental challenges, and/or become successful in careers that require compassion, sensitivity and community. This becomes their reality for as long as it is satisfying and necessary for them. Everything about their response is also normal and natural.

Grieve and Go, or Grieve and Grow? Either response is just a way of being that evolves from their experiences, but this response may differ from one loss to another. Persons with either type of response understand their journeys. Both experience the process; both recall the experience, but each chooses a different way to respond to a particular loss.

Gary and I definitely adopted the grieve and grow response after the death of our son, Chad, as a result of suicide in 1993. We responded to his death differently than other sudden losses or deaths in our lives. Each loss we had faced prior to this one (and some since) were undeniably grieve and go. None affected us or changed our lives as much as Chad’s death.

Sitting in a workshop at the conference, I recognized that though I am a seasoned griever, I had something in common with everyone in that room. I believe that the majority of those present grieved much like me. I personally talked with people whose losses ranged from three months to twenty-nine years. And, the longer the period of time, the greater the chance that they, too, would respond by grieving and growing.

So are we collectively then, chasing the shadow of grief? Call it what you may, I don’t believe that chasing the shadow is a negative response to grief. Fortunately, there are a number of bereaved persons who can resume life in a reasonably normal way. And for those of us who continue the journey there are reasons in each of our stories.

I believe I continue to chase the shadow of grief, not because it’s right or wrong, but just because it’s what has happened to me.

These are the reasons I Grieve and Grow...

**FRIENDS:** For those I have met, and for those I have yet to meet along the way. These friends are not pretentious, have no other agendas and are genuine from the core of their hearts. They have loved and lost. They are touched by their experiences.

**EMOTION:** I can still remember the first days and years as though they were yesterday. I’m grateful for the compassion I’ve learned from my emotions, so I can still sympathize with the newly bereaved and bear witness to the fact that life does get better again, someday. Now, my emotions are not as fragile as then; the pain does heal, and it does become bearable over time.

**EDUCATION:** My bereaved friends have taught me about their losses, and that makes mine easier to accept. I also rejoice in the amazing and rewarding lessons I’ve learned from all the professionals who have given me the privilege of continuing to learn from them.

**LOSS OF DREAMS:** When I fret over my loss of dreams (wedding, grandchildren, accomplishments) that once were so important to me, I've learned that the "assumptions of life" are not valid. Life is fragile and unpredictable. I trust in building new dreams and finding happiness in alternate ways.

**COMMITMENT:** I am committed to honoring the memory of my son in a positive way. Suicide has always had the word "taboo" written all over it, so when Chad died, I wanted to influence people and let them know that bad things do happen to good people.

**GRIEF WORK:** I knew that my grief work would continue for years, and that it would give me an opportunity to experience all that I needed to feel. Grief is a continuous act of healing.

**EXPRESSION:** I have found a way to use my desire to write and to express the sacred thoughts in my heart by sharing them with others.

**CAUSE:** I will continue the ministry of Wings that has come from the gnawing pain that wouldn't heal.

**SPIRIT:** I am committed to the knowledge and confirmation of something far greater than the human experience and to the wisdom of putting my trust in the promise of the next world.

**MISSION:** God gave me this mission—not to save the world, but to preserve myself. I chose to be better instead of bitter. In the process, I've found that helping others is the greatest reward that has come from saving myself.

**LEGACY:** My writing and work to create a legacy of love—not on how Chad died, but on how he lived—has confirmed the fact there are often no answers to "Why?"

**MYSTERY:** I am forever amazed at the surprises that unfold when I am exactly where I am meant to be at exactly the time I should be there. Now, I look for the "ah-ha" moments.

**SEARCH for MEANING:** As I continue the search of who I am now (after loss) I prove to myself that I can be more than I ever was before. This search gives meaning and purpose to my life.

**LOSS:** I try always to remember that I am and always will be a bereaved parent who is feeling the honest emotions of loss and grief.

**HOPE:** I believe that life and love continue beyond death.

No matter how you look at it, we all chase the shadow of grief, sometimes for a short time; sometimes for a much longer of time. We chase it for as long as it is necessary; we chase it to understand. We may never catch up to it. It can fascinate us or consume us. And, ultimately, it can challenge our lives temporarily or change our lives forever.

