



WALKING BACKWARDS THROUGH GRIEF

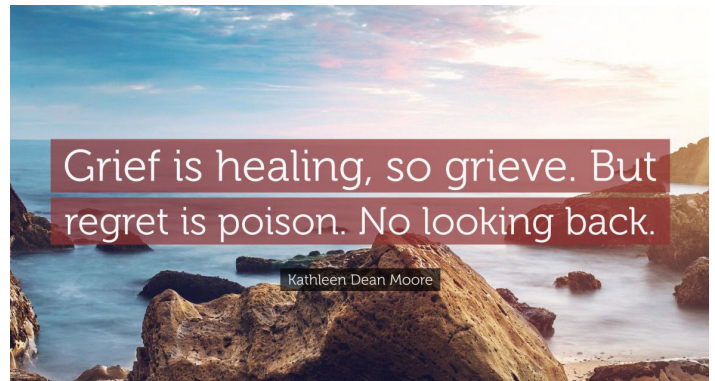
By Nan Zastrow

Our entertainment as kids often was challenging each other to walk backwards and chuckle at our inability to maintain that position for a period of time. Even if the path was familiar and smooth, it just wasn't a normal thing to do. Speed was not an option. We would giggle when we tripped and sometimes that even brought us to our knees, superficially wounded.

I was reminded of this childhood act recently when moving some outdoor furniture into the garage and having to walk backwards with it in order to navigate getting it through the back door of the garage. I chuckled at myself for being so clumsy. But then I thought, "Isn't walking backwards a lot like grief?"

This past year I've been walking backwards since my husband's death. I began experiencing every memory, emotion, blunder, inadequacy, feeling of abandonment...and the list continues because it was profoundly familiar. What I was experiencing was not new or unusual. They were normal reactions to another journey through grief. I recognized the feelings because they monopolized my life after the death of my son in 1993. I couldn't count the number of times my grief tripped me up and I fell to my knees in total despair.

When significant loss hits a second or third time, the memories of earlier death experiences can vividly be recalled. Even though each loss differs in its complexity. The emotions not only multiply but become individually unique and even more personal. Past experience has



little impact in calming the emotional turmoil that once again surfaces. Walking backwards in grief after a new loss can raise some of the same unanswered questions that you thought you left behind years after moving forward with your previous loss.

Another situation caused me to backwards slide again. Rummaging through pictures stirred up memories of my son's suicide death this time. Just when I thought I had put those concerns to rest, they manifested themselves alongside my newest grief, the sudden death of my husband in 2023. For me, it awakened my need to analyze my traumatic loss once again. Gratefully, I can say, that time, maturity, and knowing helped. Rehashing the events couldn't change a thing but I instinctively knew I could let it go quicker. But that doesn't mean to say, I didn't have moments of backwards emotions and memories so vivid and real as though his death happened only yesterday.

WALKING BACKWARDS THROUGH GRIEF...CONTINUED



While I was walking backwards trying to distance myself from my old loss while finding excuses for my sorrow in my new one, I observed people expected me to find it easier this time. They erroneously assumed that since I had coped with significant loss decades ago, this time recovery should be quicker, easier, and more tolerable. But they failed to take in account, the difference in relationship and bonds. I had my precious son for only 21 years, but my husband and I had a strong marriage that forged through many ups and downs of “life” for 55 years, until death do us part.

As I was once told, there is no expiration date on grief. It will always be there mentally in the background of my life experiences. Previous losses set up your internal expectation of how you will grieve a new loss. I accept that successive loss may bring up old memories of the despair, once before felt. I also accept that it's quite normal to remember how I coped then and count on my experience to respond proactively and positively this time. However, that doesn't reverse the reality that each loss is different and the grieving process will be different.

I admit that my reaction surprised me. However, as I worked through those feelings this time, I recognized their familiarity. I was just walking backwards, caught up in an emotional memory that triggered a time when significant loss could bring me to my knees. Grief hurts. It hangs on. It's clumsy. It's hard to navigate whether or not you understand the sensitivities that make up the

experience of grief. We don't have to like it; but we need to accept that we can't change it.

I also reminded myself about another important lesson learned. Grief does lose its intensity and bitterness in time. That is the lifeline I could hang onto with this successive loss. You see the light at the end of the tunnel clearer and quicker and know that on the other side of the darkness the sun

will shine again. Today as I reflect on the obstacles and grief thoughts, I'm able to say, it's okay to feel the familiar old reactions because they are no longer as threatening or defeating as they were back then. They are all recoverable with appropriate griefwork, patience, and time.

If you feel on some days that you are walking backwards through grief, maybe it's because you've had a previous significant loss that reminds you of those humbling emotions from before. Or maybe it's just one of those days when the emotions seem more demanding as though you are taking two steps back rather than forward. This is normal too. Or maybe it's reminding you of your childhood feat of walking backwards only to realize that sometimes things in life are uncomfortable. They can bring us to our knees, and take the breath out of us. But we survived and we learned from them.

The one thing that wasn't left unfinished, unsaid, or unappreciated was LOVE. Never a day went by that we didn't say loving words to each other. Walking backwards in grief isn't always a “negative experience” because it also is a reminder to count my blessings for all the wonderful memories. It's a reflection back of how far I've come and grown through grief. For this I am grateful. Because of these flashbacks, I'm learning to walk forward in my grief with courage towards the ultimate Gift of Peace.