

By Nan Zastrow

Wausau, WI

Wingsi@charter.net

In Aesop's fables, we can apply the lesson about the wolf in sheep's clothing to a forgotten griever. The fable reminds us that appearances can be deceiving.

Perhaps, we can recall a forgotten griever who attended the funeral of our loved one or waited silently after the event to be acknowledged. We may have perceived this person as docile, quiet and unsuspecting (sheep); but he/she was really bait being stalked by the relentless wolf (grief). Such a griever may follow the actions of other sheep allowing them to take the lead. This draws attention away from him or her. But, the wolf (grief) will stalk the unsuspecting sheep and eventually devour it when least expected.

It takes a good shepherd to recognize the quiet sheep and take responsibility for protecting it from harm. The phrase, "a wolf in sheep's clothing" is a metaphor for a hidden danger or for an enemy putting on a false display of friendship." Our recent support-group participants vividly reminded me of the lesson of forgotten grievers and how easy it is to overlook and dismiss their quiet pain. Participants included relationships such as "in-law," girlfriend, sibling and elderly parent.

We assume that "closeness" exists in this order: primarily between spouses, then between parents and children, and then among immediate family. We even use the phrase, "just a friend," to suggest that the relationship is less significant than family. The interpersonal relationships of one family member to another family member may differ. We cannot assume "closeness." Not all brothers and sisters are "close." Not all parents and children are "close."

On the other hand, in today's world, co-workers, neighbors, roommates, stepparents and others may have even closer relationships with one another than the immediate family. In regard to grief and mourning, these new "even closer" relationships often result in forgotten grievers. Friends are not the only forgotten grievers. The list may also include: siblings, former spouses or stepchildren, teachers, members in a social organization, developmentally disabled, the elderly, and many more.

This type of grief may also be referred to as disenfranchised grief—when you don't feel you can talk about or share your grief because it may be considered unacceptable to others. The world doesn't think you are entitled to your grief.

When our son died in April, 1993, we were the obvious grievers. We met the definition of "closeness" by being family. But our lives were not the only lives changed by Chad's death. At this point in my son's life, he had "another world" in which he was a young adult. And he had other relationships. We grieved deeply—but not alone.



A Wolf in Sheep's Clothing...

THE FORGOTTEN GRIEVER

Somewhere in a distant shadow were forgotten or disenfranchised grievers. They may have included our son's fiancé, his friends, his EMT classmates, co-workers, the men in his National Guard unit, and others who still remain unknown to us. Some would speculate that these people are not truly grievers—but “just friends” who attended the visitation or funeral because it was “the thing to do.” But it is likely that two or more grieved as deeply as we have grieved.

Kenneth Doka, a grief counselor, has defined forgotten grievers as disenfranchised. Specifically, this means: “the grief that a person experiences when he or she incurs a loss that is not or cannot be openly acknowledged, publicly mourned, or socially supported.” Doka defines three scenarios where this occurs:

- The relationship is not recognized.
- The loss is not recognized.
- The griever is not recognized.

The relationship is not recognized

Relationships that are not socially sanctioned are often not recognized. Such relationships include extra-marital relationships, co-habitational situations, same-gender relationships, ex-spouses and stepchildren, and others. We all know these relationships exist, and we can't deny that those involved are touched by grief when such a relationship ends.

After my mother's death in 1970, my dad met another woman and soon they lived together, but never married. Initially, as children, we objected to my dad's new friend because she felt like a “replacement” for our mother. Their relationship lasted nearly twenty years before my dad died. Irene quickly succumbed to grief and became incapacitated. She had taken care of our dad, shared an intimate friendship, and provided for his emotional needs—something we could not have done as well. She died shortly after, never fully regaining her quality of life. Fortunately, years earlier we had accepted Irene, which helped us honor and recognize her grief.

When my son died, he was engaged to Jenny. It was easy to see Jenny's grief, and we could honor that and respect it immediately. At the funeral, though, less attention was given to her than we received because Jenny and Chad were not married yet. In contrast, if they had been married at the time of his death, we, as parents, would likely have received less attention. Society recognizes the primarily known relationship as the significant mourner.

The loss is not recognized

As a society, we quickly place value on relationships that we know little about. We may find little significance in the death of an infant, miscarriage, stillborn or crib death. We have little sympathy for the family of a condemned man who goes to his execution, though this man is a human being who may have strong attachments with family that have nothing to do with his crime. We also tend to minimize the death of an elderly person feeling that they have lived a “long and good life.” Or we may forget the griever who mourns the death of someone whose life was complicated with years of illness, dementia or confinement to a nursing home. We conclude that the death was “a blessing.”

In a past support group that we facilitated, a woman mourned the death of her elderly mother. She felt that her grief was less significant in comparison to the other issues that members of the group brought to the table. Yet, she described her mother as her “best friend.” When a relationship between “best friends” ceases, there is grief—regardless of the age of either.

Similarly, a man in his mid-fifties experienced the death of both parents in a matter of a few months. He was overcome with guilt that both had died so close together and perhaps he had not cared for them well enough. He also felt the fear of being the only surviving member of his family. His wife couldn't understand why his grief was so intense. After all, his parents were elderly, but he felt alone and forgotten.

Many years ago, one of my co-workers died in a gas explosion at her home. Our company showed great sensitivity to our working relationship and personal grief. They chartered a bus and allowed time from work for anyone who wanted to go to the funeral in her hometown hundreds of miles away. We talked about Shelly's death for over a year. At the first anniversary of her death, we submitted a memorial for the newspaper in her honor. We were grateful that the company and Shelly's family acknowledged our grief. We weren't treated as forgotten grievers, but rather as an extension of family.

The griever is not recognized

We may overlook or exclude someone from a funeral service, because we don't recognize that they grieve. Their response to the death may appear to be absent, withheld or unrecognized. Among those we could include are the grief of the developmentally disabled, ex-spouses or relationships, girlfriend/boyfriend, etc.

Death education for the developmentally disabled is often non-existent. So it is not uncommon for him or her to become frightened when a loved one “disappears.” They are often excluded from the funeral because they may “become upset.” We may think that we are protecting them by not discussing the death with them. But, in reality, we are limiting their capacity to grieve.

Our daughter, Jalane, is developmentally disabled. I remember wondering how to tell her about Chad's death. She attended the funeral and seemed teary-eyed like all of us, perhaps responding to our emotions, as well. Later her questions arose. “Where did Chad go? Was he with Grandpa and Aunt Judy?” Would she see him again? What do “they” do “there” (heaven)? Death is a difficult concept to understand, even for those of us who are developmentally sound, but it doesn't mean we don't grieve.

Siblings and young children are often forgotten in the grief process. As comforters, we express sympathies to the parent when a child dies. We may neglect to remember the “closeness” between some siblings. Or if the child is young, we think they don't really grieve—yet—or understand. A child's grief may be complicated by a parent's pain. Parents often feel that a surviving child is not grieving because he/she doesn't talk about the other sibling that died. Perhaps the child doesn't mention the name because it will cause the parents more pain. Children cover their loss to avoid tearful situations, questions and their own fears.

Today's funerals will combine many, many disenfranchised or forgotten grievers” in the same room! Each is entitled to his/her grief. Nobody has the right to take that away. Each has the right to receive comfort and have their grief validated. We are a diverse society, and as we continually evolve and change, we can become more sensitive to the needs of others.

Purposely look for the sheep that is standing off to the side, seemingly insignificant, blending in, disguising feelings. Seek out him/her and acknowledge his/her grief. Help this individual talk about feelings, loss and relationship. And be aware that likely the wolf in sheep's clothing lurks somewhere in the distant shadows intent upon devouring his prey.