



Grow Where You Are Planted

The Quest for Meaning After Loss

By Nan Zastrow, wings, inc.

A friend had offered me a variety of perennial plants she was removing from her meticulous garden, and I greedily accepted, because I know that perennial plants bloom under adverse conditions in most any environment. Many of the varieties were new to me and I struggled with identifying them by their Latin names (which she knew very well) compared to the common names I knew. Additionally, I was mentally storing information about their preferred habitat: shade or sun. Laden with buckets of wilting plants, I hurried home wanting to put their thirsty roots into rich black dirt. Confused by pail after pail of plants that right now all looked the same, I tried to sort them according to my mental record “needs sun, needs shade.” Finally, overwhelmed, I plunked them all in the holes I had prepared. In the heat of the morning sun, I stammered, “Grow where you are planted!”

The old proverb rebounded and flashed a hidden memory before me. When I was struggling with my grief, someone gave me a picture of a girl with a sprinkling can, watering flowers, and the proverb, “Grow Where You Are Planted” boldly written beneath it. I hung it on my bulletin board for inspiration for years to come. Looking back, today, I believe that I took that proverb to heart and used my life experience to grow in the troubled soil I was given.

How does one grow when life itself has wilted and lost its meaning and purpose? After loss, this is probably the greatest challenge of all. Unfortunately, it’s a challenge that each person must manage alone. Growth and freedom from grief begins with soul searching, values identification and renewing our attitudes.

Our lives have come to a halt. Sometimes we are doing what we are doing because we don’t feel we have any options. Or we may be harvesting a sorry attitude because of the circumstances life has handed us. It’s easy

to get caught in the trap of feeling sorry for one's self. However, we all have the power to find personal growth and happiness in our lives—again. Sometimes, happiness begins with just a few minutes a day. And when each minute expands to an hour or even a day of peace, our spirits are reaching new potential and personal self-growth. Eventually, we can uncover the meaning, purpose and happiness we desperately seek.

DO SOME SOUL SEARCHING

When we soul search, we reach inside to understand what our culture and family traditions have taught us. Then, we determine how it applies to us today, and what is important for us to keep and what needs to be changed in order to live comfortably in today's world without betraying our heritage.

CHANGE THE RULES

The rules for grieving have changed, folks. We no longer wear black garments to symbolize death (now, black is a fashion statement). Widows aren't expected to dress drably and have restrictions for attending social events. Black wreaths aren't hung on doors anymore, nor do we wear black armbands. In fact, the rules have changed so much that workers are expected to return to work in three days—and be productive! The very act of grieving has been cut short for social convenience!

On the other hand, there is a clearer trend for funeral services to truly become a celebration of a life lived. Dirges have been replaced with heart and soul music. We applaud the deceased for his or her contribution to family, community and friends. We hang pictures telling stories about life events. We bring personal items to the funeral including achievement trophies, symbols of hobbies, interests and creativity and evidence of hard physical work. We sing! We tell stories. We even laugh!

Twelve years ago when our son Chad took his own life, I returned to work sullen, broken and empty. True support wasn't readily available. Suicide was considered taboo, and people tended to judge the survivors as pitiful. The rules were: Don't talk about the incident; it might give others ideas. Check your family history; the "crazy" gene may run rampant. Punish yourself for not "seeing" there was a problem.

Now, education about suicide is evolving and more people are becoming aware of the signs, the preventions, the human factors of tolerance in pain and the inconsistencies of the final act. I can celebrate Chad's life as an individual and an inspiration. An inspiration? Yes. Not because of what he did, but because of who he was before the act and what I have become as a result of my grief.

CHOOSE TO LEARN

Grief often leaves us helpless. Our lives shut down, and we may turn away from new experiences or things we once enjoyed. Instinctively, we are born as creatures striving to learn, develop and survive. Feeding the mind feeds the soul and knowledge gives us power to heal.

There are ways to reach inside and store new experiences, thoughts and untold wisdom that allow us to "grow" through our grief. Taking a class, listening to a lecture, trying a new sport or exercise, discussing something deep or personal with a trusted friend, expressing our feelings through music or words, and researching the conditions of life in a good book give us thoughts to ponder.

A woman in one of our support groups described her life after her spouse's death. He was her companion and her access to the outside world. He drove the car and chauffeured her wherever she went. When he died, she felt helpless, lonely and isolated. With a little encouragement, she decided to do the unthinkable. She drove alone on her first solo trip to Milwaukee (busy city some four hours away from home). She beamed from ear to ear with her personal accomplishment.

IDENTIFY VALUES

Remove the "someday" syndrome. We often live under the assumption that "someday" I will do this. (Someday, when the kids are through with college, we'll spend some money on ourselves.) Or we put conditions on choices by specifying "when": When I win the lottery, I'll go for a great vacation." I do recognize that money is often a

barrier to many of our desires. Therein is the defining question, “Do I really need this—or do I just want this?” Which becomes a critical deciding factor. Most things that bring us happiness are not purchased. What brings us true joy is most often the result of something we are doing for others.

A friend had a good paying job and was allowed the luxury of spending her earnings for personal items she liked. It wasn’t that she was “selfish” because she certainly bought things for the family, and she didn’t need to be frugal. When she suddenly lost her job, she decided to take an early retirement. Her cash flow quickly went dry. She began “babysitting” for her grandchildren at no charge. I noticed a great sense of inner joy—different than previously. She explained that she found her family appreciated the “gift” of her time more than the purchased gifts she could give them.

HONOR THE PAST, BUT LEAVE SOME BEHIND

The slogan, “Honoring the Past and Rebuilding the Future” states the ministry of our Wings organization. The stories of life and death, the memories stored and the recollection of good times should be shared, recorded and celebrated.

I remember when Chad was confirmed and again when he was graduated. I followed a tradition much to his chagrin. At each party, I dragged out framed pictures of the growing years and photo albums for our guests to chuckle over. Don’t save the experience for funerals—make anytime a good time to remember. Honor the stories of the past, but don’t hesitate to leave the traumas of the past behind. You can’t change what has happened, and you risk becoming exhausted and bitter if you hold onto the pain. Rebuild your future with loving stories and memories that heal the spirit and give meaning to your loved one’s life.

RENEW YOUR ATTITUDE

Accept a challenge. Grief, illness, and personal loss qualify as the greatest contenders for first prize in defeating attitudes. Get an “I Can Do This” attitude. When our attitudes are tainted by life’s events, it’s easy to feel “helpless” in the face of adversity. It’s also makes us feel very deserving of another person’s sympathy. The real cure for an attitude slump is the final reality that no one can change what has happened to you. No one can take away the pain except you. Accept the challenge, and you will persevere.

When Chad died, I admit I needed all the sympathy I could get. My first reaction was, why did God let this happen to me? What did I do to deserve this? My

reality check came atop a thirty-foot pole about a year after Chad died. Our consulting work-group took part in the “leadership challenge” offered by our company. The ultimate challenge ended with climbing a thirty-foot pole with belay ropes attached to the harnesses we wore. Each person did this individually and went as far up the pole as they felt comfortable with, and then one step beyond to meet the challenge. I was determined to make it to the top and jump!

When my shaking heavy legs finally supported my not-thin-enough frame on the 12” platform, I realized I hadn’t met the final challenge yet. I had to jump into vacant air with only the ropes to support me. As I gazed out over the tops of the trees, one thought came to mind, “I can do this—Chad—for you.” And I did! (To read the whole story, visit “Articles” at my website: www.wingsgrief.org). Making the choice gave me a great sense of accomplishment, and it made me realize that I had the power to overcome, or grief could destroy the rest of my life.

FIND ONE THING THAT MAKES YOU HAPPY—AND GRAB IT

Spend a few moments everyday doing something that makes you happy, even if it is a small moment like a walk in the garden, a phone call to a friend, or a warm cup of coffee with a good book. When you create your mood for the day with comfort and pleasantries, it’s easier to find happiness in the day.

Think about things you did in the past that made you happy. Was it a job (not the title)? Was it a trip or doing a special activity? Was it volunteering at a church, a civic event, a hospital, or sporting event? Was it learning something new? Was it meeting new people and learning about their lives? Look at the clues and determine possible new choices or ways to revitalize forgotten past experiences.

When Chad died, I took up writing again. As a young adult, I had written poems and short stories, but I always said I had nothing to write about. Oh, the wealth of feelings and stories I now have to share. I found volunteering made me feel useful. I learned how to golf (poorly for sure), gained more knowledge on personal computer software, and tried faux painting and new recipes.

We are planted in life with diverse elements, elements that can be either friend or foe. It is our choice how to use those elements to help us grow. Many of the plants in my garden have survived incredible odds. It is my wish that I continue to learn from them by blooming where I am planted.