

Contents of this ELetter

- Building a New Identity
- Editor's Journal:
Creating a Circle of
Friends
- On a Wing and
a Prayer
- Grief Tip
- Reader Feedback:
What Do You Wish
Someone Would Have
Told You About Grief
- The Purpose of Life
- Poems
 - The World is Mine
 - A Reason, A Season
or a Lifetime

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BUILDING A NEW IDENTITY AFTER THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE

by Lou LaGrand

Most people who are mourning the death of a loved one are not aware that their difficult experience also includes a change in identity. They are not the same persons they used to be and identity change is a major part of the adjustment process.

Identity is “who I think I am.” Depending on your perceptions (the personal meaning you give to experience) and your belief system, much of which is formed early in life, you may see yourself in a variety of ways. You may think of yourself as a good worker, important to the welfare of others, a mother or father, skillful in a variety of ways, a somebody, or a nobody, to name a few.

After the death of a loved one, a mourner usually must deal with a number of changes. The part of the self that interacted with the loved one also dies and the mourner is no longer able to interact with the physical presence of the deceased. Many mourners refuse to acknowledge that death imposes identity change and resist the transition. However, it is inevitable that the survivor has to integrate the old and the new worlds.

Here's what you need to know to ease the transition into a new life and accept the changes in identity that death imposes.

1. Understand how we get a new identity.

It is structured on skills, relationships, roles--and on all the new behaviors necessitated by one's loss. Relationships are of special importance because of the meaning they carry in terms of attention, appreciation, love, and acceptance. Love and service are powerful identity formers.

2. Your perception of your inner self is important to recognize and strengthen.

“I am good, I am capable, I am loveable, I choose to be loving,” are all crucial parts of identity. And, you can change behavior to strengthen these or other perceptions of the self. The sooner you can make the needed changes--by making them into your normal routines--all the better for you.

3. Determine what you need to add to your life now that your loved one is no longer physically present.

What will you have to learn? What new role(s) will you have to assume? What relationships will you have to replace? What modifications in old behavior will you make as you add to your daily task list? If you were too dependent on the person who died, it will be especially important to have a friend or counselor assist you in this ongoing transition.

Continued on page 2

BUILDING A NEW IDENTITY...

Continued from page 1

4. Examine your perception of social isolation. Has your loss caused you to feel isolated? Have some of your friends distanced themselves from you? This may be obvious if you are now a widow and some of your friends are married. What will you do to increase your circle of friends? Your community of friends, especially new friends, will be a part of your new identity and particularly useful in adjusting to loss. So too, will be the new relationship you establish with the deceased loved one through memory and loving in separation.

5. Examine the way you will be of service to your community. The way you use your time in service to others or in fulfilling a purpose or commitment to a cause will shape the way you feel about yourself, and how you adapt to the changed conditions of life. Think of whom you would like to help or what service you could provide and make plans to incorporate those activities into your lifestyle.

6. All that you now have to do, that was not part of your usual home routines when your loved one was alive, will also be part of your new identity. It could range from having to pump your own gas or do a plumbing repair to doing the



taxes or cooking for one. Will you think of these new duties as challenges or will you view them as demeaning chores? The attitude toward your transition is critical to success.

7. Many mourners also experience a values and/or belief shift. They are motivated to pick up on a project started by the deceased or they assume a particular value that was a major part of the deceased's life. New beliefs may replace the old.

Many factors go into the development of new identity beliefs after the death of a loved one. The work is demanding and can be very scary as you attempt to assume certain responsibilities for the first time. It is okay to feel inadequate, even overwhelmed, and to ask help from others in facing the unfamiliar.

Turn to your spiritual beliefs and the people who have suffered through similar losses. Work on one change at a time. Keep a diary to record your victories and struggles. Know that you are important, possess the willpower to make this transition, and will outlast the distress associated with your great loss.

*Dr. LaGrand is a grief counselor and the author of eight books, the most recent, the popular *Love Lives On: Learning from the Extraordinary Encounters of the Bereaved*. He is known world-wide for his research on the *Extraordinary Experiences of the bereaved (after-death communication phenomena)*.*

How to Connect with Wings:

- Email: nanwings1@gmail.com • Postal: P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401 • Ph: 715.845.4159
- Follow the EVENTS calendar posted at the website wingsgrief.org
- Subscribe to the free online ELetter sent quarterly.
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NAN ZASTROW

Co-Founder,
Wings – A Grief Education Ministry

Ten years ago, I wrote an article for my journal about our fortieth wedding anniversary. And here it is, another ten years later—and we are celebrating another milestone. I wrote then that the article wasn't about grief, but rather about the outstanding people who helped us survive before and after grief. It was a tribute to the friends, family and amazing people we've been privileged to know in our lives. It demonstrated a remarkable lesson of looking back and realizing you are who you are today because of your experiences and because of those people in your life that stuck by you and shared them with you.

On June 17, Gary and I celebrated our 50th Wedding Anniversary. And I'm so blessed to still be here and still have my amazing family and friends in my life. The past ten years have carried with them many ups and downs, joy and sorrow, sickness and health just as the decades before. But the one outstanding thing that I'm grateful for—is the opportunities Gary and I have had to appreciate our relationships with old friends and gain new friends through all the phases of our lives.

As I was reviewing my address book from ten years ago, I was startled at the number of friends who were no longer in our lives on a regular basis. Many had died, and when it happens a little at a

CREATING A CIRCLE OF "FOREVER FRIENDS"

time, you don't realize how many it has been. Initially, I felt like our world got so much smaller. In addition, there are quite a few that moved away (to warmer climates, I'm sure) or are not actively involved in our lives as they were before. At first, the realization seemed scary. Then I began to recreate my list adding a whole new circle of friends that shared our current thoughts, experiences, and future dreams. It was a picture of life going forward.



I accept that our friendships are often based on our "stage of life." The accumulation of friends over the years from jobs, activities, and community involvement changes. Not all of our friends will remain from one stage to another (i.e. college to young adult to retirement). Keeping in touch as the pool of friendship grows becomes a challenging experience, because all of us are affected by life changes and responsibilities that take us down different roads.

So again, I can connect my observation to grief. In grief, our "address book" often changes. Friends know about our loss. Some know how to handle it and others don't.

The friends you make after loss only know you the way you are at the present time. They probably don't know what you were like before your loss and before they met you. They don't even consider that you have a new identity as you emerge from a life-changing experience.

They see you as you speak, interact, and live now. They don't know your grief story until you choose to tell them. You are living in a new chapter of: "life goes on."

As I look at our list, I realized that we don't have "fair-weather" friends. We have friends who know our story, know our pain, and appreciate our passions about grief.

Continued on page 5

Clichés of Grief *By Rachel Kodanaz*

Permission to reprint granted by Rachel Kodanaz

Some of us experience hurtful comments from friends and family as they search for ways to help ease the pain. The remarks are usually said with the best of intentions but are misunderstood by the griever as insensitive.

| Cliché | Initial Reaction | What they meant |
|---|--|--|
| Time will heal | Do we really ever heal or does time soften the pain? | You must feel as though the pain will never end. |
| You are young, you can have more children | Even if I do, a new child will not replace the one I lost. | You must really be sad, let me hug you again. |
| Call me if I can help | Most likely I won't. | I would like to come by tomorrow and.... |
| He is in a better place | No, he isn't. The better place is sitting next to me. | It isn't fair, is it? |
| You are holding up so well | Right? Maybe on the outside. | I am available to visit with you, can I call you tomorrow? |
| It is time to move on! | Move on from what? | Take the time you need, I just miss your smile. |

People are not mean-spirited; they just don't know what to say. As a griever, please try to filter out the "hurtful" gestures and interpret them as love and caring.

*An excerpt from **Living with Loss One Day at a Time**, a collection of 365 thought provoking reflections of grief, loss and recovery.*

FOREVER FRIENDS

Continued from page 2



Fair-weather friends are those who can be depended upon only when everything is going well. I realized our list of friends are “forever” friends!. They know our losses, our disappointments, and our life

experiences which may be very different from theirs, but they value our association nevertheless. Wow! How much more blessed can we be?

Good grief is about looking back and recognizing who sticks beside you when you’ve been faced with life’s hardest blow. Good grief is about recognizing that even though years pass and lives changes, good friends will always be there. Good grief is about memories that never fade, but become the glue of relationships that last for an eternity.

Celebrating fifty years of marriage puts a new perspective on our meaning and purpose. Things happen for unknown reasons. People we meet are part of the plan of life and are meant to be in our story for however long is appropriate. We appreciate the time we spent together. We value what they have taught us and hope that we have shared something purposeful for them. We know that each has a story in our memory book, and we will forever consider them friends.

Would you like to share your story or poem?

If you would like to submit a short story, poem, or article, we welcome it. The material does not need to be original, but if it isn’t, please include the author or credits that can be printed along with the material. We are looking for articles that inspire the bereaved, teach, and offer hope which is the focus of our ministry of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry. Poems or material may be submitted In memory of your special loved one.



READER POEMS

THE WORLD IS MINE

– Author unknown

Today, upon a bus, I saw a very beautiful woman
and wished I were as beautiful.
When suddenly she rose to leave,
I saw her hobble down the aisle.
She had one leg and used a crutch.
But as she passed, she passed a smile.
Oh, God, forgive me when I whine.
I have two legs; the world is mine.
I stopped to buy some candy.
The lad who sold it had such charm.
I talked with him, he seemed so glad.
If I were late, it'd do no harm.
And as I left, he said to me,
“I thank you, you’ve been so kind.
It’s nice to talk with folks like you.
You see,” he said, “I’m blind.”
Oh, God, forgive me when I whine.
I have two eyes; the world is mine.
Later while walking down the street,
I saw a child I knew.
He stood and watched the others play,
but he did not know what to do.
I stopped a moment and then I said,
“Why don’t you join them dear?”
He looked ahead without a word.
I forgot, he couldn’t hear.
Oh, God, forgive me when I whine.
I have two ears; the world is mine.
With feet to take me where I’d go..
With eyes to see the sunset’s glow.
With ears to hear what I’d know.
Oh, God, forgive me when I whine.
I’ve been blessed indeed, the world is mine.

A REASON, A SEASON, OR A LIFETIME

People come into your life
for a reason, a season or a lifetime.
Once you figure out what it is,
you will surely know exactly what to do.
When they enter your life for a reason,
it’s usually to meet a need you have expressed
or they have come to assist you through a difficult time
and to provide you with guidance understanding and support.

They are there for the reason that you need them to be.
Then, without any wrong doing, or just out of the blue,
this person will say or do something,
to bring the relationship to an end.
Sometimes they ‘pass on’.
Sometimes they walk away never to be heard from again.
Sometimes they act up, and force you to take a stand.
But what WE must realize is that,
our desire is fulfilled and their work is done.
However, the need has been met and it is now time to move on.

When people come into your life for a season,
it is because the time has come to share, grow or learn.
They may bring you an experience of peace,
joy or even fulfillment and understanding.
They may teach you something you have never experienced.
They usually give you an unbelievable amount of happiness.
But sadly, only for a season.

Lifetime relationships teach you lifetime lessons;
These things you must build upon
in order to have a solid emotional foundation.
Your job is to accept the lesson, love that person;
and put what you have learned to use,
in all other relationships and areas of your life.

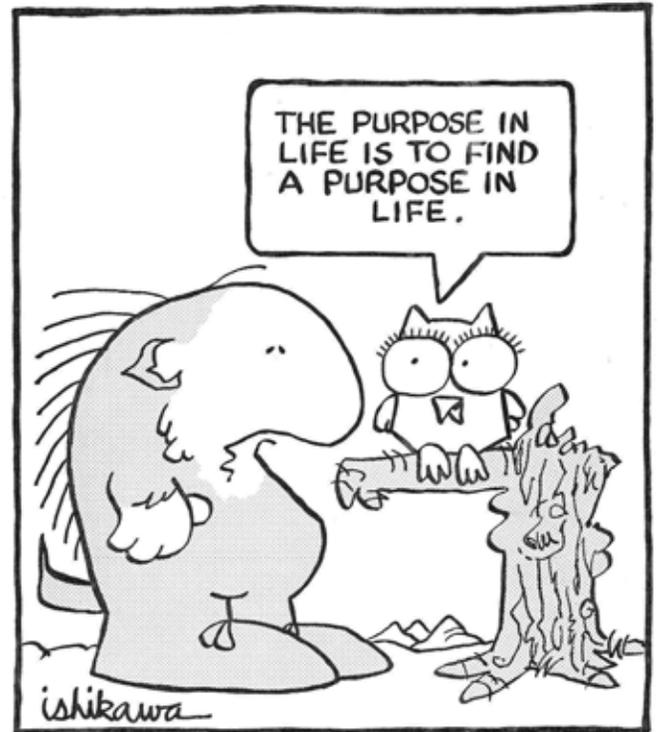


Notification to our Facebook Friends

Wings-a Grief Education Ministry

now has a public group page on Facebook which is primarily for posting the quarterly ELetter, Education Events, Support Group dates, and public speaking events. We recommend you join this group for appropriate announcements to stay in touch. Additionally, our regular Wings-a Grief Education FB page continues.

Look for Wings-Grief Education Events & Eletter on Facebook—and join the group!



*“To know the road ahead,
ask those who are coming back.”*

W Grief Tip: **Your companions are like buttons on an elevator. They will either take you up or they will take you down.**

Relationships and connections with family and friends often change when you have experienced the death of a loved one. People you expected to be supportive for you may not measure up to your expectations. And, surprisingly, someone else may rise far above your expectations and become your pillar of support during troubling times. You may want to assess what each person brings to your grief experience at the time. It may be necessary to disconnect with certain individuals for a while as you heal your grief. Not everyone can be empathetic especially if they have never had a life experience that challenged them the way your grief affects you. They may not be able to walk that journey with you. In time, as you heal, renewing your friendship again may be appropriate.

Reader Feedback



WHAT DO YOU THINK?

WHAT DO YOU WISH SOMEONE WOULD HAVE TOLD YOU ABOUT GETTING THROUGH GRIEF?

WHETHER THIS IS YOUR FIRST EXPERIENCE WITH THE LOSS OF A SIGNIFICANT LOVED ONE OR YOUR SECOND OR THIRD, YOU WILL LIKELY DISCOVER THAT EACH CAN BE DIFFERENT. YOU MAY THINK YOU KNEW THE BASICS OF COPING, BUT ARE SURPRISED BY YOUR CHANGING EMOTIONS. FRIENDS OFTEN CHANGE. PEOPLE SAY THINGS THAT ARE HURTFUL. YOU MAY HAVE FEELINGS OF GUILT, ANGER AND REGRETS WHICH HIT YOU UNEXPECTEDLY. GRIEF MAY MAKE YOU QUESTION YOUR FAITH. AND, AT TIMES YOU MAY FEEL LIKE YOU ARE GOING CRAZY. THE FACT IS, GRIEF OFTEN TAKES YOU BY SURPRISE. WHAT DO YOU WISH SOMEONE WOULD HAVE TOLD YOU BEFORE YOUR LOSS THAT MIGHT HAVE PREPARED YOU FOR THE ROAD AHEAD?

Each death is different and so too, is the grief process. However, I think the main difference has to do with how meaningful the person was to you. Obviously, the loss of a co-worker is much different than that of a spouse. For a very close relationship, I believe it might be helpful if someone is told that grief often gets much worse before it gets better. At first you are in such denial and shock that you aren't even thinking clearly. Then you are so busy with details of the funeral etc. that your brain hasn't even had time to contemplate the loss. It is when all the action is over and the "normal" routine begins again that the real depth of the loss starts to sink in. The finality of death and the reality of the huge void left to deal with starts to settle in. The year of firsts is a raw one. First birthday, anniversary, Christmas etc. After you get through the brutal year of firsts, it will get better. You will already know you have survived it once, so you can do it again (and again). Not that any of this is easy, but the raw open wound heals a little more as each year goes by. If someone had told me that, I'd not have been so scared at how god awful the year of firsts was.

Marjorie – Clarence Center, NY

I wish someone had told me who needed to be contacted about my loved ones passing including people/companies. People/companies don't know your loved has passed away. It seemed to take forever to notify everyone. As time passed, it was harder emotionally the further it got from my dad's death.

Kim – Naples, IN

I think the biggest surprise for me is the overwhelming loneliness. I keep crazy busy with friends, family and synagogue. I also have lots of chores to do around my property. But when I come home or when I stop moving, the loneliness rushes in like the tide. And I was told by a girlfriend who lost her husband 4 years before Jay and still didn't grasp the enormity of it. I am still finding it very lonely.

Donna – Merrill, WI

That you learn to manage grief; that you never get over it. Everyone's grief is unique.

There is no right and no wrong. Nothing can prepare you for an unexpected loss.

Doris – Colorado Springs, Colorado

I wish someone would have told me that when I thought I had been through the grieving process, that it oftentimes starts anew at the sound of a song, a beautiful spring day, or a special moment you have that you'd like to share. Grief is not a single event, but a process that may take several years. It's ok to cry even after several years.

Micheline – Wausau, WI

Honestly I don't think there's anything anybody can tell you. Everybody's grief is different. For me, Norm was my main support system and I lost him. Yes, my brother is only 2 hours away and our oldest lives in town here, but Norm was here all the time. What I would really tell people: you get through it day by day and breath by breath. There's going to be times you're begging just to hold on and those times are when you are fighting your hardest be gentle with yourself. Do not, under any circumstance, let people tell you it's time to move on or get over it. Because there is no moving on, and there is no getting over it. You move through it the best you can.

Lisa – Wausau, WI

Continued on page 9

WHAT DO YOU THINK...

Continued from page 8

I had to learn over time that taking one day at a time makes a difference. To quit looking ahead to plan the future while the pain is so deep...just be here now. I also wish that people would reach out once 6 weeks passed. It was like the pain was supposed to end or worse yet, never happened. Even now 7 years later since my husband died, it would be nice to have someone ask what life is like now instead of me always being responsible for bringing up the pain. I wish people had acknowledged what I knew...that grief never ends. We learn how to live with it, it softens and rears its head when triggered but I will go to my grave missing him.

Mary –Madison, WI

I think of what my sister in law, who had also lost a daughter, wrote on one of her cards, after we had lost Pam. She wrote: “The hole in your heart will always be there, but in time, it will become smaller and the edges a bit smoother”.

At the time I thought there was no way this could happen, as I could not possibly see how it could get any “better”. Now that it’s been almost 6 years, we understood what she said was true. The grief remains and Pam is so missed, but that hole is a little less deep or painful.

Gale – Schofield, WI

This is a tough one for as you said each grief is different and most important each grief is unique to the individual. I was surprised that those closest to me

THOUGHT that I was fine after a few months after the death of my husband of forty years. I wish I knew about how people will say hurtful things to you even though they didn’t mean to. It is hard to have friends and family stop asking how you are doing.

Remember someone’s loved one on special days. It will not make them sad if you call or stop in for a visit. This will help you continue your grief journey. I am wiser now and can tell people who are close to me that you will never “get over” certain deaths. Things will change but there will be days when

you think you’re right back where you started. Allow your feelings and don’t try to stuff them. Give yourself permission to take a break from daily routine and spend time with yourself. Don’t stop inviting a friend to gatherings just because your partner has died. You’re still alive and need friends more than ever.

I could write a book but it seems to have all been said already. Don’t isolate yourself. Volunteer. Start new traditions for holidays as you keep old ones. It’s OK to pamper yourself.

Anne – Goodyear, AZ

How all encompassing it is...or how grief doesn’t end, but it doesn’t stay the same either. Or don’t be surprised if all of your friends disappear. Or be prepared when everyone treats you like a child, telling you what to do, how to live your life. That it will shake your faith to the core, but it

will return, but it may not be the same. That your life as you knew it will never be the same but you will adjust eventually and build a life that you can live.

Kay – Oakwood, OR

I wish someone had told me that every life has meaning and death is an inevitable part of life. Sometimes it strikes out of the blue and all you can do is hold your breath, hang on and cry. Sometimes you can anticipate death and face it head on. Either way, allow yourself to cry. Talk about it. Name it. Say the word. Don’t sugar coat it. Talk about the road beyond. But always remember the Universe is Love and every life, no matter how brief or long, has meaning. Find the change in you, born out of this death, grounded in Love, and embrace it. This is a gift of the Universe.

Karen – Woodstock, GA

After losing a child, I wish I would have known from someone else who had lost a child how lonely and painful it would be for the next year, but that as time passes, that pain would go away and would be replaced by happy and wonderful memories of my child.

Patty – Wausau, WI

FOR OUR NEXT ISSUE: *What do you think?*

Watch for our “What do you think?” question for our next issue in your email in about six weeks. Our readers input is very valuable to our readers; and we welcome your response.

Send your response to nanwings1@gmail.com. Please limit your feedback to about 250-300 words.