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How Long Should Grief Last?

by Harold Ivan Smith

Editor's Note: In this book, Griever Ask—Answers to Questions about Death and Loss, by Harold Ivan Smith, (published by Augsburg Press) he lets his audience know the value of questions and encourages the bereaved to ask any question. He believes "the greatest tragedies are unasked questions." There are no easy answers and some answers may not meet with a reader's satisfaction or sensitivity, he admits. Follow along with this particular segment and read his book to find answer or at least very plausible possibilities to the questions you ponder.

Smith writes: Too many individuals distance themselves from the questioning process with a "Don't go there!" Sometimes a look or a tone of voice discourages a question. Even those who deal professionally with dying, death and bereavement may have a fear of death that shapes or limits their openness and their answers. A professional credential does not bestow immunity from death fears. Grievers quickly learn the consequences of a premature question or a question that makes a comforter uncomfortable.

How long should it take to get over a death?

It depends. Grief is an individualized experience of a particular loss of a particular relationship. Suppose a mother of three adult children dies after a battle of cancer. Biologically the siblings had the same mother, but emotionally and relationally they had different experiences. The mother

may have been closer to one child; she may have had a favorite (or a child may have assumed Mom had a favorite). One of the children may have been more of a caretaker during the mother's illness. Moreover, some of the siblings may have anticipated the death; they may have been handling anticipatory grieving since the diagnosis or since the reoccurrence of the disease. These siblings may assume they had a head start on "getting over" the death.

It takes as long as it takes. Grief theorist J. William Worden cautions, "Asking when mourning is finished is like asking how high is up." He further explains: One benchmark of completed grief reaction is when the person is able to think of the deceased without pain. There is always a sense of sadness when you think of someone that you have loved and lost, but it is a different kind of sadness—it lacks the wrenching quality it previously had.

My friends say I should be over my grief by now. What do I say to them?

You are grieving your loss in a "get-over-it", "move-on-with-it" world. Many individuals assume a grief should last about thirty days. Some of your friends may have never experienced the death of a close family member; they have no real understanding

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NAN ZASTROW
Co-Founder,
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When the bluebird starts singing...again

It's time...time to watch for the first bluebirds to find their way to our yard. I'm sure they won't disappoint us. Mid-March, and our bluebird houses are cleaned and made ready for early occupancy. We seldom have to put out the "For Rent" sign, because we've been blessed to have returning couples find their home (or at least friends or offspring of last year's family). It's a ritual that bears repeating because the reward of watching them all summer long is special to me.

I'm not sure what my attraction to bluebirds is. Other than blue being my favorite color, there is nothing else about them that sets them apart from other vibrant birds. For some reason, the bluebird's presence provides me with soothing peace and hope. They remind me of spring and that is the tonic of true hope. Spring—when new beginnings seem more possible than any other time of the year.

Over the years, my husband and I have watched bluebirds build their nests and raise their young. We've seen baby bluebirds perched on our deck railing as

mom began teaching them how to fly. We spotted a bluebird on the sill of our new home construction keeping vigil after we discovered building materials stolen from the work site. We've witnessed flocks of them flying south in the fall when it was time to relocate for a while. We are drawn to their song, graced by their beauty, and pleased to see their reflection as they scoot by our window.

Needless to say, the bluebird seems in-tune with our life vibrations. But the most extraordinary experience ever was the key to fantasizing that they were a harbinger of hope in our lives. I wrote of this experience in an archived issue of the original Wings magazine. A bluebird fell down the chimney of our fireplace into the fire box. I could hear the anxious chirping of the bird when I came home from work and discovered her there. It was the second time. Only a few days before, my husband helped me rescue her from the firebox. I was sure it was the same bluebird—not an accident—but rather a message or sign of some sort.

Home alone, I was determined to rescue her. I begged the bird to trust me, as I pondered how I would set her free. Instinctively, I knew that I could frighten her. In doing so, she would fly out of the firebox and expedite her escape randomly throughout the

entire house anxious to find a way out. I wasn't sure how I was going to manage this release, but I had a plan.

I took a white dish towel, hoping to scoop her up in it and let her out the windows I opened. She didn't cower, this time, when I slowly opened the door. Our eyes met as one would scrutinize the countenance of his or her captor. But there was something more there. I would describe it as "trust." It reminded me of the merging of souls when you look your newborn in the face for the very first time and feel the incredible blessings of God's wonders. You feel responsible for this being and you have great hope for her life. You want to nurture and protect her—and make life "right". As brief as this moment was, it was there.

The bluebird in this situation made no attempt to fly away, but allowed me to safely transfer her from the towel I used to cradle her to the open window...where I set her free. It was an incredible experience for me and one I won't ever forget.

Each spring I am reminded of that day thinking ...how the bluebird was grateful to be free. When she flew away, part of my soul went with her. I felt we had bonded and there was something "special" about our

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When the Bluebird ...

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meeting. It was an early spring day very much like the day my son, Chad, chose to be free and go Home. The bluebird flew to her mate and perched in a tree not far from the window where she sang. It reminded me of Emily Dickinson's words: "Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul. And sings the tune without words. And never stops at all."

Is there any wonder why I am attracted to bluebirds? We've all heard the phrase "the bluebird of happiness". To me, I think "the bluebird of hope." She is a messenger of spring. Spring is a messenger of hope.

On April 16th, it will be 19 years since our son, Chad, died on a spring day. It was

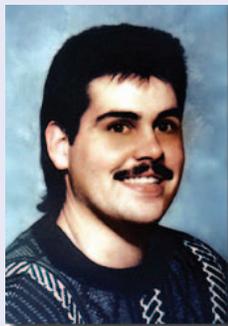
a spring day when winter still reigned and didn't offer the hope that our early spring days are bringing us this year.

But that year, just like every year, the sunshine followed and the clouds turned to hope—even though the bluebirds came later that year.

Grief, death and sorrow could not rob me of the beautiful moments in my son's life. I remember his spirit. Full of fun and laughter. Independent and strong. Teasing and happy. Cautious, but courageous. Proud and patriotic. Dreamer and realist, always hoping for positive change. It's this spirit of Chad that lives in me. A reminder of him, forever. His spirit lives in my soul and is my

messenger of hope. So each spring I renew my commitment to continue the work I've chosen to do since Chad's death.

I'm already waiting. Waiting for the bluebirds to inhabit the homes we've prepared for them. Waiting for them to give me a new burst of hope. They've been faithful over the years. I can't believe they would let us down this year. Somehow they will find us. It's early yet. I may be impatient, but I will watch and wait. I need that sign that winter has passed and new hope is on its way. I need to believe in spring again and all its possibilities. It will come. I will know its spring....when the blue the bluebirds start singing again!



*Because he lived,
I will remember,
Because I remember,
he will never die.*

*Chad. E. Zastrow
December 4, 1971 - April 16, 1993*

Where Were You God?

An Inspirational Story

Me (in a tizzy) : God, can I ask you something?

GOD: Sure.

Me: Promise you won't get mad?

GOD: I promise.

Me (frustrated): Why did you let so much stuff happen to me today?

GOD: What do you mean?

Me: Well I woke up late.

GOD: Yes

Me: My car took forever to start.

GOD: Okay....

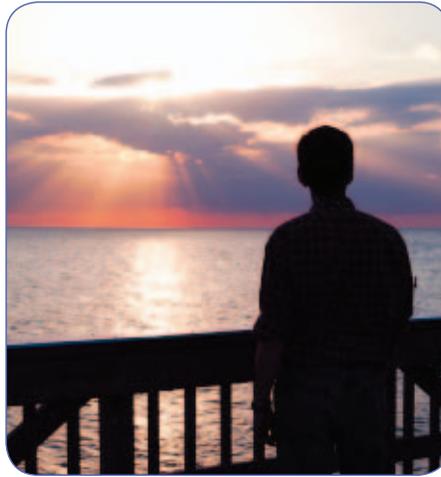
Me (growling): At lunch, they made my sandwich wrong and I had to wait.

GOD: Hmmm...

Me: On the way home, my phone went dead, just as I picked up a call.

GOD: All right.

Me (loudly): And to top it all off, when I got home, I just wanted to soak my feet in my foot massager and relax, but it wouldn't work. Nothing went right today! Why did you do that?



GOD: Well let me see..... the death angel was at your bed this morning and I had to send one of the other angels to battle him for your life. I let you sleep through that.

Me (humbled): Oh...

GOD: I didn't let your car start because there was a drunk driver on your route that might have hit you if you were on the road.

Me (ashamed):

GOD: The first person who made your sandwich today was sick and I didn't want you to catch what they have, I knew you couldn't afford to miss work.

Me (embarrassed): Oh.....

GOD: Your phone went dead because the person that was calling was going to give a false witness about what you said on that call, I didn't even let you talk to them so you would be covered.

Me (softly): I see God.

GOD: Oh and that foot massager, it had a short that was going to throw out all of the power in your house tonight. I didn't think you wanted to be in the dark.

Me: I'm sorry God.

GOD: Don't be sorry, just learn to trust me.....in all things, the good and the bad.

Me: I WILL trust you God.

GOD: And don't doubt that my plan for your day is always better than your plan.

Me: I won't God. And let me just tell you God, thank you for everything today.

GOD: You're welcome child. It was just another day being your God and I love looking after my children.

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.

How Long ...

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of what you are experiencing. Focus on your grief. In the future, when your friends experience grief, as they will, your example of taking as much time as you need to work through your grief will encourage them to do the same.

With some friends, you may have to be direct, saying: "Let me tell you how the idea that I should "be over it by now" sounds to me. In fact, you may be doing them a big favor by having a straightforward conversation with them, so they realize how their words affect others.

Will I have to live with this pain for the rest of my life?

My friend, whose eighteen-year-old son died thirteen years ago concluded, "It doesn't get better—it gets different." The pain will change early in a particular grief, the pain and confusion dominate. But if you "dance" with the pain and pay attention to it; you will learn to live with the pain.

The real question is, "What will you do with the pain?" "God's role," according to Harold Kushner, "is not to protect us from pain and loss, but to protect us from letting pain and loss define our lives."

Someone told me I need to do grief work. What is grief work?

Grief work is paying close attention to grief. Grief work is the necessary psychological and spiritual energy you must expend to integrate the loss—or the latest loss—into the story of your life.

Grief work focuses on a simple question, "Now what?" Or to restate: "What do I do with the life I have left to live?" Or, "How do I live meaningfully without (name of the person who died). Grief work is about reflection, journaling and prayerful

conversation with God about the future—a future that has been altered without your permission. Grief work is about participating in grief groups and learning from the experience of others. Grief work is talking about your feelings with a bereavement counselor. Grief work is not about "getting over it and moving on with our life."

Many people want to do something about their grief. The wiser guidance is, "Do something with your grief."

Is it wise to "keep busy" and to get back to a lot of activities?

In January 2001, Jean Carnahan from Missouri, was appointed to fill the senate seat her deceased husband, Mel, won in 2000. A plane crash had killed not only her husband but also a son and close family friend and aide. Senator Joseph Biden of Delaware approached his new colleague at the well of the senate chamber after she was sworn in. He offered this advice. "Work, hard work. It's the sure path to healing." Biden had a keen experience of grief. His first wife had been killed in a small plane crash on election night in 1972 when he won the Senate seat.

Variations on this advice are being offered to thousands of grieverers as you read this book. "Back to work" is something of a litmus test, the assumed proof of a completed, "successful" grief. Some of the most common advice mumbled in funeral homes is "Stay busy!" Unfortunately, many grieverers use work and activities as a way of dodging the pain of grief.

Grief, however, has ways to get your attention—your full attention. Give yourself and others in the family repeated permission to ignore the advice to "keep busy."

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How Long ...

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What is grief recovery?

We often use the word grief recovery as a financial or medical term. You recover from a bankruptcy or a plunge in the value of your stock portfolio. You recover from an accident, from trauma, from a heart attack, or from a bowel obstruction. But, you do not recover from a death.

For many in this culture, "grief recovery" is a polite euphemism for "getting over it." Used in this sense, the term is a clichéd oxymoron that most grieverers are too polite to challenge. Over the last two decades, grief has become increasingly medicalized. Adults often turn first to a physician for help. One hundred years ago, a griever would have sought out a minister, priest, or rabbi.

I do not believe in recovery from death as in the euphemism "grief recovery." I believe grief recovery is a process and an expectation. I agree with Bruce Vaugh, who says, "What we need today is not grief recovery, but the recovery of grief, meaning not recovery from grief, but the recovery of grief. He defines grief as a "process in which we learn how to go on loving someone who is not longer there."

(This article contains excerpts from the book Questions Grierer's Ask by Harold Ivan Smith. He will be our guest presenter on April 12-13, 2012 in Wausau at the Spring Seminars. This book along with a selection of other books will be available.)

We Walked Together



We walked together, you and I,

A mother and her son.

We had hopes and dreams for tomorrow,

But tomorrow didn't come.

We walked together, you and I.

We talked, we laughed, we loved.

We shared so many happy times

And for that, I thank God above.

We walked together, you and I,

But only for a short time.

For all too soon it ended

Leaving broken hearts behind.

And even though I miss you,

More than words can say,

I thank God that I got to walk with you

Every moment of each day....



Author Unknown

How To Connect With Wings:

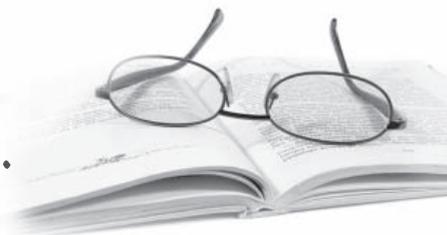
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Wings is a non-profit, charitable organization dedicated to grief awareness through education. We welcome your donations, in any amount, to support the ministry of Wings.



From the Archives

Stories worth repeating...



Honoring the Loss of a Small Child Traditions, Rituals, Customs and Belief

All losses have one thing in common, your life is not the same as it used to be. When a loss happens, we are numbed with shock and our feelings overwhelm us. In an effort to honor the life of the person who died, you can create a ritual which is a symbolic way to express your feelings.

Here are some ideas of things you can do to make the funeral service special for a small child:

1. Include siblings in the funeral service. Let them speak or read a poem, or share a memory.
2. Allow a sibling or friend to write a letter or place a special item in the casket.
3. Older siblings may wish to be pallbearers. It is a memory of honor they can take with them.
4. Some people take videotapes of the service. While this may be painful now, later it might be comforting.
5. Select music, songs, or poetry that is appropriate to the deceased child. In this case, children's music tells its own story.
6. Read a "children's story" about understanding death or grief. Invite the young children at the service to come to the front while it is read. This works also at a grandparent's funeral when small children are present.
7. Bring stuffed animals and children's toys or special items belonging to the child like a favorite blanket. New toys or gifts could be donated to charity.
8. Balloon releases are a special tribute and a ritual that can be performed at a service or anniversary of death. Butterflies and doves are also used for this ritual.
9. Have a sundown ceremony at the cemetery. Or consider a candlelight service. Use a child's bedtime prayer as your theme.
10. Purchase a special item like a necklace, bracelet, or angel figurine that you can keep as a reminder of your loved one.

If you didn't do a ritual at the time of your child's death, that doesn't mean you've lost the opportunity. Anniversary dates are an excellent time to express your feelings. As your grief heals, your expressions become more creative.

We'd like to hear from you about rituals or memorial services you've attend for a child. If you are willing, we will print your responses.



Be Good to Yourself – A Care Tip



Running Away?

When you feel like running away, allow yourself to feel scared just for the moment. It's normal to feel overwhelmed after loss. Know that the solution is not to move to another city, another job or another relationship. First you must heal the inner self, or your problems will just move with you. Seek help in the present from someone you can trust and begin putting your fears to rest.



Taking It With You

There once was a rich man who was near death. He was very upset because he worked hard for his money and he wanted to take it with him to heaven. So he began to pray that he might be able to take some of his wealth with him.

An angel hears his pleas and appears to him, "I'm sorry, but you can't take your wealth with you." The man implores the angel to speak to God if He will bend the rules.

The man continues to pray that his wealth will follow him. The angel reappears to inform the man that God had decided to allow him to take one suitcase with him. Overjoyed, the man gathers the largest suitcase he could find and fills it with gold bars and places it beside his bed.

Soon afterward the man died and he showed up at the Gates of Heaven to be greeted by St. Peter. St. Peter, seeing the suitcase, says, "Hold on. You can't bring that with you here."

But the man explains to St. Peter that he has permission and asks him to verify his story with God. Sure enough, St. Peter checks out the story and comes back. "You are right. You are allowed to carry one bag to heaven, but I am supposed to check the contents before letting you through."

St. Peter opens the suitcase to inspect the worldly items that the man found too precious to leave behind, and exclaims, "Gold bars! You brought pavement!"

Understanding Grief Spring 2012 Seminar

Presented by Wings - a Grief Education Ministry



Harold Ivan Smith

Harold Ivan Smith, is a grief specialist at Saint Luke's Hospital, Kansas City, Missouri, and the Carondelet Medical Institute in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. He is recognized as a Fellow in Thanatology by the Association for Death Education and Counseling. He has also received the Distinguished Service Award from ADEC. Harold earned the doctorate from Asbury Theological Seminary and the EdS from Vanderbilt. He speaks internationally to griever, grief counselors and educators.

A community seminar for grieving families

Juggling your Losses in a

"Get Over It and Move On" World

Thursday, April 12, 2012  7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Free of charge and open to the public

In today's society, the bereaved are pressured to "get over it" and "move on". Loss challenges our assumptions about life. Add to the death of a loved one, other losses such as job, health, self-esteem, relationships, roles, etc, the bereaved person begins to feel overwhelmed. Multiple pressures at one time threaten your ability to cope and to mourn. Learn how to live with co-losses and find strategies to face the troubling world around you.

A Seminar for Clergy, Hospice, and Others Who Care for the Bereaved

How to Heal Grief in a "Jerry Springer" Family

Friday, April 13, 2012  9:00 am - 12:00 noon

Cost: \$40

Today's families are unique and non-traditional in a number of ways. Death may be especially challenging if the family is dysfunctional or traditional familial grief support is absent or impaired. Individuals may grieve for what was, and for what never was, or never will be. Stress may be intensified by inadequate resources. Grief rituals that were once relied on may fall short in helping families torn apart by their differences. In this seminar, practical information will be shared to help survive or assist when healing grief is negotiable.

NEW LOCATION

★★ in 2012 ★★

Both seminars will be held at

Holiday Inn & Suites Cedar Creek

1000 Imperial Avenue
Rothschild, WI



*For information or a
program brochure contact:*

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