



HOW A FORTUNE COOKIE CAN HEAL GRIEF

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After the death of a loved one, family and friends console us by using the familiar expressions, “Just call, if there is anything I can do.” “Please let me know if I can help you in any way; I’m here for you.”

How many of us ever act on our family or friends simple invitations? Most of us won’t because we don’t want to bother them. Or maybe we aren’t really sure if they meant it. For most of us, we just hear empty words. We may feel too proud (or too stubborn) to ask for assistance. We feel we have to “tough” out this grief and do whatever needs to be done, alone. As a result, sometimes we conclude that friends and family have turned their backs on us during our grief.

A woman in our support group was very intuitive about what happens to friends after the funeral. She told everyone who asked, “Call me in three or four months because I’ll need you more than ever then.” Typically, a month or two after the funeral is over is when our shock begins to release and reality sets in. It’s a time when we feel more vulnerable than ever before, and many of our family members and friends have gone on with their lives. We may become so absorbed in our pain that we fail to recognize what others may be trying to do for us.

Because we can’t see beyond our immediate pain and isolation, what we may miss are the moments and demonstrations of caring that family and friends have been trying to put into our lives. A good example occurred at a seminar several years ago. During an open discussion, a woman remarked, “Nobody feels like me; nobody else has lost a spouse.”

I asked the audience to raise their hands if they, too, had lost a spouse. Over half of the group raised their hands, and the woman saw the number of people just like her. In her grief, even in a room of other bereaved, she singled herself out and felt that no one grieved as deeply as she did. When I saw her months later, she reminded me how eye-opening that was for her. She finally realized how many people were experiencing loss and how many had been trying to help her with her pain.

Can you recall intentional random acts of kindness from others since you began your grief journey? Think about the incidental meeting in the grocery store when your friend came toward you to talk, rather than disappearing down a different aisle to avoid meeting you. Think about the piece of cake on your desk, the flower, or the basket of garden vegetables at your door when you didn't expect them. What about the phone call or the invitation for lunch? How about the tickets that became "available" for the football game or community concert? People do remember, and they do try to help us. Sometimes we just don't see the sun behind the clouds.

In our Wings Holiday Program (*How A Fortune Cookie Can Heal Holiday Grief*), we decided to change that. We challenged participants to receive *Twelve Gifts of Hope* from family and friends just by offering them simple little fortune cookies in an Oriental take-out box filled with messages that could deliver hope. Tucked into each cookie was a note asking for the family or friend's understanding and help in healing their grief. The person receiving the cookie wasn't supposed to reveal what fortune they received or when and how they carried out their task of giving hope. They were just asked to be creative and willing.

We gave the bereaved person a list of the *Twelve Gifts of Hope* so they might be more cognizant of how they could be gifted. But it was up to each of them to recognize that someone cares, and to begin looking for their healing gifts.

The Twelve Gifts of Hope project is not specifically about a fortune cookie; it's about the concept. A fortune is a message of words of wisdom or prophecy and in Chinese it means "good luck." Seldom do you get a bad message in a fortune cookie. Instead, the messages offer hope. Hope is the path to healing grief. When we open a message from the fortune cookie, we anticipate that something good will happen to us.

Fortune cookies create mystery and intrigue. People respond with excitement about what the message might say and how it will apply to their lives, either right now or in the future. Whether or not we plan to eat the crisp, baked shell, we ceremoniously break it open and read the message inside. Because it is exciting for most of us to take part in such a ritual, this can become an excellent ritual for healing grief.

THE TWELVE GIFTS OF HOPE LIST

There are two ways to receive gifts. (1) Give them to yourself, or (2) Receive them from someone else. First, we encourage participants to focus on giving themselves *The Twelve Gifts of Hope*. When you focus on yourself (a necessary part of healing), you begin to practice, recognize and accept small measures and bright moments in every day. You consciously seek to help yourself heal. "You" is important because no one can heal your grief for you. Others can help, but you must be willing to do most of the work yourself.

To receive the Gift of Hope from someone else, the bereaved person was asked to be aware of someone else's random act of kindness or their attempt to help them acquire the gift of hope.

FOLLOWING UP ON THE TWELVE GIFTS OF HOPE PROJECT

Confucius said, "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand." Our project didn't end with that Holiday Program. For the next twelve months, we collected stories and periodically posted them on our website. Some were shared at our presentation at the Bereaved Parents USA conference in New York in July, 2009. You may read some of these stories at our website: www.wingsgrief.org or present a similar program in your community using our *How A Fortune Cookie Can Heal Holiday Grief*—a Program Guide available on our website.

So, what do the Chinese take-out boxes with fortune cookies have in common with grief?

- Surprises can come in small boxes.
- It's not always food that warms the heart.
- Love is spoke in many different languages.
- It's our good fortune to accept help from others who care.
- Hope can even come in the message of a fortune cookie.

As one woman told me about her experience with *The Twelve Gifts of Hope*, "The greatest lesson for me was recognizing that I had some control over my own grief. I kept waiting for that magic moment when I would wake up and my grief would be gone. I didn't expect to have to do a thing; it would just happen. When I started looking for the Gifts of Hope, I realized many of my friends had been trying to help me all along. I was resisting their offers because I felt sorry for myself. When I started accepting their kindness, my attitude improved and I was able to feel hope again."

Continued. . .

May you find:

- FORTUNES in gifts of kindness
- MEMORIES to soothe the moments
- LOVE to fill your heart
- PEACE to soothe your spirit

And may you receive all Twelve Gifts of Hope!

THE TWELVE GIFTS OF HOPE:

- Find a new place to go or someone to go with.
- Honor my wish list on a special day or holiday.
- Honor a grief burst—a happy memory of the way it used to be.
- Have a “Take care of me day.” To treat myself to something that feels good.
- Recall a cherished memory that makes me smile or laugh.
- Take time out to enjoy a hobby, sporting event or something my loved one liked to do.
- Give and receive love in unexpected ways.
- Receive love or express thanks for family or friends who support me.
- Heal my pain through laughter, music or spirituality.
- Find a new friend, a new support group or a new social activity to expand my continuum.
- Learn more about grief through books, people, classes or groups.
- Count the blessings I still have in my life.
- Give the gift of hope to someone else in need.