

Just Keep Swimming Around



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I remember growing up in a fairytale world. Our family of five wasn't wealthy, but we always had food on the table (even in lean times). We had clothes on our back (even if they were hand-me-downs), and an occasional PTA movie or two (even if it meant bringing your own popcorn.) Our home wasn't a castle, but we found laughter and fun. And there certainly was love, though as a family of German descent, affection was seldom expressed openly. Some would say we lived a sheltered life; I think we lived in the real world, without fringe benefits.

I believed that as an adult, life could be anything I wanted it to be. There were endless possibilities and unlimited happiness. I further believed that there was a prince for every princess. I believed in miracles and messages. I believed that the "good" lived long, healthy lives. I was convinced that values and actions of people spoke much louder than words. I believed money and possessions were symbols of success. I believed that success resulted from honest, hard work. I believed that "purpose" was a means to identity, not self-satisfaction.

I believed that my God was a loving God who protected his children. I believed that God would protect me from the unthinkable, and that certain things only happened to other people. I believed that life's assumptions always were true.

My philosophy of life was soft, and it was nurtured by caring people who encouraged me. I believed my philosophy could never change. It was as solid as the ground I stood on. And I carried that philosophy with me everywhere I went, tucked closely to my heart, so I would not forget that my perfect world could exist for me. I built dreams that were like beautiful castles. And I stood strong; I weathered the normal changes of life and felt in harmony with my life's plan. Problems were always coming and going, but they were manageable. I accepted them as the ups and downs of life. I found ways to deal with them, and then moved on.

That was until I experienced significant loss. Then, my world changed. My "beliefs" were challenged. Some stood firm, but others taught me that I was painfully naïve. Reality was different than I had imagined. Reality offered consequences of raw pain, unresolved grief, changed perspectives, overwhelming challenges and loss of hope. I struggled to believe that as time passed, things would work themselves out; and I would be normal again. But the definition of "normal" also changed. Significant loss interrupted my dreams, changed the endings, and caused me to doubt the philosophy that had fueled me for all those years.

I felt betrayed, distracted and subdued. I discovered that everything I believed to be true could change instantly—and sometimes, those changes were out of my control. Life was as vulnerable as the aging castle was to the forces of nature. My "whys" became intense, and I couldn't comprehend "how." I quickly determined that if I did not gain control, I would not survive. My fairytale philosophy of life crumbled, but I clung desperately to any grain of hope.

My exploration began and the challenges were humbling, frightening and sometimes crippling. Grief knows no definitive end. For weeks and months, I felt impending doom, an unforeseeable future, and a sorry story of life. I was shaken by the unwelcome realities and trembled at possible defeat. "Time heals all wounds." The often-quoted cliché prompted my defensive attitude and my "fight or flight" mode. I fought to persevere; I fought to save my sanity. I fought to survive. Time did nothing to close the gap between loss and hope. It only expanded the distance between me and those who supported me in my grief. I knew they wouldn't tolerate my lingering grief forever. I recognized that I needed to bring peace to my pain. I reached the pinnacle of feeling like a wounded victim and needed to get intimate with my problems to heal my grief.

I read: "For every fault or weakness that you lose, you have a valuable strength to gain. For every crude emotion you control, you have an opposing good feeling to experience. For every denial, a truth to be found. Part of working through the process of change is determining the problems and issues and then deciding on new lofty goals that are worthy of the effort you expend in life—from this moment forward." This became my goal, though I had no idea how I would live by its promise. I determined that I was the only one who could control what was required of me to change. This was a crucial step.

I was fortunate to have my husband and best friend as a partner in life. To share my grieving path. We could share our feelings, even if they were different. We could face the seriousness of the "loss of dreams" and what appeared to be a less meaningful future. We could discuss what hurt the most and accept that we both felt differently. When one was weak the other was strong. We worked through our loss together, and there was progress. There was no clear plan other than just "getting through."

Healing doesn't happen overnight. We absorbed everything we could learn from books, seminars and others. We had never heard of "grief work" before, but suddenly we became "graduate" students in the tasks of grief. I wrote to express my feelings. We prayed; we cried. We asked for God's help, not only to take away our pain, but to help us accept the changes and find hope. Occasionally, we slipped backward in our emotions, but each time we committed to starting over again.

The sun shines brighter again. Today, we are different people. We still build new dreams like beautiful castles. But our dreams aren't lofty visions of what might have been. We don't focus on what we've lost, but rather on what we've accomplished through our pain. We appreciate the present moment, expect happenstance, and celebrate the beauty of the past with the possibilities of tomorrow. We find purpose and opportunity by helping others through grief. We live for today and hope for tomorrow.

How did we get to this point in our grief? It wasn't easy. It came through trial and error; stop and start; rollercoaster emotions; faith and spirituality; laughter and tears; determination and hope. When one attempt to heal failed, we tried another, and we just kept swimming around. I memorized a poem many years ago (long before my grief experience) that became a mantra for that time of our lives.

Author Unknown

*Two frogs fell into a deep, cream bowl
One was an optimistic soul,
But the other took the gloomy view,
"We'll drown," he lamented without much ado.
And with a last despairing cry,
He flung up his legs and said, "Goodbye."*

*Quote the other frog, with a steadfast grin,
"I can't get out, but I won't give in.
I'll just swim around till my strength is spent
Then I'll die the more content."*

*Bravely he swam to work his scheme,
And his struggles began to churn the cream.
The more he swam, his legs aflutter,
The more the cream turned to butter.
On top of the butter at last he stopped,
And out of the bowl, he gaily hopped.
What is the moral?
It's easily found. If you can't hop out,
Keep swimming around.*