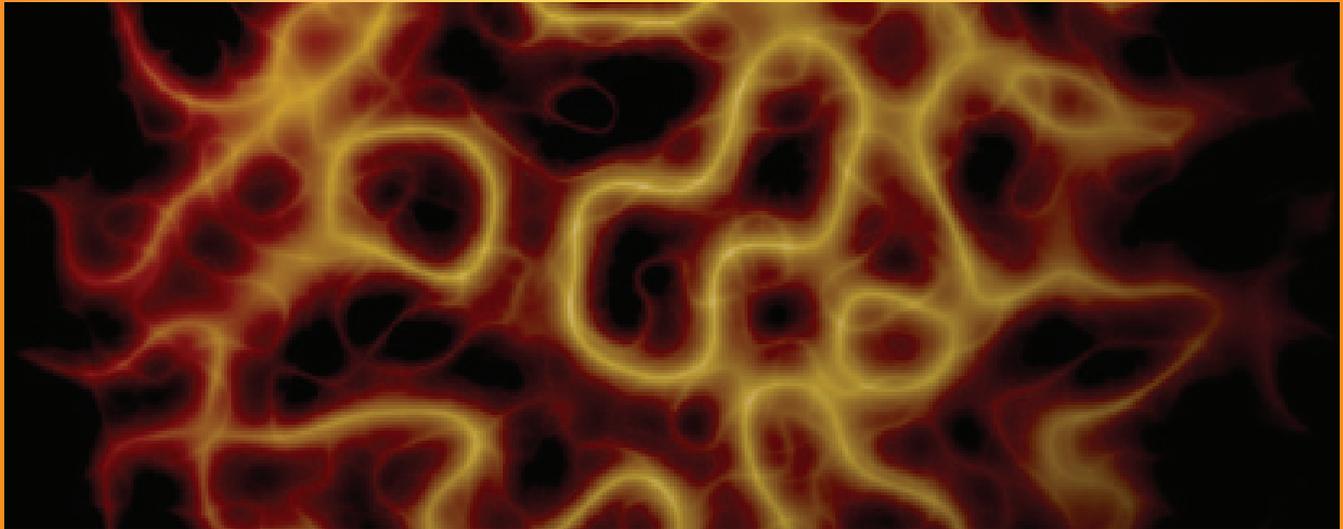


You've got the Power!

By Nan Zastrow

wings1@charter.net



Donna's spouse died suddenly. It wasn't supposed to happen, yet, it was all that she could think of as she coped to accept the reality of the event. For months, she was incapacitated by her grief, unwilling to let go of her deepest regrets and lingering pain.

Donna's reactions were normal. Many people who grieve deeply believe that grief will just resolve itself over time. Others search aimlessly for a cure. They want to believe there is some magic potion that will cure the pain forever. Some griever expect someone to set their minds at ease by saying the exact, perfect thing that will help them accept their loss. Perhaps their clergy or spiritual advisor will say the magic words that will help them heal their wounded hearts and help them move on. But more prevalent is the belief that some morning, on waking up, the griever will be miraculously over whatever it is that ailed them this long.

But grief isn't like that; it doesn't just go away. No one ever told Gary and me that we had the power to heal our own pain. Like other griever, we wanted a magic cure, the painless effort, the simple answer, the quick fix. Instead, what we found was that grief is work—and only we had the power to heal our own grief.

Grief work can best be described as making deliberate choices to re-engage in the act of living through self-reflection, social interaction, retrospect, stretching comfort zones, and rebuilding a new self image. In simpler terms, it is choosing to move on and live again. Grief work gives you the power to heal your grief. Grief work is a process of re-visiting the wounds, re-telling the story and taking a series of steps that lead to a healing transformation. Sometimes, you are doing your grief work unintentionally—you don't realize that what you are doing contributes to healing the pain! There are no text books that

teach you or coach you through the process. Grief work is often un-prescribed, undocumented, not even encouraged, and left to chance. But, oh, how essential it really is!

No one can do your grief work for you. You can have a great circle of friends who offer support, compassionate counselors, limitless invitations to re-engage, intense love of family and friends, good advice and continuous encouragement, but none of these can do your grief work for you. It's a choice you make on your own. Sometimes it hurts. Sometimes it feels as if you aren't being true to your feelings, even that you may be betraying your love for the person who died. Most times, it means letting go of the feelings that are holding you back. Sometimes it takes tears and frustration, but in the end, the choice is worth the ambivalence, and the outcome generates freedom. So where does the power come from? It comes from within, often subtly at first. Slowly, you begin to feel a day with progress. You might actually think to yourself, I can do this. That becomes the first step.

There are signs that you are doing grief work. Many times you will not recognize them as signs that you are working to heal your pain, but continued progress and exhausting all the efforts will generate the power you need to heal your grief.

- You talked yourself out—at least temporarily. You told everyone the story of this loss in your life. You reached deep into your soul and felt the emotions of life before, during and after your loved one's death. The painful parts became less obsessive, and you focused on the cherished memories of good times, instead. Your story became important to you and you told it every chance you got.

- You cried so many tears that you can't imagine that there could ever be another tear left. Yet they are there, and they come at times least expected. You recognized that tears honor the special relationship you had with your loved one who died. They are the raindrops of life's adversity.
- You wrote away your feelings until there were few words left in your spoken language to express grief and pain as deep as yours. So you used the same words over and over again in different ways, knowing that putting them on paper relieved and comforted the heartache.
- You searched for answers to all the mysterious questions of "Why me? Why him/her? Why now?" and you realized that no one can answer these questions for you. It's not easy to give up the search, but eventually you accepted that it is time to ask God, "What's next? Where do I go from here?" And you trusted in His plan.
- You made peace with your family and friends; you gave up the expectation that they would have unlimited capacity to love and listen. While you are grateful for their patience and support, you have learned that the time has come to stand on your own in this changed world. You also have allowed them to go on with their lives.
- You quit beating yourself up with flimsy excuses. Yes, maybe you shoulda, and you probably coulda, but even if things had been different, excuses can't change a thing. No matter what decisions you made, they can't bring back your loved one. You have accepted that you did the best you could at the time.
- You made peace with God even though you didn't understand. Even if you still feel cheated, you recognized that God holds you in His embrace just like He holds others who experience painful loss. His son died, too. Life and death are human experiences, and you have placed your trust in His continued care.
- You have stopped holding a grudge against another individual who may or may not have been responsible for your loved one's death. You have recognized that emotions that run deep require forgiveness. You know that this is the only thing that can truly set you free from your anger. Forgiveness allows you to go on, but it doesn't release the blame.
- You challenged the legal system and whether you won or lost, you've done all you can do to achieve justice in a battle that doesn't bring your loved one back. But you believe the work you've done gives some degree of satisfaction. Now it's time to move on.
- You walked a thousand miles in someone else's shoes and felt their pain. You wouldn't exchange their grief experience for yours, because grief hurts no matter what, but you have learned that you can deal better with your own loss. You also recognize that a mile walked in your own shoes is a better fit.
- You experienced every "grief burst" and turned each one into new-found joy. A grief burst is a sudden memory that is triggered by a sight, sound or feeling that initially brings sadness. In time, the sadness can be replaced with fond memories of happier times and pleasant stories. You used this

power in more positive ways to share the life of the person who once was a part of you.

- You realized that the books you've read and the speakers you've heard have intimate knowledge about what you are going through, but they can't do the work for you. They can only give you hope that life will be better again. Healing your grief is up to you.
- You acknowledged that others in support groups are struggling with similar feelings and disbelief. You joined a group to make a connection and you have felt stronger because of that connection. But you've also learned that the journey is taken by each of us, individually. You honored their support and moved on.
- You ventured out to console a friend who had a recent grief experience. While you're not a seasoned griever, you are compassionate. Compassion allows you to accept the pain they feel—and something reminds you that just being with them will help them through this difficult time.
- You took up a worthy cause or rallied around a principle that expressed your intimate feelings. Now, you feel good when you help others. This is superior grief work! You've come full circle now.
- You honored your new identity. You know you have changed. Now, you recognize that the role you held as spouse, parent, sibling or friend may have changed, but it has made you stronger, wiser, more compassionate. You are proud to be you. You have learned to honor the "new" you.
- You invested in life again. You opened your heart and mind to new possibilities, new adventures and new ideas. You feel inspired. You recognize that "purpose" begins with attitude and desire to honor what you have been through, and it is a mantra for handling the road ahead.

Grief work is tedious. Grief work is mourning. Grief work is something we give little thought to, but each of us tries actively to work through the toughest days and make choices that lead to reconciliation.

For most of us, grief work reaches its pinnacle with a new interest and curiosity about the meaning and purpose of life. The inner spirit has awakened. We search and seek out answers to the impossible. By doing so, we realize we are all part of something much greater than ourselves. We exist in a universe of many dimensions and our lives are minuscule in the grander scheme of things. Many of us become religious, spiritual, or both. We are compassionate about living life with dignity, purpose and meaning.

You've subscribed to grief work without intentionally signing up for any class or filling out any application to be a life-member of something good for your health and well-being. You are healing. You've got the power!

Excerpted from the book, *How a Fortune Cookie Heals Grief*, Nan uses the simple fortune cookie to weave a modern parable of life and teach the value of attitude and choice in grief work. The fortune cookie demonstrates the concept of HOPE. Available from Centering.org or wingsgrief.org.