Preparing to Die

Practical Advice and Spiritual Wisdom from the Tibetan Buddhist Tradition

A guide for those facing death and for their caregivers, including teachings from the great masters and useful advice on navigating end-of-life issues

Andrew Holecek

It can often be our own "stuff" projected onto children that removes them from proximity to the dying and death. We should be careful what we pass on to our offspring. Young children quickly pick up on our fears, making them their own. Our own relationship to death is key, as is how we prepare the young, emotionally and spiritually, for any encounter with the face of death. I believe young children are more connected to the world of spirit whence they came, and so their relationship to death is less complicated than ours. I have seen young children lovingly touch and talk to the dead without inhibition. With my own children, it has been important to talk about death as a transition that represents an end to the physical we know, but not an end to the essence of the being that we love. I believe that children (and adults) who have a spiritual framework for understanding the nature and meaning of death are able to integrate it in a healthier way.

There is nothing more life affirming, nothing that wakes us up more to our mortality, than bearing witness to death. It is a gift and a privilege to work with this threshold, and it is my belief that societies with more open and honest relationships to death operate less from a basis of fear. Our society still keeps death in the closet. But with the growth in hospice, we might now begin to reconnect to death as a natural part of the cycle of life. Caring for our dead is a final gift to our loved ones—and to ourselves.[12]

Working with Grief

by Kim Mooney[13]

A student asked his teacher, "How do I develop a spiritual life?"
The teacher replied, "Think of everyone you know, of all ages and states of health, dying at random intervals."

We think of grief primarily as sadness and emptiness, but it is far more than that. Grief is alchemy—it cracks us open and creates opportunities for transformation. It insults the mind, taxes the body, and flings us into unpredictable contradiction. Grief exploits sorrow and wonder to break open our hearts. It offers us a glimpse of the ineffable and a doorway into our own profound spirituality. It upends our values and priorities and leaves no part of us untouched or unchanged. Grief makes us stop.

When someone or something we love dies, our bodies, minds, and souls are pushed upon to reassess all that we hold dear. By its very nature, grief is a rending of our assumptive world. We are often surprised at how deeply

and relentlessly it persists, long after it has gotten old. And when we are deeply grieving, we can barely remember that there is more to the process than the pain.

A man once told his teacher, "My wife has died and the agony I feel is so deep, but I'm using my meditation practice to go down into myself and get through this." The teacher replied, "If you can still hold that thought, you're not down there yet."

In all grief—no matter what the loss—we swim in paradox. In one moment, our hearts lift up all the poignant richness of our insights. In the next moment, what was meaningful last week is now tiring. In the middle of a conversation, we may be suddenly overloaded and edgy. Relationships and things that were once compelling may now feel suffocating. Even our personal stories may feel vacant. Sometimes our vulnerability feels like a portal to something powerful and incomprehensible. At other times, we can't remember why we walked into the next room. We may be in agony, or furious, or not care about anything. Sometimes we are sad and relieved at the same time, or maybe we are strangely numb, only to suddenly plunge into a sea of wrenching emotions. And there are moments when we are brought to laughter, infusing our memories with song and color.

There are times when our feelings do not seem to be at all connected to our thoughts. To our amazement, we are caught in moments of soft wonder, as though we almost knew something we can't quite remember. Often we don't know how we will make it through. We may feel differently by tomorrow, or this afternoon. Nothing is quite right, and maybe we don't want to be here at all. We become grief soup. No wonder we often think we are going crazy.

Our brains, which consume a huge amount of energy, are not our best friends when we are in loss. They tell us to think, feel, and behave normally when we cannot. Then they shame us because we cannot. Our own tender experiences butt up against opinions from friends and families, the media, and our own enculturation about how it is supposed to go. Our bodies then carry the brunt of all the psychic energy it takes to grieve, as well as the anxiety and effort it takes to cram our grief into our ideas. No wonder we may have days when it is hard to get out of bed, when it is hard to open our eyes, when eating, sleeping or even breathing seems too much.

Often without warning, grief ebbs and flows, over days, months, and

years. We think we are "getting better" only to be retriggered by a smell, a memory, or nothing we can put our finger on. We may find ourselves distressed, far beyond when we think it is acceptable. The shock wears off, and finality sets in. Time clarifies our experience, repeatedly giving us broader contexts in which to hold all our understandings. Then, in the distance that comes with time, the deafening silence can be full of a different kind of pain, and perhaps a seasoned gratitude and perspective. We need to remember that grief isn't an illness. It's a journey that changes us into people whose eyes are now more open.

We add to the very real burdens of grief by imposing our judgments upon them and by accepting or imagining the opinions of others instead of trusting our own. My favorite teaching story, the consummate description of full-bodied grieving in two sentences, is this:

A person, in conversation with a widow whose husband had
died seven months earlier, said incredulously, "You're still grieving?"
And the widow replied, "He's still dead."

Of the myriad expressions we may find, crying, anger, blankness, yearning, regret, sleeplessness, irritability, and sorrow are only a few. No wonder grief is marked by bone-deep exhaustion. It takes an incredible amount of time and psychic energy to digest what is happening, and to be completely rewritten as a person. In the middle of grieving, we are disoriented, skinless, unfiltered, and raw.

The profound exhaustion weakens our grasp on the illusion that life will stay as we wish. We may see into the number of ways we are not truly ourselves, or recognize the things and people that do not nourish us. We remember that death is not a distinct and occasional event but an unrelenting companion of life. With confusion and relief, we see that there is nothing absolutely true or untrue; grief unhinges our certainty about all manner of things. Here is the Buddhist "beginner's mind," or the Christian mystic's *nescivi*, meaning "to not know." Here, without defenses or explanations, is the chaos in which the world was born.

All of this is not simply a gaggle of wretched opportunities given to us to learn more about surrender. Grief is our human birthright, and it is our most powerful spiritual ally because it is embedded in the fabric of daily life and has the power to break our ego. The word *grief* comes from the Latin *gravis*,

meaning "heavy," but it signifies the human condition that weights us to the earth and insists that we will not transcend the human experience without living through it. We pay mightily when we try to mask, ignore, or diminish it. Whether we choose to recognize it or not, grief is our messiest blessing.

Stephen Levine, a master teacher on death and grief, impressed upon me the recognition of both our personal grief and the grief of being human, and the need to hold both as sacred. "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" seems another reminder of our obligation to honor our singular earthly life as much as we do our collective spiritual existence. While each person's grief is unique to that loss, that time, that person, the process of constantly letting go is unique to no one in a body. Clinging to one view or the other creates more pain than there needs to be, but when we allow ourselves to grow into this dynamic tension—between the individual and the collective, between the human and the spiritual—we discover the unfamiliar comfort of being home.

We can live through grief with grace, and we can help others to do so, but not alone. We gain purchase by opening to the wisdom of community. We carry on by remembering that we are all on the same journey, whether we are in the fire at this moment, have been, or will be.

For me, one of the most powerful visual metaphors for how community can help in grief is that of a plasma globe, the kind sold as a table decoration. It is a clear plastic globe about the size of a soccer ball, and when you turn the electricity on, lightning bolts explode freely and randomly inside the globe, constantly shifting direction and intensity. It is chaos, beautiful and endless, raging with no structure or pattern. But the globe, completely transparent, provides the perfect calm container for the cosmic storm within.

We can be the transparent holding environment for the chaos of another's grief. We can be the steady reflective human community—not closing in to intrude or redefine, to suffocate or impede the chaos—but also not pulling away to draw attention or energy from the natural course of things. Just holding, simply witnessing, and not assuming that we know how anyone should be, we can collectively create the opportunity for each person to manage the integrity of their solitary grief. In this conscious witnessing there is a willingness to be of service and a faith that what is happening is natural. We also bring endless patience and vast curiosity, which help us open to a deeper compassion for self and other.

In the Dagara tradition in Africa, grief rituals can go on for days and involve the whole community. In this culture, where self, family and com-

munity are all of equal importance, each death brings the whole community together to release anything old or new, creating a globe in which no one carries forgotten or unattended grief. In utter abandon, people are enfolded into a ritual space that works effortlessly in service to the deepest and most authentic forms of grief without flinching but does not admit the emotional distractions or mental constructions that we often interpret as "being in the chaos."

In the face of the absolute desolation of grief, our caring looks almost too simple. We help the grieving take care of their precious bodies. We bring them food, help them keep their environments calm and uncluttered, and remind them they need exercise and sunlight and sleep. We run errands for them, give them massages, or bring them a glass of water.

We listen, with curiosity and without supposition about their journey. We listen while they tell us about who and what they loved. We listen while they explore their inner world, and allow them to repeat themselves over and over, as each new heartbreak or awareness arises and seeks expression before finding understanding. We keep listening months and even years later, as they put color and meaning to their story, and as they move with how it is changing them.

We listen without needing ourselves to be part of the story, and we leave vast space for the grieving person to interpret their own experience. We remember not to distract them, and avoid giving advice about how to manage. We remember not to draw comparisons to other losses, or presume that we could understand what they are going through. And we try to discern when to ask how they are and when to simply bring our willing hearts into the room. We remember that sometimes there is extraordinary kindness in silence, and let people know we don't know what to do but we'll stay anyway.

We have enough courage to let them cry and rage and be dull without wanting them to be different—to let them be unpleasant and to not back away. We offer them permission to take care of themselves and reflect forgiveness when they cannot, and we validate the intensity of their reactions and assure them that they are not crazy. We allow them to hyperventilate into their own disequilibrium while in our hearts we breathe the words of the mystic, Julian of Norwich, for all beings: "All will be well and all will be well and all manner of things will be well."

And at some point, with consent, we lend our presence to help the grieving re-enter the world, trusting that they know how to find their way. We do all this from a seat of knowing that we carry within each of us the account of

living with grief from every human throughout all time. We recognize that all losses, small and grand, teach the same lessons and that they feel merciless when we are alone but manageable when we are in community.

For each grief, no matter how leprous or how gently dispatched, is a pearl of impermanence held in our hand. With each experience—ours or another's—we learn more about how not to be surprised, insulted, or outraged by its demands. We learn more about how to accept grief's trials and challenges and discover that it holds precious gifts. We discern insights, awarenesses and secrets that we must then birth. And if we are able to recognize, respect, and protect grief in ourselves and others, then when it comes time to let go of our own bodies—whether we are frightened or ready—instead of being completely bewildered, some part of us will say, "Oh, this again. I know how to do this."

This time, like all times, is a very good time, if we but know what to do with it.—Ralph Waldo Emerson

Working with Grief from a Buddhist Perspective

by Andrew Holecek

The Relative Approach

Because of the ferocity of grief, most bereaved people just want to survive the anguish and don't care about anything but getting through the day. After the death of my mother, I felt like I was injected with molten lead. Everything was so heavy. All I wanted to do was sleep. Many Buddhists, however, want to know how to work with these intense emotions from a spiritual perspective. The following are merely guidelines.

Death is the end of a body. It is not the end of our relationship with the person who died. In many ways, healthy grief is learning how to establish a proper relationship. Bereavement is a death-within-life and may be the closest thing we experience in life to the bardos themselves. Once again, learning about the bardos not only helps us with death itself but with the many painful transitions of life. Christine Longaker writes:

> In this transition [of grief], we are suspended between the past and the future. We may feel extreme anxiety and loss of control