

Grief (3 of 5) Grief With and Without Stories

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Grief is a huge topic. It deserves a lot more attention than I can give in five 15-minute talks. Grief is something to respect and allow for. We want to make room for grief to unfold without complicating it unnecessarily. There's no shame in grief. There's no pride in grief.

With grief, many factors come into play. One factor is the stories we associate with grief. The stories might not be so conscious to us, but they can be very simple. The story might be that the person we loved is no longer here, and we won't be able to share the things that we shared before. That is true, and it's a story. Saying that it's a story does not diminish its value or show disrespect for it. The story is a kind of processing and functioning of the mind that operates in addition to the simplicity of the present moment.

We don't want to overvalue the simplicity of the present moment and dismiss the stories. We live in stories. They're a huge part of our life. The stories have meaning. The death of someone can mean that person won't wake up in the morning anymore to make coffee for me. That was a ritual of love by someone who cared, and now there won't be that caring for me anymore. So meaning has been assigned to that event.

Sometimes the stories relate to strong, unresolved grief that still somehow lives within us. New grief comes along and the stories and meaning of that grief can take the form of very powerful emotions and feelings.

When there's grief, it's sometimes very useful to talk to someone about the story: the events of it, the expectations and hopes that have been shattered. Talk about what that relationship meant for you and the value of it. Talk about the metaphors you relate to it. What are the beliefs that come along with your grief?

It is valuable to talk to someone about your grief or write about it because that allows room for you to understand and give voice to the stories and meanings that are operating. If the stories are not seen and understood, then they operate kind of underground. They can have momentum and strength that might influence your emotions, attitudes, and beliefs about what's happening in unconscious ways.

Bringing things to light is part of the function of living a wise life. If we're dismissive of grief and think that we're not supposed to grieve – that it's wrong to grieve – or we have to grieve quickly, then we are not allowing ourselves to grieve in our own way. We are not allowing for grief in a way that brings light to all the different aspects of it. Sometimes it may be useful to talk to someone who is not too close to you, not caught in some of the same dynamics.

In mindfulness practice, we do something that may be unusual: we recognize what's happening. This brings things to light. We are seeing and learning to identify all the different parts of our grief: emotional, physical, and cognitive (the beliefs and stories). We bring to light our beliefs and stories that might be somewhat unconscious or subconscious and understand what's going on.

Meditation is a wonderful time to discover how much the mind is spinning around and around, maybe saying the same thing over and over again, and we start listening more deeply. What's the mind saying? What's going on? It's like you're listening to someone else in order to hear deeply. What's going on underneath the words?

When we're spinning the same story, we can listen deeply to ourselves. The meaning of the story might be very personal: "My life has changed in this way, and I can't do that anymore." The story might be about the other person or about family or society: "Now I won't be a part of that." So we can bring that to light and let it be. Let it live there and see it clearly.

So that's part of mindfulness practice. Maybe a more radical and surprising aspect of mindfulness practice is to temporarily – not forever and not to dismiss its importance – put the story to rest. Temporarily put aside story-making and meaning-making. Put aside the flow of thoughts and ideas that come with grief. This is not meant to dismiss any of the grief. But the story-making mind, which repeats itself over and over again, can interfere with a deeper process of grief that brings something to settle, open, and unfold. It's like giving your grief its freedom –

freedom from the meaning-making mind, the story mind, the mind predicting the future, the mind constantly reviewing the past.

Not to shut that part down, but to put it aside; let it drift by. Don't live in the thinking. Of course, you're going to be thinking anyway. You can't just flip a switch and turn it off. But recognize the story and meaning as it is and compost it in the body. Feel what's happening in your body in relation to the story. The body is not a story. It might be impacted by the story, but the body is not a story.

Keep coming back to feel the breathing, feel the body, feel the embodied experience of what's happening as you're grieving, and make room for it. Make more and more room for it. Part of what meditation is doing is expanding our capacity to hold difficult emotions and states of mind. Feel it in the body as best you can for as long as it's useful, for as long as it doesn't spin out and become too challenging. If you start panicking or feel like you're drowning, at that point, maybe go for a walk, talk to a friend, or do something different. Do some *mettā* meditation. With grief, you want to moderate yourself.

The point is for there to be an alternative to living in the stories and the meaning-making mind – to allow something deeper to unfold. There can be a kind of freedom that comes from that. We can't really free ourselves from the story and meaning-making unless we learn to recognize it first. Recognize it as something that's not wrong or bad, but it's something we don't have to live in all the time. There is an alternative.

So with grief, what's so powerful about this stepping away from the meaning-making, it allows for the deeper aspects of the heart to have more space. It allows for the deeper emotions to unfold without new data coming in that keeps us spinning. It allows us to kind of drop into some deep aspects of who we are.

I'd like to propose that grief is connected to the beautiful depths of the heart. Sometimes grief is connected to our love. To be able to put aside the story and the meaning-making, we can sometimes settle into where the love is.

Sometimes grief is connected to a desire for safety or hope for a better life. That gets complicated when we start telling ourselves stories about what that's going to look like. But the very idea of wanting a better life is a part of self-care, a part of self-love, perhaps. To settle back and feel that self-care, without the complications of stories that may or may not be realistic, is to drop down to something deeper and more present here.

When we sit and meditate and keep putting aside our thoughts, letting go of our thoughts, and learning the art of that, that serves us well in challenging times like grief, where sometimes that's a trigger for a lot of intense aspects of the story and meaning, purpose, and memories. It churns up expectations, anticipations, and hopes that have been shattered. We might not have even known we had them. So to let go of them.

A wise life is one in which we understand the stories we live in. Some stories we receive from our culture, our family, and our religion. They are contingent; they are not absolute. They are stories. They are meaning we assign to ourselves. We respect that for sure, but we also learn how to put them aside.

So I define grief as the pain that arises in the emptiness associated with loss. And here, rather than filling the emptiness with words, stories, and meaning, the idea is to let the emptiness be there without the story, without meaning, without a lot of thoughts and ideas. And see what happens. Maybe that emptiness will become large. Maybe that emptiness will be freeing. Maybe that emptiness will make room for something deep inside of yourself.

To do this work of letting go of the stories and allowing the emptiness to be empty is to allow the contemplative life, a meditative life, to flower, to settle in a deep, deep place, a place that is deeper than the surface mind.

Perhaps, you'll have an occasion to have grief in the next 24 hours. See what it's like to sit with the grief, putting aside the stories, the ideas, and the meaning of it. Just sit with your experience. See what that's like for that emptiness. See if it allows for something deeper and more profound to happen. Thank you.