

Letter to the Caregiver of the One who is Grieving

There is nothing like death and grief to trigger us into an emotional memory of helplessness and anxiety. It is out of these two emotions that we rush to try to fix, help or control the person grieving into being happy, and “getting through it, and moving on with their lives,” so that we do not have to feel the intolerable suffering of our own helplessness and fear in the face of inevitable and intolerable suffering and loss. Or alternatively, instead of giving advice, we feel mute and distance ourselves, not know what to say or how to be with such sadness. Consider for a moment what you did as a child when your mother or father were sad, upset, depressed, angry, hurting... Did you, in your anxiety try to help them or absent yourself? Whether we took flight from our feelings of discomfort or tried to ease them – it was a perfectly adaptive response to the developmental age of childhood.

The feelings of helplessness and fear within us *are feelings that go all the way back to childhood*, when we were small and dependent. We have buried, put a lid on, and pretended these feelings are not there by being effective, helpful, giving advice, fixing and rescuing others. These feelings go back to when we were very, very little ourselves and felt the helplessness of our youngness, smallness, ignorance and dependence on others to care for us. If our need for love and attention, acceptance and presence, were not met as children, there was grief, loss, sadness, shame, fear and pain and so we learned to try to control others into meeting our needs, by being good, loving, helpful...

And yet, now in the wake of your loved one’s loss, there is nothing you can do to take away their pain, that is evoking your own emotional memory of fear and anxiety.

So, what do we do? We first acknowledge our own old, old feelings that are being activated, or triggered by the pain our loved one is experiencing. We see that this is alive in *US*. And it is this wound that needs to be acknowledged. It is this suffering that must be attended to, listened to, embraced with our adult capacity for compassion, and be accepted fully.... “I feel scared and unsure, anxious and helpless....” I can be present to this in myself without having to fix it.

Can you see, that here-in lies the answer? As you accept and embrace your own pain, hurt, fear and loss, you are learning to be aware, to listen, to enquire and be fully present to your own suffering. You are developing the capacity to be the non-anxious, all loving and accepting one who can then do this for someone else, by learning to do it for yourself.

Instead of defending against your own pain and pretending it is not there, you are surrendering to the reality of your childhood experience. As you can do this for yourself, so you will be able **to be** this for your loved one. Instead of teaching them all the same defenses you have used throughout your life to try to “fix” your own feelings, you will develop the capacity to BE present to their feelings with love and acceptance.

What other defenses did you learn to “fix’ or put a lid on your own feelings? To be busy, distraction, addiction, caretaking, rescuing, fixing, helping... there are thousands of ways? None of them are the same as being lovingly present to the pain and suffering you endured

and that your loved one is experiencing right now. Do you want to teach temporary defense, or do you wish to be a presence of calm, loving acceptance, that can just sit quietly with another's tears and anguish? Can you just say, "I am right here, feeling this with you."

Feeling the agony with someone, is to be com-passionate (suffer with). Or you can use the defensive platitudes and advice that we learned as children, "Just keep busy, time heals everything," or "You need to take care of yourself – what are you doing to make yourself happy," or "look for the blessing in your suffering." I am sure you can all think of the inane ways in which you have been given advice as to how to distance from your feelings, or in your discomfort, have found yourself saying them.

To Be loving, instead of "doing" something out of fear, requires some deep digging to gain self-awareness. This takes courage. Quick superficial fixes do not work in the long run. True Presence requires hard inner work.

So instead of trying to get away from feelings, practice identifying them, being with them, being interested in them, discovering how they got to be there in the first place, find out what interpretations you have made out of them, and what unmet needs cause them, remembering and putting back together the puzzle pieces of your own life. We have to be able to face our helplessness before we can awaken to love, and to BE that love in the face of helplessness and suffering.

I am not suggesting that you just Be love – love also requires action, but now your choices about how to meet the other person's needs, will be informed by what you know and are aware of that would really have met your own needs as a child.... namely interest, listening, being seen and heard, presence, acceptance.... What you do will come from a place of awareness, love and respect. It will not be imposing your defenses and decisions on someone else.

And paradoxically, the more we can accept and surrender to the pain, the quicker the process of moving organically through the grief will be.