

My personal experience of Grief and Loss and learning to live in the NOW.

Marian Staunton



I thought I knew what grief and loss felt like. From past experiences of death, knowledge gained, trainings and the privilege of being with others who were grieving, to date I knew I could empathise with others as they shared their thoughts and feelings. I knew and had felt before now, the different stages according to; Elizabeth Kubler Ross; of shock/numbness, sadness, depression, anger and acceptance. I felt confident and comfortable sitting with, listening to and accompanying clients as they journeyed their paths into, in and through their grief and loss experiences.

Then I received a phone call which was to change my life and the lives of everyone in my family. My brother not yet 60 had just

received a diagnosis of a terminal illness; he had colon and advanced liver cancer. No option for surgery or chemotherapy— only a short time left. A remote possibility to participate in a trial drug and only if he were a suitable patient, *which he did*, giving him and all his family valuable time to live, grieve, accept, time together and to complete all he and we could complete before his physical life ended. Feelings of shock, numbness, fear, sadness, powerlessness, along with horror and disbelief erupted and swirled in my body and rushed to the surface, all at the same time, leaving me feeling overwhelmed.

Trying to comprehend that in a very short time my brother would no longer be in this realm was an

enormity almost too great to bear. With acute awareness I watched his life's energy ebb and flow from health to sickness over and over again until such time as the dreaded death itself became a reality. I witnessed my brother's physical strength weaken and his body deteriorate and at the same time his inner spiritual strength develop and grow. The grief and loss stages became constant unwanted companions. I watched his failing health and his huge determination to live and at all times feeling the loss of whom I had known him to be. My view of life and the after-life changed many times as I travelled my journey through this time. My past experiences of death were of little comfort now as I witnessed my brother just one year older than me die a little more each day. **I felt utterly powerless.**

Day and night brought my emotions, feelings, thoughts swirling and crashing into each other— all vying for their own space. Words like no hope, too advanced, drugs, procedures, tests, and results very quickly became the new normal in every day vocabulary. Despite all this an overall feeling of hope was ever present and cushioned a stark reality that kept us all going. Being “in the moment” took on new meaning and gave a sense of power in an otherwise overwhelming situation.

Together we began to reflect on life, and the sharing of memories

of our times together- when we played, laughed, disagreed, fought with each other, were in competition with each other, all became bitter sweet. Cramming as much of these times into each day along with visits, phone calls, texts, chats with him and other family members, when we travelled the length of the country to be with him was difficult but, I had much gratitude that I could do it.

I truly valued the times when he was capable of interaction and response and when he was not able we sat with “presence and stillness”. *Now I could be truly with me in the moment and without any effort.* A treasured and privileged space in which I was storing memories that “has” to last a life-time. Journeying the four hours home after each hospital visit was often the most painful because the reality of how he was on that particular day could now be really felt and also a glimpse of the future I did not wish to see. His deteriorating health, his struggle to stay alive, his-physical pain, weight loss, at times not able to engage left me with a harsh reminder that the inevitable was going to happen. Nevertheless, I wished I could hold onto **the now** and that time would stand still. Denial, (another of the grief and loss stages according to Kubler Ross), served me well and was most welcome and had a very valuable place in my life. During these trying times my heart felt sore and heavy. Tears of deep sadness brought some relief. I witnessed my brother living and dying consciously, choosing how he wanted to live the last few months he would be on this earth and in so far as he could choose, how he was going to die. He rarely talked about his diagnoses or dying. His response when asked “how are you?”; was always the same, “sure what can I do – I’ll do what the doctors tell me and I could have

dropped dead from a heart attack or be killed on the road”. He would then talk about life and living and remembering the past became part of all our conversations. Not sharing about how he felt and/or death definitely helped him to live and die in his own way. Kubler Ross states “that we all live, grieve and die in our own way”. Journeying and walking with “another” took on new meaning and staying present was all that was needed.

As I watched his enthusiasm in telling a story it was obvious that he enjoyed and got great satisfaction at recalling and remembering events in his life so far. Happy, funny, difficult and challenging and above all rewarding times – his view and experiences in life. I so so treasured those times together.

His dreams, projects, aspirations for the future now took precedence. He continued to plan for his family’s future, a future he knew he would not be here to experience. No time now for him to wait or have patience. This time he was in a hurry and it seemed his joy was in being able to share with them his wishes for when he would no longer be in this realm with them. Always a worker- a hunter gatherer, he planned and arranged turf for the following winter- organised the refurbishment of the range he would not see again but, it was sufficient now for the job to be completed. This was a huge change for him given that he had always been task orientated and would always see a job through to the end and then stand back and admire it. Now the planning for some-one else to do it was enough and he “was in the moment”. In this I am reminded of the stage of “chaos” according to “Kubler Ross and others” when thoughts feeling emotions are all experienced together with no acceptance of something that is very fearful. It is

a time when powerlessness is truly felt and to engage in life and doing gives some sense of order and power. Next he decided to organise a really big project the replacement of the septic tank at his home. He had already thought about this job but, had been waiting for “good weather, longer and brighter days and a few weeks off work”. Now there could be no waiting and he organised and arranged this job from his hospital bed and in between tests and procedures. The project that normally would take a number of weeks maybe even months, was completed in record time. He had a purpose at a time when I have no doubt he often wondered about life and purpose. Through the seven months from diagnosis to his death he engaged in a crash course of guidance and advice for his two boys telling them, many things about his life, how to go forward with theirs and how to look after each other and their mam. During this time I and other family members who were present felt an overwhelming and deep sadness and an acute awareness of the reality of his limited physical time on this earth. Giving life and whatever energy he had to his plans seemed to bring comfort, satisfaction and fulfilment. Grief, loss, failing health, spiritual, profound, were all together in each moment. Straightening his affairs – the making of his will also became part of completing his life’s journey and creating closure, before he travelled on. For me, each day was welcomed as a new beginning and at night I felt a grief that we had one less day as sister and brother in this lifetime.

His refusal of certain pain relief medication which would leave him sleeping more and less conscious, was his daily choice and decision. He wanted to and did live his life to the full and up until his last day.

True to who he had always been there was work to do and he was completing his journey in his own way. His power to complete and leave in his own conscious time was comforting to witness despite my sadness and I had immense gratitude that I could spend more time connecting with him, before he slipped into unconsciousness and eventually coma. During those times I saw again the man and brother who lived life to the full and to the very end. At the same time I was living my own parallel journey of feelings, emotions and thoughts all taking on their own form and expression. I was letting go and experiencing all the stages of death before it happened. Life and death were now as one, with a new and most profound awareness, “that one is the opposite side of the other just as a coin has two opposite sides”. A deep and real sense of spirituality surrounded and enveloped me and I could feel it within and without. Watching him fade away whilst, he was living life as fully as he could, brought comfort. His body dying and his soul fulfilling its purpose was sad, frightening, humbling, and a privilege to be part of. Mourning for the past, relishing in the present, longing to hold onto the now and fearing for the future we would not have together in this realm. This heightened awareness gave birth to an acceptance of “this is it” “the now” is all I and each one of us has. His grief and loss was for the death of his physical body, death of the future that up until now he thought he would have and most of all leaving his family. Mine was for my brother as I knew him. I was letting go of the healthy man and very soon I would also be letting go of the sick man, and letting go too of future family times together.

The ordinary everyday happenings and activities helped during this time. I had an acute awareness

of everything. Sounds seemed louder, smells, taste, touch, were all heightened, lights were brighter, my work as a therapist became more meaningful and real. Love and support from family and friends felt supportive, comforting and wholesome and gave profound meaning to living and being in the now. I felt at a very deep level the meaning of living in the NOW. Awareness of my own limitations and energy levels had to be considered and right alongside this was a fear for my own mortality and of course the fragility of life.

I had thought I knew, and felt deep within my psyche, what it felt like, to be in the moment but, now I have been brought to new depths in my own being. All this brought me to trust and acceptance- trust in the process, trust in my journey; my brothers journey, in all our journeys- trust in the purpose of life, trust in the length of time each of us will have in the physical realm- trust in our souls journey. Trust became my new and close friend. My brother was just one year older than me. As he was slipping away from this life, this world, we all joined hands around his bed and included him in our conversation as we chatted about life, told jokes, laughed and cried together. It was only when he did not take his next breath that I knew he was gone- a beautiful death and a really spiritual time- one moment **life** and the next moment **death**.

Two years on I am still grieving, facing the many stages of grief, now that my brother has died. It has not been an easy time. It certainly is not the same as other losses which I have experienced throughout my life. Acute awareness of my own mortality surfaces often. The loss of my sibling has left me feeling, vulnerable, sad, questioning life and life's meaning repeatedly. And in the midst of all my feelings, emotions

and thoughts is, “a deep and heart felt loss for my sibling-my brother”. I miss the ordinary things – the phone calls, the banter and healthy teasing, our times together around mine and his kitchen tables- where we drank copious amounts of tea/coffee and one meal ran into the other. The day trips to a local town where we always bought something perhaps a jacket which he liked to wear especially when it was bought in our home county – a dress or piece of jewellery for me. Precious visits, times, fun and craic that can never be repeated now. A **gift** in his death for me is “to live life to its fullest”.

Before he died my greatest fear was that our connection to each other would be severed forever but, throughout the past two years of grieving I have also experienced a parallel process of “loss and at the same time connected”, connected in a way I had not felt during his life, and his to me, is our spiritual connection. My memories remain special and will last me my lifetime. ☺

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Marian Staunton works in private practice as a psychotherapist and supervisor in Castlebar Co Mayo. Having completed her training in 1998 Marian has continued to pursue various studies in her search for deeper meaning and in 2007 she completed her training in Holotropic Breathwork™ facilitation and Family Constellation facilitation in 2013. Her interest in trauma has led her to offering supervision and support to Rape Crisis Centres in Mayo and Sligo.

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