

Preparation for Loss and Grief

All of us feel loss and grief around many of our life's experiences – from the toddler who erupts into a tantrum when a favorite toy is taken away, to a teenager experiencing the end of a friendship, to any of us coming to terms with the death of a loved one. The global COVID-19 crisis has brought many losses – illness, loss of jobs and connections with family and friends, loss of enjoying normal life.

The losses associated with the pandemic may have brought up issues of grief and loss that we have experienced in our own past. Each time we face a new incident resulting in feelings of loss or grief, it can remind us of a past event. Each time we grieve, we may struggle with feelings both new and old.

Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's *On Death and Dying* is a groundbreaking work on the grieving process. The book's "five stages of grief" are a standard in grief groups: **Denial**, a state of shock or "preferable reality" where we blunt our response to keep from being overwhelmed; **Anger**, a feeling that "life is unfair" or "why did this happen to me"; **Bargaining**, a willingness to make changes to return to normal; **Depression**, hopelessness on realizing that life will not be the same; and **Acceptance**, gradual adjustment to new realities. The stages don't occur in order, and not everyone will experience them, but they are ways to come to terms with loss and move toward healing.

"Grieving is Hard Work," from First Unitarian's Grief Group, discusses the complexities of grief:

- When we grieve, we not only grieve the loss of the person, but the loss of the plans and opportunities we had with that person. We lose our vision of the future.
- The sense of being destabilized by our loss ... understandable and normal, but very uncomfortable ... reminds us of other times in our lives in which we were involved in transitions, chaos, or stress.
- Grief and anger often go hand in hand. We are angry, at God, Fate, or just plain angry, at what we are going through and how hard it is.
- One thing grievers lose for a while is the things that gave them joy ... holidays, good memories, family rituals, because now those things remind us of our loss.

Sometimes losses can lead to personal growth. In his meditation on "The Illusion of Loss," Panache Desai mentions losses we may suffer – "a divorce or a change in your financial circumstance or the perceived loss of an opportunity or an illness." When losses occur, says Desai, "life is teaching us ... the loss free[s] you of something that you no longer require." The idea is that by seeing experience as "a continual journey of letting go," we can see the real truth in our selves.

Our responses to loss, however, are individual. For some losses, our spiritual task may be to figure out how to get up in the morning, put one foot in front of the other, keep on living and loving, and begin to see sunshine again. How we may have processed incidents of grief in the past can help us get through each new time of change. Life's transitions, despite the feelings of grief and loss they may bring, are an opportunity to pause and reevaluate our life and return to what is real for us.

To live in this world / you must be able / to do three things: / to love what is mortal; / to hold it / against your bones knowing / your own life depends on it; / and, when the time comes to let it go, / to let it go.

Mary Oliver

To be human is to know loss, and indeed, the more fully human we are, the more loss we will know and the deeper we will feel the losses; for the more we love and care, the more we have to lose ... And when we lose someone or something we love, our response is grief. *Rev. William Murry*

Suffering ceases to be suffering in some way at the moment it finds a meaning. *Viktor Frankl*

Practice all the letting go's you can. From letting go of your thoughts in a meditation practice to letting go of your attachments to the things and relationships that leave our lives constantly, practice letting go. Every goodbye you say is a practice for the big goodbye. Don't let a day go by without letting go of something! *Rev. Christine Robinson*

The pain we are in reminds others of their own losses and resolved transitions, and that may be so painful or frightening for them that they can't support us, even if they want to.
Grieving is Hard Work, a handout from First Unitarian's Grief Group

And we may start to feel that this is a time of always letting go, of one thing after another after another: Our waistlines. Our vigor. Our sense of adventure. Our 20/20 vision. Our trust in justice. Our earnestness. Our playfulness. Our dream of being a tennis star, or a TV star, or a senator ... We give up hoping to read all the books we once had vowed to read, and to go to all of the places we'd once vowed to visit. We give up hoping we'll save the world from cancer or from war. We even give up hoping that we will succeed in becoming underweight – or immortal. *Judith Viorst, Necessary Losses*

The sobering reality is that just when we need to work together, we can't be together. Social distancing and quarantines mean that we can't affirm our human ties by meeting together in groups large and small ... So we must learn to think differently. What can I do, right here, today, to preserve this world? I can affirm that one day this will be over, and that there will be a world in which my great-grandchildren can live and love. I can show kindness to myself and to everyone I meet ... I can realize that others are facing far severer challenges than mine, and help them however I can. It seems so little – but if each one of us lived this way, the world would be changed. *Alice Parker*

Questions to Ponder

1. What endings/losses have you experienced in your life? Where are you in the grieving process now?
2. Have you observed yourself going through the identified stages of grief from any of life's losses?
3. What is an example of a way that grief or loss has provided an opportunity for you to reevaluate priorities in your life?
4. How has your ability to leave behind what no longer serves you helped you move forward toward healing and becoming more authentically yourself?
5. What UU principle or other spiritual teaching may be of support during a period of grief or loss?
6. What in our current culture encourages expression of feelings of grief and loss, and what works against it?

Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, think of situations where you have learned from loss or grief. The Words of the Day activity will be to complete this sentence: "One lesson I have learned from experiencing loss or grief in my life is ..."