

Reweaving our life web
by Lloyd Robertson

My friend and colleague, Jeannette Ambrose, says that our lives are like a spider's web. We spend much of our lives constructing our web and every person that we love or care about, every "significant other", is a strand in that web. Our web is both resilient and beautiful. When someone dies, a strand in our web is missing. Our web collapses.

Grieving is about reweaving our web. Strands must be shifted, new strands added. In the end, when we have accepted the reality of the change and when we have rewoven our web recognizing that change, then we resolve to continue on with our lives.

It is a natural task but it is not easy. The process includes a range of emotions: rage, guilt, remorse, sadness, depression, numbness and pain. There is no particular order to these feelings and not all feelings are present in every individual. Everyone grieves in their own way. But the task of mourning is to accept the reality of the loss, experience the pain, adjust to our loss and to resolve to go on with life.

I like using the metaphor of the cut. Psychic pain is to our mental selves as physical pain is to our material selves. Grieving is mental bleeding. Bleeding is necessary because it cleanses the wound and allows new flesh to grow. When someone close to us dies it is like a piece of us was torn or cut off. Psychologically, that is exactly what has happened. Psychologically we are not islands unto ourselves. We grow attachments with other people. When someone who was part of our mental or spiritual selves dies we bleed from that severed psychic limb. A kind of scab will form and healthy grieving will allow us to eventually form new attachments.

Rituals are important. These rituals vary from culture to culture but they all have in common the purpose of helping the individual and the family accept the reality of the death, 'normalizing' the grief, and showing support. Wakes and funerals are an important part of this process. Not everyone wishes to participate in the wake or funeral. Everyone grieves differently but everyone must find their own way to "say goodbye".

Complications can arise. For example, alcohol abuse to escape the pain of grieving may halt the entire process. The griever may never heal. Denial or refusal to acknowledge the loss will also delay the grieving process. If the loss is of a complicated nature, that is, the death was excessively traumatic as often happens when one's child dies, when there are a series of suicides, when multiple deaths occur from a tragedy, when the death was due to some silly or needless act, then the grieving process can become frozen in place. The griever may become obsessed with a particular issue or feeling and may not go beyond.

Therapy is needed when there is complicated grief and the community is unable to respond effectively. Sometimes the griever needs assistance in changing from being an immobilized victim to an active survivor, dealing with traumatic symptoms.

Sometimes the griever needs support in abiding with the knowledge that life is often unpredictable and unfair. The griever needs to realize that while life is not always fair but it is mostly predictable and he or she can do things that will usually bring a good result.

Often, when there is complicated grieving, the client needs assistance in "telling the story". Often, in remembering and sharing the griever will find meaning and direction. Even where this does not occur, the memory will remain and will remain sacred.

Counselling always involves assisting the griever in the normalization of feelings. Many of the feelings may be scary. There may be symptoms such as violent mood swings, post trauma stress, excessive irritability and sleeplessness. The griever may think that he is going "crazy". These kinds of symptoms often occur, especially in complicated grief, and must be recognized as part of the process of "reweaving the web".