Hospice Yukon

On Mourning

What is Mourning?

By Anne Macaire

Mourning [def'n]:

The process by which we adapt to a loss, for example the death of someone near and dear. Mourning is influenced by cultural customs, rituals, and society's rules for coping with loss.

Our loved ones die and we carry them in our hearts. We remember and we mourn. In simple yet profound gestures we find the ways that keep us connected to them, that give us comfort and help us to navigate the new, unfamiliar world without them.

Since ancient times humankind has mourned. For thousands of years we have found expression for our loss and grief through rituals, customs and traditions that support and enrich this experience of life passing.

Most people have a deep-rooted wisdom within themselves for mourning, turning naturally to activities that bring comfort and consolation. Mourning can be very personal and private ~ creating a simple space with a photo, a few mementos and a candle to light ~ or it can involve gatherings with family, friends and whole communities that include storytelling and sharing.

Grief may feel like numbness, sadness, anger, guilt, and sometimes relief all rolled up into one. Mourning is our way of taking everything we feel on the inside and bringing it out. When we mourn we cry, we talk, we write and find our own ways to express what often feels inexpressible ~ and it is through our mourning that we eventually find solace.

Finding our own ways to mourn can sometimes take us outside of the narrow margins of what our culture considers appropriate. We are judged for taking too long with our grief or doing things that make others feel uncomfortable. When I am with someone who has lost a beloved and they begin a sentence with "*I know this will sound stupid but…*" I am prepared to hear something sweet, sincere and genuine about their relationship.

"*I sleep in his t-shirt every night*"

"*I set an extra place at the table and tell her about my day.*"

"*It's been months but I can't wash Fido's blanket, it still has that doggie smell!*"

There are so many ways to mourn and different things work for different people. It is important for us to let go of judging ourselves and others because it is in our own individual expression that the deepest healing is brought forth.

Since time immemorial we have held funerals, but today there is a trend away from this tradition that brings families and community together at a time when it is most needed. More and more often the dying wish is a request for 'no service' because it is seen as a burden on the family. And yet often the ones left behind who want to honour those final wishes feel bereft of the sense of closure or simple sharing that a memorial service can provide.

It is heartening that many Yukon First Nations have brought back the potlatch tradition that supports remembering, mourning, and connecting with community, for all of this makes up the healing journey.

When we are hurting, whether it is physical or emotional, we heal more quickly when we are comforted. Finding ways to feel comfort and take care of ourselves can help with our grieving. Embracing our mourning is one of the surest ways to bring tenderness and compassion to ourselves and those around us.

The Wind Telephone

By Clea Roberts

Whether our grief is expressed as publicly as a giant flag waved in the sky or as privately as a quiet stroll in a forest, we know that the expression of grief is the key to our healing. Self-expression can help us to, among other things, define ourselves in the new landscape of loss, to be angry at what was taken from us, and to provide a way to inventory our blessings. The reason why self-expression is so important is because it externalizes our complicated emotions around loss. Externalizing emotions lets us see grief for what it is—something that is significant, life altering, uncontainable and, hopefully, something that will evolve and become more bearable over time.

With self-expression, we can plumb our depths and bring our grief into the light.

And in seeing our grief clearly, we can begin to understand it and to heal.

This past year, I had the honour of developing and teaching a Hospice workshop for people who wanted to learn journaling techniques for processing loss. Journaling is something that I have always gravitated toward because I find private, contemplative, self-expression very soothing. Expressing myself through journaling helps me solve problems, vent anger, build my self-awareness and externalize and resolve complicated emotions. Knowing how essential journaling is to my health and well-being, when Hospice called asking me to facilitate a journaling work-shop I was happy to volunteer. Registration opened and the class was filled with a waiting list the very same day. Clearly, Hospice wasn't alone in thinking that journaling held value as a way of processing grief. Over the two evenings we had together, I spoke to the group about the different benefits of journaling and some ways to deepen the journaling experience. I taught different journaling techniques, gave ideas on how to make time for journaling in a busy life, and provided everyone with a drawstring bag full of daily writing prompts to take away. We had a lot of group discussions, one of which focused on why we were drawn as individuals to journaling. The general consensus was that we journaled because we needed to express ourselves, and that this self-expression was essential to living a good life. And, more important than just talking about journaling, we put pen to paper and wrote. One of the exercises that really connected participants to their grief was an exercise I call "The Wind Telephone".

The exercise is named for the real 'wind telephone' (or kaze no denwa) in Otsuchi, Japan. The phone is an old, black, rotary style device that sits in a white phone-booth overlooking

The Wind Telephone

the ocean. Itaru Sasaki, a 70 year-old resident of Otsuchi, set up the phone-booth in his hillside garden to create a private space where he could cope with the loss of his cousin. The phone was never connected, but he would visit the booth regularly to talk to his dead cousin. His words, his self-expression, travelled in the only way I could imagine reaching someone dear we have lost—over the wind. The magic realism of picking up a wind telephone to talk to the dead still puts me in a state of awe—even after sharing this story so many, many times.

After the tragic 2011 tsunami that leveled much of Japan's north-east coastline and killed more than 15,000 people, the phone booth became a place of pilgrimage for people who wanted to talk to their dead relatives. It was a way to say things they couldn't say because their loved ones had been taken from them so suddenly and unexpectedly. The wind telephone became a well-known site—three years after the disaster, it had drawn over 10,000 visitors. All of these people came to talk privately—to express themselves in conversation with those they had lost.

In the Hospice journaling work-shop, we use the idea of the wind telephone to connect with our loved ones through journaling. Each participant is asked to think about a loved one they have lost, and to write them a letter. This self-expression through journaling allows people to voice things left unsaid or to articulate new insight or turmoil that has come about as part of the grieving process. With self-expression, we can plumb our depths and bring our grief into the light. And in seeing our grief clearly, we can begin to understand it and to heal. And, if there is any possibility of a silver lining around grief it is this: through our healing from grief we can grow. This growth changes us in profound ways. Through change, we can thrive in new ways unavailable to our old self.

So who would you call on the wind telephone? And what would you say to them? Has it been a long time or was it just a week ago you last saw them? Maybe you would just hold the receiver to your ear and enjoy the silence between two people. Maybe you would yell or whisper or cry or laugh. I've always valued other cultures for what they can teach us about the difficult but rewarding work of being human. And because we all, regardless of our culture, share the capacity to know love and to experience loss, there is a whole world of ways to heal from grief. If you are feeling stuck on your grieving journey, I hope you'll consider journaling (or any form of self-expression) to help you process your loss.

Spring Planting

Poem excerpt by Clea Roberts

Grief is a slow
river, never freezing
to the bottom.

*

Grief is a good
scavenger, locates

the plangent songs
of mourning

clean and white
as gulls.

*

Grief is a burled log.

Cut to length, polished
and bright, it can hold
up your porch roof
for years,

greet everyone
who comes
to the door.

*

Grief is
spooked horses
in a storm
and you can't
find your coat.

Ways to Mourn

We asked volunteers and others about what they have done to mourn the death of a loved one...the little things that helped them through the hardest times. Here is what they shared:

Because my daughter was buried on our rural property, I was able to visit her grave often. I hung a wrought iron lantern beside her, and made little beeswax candles for it. When I visited her, I would light a candle and when I got back to the house, I could see its flickering light. It felt like our special connection. It also allowed me to feel like I was 'mothering' her by providing light to her dark place on the hill.

- Katy Delau

When my dad passed away, I took his ashes on one of my favourite walks in the hills near my home. There is a spot with remnants from an old cabin that overlooks the valley where I can sit and think of him. He was never a really active guy but it is a place that I would have loved to have shown him. Now when I go for walks I stop by 'Grandpa's bench' and imagine him sitting there admiring the scenery.

- Carrie Dinn

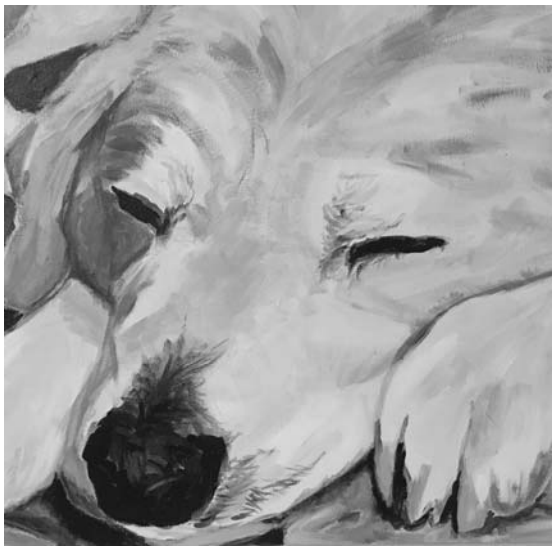
Oscar came to live with us for three brief years and died young and suddenly. It was the first time I 'got it' about pet loss and what a pet can be: compassion and love for everyone. I did the Loss & Creative Expression Workshop and made a booklet with his photo and wrote briefly about the qualities he shared with us all. Something in the creating with my hands connecting to my brain moved my healing along. I was surprised. The booklet comforts me as it sits on my kitchen cabinet.

- Barb Evans-Ehricht

When my brother was dying I made a rag quilt constantly thinking of warmth and love for him. Before sending it to him I smudged it, concentrating all my strength into seeing him and I did Healing Touch on the blanket.

When he left us I placed a square of the flannel I used to make his blanket and pinned it behind a picture of us together. When I touch it or look it I know he is in a better place, not in pain ...and in time I will be ok too.

- Christine Gray



I mourned the death of our dog Jaz by painting this portrait of her for my son, who was very close to her. It felt really good to spend intimate time with a photo of Jaz, noticing and re-creating the details of her beautiful nose and paws and zenned-out eyes, and recalling how her presence brought such a sense of peace and love.

- Becky Striegler

When I had a miscarriage at ten weeks, I bought a statue of Jizo, the Buddhist patron saint of unborn babies. When I lived in Japan, I'd seen parents dressing these statues in temples and leaving snacks and toys with them in hope that Jizo would deliver these supplies to their children in the afterlife. I always thought this was a touching way to honor the souls of the unborn, but when I found myself in the same position, I found great comfort in mothering the statue itself -- crocheting it clothes, planting a garden for it in the yard. I still make my Jizo a new outfit every spring as my way of remembering the baby who never was.

- Angela Elson

I was 32 when my dad passed away and worried that I would forget about him. So I started making a list describing favorite expressions, odd things he liked, a laugh, a smell, a funny face, or a bad habit he had to remind me of him. At first, memories were overwhelming. I cried a lot. Memories would come and tears followed. Each little memory was like pearls on a string. Keeping the list 'alive' was a good thing for me; I was not afraid of losing my father anymore.

- Sandra St. Laurent

My Brother Died

By Susan Walton

Just over a year ago my only sibling Brian died. He was my older brother by a year and eight days. I had never known life without him. Brian died of a sudden heart attack. He was 53.

One of the hardest things I've had to do in my life was to tell my mom that her first-born child had died.

Brian made his life in China. His family lived an ex-pat lifestyle with a housekeeper, a cook and drivers. When we arrived in Beijing after the 14-hour flight, it seemed we couldn't *do* anything; even making a cup of tea was taken care of by their Ayi. This meant we were isolated not only by the language barrier but idle with our emotions as well.

People came by who knew my brother's daily life more than me. I had hard feelings of being 'just the sister.' I felt I couldn't show more emotion than my mom, Li Hui or the kids. I felt stabs of guilt for not visiting more often.

For the funeral we followed Chinese tradition along with smatterings of Buddhist and Christian faiths. We lit candles and offered food, we burnt fake money on the city streets chanting "this is for you Brian."

Our own father had died when we were teenagers and this felt like history repeating itself. I know how important it was to hear stories about my dad and so sharing our childhood memories is something I can do for TJ, Syndi Li and Daniel. When I look at them I see and feel my brother. I forever want them to know how very proud he would always be of them.

I walked into Hospice house. I picked up a felted heart and was warmly greeted. The very air was peaceful. I had Healing Touch, and felt relaxed for the first time in months. I went to a counselor and talked. She listened. It helped.

Back in the Yukon I couldn't face work. I couldn't face friends too well either. I hid myself away in the safe comfort of home. Despite knowing it was not healthy, eating popcorn and watching Netflix for weeks on end was all I could do.

My work mates were quietly and generously supportive. I struggled to feel in the moment while being an upbeat nurse helping patients through their own issues.

Soon, I walked into Hospice house. I picked up a felted heart and was warmly greeted. The very air was peaceful. I had Healing Touch, and felt relaxed for the first time in months. I went to a counselor and talked. She listened. It helped.

In the spring I was a participant in the GPB photography show *'This is How I Really Feel'*. It was a vulnerable and powerful process to share my grief with a wider Yukon audience. I posed in my nurses uniform with a black band on my arm. The black band used to signify a period of mourning. I seriously considered adopting the idea as a way to indicate to others to please be just a little more gentle. So strange that we live in a world where we have to ask for kindness.

As summer came my mom and I chose pink flowering shrubs to plant in honour of Brian. We watched with a strange sadness as two of the shrubs wilted and died soon after. Despite knowing that we all die, that life and death are part of the whole, it doesn't make it any easier to walk through. Mom and I reminisce and let our feelings bubble up together. We hug each other and never leave without saying "I love you."

Within a 6-month period of time we ended up losing 5 family members. My brother, a cousin, 2 uncles and then last March, my husband's mother, Lenore, died as well.

One of the rituals we do is to light candles in their memory. This provides a moment to reflect, to cry and perhaps to smile with certain memories. The candlelight also feels warming to our hearts.

Grief is a personal journey. My husband John and I focus on remembering to be gentle with each other. I feel so very lucky to have him to hold.

It has been just over a year since Brian died. The fog of grief has slowly lifted. The intense hidden bathroom crying and middle of the night wrenching sadness has abated. I can talk about Brian without my eyes instantly filling up with tears.

Feelings of sorrow are now tempered with acceptance and a touch of lightness. Exercise, being outside and talking with friends helps so much. I can dance and laugh again despite knowing that life will never be the same. I'd like to say I've done a lot of 'work' on my grief over the past year – but honestly, it has been an up and down affair and I feel the greatest work is that of time itself.

Rituals of Death and Dying from a Yukon First Nations Perspective

Cultures around the world have always had traditions and customs for the end of life. Funerals, ceremonial fires, food offerings, song, dance, the laying of flowers, and more have given expression to one of the most poignant moments we experience. Helping us to accept the reality of death, feel the pain of grief, receive support, and honour the deceased - these practices bring greater meaning to life after loss.

Here in the Yukon each of the 14 different First Nations has its own traditions surrounding death and grief. Each community - and families and individuals within each community - have their distinct ways of mourning the lives of those they have lost.

First Nations people, from all Yukon communities, make up about one third of those who turn to Hospice for grief support. Many are bridging their traditional customs and the modern life in which they live and work. One traditional practice that is honoured by many, but not all, is the potlatch.

For most, the clan system is an integral part of the potlatch ceremonies. In the Yukon, all First Nations people belong to one of two clans: the Wolf or the Crow. The clans are matrilineal - children inherit clan lineage from their mother - and typically marry members of the opposite clan. Each clan has responsibilities towards the opposite clan, especially in times of loss.

When a death occurs in a community, traditionally members from the opposite clan come to take care of the needs of the deceased person's immediate family. These include making food, housekeeping and welcoming visitors. This allows the family to focus on receiving support and being with their own grief.

Soon after the death a funeral potlatch is held. This gathering is to honour the person who has died, provide support to the family, and bring everyone together in mourning. Usually it includes speeches and sharing food, but no singing or dancing.

Members of the opposite clan perform the duties of the funeral potlatch, including reserving the hall, preparing the order of service, making and serving food, dressing and transporting the body, digging the grave, and acting as pallbearers. Again, this lessens the burden on the family and allows them time to grieve.

In the time between the death and the funeral a 'spirit fire' may be kept burning day and night to help the spirit of the deceased cross over. Other traditions may include smudging the home, or burning favourite clothes of the deceased.

After the funeral potlatch about a year goes by before the headstone potlatch is held. During this time the family members continue to be supported by community. Traditionally they make or gather items in memory of their loved one who died to give away at the headstone potlatch. By creating carvings, beadwork, gathering and preserving food, or buying special mementos they keep busy while honouring their loved one.

The headstone potlatch is held after this year of grieving. It is a celebration with singing, drumming, dancing, eating, giving gifts and naming ceremonies. The gifts given are those that were gathered or made over the year in memory of the deceased, and are given to members of the opposite clan as thanks for their work and support at the funeral potlatch. The headstone potlatch traditionally marks the end of the grieving period.

Nina Bolton, respected elder, counsellor and program facilitator for various Yukon First Nations has shared with us some of these traditions - just a few of the mourning customs used that are used by First Nations in the Yukon. There are many others, both big and small, that create opportunities for comfort and support after a loss. As Nina says "we will never forget, but we can let them go and move on in our lives in a healthy way".

How can we support you?

Living with Loss

A free, 2-hr education session to help you better understand the grieving experience. Offered four times per year.

Counselling

One on one support for those who are dying or grieving and their loved ones.

Healing Touch

Relaxing energy therapy that can offer relief from the pain of grief. Clients lie fully clothed on a massage table and receive gentle, soothing touch.

Grief Support Groups

These groups help grieving people find support and connection with others who are also experiencing loss. See our website for upcoming offerings.

Lending Library

Come in to browse and borrow from our range of books and other resources.

Vigil Support

Bedside support in the final week to days of life.

Professional Support

Support and resources for those in the caring professions.

All of these programs are offered free of charge.
Please call 867 667 7429 or email info@hospiceyukon.net for more info.

www.hospiceyukon.net

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