

Chapter Fourteen Loss and Grief (from The Journey Within: Living After Loss by Coralie Harlow Robertson, Betterfly Press, 2017).

Loss and Grief

When I thought about what I have learned from the generous sharing I have experienced, I was struck by how much loss had been experienced by the people I had met and interviewed. I turned to my expert on loss, my sister Grace Harlow Klein, Ph.D. who has written about loss and grief and is a psychotherapist in the Center for Human Encouragement. She wrote, “Divorce or death of a partner begins a process of loss and grief. The feelings and experiences that emerge are unique to each individual, according to the nature of the relationship, the length and depth of the connection one had with that person. Even relief from a negative relationship is still a complex experience accompanied by guilt and self-questioning and self-blame as things are often clearer in hindsight. “Why didn’t I ...” “I should have...” “Why did I ever...” is a part of regret which may be universal in the process of grief.

Every aspect of a person’s life is changed in the loss of a significant relationship. The wonderful things that brought joy are now mourned. The loss of identity, friendships, financial stability and home can all be affected by both death and divorce. When children are involved, there are many challenges because the children are experiencing their own losses. Parenting becomes much more difficult as is evident in Nancy Sharp’s story with her twins...

Another aspect prominent in some of the stories is the issue of care-giving which many persons experienced with spouses or parents and spouses before death occurred. Care-giving, even when done lovingly out of the richness of a relationship, is still debilitating. It takes over one’s life, energy, thoughts and emotions. It takes even longer to restore one’s health after the end of caregiving. In fact, some caregivers do not survive the process and die before the one they cared for. The sense of oneself must be restored before a new relationship can be successful – as is apparent in some of the stories.

“How long does it take?” is a frequent question by those in the grip of grief? It takes as long as it takes – if one works at the feelings of grief and loss. Time does not heal all wounds but it takes time to work with the losses. Susan Gantz, whose husband died suddenly and tragically wrote, “The only thing I know for sure out of this experience of loss is that time helps, connections with people, animals and nature help. And for me, art has offered a means of relief I don’t really understand.

The pain involved in loss and grief is not under one's control. It just is – and the brain shuts down, creating a sense of deadness, confusion, not feeling like oneself. Creating a language for the feelings of grief and loss is essential, along with the awareness of the physical experiences within one's body.

Grief is also an active process of one step after another – first dealing with what has to be done, gradually giving way to choices about the life we create in the empty space. As one emerges from the pain, one begins to feel “like myself again,” a self forever changed by the experiences of the life one had and by the loss of it. It is only in the Dolores Story and somewhat in Nancy Sharp's that there is evidence of cultural support for this process of grief – a timeframe, a set of activities, active participation by others with the bereaved one.

Interestingly, in the open space which I called *The Space Between* in my book, *Transition*, one may have access to all of the good feelings and memories of the person who is no longer there, integrating them into an overall sense of one's life.

At its core, one has to let in, “I am alone” – with all of the fear, confusion and other feelings that accompany it. For many, it is the first time one has lived alone, going from childhood home to marriage, creating uneasiness in the space of aloneness. Old feelings from infancy and childhood may emerge in this process, feelings of abandonment, not being cared for. It is an existential crisis for in reality each of us is alone in our own skin. Coming to terms with that reality, becoming comfortable with oneself is freeing – the doors opening to possibilities to create our own world with whatever challenges accompany that.

In my life, I have experienced times of intense loss beginning with the tragic death of my five year old sister when I was fourteen. I have struggled with each of these losses with sadness, grief and despair at times. But as I look back, I see that my experience in each loss led me to a new time of growth – which brought great happiness and purpose in my life.

That process is happening once again in the aftermath of the death of my much loved husband whom I cared for at home with the amazing help of others. My books, *A Bridge of Returning*, *Loss*, and *Transition* reflect my experiences. Each of them combines prose poetry, photography and art I created in those losses. *Kaleidoscope: My changing World* will soon be out, the conclusion of writing that began eighteen years ago at a time of significant loss in my world of work.

In the stories recorded by Coralie Harlow Robertson from her interviews, the complexities of loss are evident in most, if not all, of the stories. One can sense who has done the work of grief, who not. Only three stories included a reference to the use of psychotherapy or bereavement help in their process. But it is a very powerful facilitator of the process of grief to have someone to talk with as one navigates this very complex path or to share with members of a bereavement group

Coralie experienced the process of going inward as she shares in her book – the process she named, *The Journey Within: Living After Loss* and then reached out to others who shared their stories with her.”