

Grieving With Gusto

By Mary Patrick Kavanaugh

Years ago, after my elderly father-in-law died of natural causes I often took my beloved mother-in-law to visit his gravesite. Each time she would collapse into tears and wail, “Why did this have to happen? Why? Why?” I felt terrible about her loss, and was more than willing to stand by her side, rub her back and hand her hankies to help ease the pain. But as the months passed I noticed my patience wore thin. One Sunday afternoon, about six months after his death, we stood at his tombstone as she once again cried, “Why? Why?” It took every ounce of self-restraint for me not to grab hold of her and say, “BECAUSE HE WAS NINETY-TWO YEARS OLD FOR CHRISAKES. WHAT DID YOU EXPECT?”

I mean, everybody and everything dies, right? I couldn’t imagine why it was still was a shock. Why couldn’t she just move on?

As karma would have it, my lapse in compassion was cured shortly thereafter, when my husband died, followed two months later by his then doubly grief-stricken mother. This time I was the one left at the side of the family plot crying, “*why, why, why?*” No doubt I did my fair share of exasperating and worrying my friends and family when—two, three, four years later—I was still struggling with the grief, holding ongoing memorials, keeping poster size photos of him in the house, and toiling over a novel about our life together, trying to make sense of it all.

That’s why when a friend of mine recently confided she was worried about her cousin because the woman had tattooed a photo of her dead daughter across her belly five years after the child had died, I insisted it wasn’t weird. Unusual? Yes. But what is our obsession with judging the way other people grieve? Leave her alone, I said. She’s fine.

Plus it’s pointless to advise people how to express grief. Not long after my husband died I had a heart-shaped locket made from the gold of our wedding rings and filled it with bits of his cremated ashes. I wore it proudly around my neck, thinking it was a lovely way to carry him with me, close to my heart, while leaving my naked fingers free to attract suitors. When I later suggested to another widow that—a full two years after her husband’s death—she should get his voice off the answering machine, she said, “At least I’m not keeping him chained around my neck.”

That’s the day I decided to retire my opinion on what’s normal and what’s not with the grief process.

We are expected to take one year, at least in this culture, to successfully move on from loss. After that, our support people may grow worried or even bored with our ongoing attachment to what's gone. But I'm wondering if part of the reason grief gets sidetracked, impacted or prolonged is that our culture is repelled by the raw displays of pain required to move it through, and eventually out, of our systems. And I'm not just referring to grief over the loss of a loved one. This extends to all of the people, places, dreams and ideas we fall in love with, become attached to, and then have to let go.

Maybe if our unpredictably-timed bouts of grief were as accepted with the same tolerance as a common cold, they wouldn't take unhealthy turns into guilt, anger, depression, pills, booze or bitterness. We could just recognize them for what they are—dramatic but temporary flashes of raw pain that need expressing. Why not indulge ourselves and others in some good old fashioned wallowing, knowing that—like a simple virus—if we let it run its course, it too shall pass.

Maybe it's the exhibitionist in me, but I'm a huge proponent of public displays of grief. That's why I love the annual Mexican Day of the Dead holiday. Loss is a given, why not embrace it? When my husband died I had a funeral for him that one friend referred to as "the gala." I followed this with a Lovefest in his name to benefit a local hospice. Then there was a bench installed in his honor by the Golden Gate Bridge. At one point my mother warned me that I had to stop throwing parties and start grieving. But for me, those events were all a part of the grief.

We celebrate life's incremental joys in community with christenings, barmitzvas, weddings, and anniversaries. Why not make more room to honor our incremental losses—the end of relationships, businesses, political campaigns, or dreams that just never took flight? Why carry that sadness and disappointment around when you have friends who can share it—even help you let it go?

Given my proclivity for public displays of grief, I am now planning a funeral for the book I wrote about my husband's family that I'd hoped would someday be a bestseller. But the publishers rejected it; so I'm burying that dream and moving on to find a different path. At this funeral, I'm also inviting others to bring along any dead dreams they're ready to release to put into the coffin with my book. We can lighten our loads together and make room for the next big thing.

After making up so many creative ways to embrace loss, I feel like a cheerful poster child for the practice of grieving with gusto. If we let ourselves cry, scream, complain, curl in a ball for a few days, and even make up wacky rituals to aid in the process (check out the link to my free *Dead Dream Funeral Party Planning Kit* below), something miraculous happens. Regular and healthy grieving allows our pain to be transformed into a hearty emotional compost that becomes useful for growth in the next phase of our lives.

If we get skilled at grieving, we will become a more compassionate crowd. This will also prevent us from getting offended when someone, in an innocent attempt to connect to our pain, compares the loss we are facing to something we judge of lesser impact. After my husband died I received all manner of remarks, including, “I know how awful you feel, I lost my dog last year.” When I looked into the eyes of the man who said that to me it was so clear to me how much he really, really missed that dog. Later when a divorced woman said, “You’re lucky your husband is dead. I still have to see mine,” I realized she didn’t mean to be insensitive; it’s just that she was still grappling with her fury over the loss.

Yes, people do and say weird things while processing the loss of loved ones. Sir Walter Raleigh’s widow kept his head in a leather bag for twenty-nine years after he was executed. Maybe we could spare people the need to make these extreme gestures by offering more frequent and socially acceptable outlets to fully express pain that ultimately leads to strengthening our abilities to let go.

Is there anything in your life you need to bury? Those ready to let go of stale hopes, dreams, and desires that are dragging them down are invited to join my funeral party. Visit my website, www.mydreamisdeadbutimnot.com, where we help turn life’s crap into compost one plot at a time. For more information or help, contact movingon@mydreamisdeadbutimnot.com.

Family Plots

Love, Death, and Tax Evasion

A novel by

Mary Patrick Kavanaugh

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