Seeds, Mirrors, Hands and Keys: Stories to Support Mourning

by Gail Rosen.

Grief is complex, with many qualities, many dimensions, many feelings, and many colors. A number of researchers have tried to define it, or at least lay out the path so that we can walk it with a little more wisdom or peace.

It was once thought that there were stages to grief — almost stair steps, tasks we accomplished before moving on to the next stage. We know now that grief is a more complex and often non-linear process. It is a journey of experience that is often difficult and painful, but it can also be rewarding, providing possibilities for insight and growth. Grief, we realize, is not something that is “done” in a set time. It is a process integrated over a lifetime.

I have been working with stories in bereavement settings for ten years. I am not a therapist, but have studied some of the literature and watched and listened as people made use of stories. In 2006, I found Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers1,a book by internationally noted author, educator and grief counselor Dr. Alan Wolfelt. It resonated perfectly with my instincts and intentions in doing this work. I have since taken several of Dr. Wolfelt’s educational seminars at his Center for Loss and Life Transition in Colorado. His writing and teaching continues to inform my work.

Listening and presence are the foundations of “companioning.” We are together with the mourner as a companion, not a guide. We offer safe space to actively engage with what Dr. Wolfelt calls the six central needs of mourning:

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.
2. Move toward the pain of the loss.
3. Remember the person who died.
5. Search for meaning.
6. Receive ongoing support from others2.

Wolfelt differentiates grief from mourning. Grief is our internal experience, the constellation of feelings and thoughts we have when someone is important to us dies. Mourning is how we express that inner experience and Wolfelt says that in order to heal, we need to mourn — to use voice, tears, words, anger, music, art, ritual expression or any of the myriad human outward expressions of inner grief.

I believe storytelling can support the needs aroused by both grief and mourning. I have been privileged to work as a storyteller in grief support groups and grief retreats for children, teens and adults. Grief support groups may meet weekly at set times for eight or twelve sessions, or can be ongoing “drop-in” groups. Weekend grief retreats are usually sponsored by hospice organizations, and often held in a camp-style natural setting.

In addition to group educational/therapeutic sessions about the experience of grief, with time for each attendee to share their experience and concerns, there is recreation — swimming, boating, hiking, games and crafts. Some of the activities, like making memory boxes, are connected to grief work and others are “just for fun.” All are important in helping people make connections with others who have had losses. Children and adults benefit both from hearing each other’s stories and being heard. Each child has a volunteer “big buddy” assigned to him or her for the weekend, an adult who listens and is there to support one individual child.

In these settings, stories help to create rituals that bring the group together. Stories can set a tone, open a topic for reflection and discussion, challenge assumptions about how grief “should” feel or be expressed, and offer touchstones for meaning making. My storytelling also can model the sharing of personal stories, helping people feel comfortable and safe with the group.

In my practice I have told a mix of traditional, personal and original tales. Traditional folk and fairy tales often have motifs of common human experience such as loss and growth and longing to find one’s place. The settings of these stories are removed from our daily reality yet offer the possibility of identification and connection with story metaphors and symbols. Personal stories or anecdotes of my experience with friends and family can help establish an empathy bond between both teller and listener and among listeners. Original stories can be crafted to address specific issues and experiences. All stories offer the possibility for vicarious experience and personal meaning making.

I encourage you to seek out and create stories that speak to you and move you. Following are some brief reflections and story suggestions based on Dr. Wolfelt’s delineation of the needs of mourning.

Mourning Need #1.

**Acknowledgment the reality of the death.**

The Mustard Seed3
In the time of the Buddha, a woman named Kisagotami suffered the death of her only child. Unable to accept it, she ran from person to person, seeking a medicine to restore her child to life. The Buddha was said to have such a medicine.

Kisagotami went to the Buddha, paid homage, and asked, “Can you make a medicine that will restore my child?”

“I know of such a medicine,” the Buddha replied. “But in order to make it, I must have certain ingredients.”

Relieved, the woman asked, “What ingredients do you require?”

“Bring me handful of mustard seed,” said the Buddha.

The woman promised to procure it for him, but as she was leaving, he added, “I require the mustard seed to be taken from a household where no child, spouse, parent, or servant has died.”

The woman agreed and began going from house to house in search of the mustard seed. At each house the people agreed to give her the seed, but when she asked them if anyone had died in that household, she could find no home where death had not visited—in one house a daughter, in another a servant, in others a husband or parent had died.

Kisagotami was not able to find a home free from the suffering of death. Seeing she was not alone in her grief, the mother let go of her child’s lifeless body and returned to the Buddha, who said with great compassion, “You thought that you alone had lost a son; the law of death is that among all living creatures there is no permanence.” [Dalai Lama, p. 133]

When acknowledging the reality of the death is difficult, stories can reassure people that this struggle is human and is a part of our healthy response to loss. People who have chosen to come to a grief group or retreat are already facing the reality of the death. However, there is a gift in stories such as these. They honor and acknowledge the part of us that finds it difficult to believe that someone has died, the part that replays the story over and over, trying to make it end differently, or wakes us up with the thought that it must have been a dream. In our culture, many people grieve privately because death and dying have been removed from the home, and the death of the young, thankfully, is not part of everyone’s experience. We don’t know what normal mourning looks and feels like. Often grieving people feel like they are “going crazy,” that something is wrong when there is difficulty taking in the reality of a painful loss. We don’t appreciate how our minds and hearts sometimes protect us from the magnitude of our pain, by holding it off until, gradually, we can come to reconciliation with what has happened in our lives, integrating it into our life story.

**Mourning Need #2.**

**Move toward the pain of the loss.**

**Moon Tears**

By Gail Rosen ©2005

In the beginning of time, Moon shone full on Man and Woman. Moon shone big and round and bright

Night after night, Moon shone alone in the dark sky.

Man and Woman loved each other and a child was born.

Moon shone full, night after night, smiling as they held one another.

Moon shone full, alone in the darkness, full and round and bright

And there were more children.

Man and Woman loved all of the children.

They loved the one who ran so fast

The one who wove beautiful baskets.

They loved the one who took care of the animals.

The one who whistled and sang all of the time.

The one who climbed the mountains.

The one who swam in the river.

They loved the one who told stories of the adventures of all the others.

Man and Woman loved all the children.

Moon shone full, round and bright, every night.

And one child died.

How? I don’t know how.

Water? Fire? Falling? Sickness?

No one knows.

And which child?

I don’t know that either.

All I know is that each child was precious. Man and Woman, each and every child.

Moon shone full that night when the child had died, and Moon saw Man and Woman, each awake and alone, apart in their grief.

In the pain of their sadness, they each curled around their broken hearts, curled away from each other.

Because their pain was so great, it was even hard to remember their love for each other.

Moon looked down at their sadness and Moon grew sad too.

Moon took some of her light and turned it into tears.

And Moon sent tears into the hearts of Man and Woman.

And the tears soothed the sharp edges of their broken hearts, and the tears flowed from their eyes.

Man reached out to touch the tears on Woman’s face.

Woman touched the tears that wet Man’s cheek.

Each night, Moon took more of her light and turned it into tears.

And Man and Woman held each other as they cried.

Their living children saw the tears and they cried their own tears.

And they all held each other.

Night after night, as Moon watched, they wept. The tears did not bring that child back to life. The tears did not erase the grief of
Mourning Need #3.
Remember the person who died.

Healing Hands
By Gail Rosen ©2007

My friend Beth, my dear, dear friend Beth, had cancer. Friends and family who lived close by helped with food, with housekeeping, with trips to the doctors. But Beth had friends and family all over the country and people wanted to know, “What can I do? Please tell me how I can help.”

We emailed everybody. We wrote and asked people to trace their hands, cut out the shapes, decorate them and send them to Beth – to send her healing hands.

And those hands started to come in the mail some were decorated with crayons, some with colored pencil or paint. Some were collages done with pictures cut from magazines, some with photographs. Some had Celtic designs – Beth loved everything Celtic. Some had sequins, beads, and crystals. Some were fabric. Some had poems or even stories. We have friends who run a preschool, and they had the children trace and cut out the shapes of their little hands. Then they asked the kids to say what advice they would give to someone who didn’t feel well, so they could feel better. They wrote this advice on the hands. “Take a nap. Hug your teddy. Hug your mommy. Sing a song. Watch cartoons. Eat some soup.” They took all those hands and put them in a circle, so Beth got a wreath of baby hands with all that good advice. One friend cut out a hand, then a long strip of paper and another hand. She said “I’m sending you the whole hug.” Beth loved those hands! She liked to look at each one and think of the friend who had sent it. She imagined people coming up with those ideas, making that hand, and thinking of her. She thought of the friend who had sent it. She imagined people coming up with those ideas, making that hand, and thinking of her.

And Moon began to gather her light back into herself. Each night she grew, a sliver of moonlight, a crescent moon, half a moon, three quarters, until Moon shone full, round and bright once again. Ever since, at death, each soul races towards heaven, a bright star, shining to let us know that we are not alone, that love continues to shine. So many stars! So many souls! So much love! And ever since, Moon sees grief and sadness and the pain of loss. And Moon turns her light into tears, so that tears can flow and heal our broken hearts.

Dr. Wolfelt says, “To heal we must go to the wilderness of our souls.” Our culture encourages us to avoid pain, to deny it or to stay “in control.” Yet pain is an intrinsic part of grief, not a sign of something gone wrong. Wolfelt says that we need to “dose” the pain, so to make a safe place for moving towards the pain in doses, rather than overload ourselves with all the hurt at one time.

A well-chosen story can make a safe place for people to tell their own stories. Telling their own stories can move them to awareness of the pain of the loss. I never know if a story will “trigger” mourning, the outward signs of grief – tears, sobs, anger and more. In our culture these emotional expressions often make people uncomfortable. If someone is obviously in pain we want to do something to fix it, to make the tears stop, but these are the behaviors of mourning, the healthy expression of grief. Allowing people to express strong emotions in a safe and supportive environment can be a compassionate gift. Mourning is not something that happens just once at the graveside or only for a specific time. It is a need that can come again and again. People speak of being “blind-sided” when they have what Wolfelt calls a “griefburst” long after the initial loss. I believe those strong feelings can affirm that the relationship is still important, that the love is still there.

There are a great variety of stories that may offer people the opportunity to cry and grieve. These stories allow people to acknowledge and honor their feeling, to see them as a reflection and part of the relationship they had and continue to have with those who have died. These are not stories to take away the pain, but to offer a respectful place to be expressed.

I wrote another story from the perspective of a child whose mother has cancer. The child is searching for a way to help her mother. The poignancy of this story has made a welcoming place for tears as people explore feelings of helplessness and grieve their own losses.

Personal stories and anecdotes can also model and give permission for the expression of the pain of grief, reassuring people that while their mourning is a unique expression of their particular loss, their emotions and experience are a normal part of grieving.
Beth died at three o'clock in the morning. The family called me at seven and I was there at nine. I walked into the living room and everything had been cleared away. The hospital bed was gone, along with the oxygen machine and the other medical equipment. The room was silent and quite empty, except for those hands, still clothes-pinned all around. I asked the family if they wanted me to take them down. I thought it might be hard for them. They said, “Yes, please.”

So I got Beth’s kitchen stool, and climbed up, untied all the string, put the clothespins back into Beth’s clothespin bag, and put all the hands into a shopping bag, wondering what to do with them. I went into the kitchen where Beth’s four sons and her husband were planning the tasks that needed doing that day. I said to Steve, her oldest son, “You know, people sent these hands to be with your mother, to send their prayers and good wishes. Do you think they could go with her now? Go in the casket with her?”

“Well, my mother wanted to be cremated.”

“Yes, I know. I just thought it would be wonderful if I could tell people that all of their good hopes and prayers went with her.”

When the boys made sure that Beth’s husband understood and agreed, Steve said, “Okay, we’re going to the funeral home this afternoon to make all the final arrangements. Leave the bag by the door. I’ll take it with me.” I thanked them and went home.

The funeral was two days later.

When I got to the church, there were easels set all around with photo collages of Beth with her children, Beth with her grandchildren, Beth teaching creative dramatics and storytelling, surrounded by children acting out her stories with homemade props and costumes, Beth traveling in Ireland, Beth in her garden, Beth performing… all of the delights of Beth’s life. And a couple of hundred people crammed into and spilled out into the sunshine around that little country church. I saw Steve and he called me over. “I need to talk to you. Come outside. Let’s go for a walk. There’s time.”

Once we had stepped away from the church, he said, “I have to apologize. I took the bag of healing hands in the car, but when we got to the funeral home, well, there were so many details to tend to and decisions to make. My dad was confused and we had to explain everything. I forgot. And when I remembered, it was too late. The casket was sealed.”

“That’s okay.”

“No. Wait. I took the bag home and I didn’t know what to do with the hands. So that night I went to the barn and got out some rockets.”

Beth’s four sons have always loved setting off fireworks. Now all in their forties, those boys still love fireworks, so there are always rockets in the barn.

He continued, “I taped as many hands as I could to each rocket, like a tail. One of my brothers wasn’t happy. He said it was frivolous. But it wasn’t frivolous. It wasn’t frivolous.” A smile tweaked the comer of Steve’s mouth. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Steve, who would appreciate a little frivolity better than your mother!”

“We set them off. My father was laughing. And one of the grandchildren was taking pictures. In all of the photos, there is a strange glowing cloud, all around us. We didn’t see it then, but it’s on all the photos. The next day I went out to clean up, to make sure there wasn’t anything left that would upset my father. I couldn’t find any healing hands. I found a few healing fingers and healing knuckle or two. I gathered them up and I burned them too. So I’m sorry.”

“Oh Steve. Thank you. It sounds wonderful! If your mother had organized it herself (and maybe she did) it couldn’t have been better! Thank you, I can’t think of anything better than the night before her funeral—you, your brothers, her grandchildren and your dad, all together, setting of fireworks, and laughing. Perfect!”

Death irrevocably changes our relationship with the person who died, but the relationship does not end. Mourning is not about “letting go,” but about finding a relationship with memory when the physical relationship of presence is gone. Telling stories, even short vignettes or sensory memories, helps to meet this need. Often people need very little, if any, prompting to tell their stories, but they do need a sense of welcome and listening. If there is reluctance, stories, of course, evoke stories.

The story “The Cow Tail Switch,” is an African tale in which the father dies and his sons, through remembering him, bring him back to life. I have told this story to adults and to children as young as middle school age, who understand that the story is not about “real” magic, that they cannot bring their loved ones back to life, but that people we love do “live on” in memory. Nadia the Willful is a literary story that strongly honors the need to tell stories of remembrance. Often people begin with the story of the death. That story may need to be told (and heard) many times. As the first two needs of mourning are met, acknowledging the death and moving towards the pain of loss, we are often more able to remember the fullness of our experience with the person who is gone. Modeling and also using prompts, encouraging specific memories of holidays, seasons, particular places, foods and music, can be helpful. We can tell personal stories of warm memories, and also difficult memories, as we recall the complexity and richness of relationships.

**Mourning Need #4.**

**Develop a new self-identity.**

**The Mirror of Matsuyama**

In ancient days there lived in a remote part of Japan a man and his wife, and they were blessed with a little girl, who was the pet and idol of her parents. On one occasion the man was called away on business in distant Kyoto. Before he went he told his daughter that if she were good and dutiful to her mother he would bring her back a present she would prize very highly. Then the good man took his departure, mother and daughter watching him go.

At last he returned to his home, and after his wife and child had taken off his large hat and sandals, he sat down upon the white mats and opened a bamboo basket, watching the eager gaze of his little child. He took out a wonderful doll and a lacquered box of cakes and put them into her outstretched hands. Once more he dived into his basket, and presented his wife with a metal mirror. Its convex surface shone brightly, while upon its back there was a child. He took out a wonderful doll and a lacquered box of cakes and put them into her outstretched hands.
Not long after this happy homecoming and distribution of presents the woman became very ill. Just before she died she called to her little daughter, and said: "Dear child, when I am dead take every care of your father. You will miss me when I have left you. But take this mirror, and when you feel most lonely look into it and you will always see me." Having said these words she passed away.

In due time the man married again, and his wife was not at all kind to her stepdaughter. But the little one, remembering her mother's words, would retire to a corner and eagerly look into the mirror, where it seemed to her that she saw her dear mother's face, not drawn in pain as she had seen it on her deathbed, but young and beautiful.

[Ashliman. This selection is the beginning of the story.]

Another primary reconciliatory need of mourning is the development of a new self-identity. We are all social beings whose lives are given meaning in relation to the lives of those around us. I am not just Gail, but a daughter, sister, mother, friend in different ways to different people. When someone close to me dies, my self-identity as defined in those ways, changes. I miss the part of myself that was mirrored or recognized by the person who died. This self-identity issue is illustrated by a comment the bereaved often make: "When he died, I felt like a part of me died, too."

I tell a story about my grandmother, "Outwitting Death" [Cox and Albert] and how I feel I embody a little of her energy, so that she "lives on" in me. "The Mirror of Matsuyama" is a Japanese tale that is also a good conversation starter about who we see when we look in the mirror after someone important to us has died.

With stories, we can model ways we carry memory within our own identity, the reflections of our loved ones who have died that we see in ourselves or in children. We can tell stories that reflect the values that were dearly held by, or the lessons learned from, people who are no longer living but are still present in our memories.

**Mourning Need #5.**

Search for meaning.

**Why Death is Like the Banana Tree**

A Tale from Madagascar

God wanted the first man and woman to be able to choose the kind of death they would have. One day he asked, "Would you prefer to die like the moon, or like the banana tree?" The couple did not know what it meant to die like the moon or the banana tree, so God explained. "Each month the moon dies and fades away, but it revives bit by bit to live again. When the banana tree dies, it does not come back, but it leaves behind green shoots so that its offspring can carry on in its place. You may have offspring to take your place, or you may revive each month like the moon. You choose."

The couple considered the options for some time. If they chose to be childless, they would always be restored to life, like the moon. It would be lonely, however, and they would have no one to help them with their work, no one to teach, to love, or to strive for. They told God they preferred to be fruitful like the banana tree. God granted their wish. They had many fine children and a happy life and then they died. Since then there has been much love and new life on this earth, replenishing generation after generation. But since the first couple chose, each individual's life is brief, and in the end the body withers like a banana tree.

[Helm Meade, pp. 141-142]

When someone we love dies, it is an essentially human response to ask, "Why?" In order to become reconciled to our grief and to the changes in our lives, we need to explore questions of meaning, of life and death and faith. "What happens now? To the person who died? To me?" Answers may be less important than the opportunity to ask the questions, to think, and to feel.

Stories are particularly useful here. Dying is a natural and unavoidable part of living. There are many stories, from all over the world, about how death came into the world and about what happens after we die. There are many other stories that hold metaphors that offer meaning. Even when those stories do not reflect our beliefs, they can give honor to the questions we ask. We realize that human beings have always asked these questions. There are stories from far away and long ago that ask the same questions we ask when someone dies. In the same way that difficult emotions – anger, guilt, despair – are often a normal part of grieving, so are the questions.

I have learned something in my work that I believe is extremely important: Each person has the right to explore and discover meaning in the events and the losses of life. It is not helpful for us to impose our meaning on others.

When I tell stories to the bereaved, I always talk about the messages people may hear in the stories. I do acknowledge that many of the stories I tell may have been used as teaching stories. But I encourage people to listen for the message that is there for them. It may not be the same message I hear or their neighbor hears. "If you hear a message you like," I tell them, "that's great! Hold it close. Take it home. Tell the story to someone else. That's the best way to remember a story." I am also sure to say, "If you hear a message you DON'T like, that's good too! My hope is that it will help you to clarify, to understand and affirm what you do believe, the meaning you make from your own life, from your experience and your loss." Giving people permission to disagree with or to dislike a story has been vital in opening up discussion and setting up safe space for them to share their experience and their grief.

**Mourning Need #6.**

Receive ongoing support from others.

In our culture, we often believe that to be strong, we must be self-sufficient, as rugged as the legendary pioneers. Again, because we are reluctant to talk about death and grief, we sometimes don't realize how necessary it is to have people hear our stories, and how much we can learn from the stories of others. We do not need people to "fix"us, to "resolve"our grief for us, but we need
friends, companions to help us look for our own meaning, to listen, to support us, to let us know that we are not alone. It is true that there can be parts of grief and mourning that are done in solitude, tears that come when we are alone, private conversations with ourselves and with the dead. But if we are to truly heal—not to return to how we were before the one we cared for died, but to be transformed by our experience, to come to some inner balance, to grow and to live fully—we need other people. This is a story that I often tell at the beginning of grief retreats.

Nasrudin and the Lost Key
(based on a traditional story from Turkey)

Nasrudin Hodja was on his hands and knees peering through the grass and sifting the dirt with his fingers. A neighbor arrived and saw him their. "Hodja (teacher) why are you crawling about?"

"I have lost my key," replied Nasrudin.

"Let me help you, then" said the neighbor and began to crawl on his hands and knees, meticulously searching in the dust. Another neighbor came, and then another, and another. Each one asked and then offered to help look, all of them crawling about, all around the Hodja's house. The sun began to set and the streetlamps were lit. Still they had not found the key.

Finally, the first neighbor sat back on his heels, "Nasrudin Hodja, where was the key when you last saw it?"

"I dropped it when I was in my basement" said Nasrudin.

"Then why are we looking here, outside?!"

"Because, my friend," said Nasrudin, "it is dark in my basement, and I am alone. Out here, there is light and there are many friends to help me".

This story evokes laughter, which helps to release the tension that is present in wondering what the weekend will bring. In conversation about the story, I can acknowledge that often when people die, we have questions to which we may not find answers. And yet there is value in the asking and comfort in being with other people and "in the light" as we search for meaning.

For me, it is a privilege to be able to be present in that "light" to be a companion to people who are grieving, to listen deeply, and to tell stories with care.

References

This article appeared in the Diving in the Moon Journal, Issue 5, Summer 2008.

Founder of the Healing Story Alliance, storyteller and bereavement facilitator Gail Rosen tells stories that ask the "big questions," about life, death, and meaning. With humor, honesty, intelligence and insight, her work serves people dealing with loss and grief. She offers trainings on story and bereavement work, performs and leads workshops in health care settings, synagogues, churches and schools, and has presented at national conferences including the Association for Death Education and Counseling and National Storytelling Network. Other programs include "For Tomorrow," the unique story of a Holocaust survivor, Jewish folktales and original stories. For more information, please visit: www.gailrosen.com.
evil plans of the mourners. If our hero is to succeed, they must solve one of the most complicated puzzles in all of Gielinor.