

## **What Does It Mean to Heal?**

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I recently talked with a woman who was very distraught because it had been eight months since her husband had died and she had not yet “healed”. In further exploring what she meant by this, I discovered that she had been talking with some friends who felt that she should no longer be experiencing pain or sorrow over the loss of her husband. She looked at me in dismay and asked “How am I supposed to stop missing someone in eight months when I spent forty-five years with the man?”

Unfortunately, I hear this all too often. In our society of managed health care, time shared vacations, and the one-minute manager we are becoming programmed to think we should “heal” the majority of our grief in the three days of family leave that we are given at work.

On the other hand, I also know people who truly believe that they will be lost in their grief forever. Their entire identity is caught up in mourning and they can not seem to reinvest themselves in living. Ironically, society reinforces this stance as well. Grief can be used as an excuse for poor job performance, the breakdown of a marriage, or the over use of alcohol or drugs.

I think these perceptions of the grief process are reflections of a misunderstanding of the word “heal”. We usually use this word to describe the absence of pain. It implies that grief is something you recover from, and return to a previous state of health. We are expected, after some magical period of time, to become our “old selves” again. If we can’t accomplish this then we will remain in a chronic state of sorrow because the loss was so great.

If this were true, most of us would either feel like failures or terribly insulted. Just as we were changed when we met our loved one, we are also changed when we lose that special person. We are never the same again. And just as we could not predict who we would become over the years of living with our loved one, we can not predict who we will become as we learn to live without them.

It seems to me, that “healing” from this perspective, means being willing to “discover”. Through the pain, guilt, anger and confusion of grief we discover what our loved one truly meant to us. Sometimes we are disappointed by what we discover. A woman may discover that life is easier now that her alcoholic husband is gone. Sometimes the discovery is mixed. A man discovers how precious his dependency on his wife has been and how lost he feels without her.

We also have to be willing to discover how the loss changes who we are. Initially, there is resistance to this. We just want to get away from the pain and not face that the loss has changed how we feel about ourselves and others. Courage and an open heart is needed to discover how we are being molded by this experience and to move into the world as this new person. Probably the most profound example of this was a man who told me, with tears in his eyes, that he wished his wife had not had to die in order for him to become a more compassionate person.

There does not seem to be any magic timetable for this kind of healing. Instead the measure is one of experience and living. Each experience after a death, whether it is the first Christmas or a vacation years later that triggers a memory, is an opportunity to discover who we have become and how the loss still moves us.

Whether we like it or not, we truly will never be the same again. So instead of asking, "When will I get over it" ask yourself "Who am I becoming?"