

A Brief Guide to Grief
Dr. Raymond Moody



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By Dr. Raymond Moody

Dr. Raymond Moody is the world's leading authority on the near-death experience. For nearly 50 years he has researched, interviewed, written and lectured on the subject of what lies beyond this life and what happens to those left behind. Dr. Moody has counseled thousands of grieving people to understand the nature of grief. Here Dr. Moody shares his knowledge and experiences through stories and insights. In addition to the five stages of grief described by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, Dr. Moody reveals how we might also face a variety of unexpected emotions, ranging from anxiety, to guilt, to bewilderment. Dr. Moody assures us that we will learn to live with the never-ending feeling of grief, and in the process deepen our appreciation and understanding of ourselves and others.

Grief is a universal human phenomenon, and it goes back as long as there have been human beings. As a matter of fact, the whole Western intellectual tradition, which began with the Ancient Greek philosophers, began with a concern about how to help people with grief. Grief is, first of all, a process. That is, it's not something that happens instantaneously, but it takes place over a long period of time. And this process of grief involves, first of all, the physical body; it creates changes and disturbances in the physical body. Secondly, it creates disturbances in the emotions and the feelings. And also, over a period of time I think, it touches into the spiritual dimension of life. And what this emotional and physical and spiritual process has to do with is coming to terms with the loss, primarily of a loved one, to death.

However, it is very important to remember that the same feelings, the same process that goes on after we lose a loved one to death, also goes on after, for example, someone loses a limb of their body, one of the senses, such as vision or hearing, or a relationship, like through a divorce, or a pet. These same kinds of responses to loss take place no matter what the particular loss is.

Everybody grieves in a little different way, but there are definite patterns. And any sort of loss that you suffer can bring about these standard sort of aspects of the grieving process. Grief doesn't necessarily unfold in one fixed order. People grieve in all sorts of different ways, and there's no such thing as a strict or rigid order in which people go through the so-called phases of grief. In reality, it's more that everything is all sort of mixed up at once. Grief can be a very confusing time for people. Grief causes confusion in people because it brings all sorts of emotions to the fore that often they're not familiar with.

There are two major different kinds of situations that we need to think about in grief. One is the situation that I'll call acute grief, and that's where the loss comes out of the blue. At one moment the person seems to be fine and healthy, and the next moment, unexpectedly, they die. Now, the other situation is what we call chronic grief, and that's the situation where, for example, we learn that Grandma has Alzheimer's Disease – and usually it takes about, say, seven years for someone to die from Alzheimer's Disease – and so while Grandma is still alive, we are going through the grieving process beforehand; that's called anticipatory grief. And that is why so often when somebody dies after a long period where they've been ill, the loved ones say, "Well, we're glad that Grandma's died," or "We're relieved because now we know she's not suffering anymore."

However, the emotions and the feelings that are involved in acute and chronic grief are really the same. The only difference is that in the chronic grieving situation or anticipatory grieving, we've gone through most of those things before the death actually occurs. We will talk here about the acute situation as though the person dies suddenly, but these same things can be applied to the chronic situation where we have advanced warning of someone's death. But in a situation where suddenly someone finds out that their loved one is dead, the most common thing that they report in those initial moments is

what we call numbness. And this is something that any doctor who works in an emergency room will well understand. When people learn that their loved one has died suddenly and unexpectedly, they just sit there with a complete look of blankness on their face. People describe at this point how they have no feelings. They are unable to feel.

Now, as this process progresses, the first thing after the numbness that typically comes about is what we call denial. And that is that you hear from people words to the effect, "I can't believe it," or "It's not possible," or "I just don't believe it." And having had this experience as a physician in the emergency room, many times I'm still impressed with how almost uncanny it seems. For example, back in the eighties I remember talking with a young man who was 26 years old, and he had brought his father into the emergency room. His father was ill, and we were treating the father, but the father died. So I was the one appointed to go out and to talk to the young man.

So I told him, "I'm sorry, sir. We did all we could, but your father died." And the young man said back to me, "Oh, yeah, I understand, Doc. He's had these little spells before. When are we going to be able to take him home?" So at this point then you have to come back again and say, "I'm sorry, sir. Your father died. We did all we could." And again it was, "I understand, Doc. Are you going to give him some of his medicine when we take him back home?" And you just have to keep going back to repeat it and insist on it, until people finally break down and become tearful and sad. And then – this is of course an aspect of the grieving process that we all understand – it's normal and natural for people who are grieving to cry, to have tears, to feel sad, and so on.

Then, as this continues to unfold, people begin to have emotions that they find difficult to understand in this context. And the most frequent one of these which people have a great deal of difficulty with is anger. It is a very

common and expectable thing that when you lose a loved one to death, people feel angry toward the person who's died. Because they generally can't understand why they should be angry at the person who died, especially in the circumstances that the person who died didn't mean to die: from a cancer, or an accident, or whatever.

And I've had many people come to me over the years with that problem, saying that very thing. I remember an admiral, for example, back in the eighties, who had lost his wife of over 30 years, came to me, and the reason he did, he said, "Dr. Moody, I don't understand it. My wife died of cancer, I loved her very much, and now that she's dead I feel angry at her. And I just don't understand why." Now, if you're angry at someone, and you don't have any reason to be angry at them, then you start feeling guilty. And that's exactly what this admiral did. He told me that he felt that he must be a bad and despicable person because he was angry at his wife for dying when she didn't mean to die. Fortunately, it's very easy to help people with this particular kind of feeling, because what I explained to the admiral, as I have explained to so many other patients over the years, is that we have two levels in our mind.

We have a conscious level where we're aware of what's going on, and we have a deeper subconscious level which we're not aware of; and so what happens when we lose a loved one to death, even if it's an illness, what happens is that the deep level of the mind interprets death as an abandonment. The conscious level is aware that that's not true, but the subconscious level interprets someone dying as though that person simply walked away and left. And fortunately, when we explain this to patients through a process of psychoeducation – in other words, simply educating them about what the grieving process is like – when they understand about the difference between the level of the subconscious and the conscious level, the symptom of anger immediately goes away. So this can be very helpful to people.



There is another aspect of guilt in the grieving process that is very common, and it has to do with the fact that, let's face it – every one of us, no matter how much we love someone – we've had moments where we said things like, "I hate you," or wished people were dead, and so on. This is just part and

parcel of being a human being. And it happens all the time that when somebody loves someone very much, and then they lose that person, what happens is they start going back in their mind to that time that they said "I hate you" or "I wish you were dead." And even though they fully realize that this is not rational, it's not like they're psychotic; they realize that it's not true, but nonetheless they begin to dwell on thoughts like, Oh, if I only hadn't said that thing 20 years ago about wishing he were dead or wishing she were dead. And then this is very troubling to them, they can't get it off of their mind.

And I have learned in my counseling practice over the years that this is very common with people, and also that people are very embarrassed about it, because they know it's irrational. And so over the years I've developed a sort of sixth sense where I can tell when that's on someone's mind. And so what I say to such a person, is I say, you know, I hear all the time from people that after somebody they loved very much dies they get into these thought cycles where they think back to that time they said, "I wish you were dead" or whatever, and then they wonder, "Oh, did that cause the death?" If I hadn't said that, would things be better? And of course they know the real answer, that it doesn't really work that way. And when you say that to people, you see them take a big sigh of relief, and they say, "Yes, I've been torturing myself with this for long periods of time." But just talking about it, I think, in that case, will alleviate that symptom.

Now, all of the feelings we've talked about thus far – denial, numbness, anger, sadness, guilt – those are feelings that we experience in other contexts than grief too. So we're familiar with them even if we've never grieved. However, there are other parts of grieving that are unique to the process of adapting to a loss. And what I have found with those over the years is that the most common thing that people say when they have these other symptoms of grief is, "Doc, I must be losing my mind." And that is a refrain that I have heard

so many times from people over the years. They come into your office and they say, "Dr. Moody, I must be losing my mind." Now, to put this in context, I worked for a long time in a maximum security unit for the criminally insane, with paranoid schizophrenic murderers and severely psychotic people who had done these awful kind of murders that you read about in the newspapers. And in all of that time, not one patient ever came to me and said, "Dr. Moody, I must be losing my mind." And my point with that being that, paradoxically, in the situation of grief, when you hear people say, "Dr. Moody, I must be losing my mind," that's a symptom that they're not losing their mind.

These things that happen to us in grief are just strange. And because they're so strange, people don't talk about them, and then they start obsessing about it, and they think that there's something wrong with them; when in reality all they would have to do is just to talk about this and they would find all sorts of other people have the same symptom too. For example, my mother died in 1994, and for about six months to as long as a year after that, every time my wife and I would get into the car to drive down to the city where my parents used to live, and where my siblings still live, I would be sitting in the car and I would start going through my mental list of things I would ask my mother when I got to her house. And about several items into the list I would wake up and I would say, "Oh, my god. Mom's dead."

Now, if I hadn't have heard that from hundreds upon hundreds of patients by the time it happened to me in 1994, I would've thought that same thing. I would've thought I was losing my mind. But no, in reality, it's just part of grief that people will actually forget that their loved one is dead. Had a dear friend, Milton Friedman, who died April 28th 2005, and still a couple of times a month I will think about going over to the telephone and giving Milton a call. For some reason we're set up so that we actually forget that our loved ones have died.

Another troubling symptom of the grieving process is what I call searching. I have heard this, again, from hundreds of patients, but I will relate a particular story that sticks with me. Back in the eighties I was working with a young woman in her thirties who had lost her sister some months before, and her sister was several years older than she. And this woman came to me saying, again, as people do, announcing herself as she came into my office, "Dr. Moody, I must be losing my mind." And so as we talked about this, this was why she came in. Her sister had died, say, six months before, but since that time, this young woman told me that every time she went to the shopping mall or to downtown, and she would be in a big crowd of people walking, she would see someone in the crowd up ahead of her who looked, say, from behind, just like her sister; the cut of the hair, or the way of walking, or whatever.

And this woman would be perfectly aware in her conscious mind that that was not her sister out there in the crowd, but nonetheless she would feel, as she said, absolutely compelled to almost run through the crowd and to get up ahead of the person, and to look back to ascertain that that was not her sister. And you can imagine, I think, if a young woman in her thirties has no knowledge of mental illness or no knowledge of psychology, you can easily understand how someone in that situation would think that that's crazy.

But it's one of the nicest things about working with people with grief is that most of it is just reassuring people that the things that they experience may feel very unusual and strange, but nonetheless that they're perfectly ordinary and normal in the context of the process of grieving.

Another aspect of grieving that's very troubling to people is what I call taking on the characteristics of the deceased. And that means that after someone dies, the people who are left behind feel, consciously or unconsciously,

a desire to fill that void, to fill that space that was left behind by a person dying. So what they do – and they do this subconsciously without realizing it – is that they begin to take on the characteristics of the person who died. And they do this without awareness of what they’re doing, and, paradoxically, very often the very characteristic of the dead person they take on is that very characteristic that most annoyed them. For example, in this one family in the town where I grew up, there was a woman who was noted in the town for being a very sweet, loving, and giving person who was always there to be helpful to others when they were in a tight spot. However, in this particular situation, the mother of this woman happened to be well known as a thoroughly unpleasant person in this town, much to the embarrassment of her daughter.

But the mother, this mother that I’m talking about, was always going around and making herself obnoxious in stores and yelling at people, and so on. And the tender-hearted daughter was very embarrassed by this. And the younger woman had several children and a husband who all adored her. Now, after the mother died, about six months later the daughter in the family began to yell at people in stores, try to boss her family around, and generally act out of character. And not knowing much about grief, the family decided that there was something wrong with her emotionally or perhaps physically. So she came to me and described these symptoms. Now, when somebody reports symptoms to you, even though you can tell very well what’s going on, you can’t just immediately tell them what’s happening. You have to sort of let them talk about it until they realize it themselves.

And so after relating many incidences of this in which this young– this relatively young woman would yell at people in stores, which was out of character, I asked her one day, I said, “Well, Helen, who does that sound like to you?” And of course I saw the big dawn of realization come over her face. “My mother!” she said. And very quickly, as we talked about that, she gave up those

symptoms and went back to her normal state. So that's called taking on the characteristics of the deceased.

My best friend of 30 years, when he died about three years ago, about two weeks later my wife and I were sitting in the restaurant for breakfast. And when the waitress asked me what I wanted, I said I'll have bacon and eggs. And my wife almost dropped her fork. And I was equally startled by what I heard coming out of my mouth, because I never eat bacon and eggs. Matter of fact, that's a very unpleasant thought to me, is bacon and eggs, and I was just wondering what was going on. And then a couple of weeks after that I realized that my best friend Milton Friedman's favorite breakfast was bacon and eggs, and whenever he and I would have breakfast together he ordered bacon and eggs. So without even realizing it, I was taking on that characteristic of Milton. When we take on the characteristics of the deceased loved person, that's our way of bringing them back. It's like we fill a void they're missing, and so the unconscious takes over and creates that person again by living ourselves through the person who died.

Grieving, to me, is truly one of the great mysteries of the mind. There are aspects of the grieving process that we really can't even begin to understand yet; and to me, the most baffling aspect of grief is what is known as the anniversary reaction. And that is that it's very common when someone loses a loved one to death, that one year later, on the anniversary of that loss – or several years later, on the anniversary of that loss – the person who is left behind will come up with some often very puzzling or bizarre symptom. And it often mimics the illness from which the deceased person died.

In other words, as in my medical practice once, a family came in real late one night, and the youngest sibling in the family was having respiratory distress. The lung doctors couldn't find anything wrong, so they sent him to the

psychiatry department. And in looking through his medical records, I happened to see several years before he had had those same symptoms on that same date, which I happen to remember – it was December 12th. So I started asking the family: what happened on December 12th?

And all these brothers and sisters together, they started saying together, “Oh, yeah, well that was about the time Mama died. Yes, it was on December 12th that Mama died.” And so what happened was the youngest child in the family reproduced the lung symptoms from which the mother had died. And this is totally unconscious.

I lost my first child in 1970 when he was 36 hours old. Twenty-four years later to the day, my mother died on the 24th anniversary of her first grandchild’s death. One year later to the day, my brother had a major heart attack on the anniversary of my mother’s death, then six months later my brother died on the third anniversary of my father’s death.

So the anniversary reaction is very real, as any physician will tell you, but the difficulty is understanding how in the world it works. Now, it doesn’t have to be necessarily a death or a bad occasion that can cause this. In American history we have a great example of this. For example, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams both died on the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th 1826. And the question, of course, is: how does the body work that out? It is a real mystery.

After the death of a loved one people often experience what they call signs. And these are things that occur in the physical world that the person intuitively feels has to do, somehow, with the person who’s died. One of the most interesting one of these, and most common ones, which occurs all over the world, is the appearance of birds in some unusual fashion.

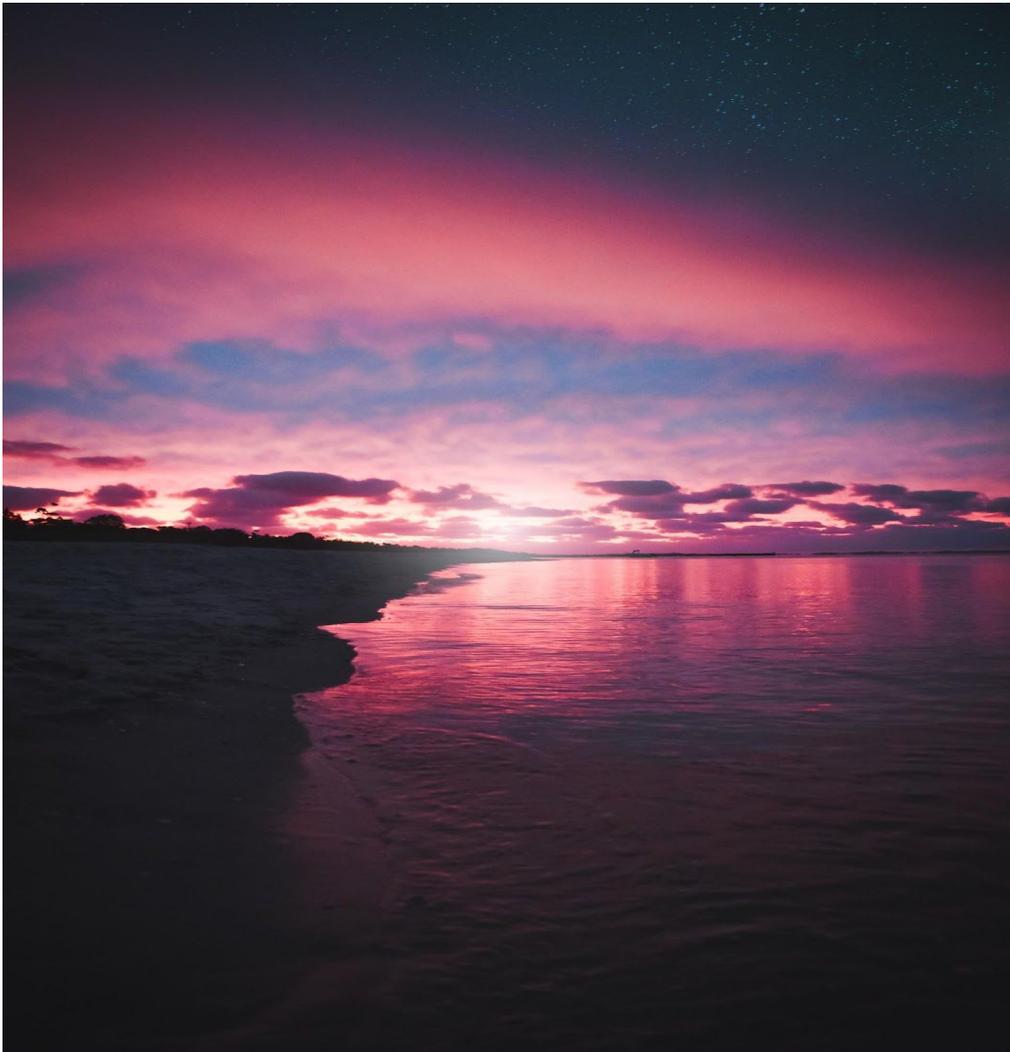
This is not transmitted in our culture, we're not told that we're supposed to be watchful for unusual behavior in a bird after a death, but it happens to people all the time that after someone they love very much dies they'll see a bird in some unusual context, or a bird out of place. And intuitively they feel or understand that this appearance of the bird somehow has to do with their loved one who has been lost.

A sign that occurs a lot in the modern world – and this, to me, is utterly baffling – is that people will tell you, for example, that after the loss of a loved one the lights in the house come on and off, or sometimes the television will turn itself on spontaneously. And the interesting thing about these events is that people tell you, number one, the television never did that before. The lights didn't come on and off before. And that, secondly, they feel quite sure that it somehow has to do with the person who has passed away.

Strangely enough, in almost all the cases that I've heard of this, where people interpret the misbehavior of the television or the lights as the manifestation of a deceased loved one, it's almost always a young person who died, and almost always a sudden or unexpected death. But why this should be, I just don't know. This experience occurs to so many people that it's natural to mention it, I think, to let people know that what they're experiencing, as unusual as it is, nonetheless they're certainly not alone. Numerous medical studies have shown that a high percentage of people who lose a loved one to death will, within a certain period of time of the death, have some sort of experience that they regard as an apparition or a contact with the person who died. Sometimes this happens in the middle of the day from a full state of waking awareness. People may say that they're just sitting in their living room where their deceased loved one appears and has a talk.

Other people have this experience in that time between waking and sleeping. When one is drifting to sleep at night they say that they see their loved one. And a third group of people say that during the night, while they're asleep, they see a loved one who has passed away. And it's interesting. In that case they say that they have to call this a dream because it occurred while they were asleep, but that it doesn't have the normal characteristics of a dream. Rather than the diminished sense of reality, they say that there's almost a heightened sense of reality. And these apparitions of the deceased occur in as many as two-thirds or more of people who have lost a loved one to death. We also know that this is just part and parcel of being a human being, because the very earliest records we have, going back far into the ancient world, describe the same experience.

By and large, when this happens to people they're reluctant to talk about it because they fear that other people will say they're crazy, or they've lost their mind, although they themselves are aware that it has nothing to do with being crazy. Matter of fact, they interpret it as a real event. When someone has an apparition of a departed loved one, it definitely helps the grieving process. People say that afterwards they still miss the person who died, but that nonetheless the apparition gave them confidence that they will see their loved one again, and sort of brought the grieving process closer to resolution.



Another very common phenomenon of death and dying is what I call the empathic death experience. And that is that we know that quite frequently when someone dies the people standing around the bedside themselves have profound spiritual experiences. A typical empathic death experience would be, for example, that when one's grandmother dies and one is present, then the bystander themselves, the person standing by, has an experience in which they seem to leave their body and they seem to accompany their dying loved one part-way toward a light. They often describe how relatives or friends of the dying person seem to be there to come and to meet and to greet the person who is dying almost as a welcoming committee. And then people will tell us that

as they see their loved one recede off in the distance towards this light, the bystanders themselves come back and rejoin their physical bodies.

So I call these empathic death experiences or shared death experiences because the experience of the bystanders is that they empathically share the dying experience of their loved one. They actually feel that they accompany their deceased loved ones part-way toward the other side.

At the end of my first quarter in medical school, December 1972, I was standing in the bookstore at the medical school, and a very nice woman came in and introduced herself as Dr. So-And-So, and I immediately recognized her name as a distinguished professor of medicine. And she said to me, "Dr. Moody, I've been wanting to talk with you because I had an experience that I wanted to talk with you about." So this was in the evening, and she led me across the campus to her office, and she told me that some years before she had been present when her mother had unexpectedly died. And my medical school professor at this point began to try to resuscitate her mother.

And she said that as she did, at the moment that she saw her own mother die, she herself, this physician, felt herself lift out of her body. And she was very puzzled; not being a person with a religious background this was really quite a shock to her. And to use her exact words, she said, "As I was trying to get my bearings," she suddenly became aware of her mother there beside her. To use, again, this physician's exact words, "-now in spirit form." And she said her goodbyes to her mother, and she saw her mother recede off into the distance toward an enormous light that was shining as though it were shining out of a tube of some sort. And she saw her mother recede into this light. She saw her mother meet up with people, some of whom she recognized. These were relatives and friends of her mother's who had died while she, this physician, was still alive.

Others that she saw there – she said she had no idea who they were, but she surmised that they were people who were friends or relatives of her mother’s who had died before she herself, this physician, had been born. And she saw this reunion take place, and then she saw all of those people recede back into this light. And I remember this little detail, her telling me, which still puzzles me: she said as that light closed off, it did so in a spiral fashion, spiraling down like the aperture of a camera closes. And at this point, then this physician found herself back in her own physical body, standing there beside the bedside of her now deceased mother. And subsequent to this 1972 event, I heard hundreds and hundreds of these so-called empathic death experiences in which people feel that they empathically co-live the death of a dying loved one.

A relatively rare, but nonetheless utterly fascinating and very ancient phenomenon of the dying is what I call the swan song. Plato, who first observed this phenomenon, likened it to the song of swans, who according to the Greek folk belief, that just prior to their death, swans would sing the most beautiful songs of all. And Plato speculated that it was because they had a sense that they would soon be going into another state of existence and would be in the presence of the gods.

But subsequent to that time, I have heard the same story from hundreds and hundreds of people. And that is that they will tell me that just in the days or hours or sometimes minutes before a loved one died, that that loved one who was passing away would suddenly and unaccountably burst into poetry. Most often, reciting poetry that they had presumably heard earlier in their lifetimes, but sometimes also out of nowhere, as it were, composing poetry spontaneously during the dying process.

And this, to me, is really one of the real mysteries of death. We just don't understand this. One thing that's remarkable about it is that in many of these cases the people tell me that as far as they knew, their loved one who had died had no interest whatsoever in poetry before they suddenly started being poetic on their deathbed. I don't really know how to explain this. I have some ideas. One is that one thing we know very clearly is that people on their deathbeds, or in the last few days or hours of life, will very often have profound spiritual experiences that they find very difficult to put into literal words. But nonetheless, as human beings, we all want to talk about it or express it when we have a powerful experience, and poetry is probably a good compromise because poetry is very compressed; it's close to the human emotions.

So perhaps it's not too surprising that people in their last hours of death, having very profound experiences that they can't put into literal words; that a good compromise in that situation would be to go into a poetic mode of expression.

Quite frequently when people are on their deathbed from a lingering illness, in the immediate days or hours before they die, they look up, and they start talking with relatives and friends of theirs who have already passed away as though their relatives are coming there to escort them over to the other side. And I've seen this in many, many patients. According to some studies, as many as 40 percent of people dying from a chronic illness will experience this. And what strikes me about it is that these people are talking completely coherently. It's not as though they're delirious. They can talk with you completely coherently, but at the same time they're talking with you, they can be talking with Grandma who's passed away some years before. Lisa Smartt's *finalwordsproject.org* offers some interesting insights into the language of the dying, as does her book *Words at the Threshold*.

Personally, I am very uncomfortable with a word that's bandied about in relationship to grief: *closure*. In reality, I don't think there's any such thing as closure; and people in their grieving process should not be aiming for some state in the future where these feelings will just be demolished and there won't be any more grief. In reality, when we love someone very dearly, the grief never completely goes away. In my long career of helping grieving people, one thing I'm absolutely sure of is that love transcends death. And by that I mean that you don't stop loving somebody just because they die. Overall, I think the most important thing to emphasize to people who are grieving is that, number one, grief never really completely goes away. Closure, as it's called, is an illusion. You will always miss your loved ones after they die.

Now, the second thing I tell people is that there's no such thing as a timetable, or there's no such thing as normal grief. Everybody goes through grief in their own individual way. And the most important thing to do in this circumstance is to talk about it. There's no better medicine for grief than talking about your feelings. Over the last 40 years I've talked with literally thousands of people from all over the world who are grieving. And I must say that out of all of that experience the one thing that stands out in my mind, that I can say with utter and complete confidence, is that love transcends death. Just because somebody dies, that doesn't mean you're going to stop loving them.

Since 1965, I've had the very great honor and privilege of being able to talk with thousands of people from all over the world who apparently were dead, or came very close to death, and in the interim had experiences which changed their lives dramatically, and which utterly convinced them that what we call death is just a transition into some other reality. These people tell us that when their heart stops beating or that when they come very close to death, they seem to rise up out of their physical bodies, they look down, and they can see their own physical body on the table down below. As they're assessing the

situation, they become aware of a passageway of some sort that they often liken to a tunnel. They say they go through this tunnel into a very bright light, far brighter than anything that we have ever experienced while we're alive, and yet in no way is it uncomfortable. It doesn't hurt the eyes. And as they go into this light, they feel completely taken up with feelings of comfort, joy, and love that is so strong that they say that nothing that we ever experience while we're alive is adequate to give us a sense of what this is like.

They describe complete, total, and unconditional love. And in that light and love, they often say that relatives or friends of theirs seem to be there to help them through this transition. They see their grandparents, their parents, their friends, and loved ones that they had lost.

Then, as this experience progresses, they say that the whole environment disappears and they find themselves surrounded by a full-color, three-dimensional holographic panorama, which consists of every single event that they have ever experienced in their life; every single action that they have ever done. And this takes place instantaneously, although they have to relate it as though it were a sequence, because that's the way our language is set up. They say that in the experiencing of it, it wasn't a sequence, but rather everything they had ever done was there all at once. And they have relived these events of their lives not directly from the perspective they had when they were doing the action of their lives, but rather from the perspective of those with whom they have interacted.

Hence, if they see themselves in this panorama doing an unkind or unloving action to one of their fellow human beings, then when that action has its effect they feel the sad feelings that they brought about in that other person's life. Or if they see themselves in this panorama doing a loving or kind-hearted action to someone else, then they feel the good feelings they had

brought about. At some point, obviously, all of these people have to come back. Some say they have no idea how they got back. At one moment they seem to be in this light of complete love, and the next moment they found themselves back on the operating room table or at the scene of an accident with no sense of transition. Others say that they were told that they had to go back. Perhaps some presence that they experienced in this experience tells them, "You have things left to do. It's not your time yet. You have to go back." And then a third group tell us that they were given a choice; that they were told that they could either go on with the experience that they were having or could go back to the life that they had been leading before.

And not too surprisingly, perhaps, all the ones that I have talked to who were given that choice, chose to come back. And it's very interesting. They say that when they choose to come back they do so not because that's what they really desired. If it had only been them, they would've stayed in the light. But they choose to come back almost universally because they have young children left to raise – that's almost always what people say.

When people return from this, naturally their lives have been very powerfully transformed. First of all, they tell us that they have no more fear of death whatsoever, that their experience was completely convincing to them; that death is simply entering into another state of existence. And they also tell us that whatever they had been chasing before, whatever their hearts desired or whatever they thought they most wanted, they learned from this experience that the most important thing that we can do while we're alive is to learn how to love.

Now, obviously science, at least as it exists in the 21st century, is not going to prove that there is a life after death. However, what these near-death experiences give us unequivocally is hope. The fact that so many people all over

the world of good judgment have these experiences and are convinced by them is a very interesting fact in itself.

And we have every right to look at this as a hopeful message. These near-death experiences give us hope not just that there is a life after death, but, in the ultimate closing moments of our lives, we will be rejoined with those that we love who have passed away. The biggest question of existence is whether there is life after death. People have wanted to know that as long as there have been human beings. Science in the 21st century is not yet equipped to answer that question, but I absolutely am convinced that there are ways that reason can go about getting closer to the answer.

The question of life after death is built into human beings. As long as there have been these *Homo sapiens* creatures, they have buried their dead in such a way as to indicate that they believe that something comes afterward. And because this question is so ubiquitous, because it's in all cultures, all religions, and every individual human soul, I am completely confident that the next few decades will see the development of entirely new methods of rational inquiry that will take us several giant steps closer to the ultimate solution of one of humankind's biggest questions: Is there life after death?



Raymond Moody Answers Your Questions About Grief

QUESTION: This may sound crazy, but do you think there might be some relationship between dancing and grief? After my mother died, my dad became obsessed with dancing. Was that a unique reaction, or something that has happened with other people?

RAYMOND MOODY: Funny thing you should ask about this. I have clearly seen this pattern in my personal and professional life. One bereaved man had his living room floor dug out and replaced by a professional dance floor, and started taking ballroom dancing lessons.

Another example is a friend of ours who lost his son, and shortly after that he takes up these ballroom dancing classes. Everybody was having dance contests 'cause of something on TV, so this friend of ours just suddenly gets really into this dancing. Now, shortly thereafter – I don't read the *Wall Street Journal* in terms of the business news 'cause I don't understand the numbers, but I love the *Wall Street Journal* – because down on the bottom, below the centerfold, they have these great human interest stories. So I was reading this, and it was about how in China they have this dance craze going on among grandmothers. Like, for some reason, grandmothers are just having these big dance events. They were interviewing this one woman, and she said, "We've just had so many losses." Right?

Then shortly thereafter, I was giving a lecture at a college class, a seminar, and I just talk about my findings, and I saw this look of shock on this young woman's face, and she said, "Dr. Moody, I'm a professional dancer." And she

said, "I never had any interest in dancing 'til my mother died." And she was just shocked, you know, to put two and two together.

I mean, that's not an adequate number to really make an inference of, but I'm confident enough to think, and I think that's right, that some people respond to the grieving process by dancing. You won't find that in the books, but I think there's a connection there.

QUESTION: Has someone close to you ever taken on the characteristics of someone who has died? Or have you taken on such characteristics yourself?

RM: If they do it naturally, and unconsciously, and I did it with respect to Milton, because I used to go to D.C. several times a year just to hang out with Milton.

You know, he never got married, 'cause he felt that he had a hereditary insanity, because his mother had died in a mental hospital in Williamsburg of what they called, then, schizophrenia. But I kept trying to tell Milton, "No, it's like back then anybody who went to the mental hospital was diagnosed with schizophrenia," but this was certainly manic depression, was what she had. But anyway, he just let it get to him, and although he had Marianne – his friend that he loved very much, they lived together for a long time – but he never got married 'cause he was afraid of passing on this to his children.

But I would go to D.C., and Milton and I would go to breakfast, and Milton had this habit that was just– I mean he just loved bacon and eggs was what he always wanted for breakfast, but the bacon had to be almost charred. So I would sit there trying not to look at this, but it was something that I just was not comfortable with, him eating these big piles of bacon. And so, about two

weeks after Milton died, Cheryl and I were in the IHOP and the waitress said, "What do you want?"

And without thinking, it just sprang out of my mouth, I said, "I'll have bacon and eggs." And to show you the power of the unconscious, it took me another two weeks to work out what that was all about. I mean, it's just so unconscious. Two weeks later, it made it, "Oh, of course. That was trying to bring Milton back." But it's like you don't realize it at the time, 'cause it's unconscious.

QUESTION: One of my closest friends who had beautiful long, black, curly hair cut it all off after her boyfriend died unexpectedly. Is it common for someone grieving a loss to cut or shave their heads?

RM: So, cutting the hair. This is, again, one that won't be in the books, but you just watch it and you will see it. In some cultures this is traditionally passed on, and the way I happen to know about it was that, the book I guess that's been more influential to me than any other in my life, other than Carl Barks' Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge comic books which some of you may remember, but the second place is Plato's *Phaedo*.

And I remember in 1962 when I read that, I was very impressed by the fact that Socrates was putting his hands in one of his follower's hair, and he said, "I guess tomorrow these locks will all be shorn," because Socrates was getting ready to be executed, and the allusion was that in the Greek culture, when somebody dies, what you do in response is you cut your hair. Right? Now, that was October of '62.

Flash forward to the summer of '64. My grandfather died, and then it was late in the day. The next morning, we all went off to Covington to be in the funeral and stuff, and so I noticed that, even though we were kinda rushing to get around

to the car, my mother and sister had to go to the hair place to get their hair cut, and I immediately thought, "Oh, that's..." I knew that that was like this thing that was the same thing, but in the Greek culture it was transmitted on by tradition, whereas in our culture, it's ... it's not a tradition, but people do it anyway.

You just watch that and you'll see it, and we have a wonderful friend, Christine Cabell, who is a Blackfeet Indian from Montana, and her husband, Fred, died a few months back, and so I was talking to Christine on the phone about it a few weeks back, and she was just saying, she said, "Yeah, I cut my hair and I buried it with him," and she said, "because that's what we do in our culture."

And so my point here is that these things are in us somehow, and some cultures acknowledge it specifically, but others don't acknowledge it specifically, but nonetheless, it happens, and if you just watch you'll see that happen.

I've noticed new mothers often cut their hair, too.

QUESTION: I felt a strong sense of loss after I delivered my healthy, beautiful son. My friends thought I was crazy. Is it odd to grieve after a positive event, like giving birth?

Oh, interesting. Yeah, at the birth of a baby. Well that would make sense, 'cause you're losing the pregnancy role, right? And then, there's not as much sympathy for you, right? Once you got the baby, well, you know, you were pregnant and we were just dancing around it. Now you go take care of that baby.

QUESTION: After my mother died, I 'saw' her several times around town, disappearing down the aisles in shops or driving by in her car – have other people had this experience?

And another really interesting one, and again, I don't know that this is in any book, but it's one I've observed, and anybody who has a lot of grief patients will be able to see it. And I call it the Fregoli reaction, F-R-E-G-O-L-I, and there's ... one of the very interesting delusions that people develop is called the Fregoli delusion, and Fregoli was an Italian entertainer, a quick change artist, and he could change in the front of the audience just in a split second, from one character to another.

Like, these very dramatic character transformations he would make on stage by changing quickly, and so there is a delusion that sometimes people get, in which one tormentor is appearing during the day in different forms. It's like, I remember a woman told me, "Well, at first he came by this morning, he was that baby in that baby carriage, I know he was. Then later in the day, he changed to the postman." So the idea is that there's one individual who's tormenting you, who's changing identities during the day to drive you nuts, with whatever their goal is.

But I've seen this happen in grief, too. But it's not a delusion in grief, because in a delusion, the people will not acknowledge that it might be incorrect, but with the Fregoli phenomenon in grieving, they will sort of say, "Yeah, I understand it might not really be, but that was my feelings about it." And in this kind of reaction, what people will do is they will say, for example, that, "Yeah, my son died weeks ago and this morning I went into the pharmacy to get my prescription, and I realized that the young woman behind the desk was my son coming back to me."

And then, "Later in the day I was on the bus and I saw this young man with a guitar, and I just knew that that was my son." And yet, but it's not like a delusion, because people will tell you that, "No, I realize this is sort of funny, and it may not be, but that was just how I felt about it." And I've seen maybe, I don't know how many, I've seen that a few times, but enough to make me realize that this has got to be something anybody who had a lot of grieving patients could see for themselves.

QUESTION: Can someone seem fine after the death of a loved one and then just lose it after a smaller, second loss? Is that normal?

RM: Then another rather interesting experience that really freaks people out is grief triggers, and here's a situation:

Aunt Ruth stayed home and lived with Mama, but all the other girls and boys went off and made their own lives and careers. But Aunt Ruth always stayed home with mama, and so all of the other kids in the family said, "We're so worried about Aunt Ruth, because when Mama dies then Aunt Ruth is just gonna go over the edge."

Then the event, and Mama does die, but to everybody's surprise Aunt Ruth holds it together and plans the funeral, comforts everybody in a way, and so then people are saying, "Oh, Aunt Ruth is so insensitive." You know? "She acted like she loved Mama, but now that mom died it just doesn't even phase her." Then, six months later, the cat dies, right? And then all of it comes out.

And people say, "Oh, she's so insensitive, she didn't even cry when Mama died, but now that the cat died, she falls apart." Well, it's like that's a trigger. It's like the cat just brings out all the grief that was backed up, and there is another

phenomenon. I'm kind of out of it now, but I was in this one for years, and I'm sure there's somebody here who has this: I call it grief pileup, and that is that when you're in a sequence of events, it often happens at middle age or when you're a little older, that the deaths come so quickly, one after another, that you don't have time to go through one before the next one comes around.

QUESTION: Are there any deaths you just can't forget? Can't shake loose the grief?

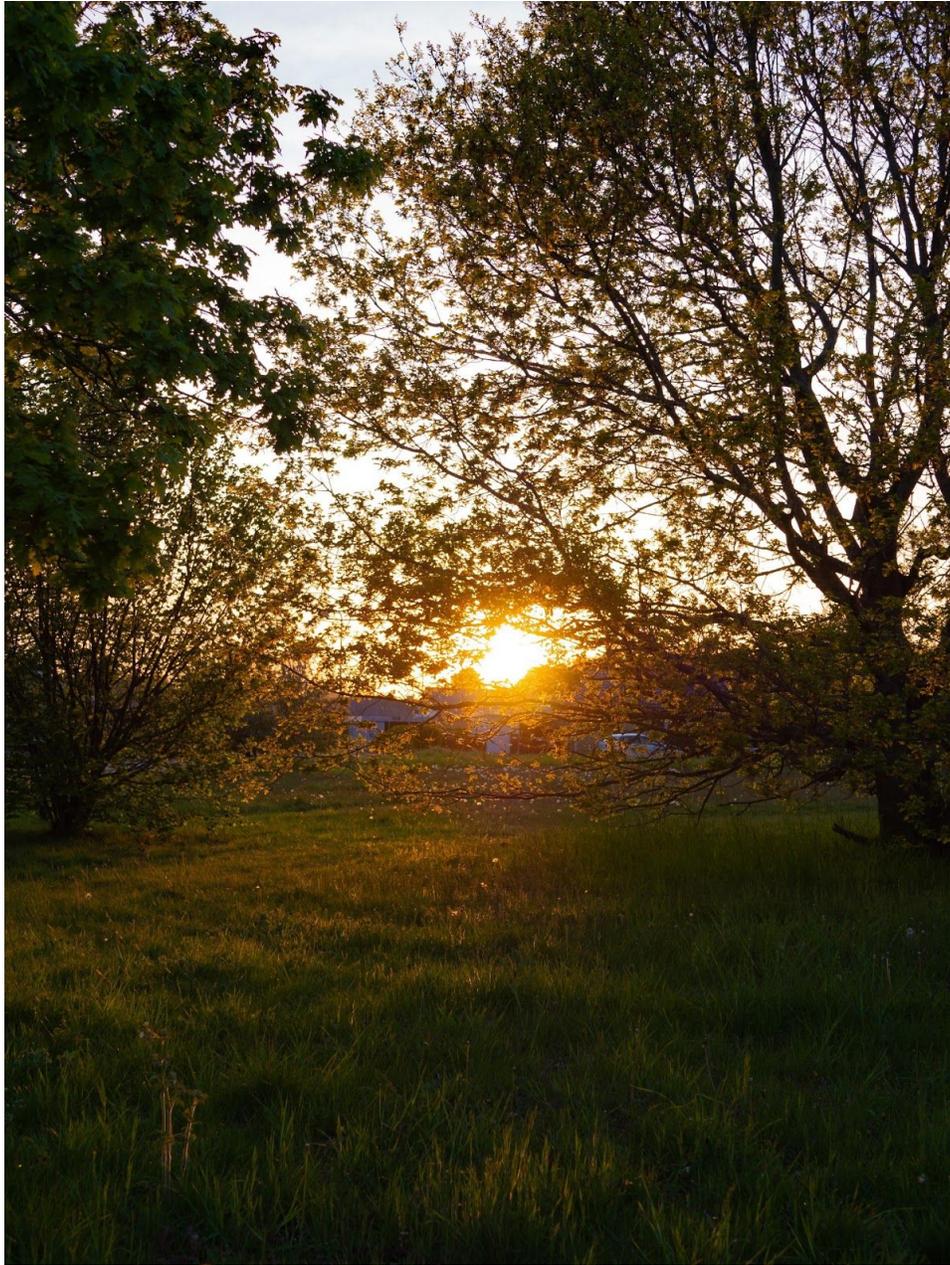
RM: The one that's still in my mind is our friend Vie who died in the spring of 1995. So she died on a Friday, and so because of her religion, they had to have the funeral the next day. Well, that was the day that my family and I had set aside to go scatter my brother Randy's ashes, so I couldn't go to the funeral, and still here like 14 years later... or how much? 24 years later, I still... it's like, you know, if you've ever had that experience when you're anxious and you can't get your yawn out. Like you can do the intake, but it just won't go out? And that's from anxiety, it's like that. It's like I know that I have this grief stuff in that I need to think about with Vie, but it just won't come out.

QUESTION: I have lost several friends in the past two years. Now that I'm in my fifties, I find myself having more trouble processing death. Do many people experience that?

RM: We had fourteen close friends and loved ones die in the first fourteen years of our marriage, and that's grief pileup, is what I call it. And it's a very common phenomenon of middle age. How many people here have experienced that? Yeah, look around. And it's like they come so quickly you don't have time to get through one before the next one is on you. It's very difficult. Now I think,

personally, that grief is one of the major mysteries of the mind.

I think... There's humor, is one. How does that work? What in the world is humor? And secondly, I think grief is a major mystery of the mind because very commonly associated with it is what's called anniversary reactions.



QUESTION: What exactly are 'anniversary reactions'? My father died on the same date as my mother, but five years later.

RM: People will tend to get sick or to die on the anniversary of a significant death, even when it's unconscious. Even when they are not consciously realizing they are reproducing the symptoms on an anniversary. In 1981 to '82, one of those years, I was on call, and at night, it was December the 12th – remember the date very well – and I was called down to the emergency room to see a patient who had been brought into the hospital with breathing difficulties.

So the ER doctor checked him over, couldn't find anything, so they called a pulmonologist who couldn't find anything, so then they think, "Well, maybe this is something emotional." So they had sent him to us. So that was what I knew, and I went into our examining room, and I saw the primary patient who was late 50s, but with him were four other people, and this family were, I guess the oldest man and woman were maybe in their 60s, as I inspect my image. It's so funny when you look back, when you're a kid and you see all these people and you think, "They're so elderly."

Then you look back, at my age, and I think, "Oh my God, those were young people." But, so the five siblings had been raised on a farm in Scottsville, Virginia, and none of 'em had ever married. They'd just grown up together on the farm and they still all lived together, and the primary patient was this man in his 50s, and he was the baby of the family, right? And he was the one who was brought in with the breathing difficulties.

And so, I was just talking to these five people, and I was just really baffled. I didn't know what this was, and so I was anxious, and so I was fidgeting, and the chart was about this thick, and I was just fidgeting through the chart. I mean, I wasn't really trying to look about anything, I was just fidgeting, and in

the fidgeting, flipping through the pages, my eyes fell on that date, December 12th. Same date, but it was several years before.

And I looked, and it was the same thing. It's like, this man comes in, breathing difficulties. They showed him to the ER doc and the pulmonologist, but nothing was found. But at that time, they didn't make a psychiatric consult, it was just like they just released him. So I went, "There's December 12th, same thing." Happened several years before, and so I said, "Does that date, December 12th, mean anything to you?"

And so the two older kids, the man and the woman were turning to each other and talking, and it's like, "Wasn't that about the time that Mama died? Yeah, that was. That was the day that Mama died." But it was none of 'em had any conscious recollection of it, but that's how it works. My son died on a certain date that I don't like to say, even, in early June of 1970. 24 years later to the day, my mother died out of a two day coma, on the anniversary of her first grandchild's death.

One year later, to the day after that, my brother Randy had a major heart attack and died six months later, on the third anniversary of my father's death. And these are not things that people keep consciously in their mind, it's just unconscious. My wife Cheryl was very attached to my mother, and one year after my mother's death, Cheryl and I were in Spain. We were touring around, and on an airplane getting ready to go to another city in Spain, and Cheryl, who's a very tough person, just burst into tears, and just unaccountably, which is not like her.

But several days later, we put to it, "Oh my God, that was the anniversary of my mother's death!" But, you know, we were just traveling around. We had kind of lost track of the date, but your unconscious keeps track.

QUESTION: You were just speculating about having a cold, but yesterday was Milton's anniversary. Is there any connection?

RM: Oh, you're right. This is the first cold I've had in 10 or 15 years. That's, really— that is interesting, yeah, and also the tearfulness that comes with a cold. But, anyway, there are certain things that are very important in understanding somebody's grief, but that the books don't tell you to take account of. But these are things that I take account of.

QUESTION: I actually have a question about love. My grandmother passed two years ago and she and my grandfather were best friends since second grade. I've read lots about the death of a spouse, but nothing seems to sum up the depth of his loss. Is there a deeper grief when a couple have been together for so long?

RM: It's the type of love relationship there was between two people, definitely is one of the factors that shapes the grief, and the most dramatic example of this is that I'm sure, and all of us, when we were kids, learned about how where we have one word love, the Greeks had, allegedly, three. Remember? Like *éros*, the sexual. The *philiós*, the brotherly love, or friendship. And then the *agápe* love, the selfless love of another, and we all learned that in school.

But when I started studying Greek in 1963, I was astonished that that's not correct. Actually, the Greeks had four types of love, and I've always been curious why don't they talk about the fourth type? But the fourth type is called *storgē* love. I think it's transliterated S-T-U-R-G-A-Y, and this is something I've seen in my own family, but it's very rare these days; but it used to be common, and that is that, let's say ... around Porterdale in Covington, my grandfather grew up on a farm, and with his two sisters, Dwight and Kate.

My great aunts. And next door was a farm of the Stoddard brothers. And so what happened was they just grew up playing together as kids, and then as it evolved, Kate married Eugene, and Dwight married Clifford, and this is called storgē love, and what it means is ... basically, that kids living together on the same block, or right in the same group, that they grow up together as playmates and then they kind of evolve into a marriage.

And this one is not as common as it used to be, but I knew a number of people when I was a kid, who had that kind of relationship. But what I've observed in my practice is that that is the most difficult one to deal with, because, after a long-term marriage like that, and one of the partners dies, it's hopeless. I remember after Clifford died, you never could say anything else to Aunt Dwight, because she would just collapse into tears, and just a wreck.

And, you know, there was nothing anybody could do, and I've seen that with other cases of storgē love, too, that it's just a particularly difficult one for people to get through.

QUESTION: I lost my cousin last month and my whole family still seems in shock. What helps when someone's grieving? What can we do?

RM: What helps? Well, crying, from my experience. I don't know what the books would say about it, I just think that's the main one, is crying, and letting it all out. One grief I had, it took me about five years to finally cry it out, you know? Then talking is really important. You know, just talking about it with people, and not to hold it in, but just to talk to everybody who will listen or talk with you about the grief.

QUESTION: I've been seeing a therapist since the loss of my dad last year. But my friend suggested group therapy – can that help?

RM: Group sessions, I don't know what to say, because I am socially phobic, a little bit, so I never did like group therapy or group sessions. I much preferred just talking to people one on one, but some people are really good at group therapy, and maybe it works, I just don't know. But I'll tell you the truth in that my impression I have seen about grief groups is a recurrent phenomenon: where people will go to this grief group, and then there will be the couple that's been there for 20 years, right?

That this becomes their social place they go, and they're talking about the grief of their loss 20 years ago, and it doesn't really seem that there's any progress made but that it's just become their social group, and maybe, I'm going on a very limited sample, and maybe in the bigger picture– But I've seen that so often that I wouldn't go to a grief group myself, I don't think, but I would say to people, try it, if you wish, but to avoid that syndrome of just getting it to be your society, is your grief group.

QUESTION: I want my ten year old to process his great-grandmother's death in a healthy way, but my husband just tells him 'Don't be sad. Nanna's in Heaven with the angels now.' Is that all right?

RM: And people get stuck in that, so I don't know what to tell you about that. Religious and spiritual beliefs or practices, how that helps in the grief process is highly variable, and because some people will use their religion to avoid the issues. You hear people say, for example, "Oh, I'm not upset that Grandma died because I know she's in a beautiful place now. I'm not going to feel bad about Grandma dying." And that's just rationalization, really.

I mean, it's like, "I'm not gonna feel these feelings and allow myself to be upset because I have this religion." And that is fake, and it's not good for people, and I often think in that regard that I hear people with near-death experiences tell me, they say, "You know, in a way it makes your grief more acute when somebody dies, because you know that they're fine, but that focuses your attention on your feelings, and you miss them, is the point."

But somebody who says, "Oh, I'm not gonna just worry or feel bad about Grandma, because I know there's this beautiful Heaven" – that's just running away from it, right? Because if you really could know in your mind, as the people do who have had near death experiences, that Grandma's fine, then that would make you aware that the point of the grief is that you miss them, even when you know they're fine.

QUESTION: Any other recommendations?

RM: The last thing to talk about is bibliotherapy, and this is very paradoxical for somebody who's writing a book on grief, but I am very judicious about recommending people read books with the grieving process, because, number one, people can't concentrate, and number two, some people will use it as a crutch. So that's why I'm trying to write this book. Not as any sort of inspirational thing, but rather just a description of what happens during the process, to inform people about it so that they won't think that they're going nuts when this happens to them.



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