

What's Grief Got to do With It?

A Focusing Highlights Presentation with Jeffrey Morrison, MA, LMHC

This presentation is an opportunity to explore the relationship between the sorrow life brings and the joy experienced when burdens are set down, making room for a fluid heart that embraces the joyful sorrow of life in connection with others.

I will share reflections from a career as a trauma therapist and offer writing prompts to explore your relationship with grief, sorrow, gratitude, and joy, and how listening to their calling helps us grow and heal. We'll allow time to share written reflections so we can experience a perspective shift from the personal to the communal. Grief as a community offering brings unexpected resources for setting down our burdens, opening our heart, and healing.

I came up with the title, *What's Grief Got to do With It*, after the death of Tina Turner. An amazing woman who suffered abuse and loss in her marriage and used it to rise further and further. Somehow it seemed to fit. What does grief have to do with life? When we experience a loss, we often grieve the loss. If we do not grieve, we have both the loss and a disconnection from our self, our soul, and Joy. I am just beginning to understand this. This program is an attempt to explore this further and share what I have found ... so far.

My personal experience of loss has mostly been about the death of people I have loved. I grieved their death. As a trauma therapist I know that clients need time and support to grieve what they have lost through traumatic experiences which have affected their lives. I have seen this as a very intimate and personal experience as well. Something happens and we attend to it by ourselves or with a therapist but in many ways the grieving process remains personal and private. More recently I see our responses to trauma more like a complex web of relating, of interaction, all of which includes grief and loss. Perhaps this is the sorrow that infuses all of life from the beginning.

Grieving can be very personal and yet when we share what we are going through we offer something important to others, something of ourselves, a way to connect and find belonging. A community of safe listeners provides a container for mutual healing and support. Our grief is needed as much as our gratitude to bring wholeness to ourselves and those we gather with.

Four Main Points: (and some other ideas)

Point 1 - Gratitude and grief are both about connection.

Grief is something that can and should connect us. Yet, when we experience loss we often experience disconnection. Grief, like gratitude, can be practiced and shared in community with others. I like to quote Robin Wall Kimmerer who says, "All flourishing is mutual." I would add, all sorrow is mutual. It connects us with each other and to life itself. To flourish is also to know both gratitude and its twin, sorrow. Like yin and yang, together they remind us of the interplay of seeming opposites that support life. Both are avenues of connection with others.

Point 2 - Sorrow and joy are not two separate things.

They are inseparable, woven into the tapestry of our living. We need to learn to be with both as each can nurture us and help us grow. Slowly I am coming to understand what Francis Weller means when he says,

“The work of the mature person is to carry grief in one hand and gratitude in the other and be stretched by them. How much sorrow can I hold? That’s how much gratitude I can give. If I carry only grief, I’ll bend toward cynicism and despair. If I have only gratitude, I’ll become saccharine and won’t develop much compassion for other people’s suffering. Grief keeps the heart fluid and soft, which helps make compassion possible.” (Francis Weller, *The Wild Edge of Sorrow*)

If I want to be open to joy, I need to also be open to sorrow. We need to develop the capacity to hold and be curious about both.

We all want to feel better, lighter, happier, and more peaceful. We want lives that lift us up and overcome the dregs of the mundane or worse. If we pursue the one without the other a kind of disconnection forms. We think we can forget the sorrow, darkness, and grief, and sweep it under the rug. Yet our deeper continuity (soul) will register this discontent eroding our wholeness.

Weller says, “We are an ascension culture. We love rising, and we fear going down ... So, we cry at hallmark commercials, weddings, and graduations but the full-throated expressions of grief never come or remain for those times when we are alone.”

It is important to open our hearts to the fullness of life. Often the opening is reserved for the joy and gratitude while leaving out the sorrow and loss. We need both to be whole. One without the other returns us to our sins of going numb and forgetting. If we fear going down into our sorrow, into the murky depths ... of our soul, we push down the voices that are trying to speak up through the cracks, that whisper to us ... *you I am here too*. They need to be turned toward and listened to, so we comprehend our *full* story. We need the joyful-sorrow and the bittersweet that accompanies our full-throated embodied experience of living.

Point 3 – There’s deep value in integrating grief work into our daily living. Loss is involved in all we do. Joyful experiences end. There is a loss, and it is felt. All we have gained we shall lose. We are touched by others’ sorrow daily. What if grief, sorrow, and letting go were experienced as a natural process integral to living itself?

I think this is why Weller talks about developing an *apprenticeship with sorrow*, following a path of holding both grief and gratitude. We need a way to invite both into our daily life and community. A tree grows both up and down. The fullness of life that reaches for the sky is supported from deep roots in the earth through our embodiment. We need both the rising spirit and the descending soul, the gratitude of opening and the embodied expression of sorrow.

There is an old Zen story that goes something like this. After breakfast the young student approaches the Zen master and asks, “Master, how do I reach satori?” The master replies, “Wash your dishes.” Enlightenment can be found in the everyday mundane tasks of living. It is also true that “washing your dishes” is part of the process of enjoying breakfast. If we live in a way in which separates what we like about a process from what we don’t like about a process a disconnect forms.

All experiences have something like a beginning, middle, and end. There is a natural cycle much like that of preparing, eating, and washing the dishes from breakfast. All experiences give us the opportunity to experience gratitude and grief, joy and sorrow. It is an illusion to separate what we like from what we don’t like. We may think we can, but our soul knows the difference between wholeness and separation. Our deeper continuity longs for inclusion, to be seen and connected. This relates to my first point that grief connects us and sharing our grief builds community and connection. Grief work is guided by our deeper continuity which whispers to us, “Oh dear one, sit with your sorrow and it will return you to wholeness. An *“apprenticeship with sorrow”* is a path of open-hearted gratitude and the courage to sit with its twin, the heavy-emptiness of grief.

Grief and gratitude work go together and need to be shared (made visible). If we open our heart without grounding our sorrow, we will fall like a tree with out a sturdy root system. I believe trees know this and develop their roots before growing taller. We seem to grow taller and wonder why we fall.

Wounds and Gifts - I have written and presented on how wounding experiences can initiate us to our gifts. Gifts can of course be found through the experience of joy touching us deeply and waking us up to something fundamental about who we are. That is door number one. Door number two is less frequently visited. It is natural to turn away from the pain of a wounding experience. Too much pain and we are unable to be-with our woundedness. However, if we turn away from our experience, we cut off what it can teach us about life.

Many myths begin with a loss or **separation** in which someone must leave ‘home’ and begin a quest for something that will open and transform them. Our being longs for deeper initiation which will open us up to our true self and unique purpose. Along the way they experience an **ordeal** and are often wounded by the experience. This is meant to show us the other universal path through door number two. Suffering, sorrow, and grief provide a path forward. To be broken is to allow a bigger process to guide our life. But in the breaking of the smaller self, fear arises and threatens to return us to our smaller self. If we can be with the loss, our sorrow will show us something more about how to listen to our inner voice and trust its guidance. If we can apprentice with sorrow, our grief will become fluid and carry us further in our own unique way.

Point 4 - The territory of sorrow is not one to simply get through so we can get to something better. If we think, “How quickly can I get through this ordeal so I feel better?” then we miss how the experience can help us connect to self, others, and heal. Of course, sometimes events are traumatic, aspects of the experience are lost to conscience awareness, and it takes all our energy to simply stay alive. This is often the fertile ground of therapy.

Most of my work with survivors of trauma is helping them safely return to the wounding event so they can fill in and carry forward the missing interaction that was needed but not available to them at that time. They did not have the resources then to do more than they did. Yet, the disowned aspects of the experience can bubble up, cause trouble, and require attention. Life wants to heal. In a safe, healing relationship, clients can for the first time have the experience of what happen *back then* by working with it in the *present, so that their identity is restored*.

Once the client and I have pieced together enough of the wounding event so that the client has their memory of it, we can work together and process the grief and sorrow they have held in their bodies. Then the burdens and losses can be worked with and set down and a ritual can be created to help us mark the transition into wholeness. Without spending time with the dark night of the soul, we all will remain separated from ourselves in ways that may not be visible but are felt and reactive in our system and cause further suffering.

Therapy can provide a kind of apprenticeship with sorrow. It can teach you how to be with your sorrow. Therapy may end but living goes further. The bigger picture includes the return home. Myths provide this further step. They show how someone attending to their wounds can find of one's gifts and take them back into community to be shared with others. This is the fruit of sorrow. Individual healing is not enough. It is not enough to simply feel better. That is a good start but not a full, whole, living forward. Only after our gifts are found, embodied, **and shared** can they manifest and be a resource for community.

Focusing is the perfect practice for developing an apprenticeship with sorrow!

Francis Weller writes, "An apprenticeship with sorrow offers us the chance to build our capacity to stay present when the intense feelings of grief arise. Through meaningful rituals, community of friends, some time and bereavement solitude, and effective practices that help us stretch into our bigger selves, we are offered the opportunity to develop a living relationship with loss ... it is an act of soul activism."

He references Irish poet philosopher John O'Donoghue who suggests that "what you encounter, recognize, or discover depends to a large degree on the quality of your approach ... When we approach with **reverence** great things decide to approach us."

We know this in the Focusing world as developing a **welcoming attitude** of interested engaged curiosity. Each something in our awareness is a guest that offers something more to our understanding of the situation. Weller goes on to encourage us to **Be-with** our experience, finding the **right relationship and distance** so we can be **Present** and have an ongoing conversation (**focus**) with our guest. This is Focusing.

In Weller's words, "When we come to our grief with reverence, we find ourselves in the right relationship with sorrow, neither too far away nor too close. We have entered into an ongoing conversation with this difficult, holy visitor. Learning we can be with our grief, holding it softly and warmly, is the first task of our apprenticeship."

"One of the most essential skills we need to develop in our apprenticeship is our ability to stay **present** in our adult selves. When grief arises, it is important to help them restore a connection

with their adult selves, or they (those grieving) risk slipping further into a dissociated state and possibly getting lost there for a prolonged time.”

Weller suggests practices to support our apprenticeship: “This is done through developing a practice that we sustain over time. Any form will do--writing, drawing, meditation, prayer, dance, or something else--as long as we continue to show up and maintain our effort. A practice offers ballast, something to help us hold steady in difficult times.”

I could not agree more! One of the most important things for supportive, ongoing mental-spiritual health is developing practices that support presence. Presence allows us to welcome and be-with our experience. When we can be-with our experience, we cultivate our present moment experience and awareness of how we are with the experience. This allows the freedom to make non-habitual choices beyond stuck patterns of relating being relief and change.

The practice of Focusing is essentially the natural process of embodied experiencing. Practiced in partnerships, it affords ongoing support, cultivation of presence, compassion, and embodied listening to our deeper continuity. We become whole through the ongoing conversation with our inner guests. As Rumi says, “Be grateful for whoever comes, because each has been sent as a guide from beyond.”

Summary

Grief and gratitude are intertwined and inseparable. One supports and leads to the other. Grief work is community work. It need not be done alone. Not all grief work is personal, much of it is communal and can be shared. Compassion is a response to life that says, “I know I am also connected to all beings through my own suffering and joy.” To hold grief in one hand and gratitude in another is to grow from both. Practices of presence help us develop our capacity to be-with and sit-with our experience. That work will lead us to **wholeness**, our **unique giftedness**, and nurture community through **sharing our medicine with others**.

What’s grief got to do with it ... well everything. Let it fill your cup and carry forward your living.

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Focusing-Oriented Psychotherapist and Certifying Focusing Coordinator Jeffrey Morrison, practices on Vashon Island, Washington. He specializes in working with complex trauma and teaching Focusing-Oriented Therapy (FOT) to therapists, other healing professionals, and those on a healing journey. He has developed a [Training Program](#), which blends Eugene Gendlin’s psychology and philosophy with mythology, spirituality, and other embodied practices for unwinding trauma and restoring wholeness.

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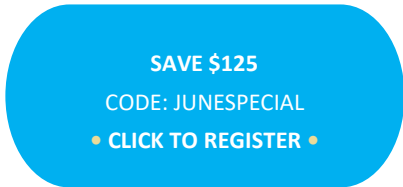
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Fire and Rain

by James Taylor

Just yesterday mornin', they let me know you were gone
Suzanne, the plans they made put an end to you
I walked out this morning and I wrote down this song
I just can't remember who to send it to

I've seen fire and I've seen rain
I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end
I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend
But I always thought that I'd see you again

Won't you look down upon me, Jesus?
You've got to help me make a stand
You've just got to see me through another day
My body's aching and my time is at hand
And I won't make it any other way

Oh, I've seen fire and I've seen rain
I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end
I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend
But I always thought that I'd see you again

Been walking my mind to an easy time
My back turned towards the sun
Lord knows, when the cold wind blows
It'll turn your head around
Well, there's hours of time on the telephone line
To talk about things to come
Sweet dreams and flying machines in pieces on the ground

Oh, I've seen fire and I've seen rain
I've seen sunny days that I thought would never end
I've seen lonely times when I could not find a friend
But I always thought that I'd see you, baby
One more time again, now
Thought I'd see you one more time again
There's just a few things coming my way this time around, now
Thought I'd see you, thought I'd see you, fire and rain, now