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Along The Way

Helping you understand your
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Grief: A Journey of Discovery

By John Kennedy Saynor

When was the last time you went on a journey? A journey of any duration needs a lot of preparation. You need to make sure your passport is up to date. Possibly you need to change your money into a different currency. Then you need to decide what clothes you want to take with you. You may even have a choice about who goes with you. The details are endless.

When it comes to the journey through grief, I think it is safe to say that very few people understand what this journey will be like. Many do not understand that a grieving person can actually determine the outcome!

The journey through grief, like any other journey, takes some careful planning. In this article we will look at factors that are common to any journey. I hope it will help you gain new insights into what this journey may be like for you or someone else you know who is grieving.

Who to take with you

A common complaint I often hear is, "I feel so alone. Does everyone feel this way?" You may have a large family and many friends, but the path through grief is one that most people begin alone. What many soon realize is that they need to have someone with them.

So it will be helpful to remember a couple of things. First, nurture lifelong friendships. When people ask if there is anything they can do, make a mental list of things you need help with. If, for instance, people invite you for a meal, accept the invitation. If you don't, you will find the invitations will soon stop.

Your closest friends will want to talk about the one who has died, but may be afraid of upsetting you. You will set the tone by talking about the one who has died. This gives your friends permission to talk about your loved one too.



Your family is also important. Remember that everyone in the family is grieving for different reasons. Sometimes a family can't help itself, but often it can. Let other family members know how you are feeling. Tell them you need to talk and cry with them. This may not be the way your family traditionally deals with a death, but it has the possibility of being a new beginning for your family.

Many bereaved people also find a support group very helpful. In their evaluations people say things like, "I realized I wasn't alone. I found people who wouldn't judge me. I learned that a person's grief can be healed with support from others."

An important part of your journey through grief is meeting new people. It is good when this happens. Relationships change when someone in the family dies: relationships within the family and among friends. As new people come into your life, nurture their friendships. It may be that through them, you will discover new directions for your life.

Remember, also, that your past goes with you on this journey. Your past has made you who you are right now and it is an important part of who you will become. Take time to list those things for which you can be grateful. Much of what you have to be thankful for will be the basis upon which you will build your new life: what your loved one taught you, your home, your personal resources, family, friends and the memories of the one who has died.

Your faith is also something that remains with you even though it may be severely tested at this time. Spend time meditating on what you believe about God, life and afterlife. Don't be afraid to ask the difficult questions! You may have new insights into what your future could look like.

Danger signals on the journey

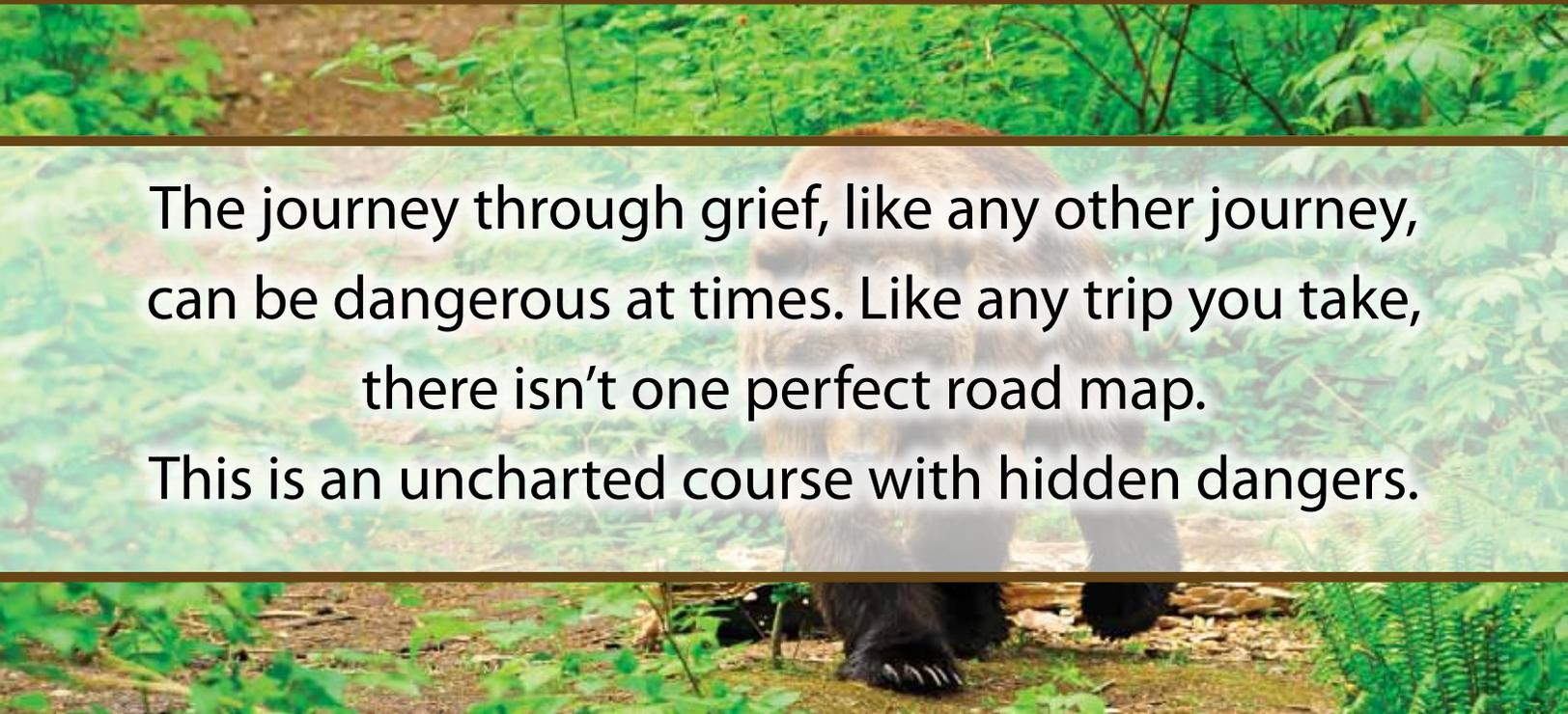
The journey through grief, like any other journey, can be dangerous at times. Like any trip you take, there isn't one perfect road map. This is an uncharted course with hidden dangers. Here are some of them.

Overwork or overactivity: Work and some productive activity are good antidotes for grief. However, spending excess hours at work or getting involved in a lot of things right away tends to sap the energy you need to grieve. As a result, you may experience a delayed reaction a year or two after the death. It is better to deal with it sooner rather than later.

Over-medication: I believe there are times when a doctor's prescription can help us through difficult times. Sleeping pills and mild antidepressants often help people get over the rough patches near the beginning. However, if you allow yourself to become dependent on them, you severely limit your ability to move on to a new, productive life.

Well-meaning people! I think it is safe to say that people you know want to help you. But they often say the most ridiculous things! In the early months following a death, someone may say to you, "Oh, are you still crying?" or "Aren't you over this yet?" or "Have you started to date yet?" It will help you to understand that the journey through grief isn't overnight and that people, for the most part, don't understand that it takes a long time.

Alcohol or drug abuse: The abuse of alcohol or non-prescription drugs can impair your ability to reason clearly. Your ability to process this loss and to begin to make productive decisions about your life will also be impaired.

A photograph of a large brown bear walking through a lush green forest. The bear is the central focus, moving from the background towards the foreground. The forest floor is covered in ferns and other green plants, and the background is filled with dense foliage and trees.

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them about something you have just done. It takes time, but I think it is best to face these facts realistically. Gradually the reality of your loss will become clear.

Take time to experience your pain. Grief is exhausting. The tears, sleepless nights and anxiety – just to name a few – will exhaust you. The best way to go through this is to go through it! You can avoid it with medication, alcohol or drug abuse, overworking or overactivity. But the best way to deal with it is to take time to cry and to express what you are feeling.

Begin to take steps towards recreating your life. There are ways in which your situation alone will force change on you. Just the absence of one person in your home or family does that. But a time will come when you will be given the opportunity to consciously make some creative change in your life. Recently a woman, whose husband had died five months previously, said to me, "Guess what? I'm going to Mexico for two months!" "Two months!" I responded. "Yes, why not! My husband didn't want to go south in the winter, so now I'm going." Although she would rather have her husband back with her, the reality was that she was now free to do something she had always wanted to do and she was going to do it.

Gradually develop a new relationship with the one who has died. The relationship with your loved one that was once physical and present, is now a relationship of memory and of feeling. Most of us have happy memories of those who have died. These memories are a great gift because they not only preserve the happy times for us, but they also help us to remember the things that were important to our loved ones. Unfortunately, some people have memories of a difficult and perhaps abusive relationship. In that case, it may be necessary to seek professional help.

Rest stops on the grief journey

As I have already said, the journey through grief is hard work and it is exhausting. Most people who are grieving don't understand the need to "limit their grief." By that I mean, it is important to consciously take time out of your grieving to relax and, yes, enjoy yourself. It is a very important part of the process. It is what we mean by "taking care of yourself."

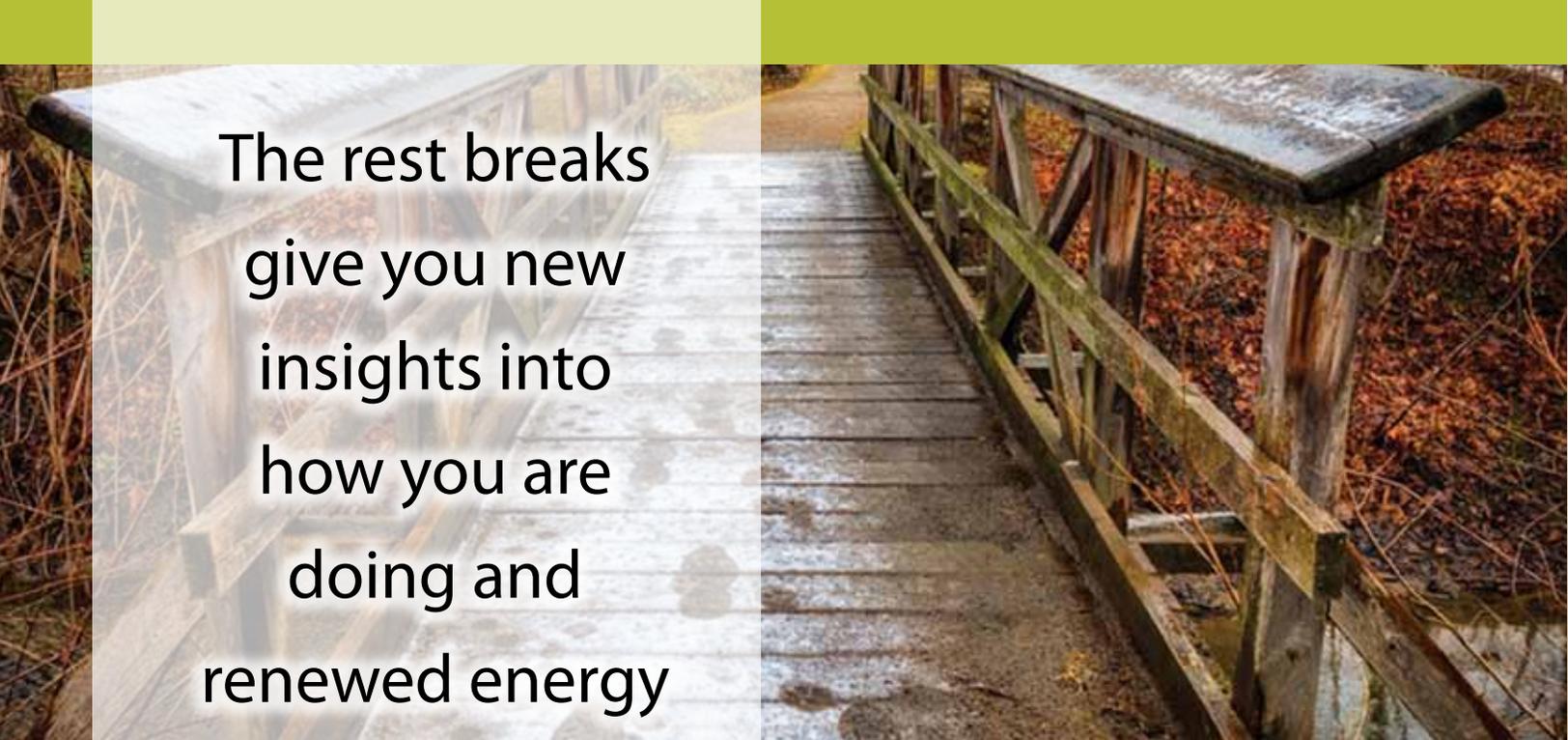
What are some of the things in your life that bring you joy? Your family? Music? Flowers? Fishing?

Tasks along the way

If you go on a long trip you will often find that it isn't all play. There are days when you need to take time out to make sure the trip is going the way you want it to go. The journey through grief has days of play, but only as the journey progresses. Most of the journey is hard work! And it is up to the individual who is grieving to do much of the work. Here are some things you need to do in your journey through grief.

Consciously begin to accept what this loss means to you. During the first few months almost every day will bring a new realization of what this death means. For instance, you may discover new ways of doing your grocery shopping. You will discover a change in your daily schedule. Every anniversary, birthday or special event will draw to your attention that life has changed forever. If it is your spouse who died, it will gradually sink in that you are no longer part of a couple. If it was your parent who died you might have moments of wanting to pick up the phone to tell





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Walking? Friends? Cooking? Only you can answer that. It takes some planning to have a rest stop in your journey through grief, but it is essential.

Don't feel guilty about enjoying yourself. Your loved one would want you to move on with life. Make plans to give yourself a break from grief. Invite a friend to join you for lunch or a concert. Treat yourself to a new piece of clothing, a baseball or football game, or a short trip away. These things help to bring a normalcy to life and will make you realize that you can and will move on.

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Coming to the end of your journey

How do you know when your journey through grief is over? Well, it is easier to know when you are getting near the end. You will have days and weeks of feeling much better. The crying will become less, a new light will break the darkness, and you will find joy in being alive again. You will laugh again! You will begin to say things like, "I want to live. I know I can do it." You will begin to make decisions about your life based on your new reality.

The journey through grief, like any other journey, has lingering memories. The journey of coming to terms with your loved one's death becomes part of the bigger journey of your life. You will feel like you have completed it, but years later, you may be surprised when memories of the past bring tears. This is normal. When you think you have come to the end of your journey through grief be thankful for all you have learned and allow this experience to continue to influence who you are and how you live the rest of your life.

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