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Along The Way

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LEARNING THE CHANGE

By John Kennedy Saynor

One of my favourite summer pastimes is sitting on the dock on the small lake where my rustic cabin is located. The city is far away and I am free to dream and to look at life from another perspective. Nature is a great teacher isn't it? On the one side of my lot is a small marshy area. It is a favourite fishing spot for our local blue heron. The top of the water is dotted with white and yellow water lilies. The shoreline is abundant with cattails, water hyacinths and iris flowers.

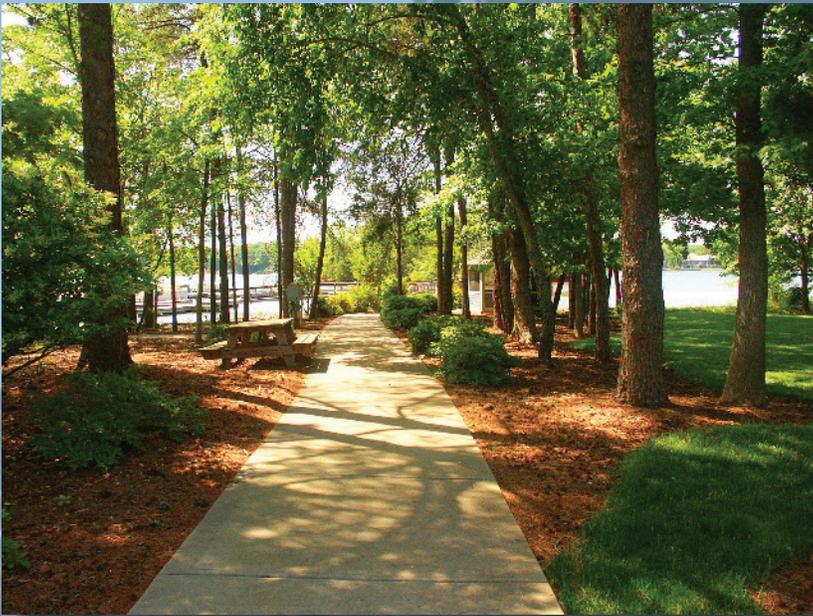
All of the beauty isn't above water, of course, because one of the first things I look for each year are the fish and frogs – a sure sign of a healthy lake. I have to confess, after all these years, I am still fascinated by the tadpoles. No wonder it was so difficult catching them when I was a kid! The minute I step out onto the rock, they dive for the mud and are gone from my sight. But I notice that later in the summer they become more lethargic. Tiny legs begin to sprout on either side of their tails. Then they appear at the front of their body. Their body begins to change, their tail begins to shrink and they change appearance entirely. Then, of course,

you know what happens. One day they leave the family at the bottom of the lake and life is changed for ever.

Life is like that, they say. A cocoon breaks open on the side of the dock and a beautiful dragonfly bursts forth to play in the summer sky. An egg breaks open and a tiny bird struggles to get its first breath and opens its eyes to the world around. Change, change and more change.

When someone in our life dies, change becomes the norm. Changes we don't want. Changes we have never considered. Changes for which we are not prepared. It may be that if we can clarify what some of the changes are, we can cope with them better. What are some of them?

Change to your identity. A woman said to me recently, "I just realized this week that I'm not a wife anymore. I'm a widow!" When a parent dies, you are no longer a son or daughter to that parent; you may still have one parent, but the unique relationship you had with the one who died has ended. Yes, you have a new identity.



"A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle."

*~ Kahlil Gibran,
The Prophet*

Change to your tasks in life. When your role changes, your tasks change. While not all bereaved people experience this, many in a family discover they have new responsibilities and new tasks to perform as the family reorganizes itself. Recently I spent some time with four daughters of a man who died suddenly. What was their main concern? It was around their mother and how she would get through the months ahead. After years of thinking mom and dad were immortal, the daughters had new responsibilities and new roles in the family.

Change in your environment. That may sound like the understatement of the day, but it comes as a surprise to many. If it is a spouse who dies, the survivor, who may be alone, discovers a home that is no longer "our" home. It is "my" home. There have been many people I have spoken with who have been very successful in creating a new home for themselves. Others have had a difficult time.

Change in your social life. Nothing changes a circle of friends like a death! It is the most dramatic example of the fact that not only family members mourn a death, but friends do as well. So you may find your social group changes after a death in your family. This comes as a surprise to many, but it happens. Because of this, the bereaved often discover that the people they expected to get a lot of support from, aren't there to offer the support.

Change in your values and priorities. This is especially true when death is sudden. It makes you realize how short and uncertain life is. Sudden death often forces the survivors to take stock of their own life and what it is that is important to them. Death may affect you spiritually as well. Perhaps your faith will be challenged. Perhaps a death will cause you to begin to think about spiritual

issues. Yes, there are many ways death can affect those things that give life purpose and meaning. This leads me to my next point.

Change in life's hopes and dreams. Again, this may seem like a gross understatement, but recognizing it is an important part of the healing process. In a support group I conducted a few years ago, one of the members wrote this in his evaluation: "We have learned to recreate our lives." I have never forgotten that! Recovering from grief is about many things, but recreating life is one of them, and a very important one.

"Change?" you say. "It's upheaval of the worst kind!" Well it is that! But the upheaval doesn't last forever if you have the courage to face what has changed and take steps to gradually recreate your life. Kahlil Gibran once wrote these words. "A little knowledge that acts is worth infinitely more than much knowledge that is idle." The difficulty many grieving people have is that they don't act on the knowledge they have. But then that is a difficulty most people have isn't it?

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Living the Change



Eleanor Roosevelt, America's first lady when her husband Franklin was president, said this, "You must do the thing you think you cannot do." She probably never thought when she was a young girl that she would one day be married to a president of the United States. Life for the two of them wasn't easy, yet they accomplished things they would never have believed possible because they were both courageous.

The reaction of many newly bereaved people to their situation is, "I don't know how I will get through this!" There is nothing wrong with that reaction. It is a normal response to their situation. So what are some ways you can help yourself deal with the change that has taken place in your life.

Gradually adjust to your new identity. This is one area of adjustment people find difficult. For the new widow it is worsened by the fact that there is an unspoken stigma around the word "widow" or "widower." Nobody wants to be a widow or widower and adapting to this new identity is difficult. Changing the name in the phone book, on your chequebook, your address labels and your bank accounts are all part of the process. If you are mourning the death of a parent, or parents, you may find the loss of that "line of defence" that parents often provide a great difficulty.

Begin to learn what your new responsibilities are. This is closely connected to adjusting to your new identity, but it is different. Your time, energy and priorities may change greatly because of this death in your family. It will take time for you to adjust to it, to adjust your schedule and to adjust your expectations of life. Be patient with yourself and seek the support and advice of professionals, family members and friends who can help you.

Begin to adjust to your new environment. This is perhaps an area where most people have the greatest difficulty. A woman who I have been counselling found her husband dead beside her in bed not long ago. Her adjustment has been typical of many who find themselves recently bereaved. She told me she found it difficult to go into their bedroom because she could see him in the bed where he died. So I suggested she rearrange the furniture so the bedroom didn't look the same. She did that and can now go in there without seeing him. Then, she sold her husband's truck and bought herself a new car. The lease on the truck was coming up and had to be dealt with. It was difficult, but she did it and now has a new car. Of course, she would rather have her husband here to deal with it all, but she did it and I think is quite proud of herself. She is beginning to make plans for next summer when she will take her grandchildren to her trailer. Many changes have to be made after someone dies, and some can be made in order to make the adjustment to a new life.

Adjust to a new social life. Many newly bereaved people don't want to go out socially immediately after a loved one dies. However, the time comes when they want to get out again. Some fit right back into their old social group without a problem, but I think most begin to develop new friends and interests. It is part of recreating life! As odd as it may seem, some people make new friends in a bereavement support group. Others find new friends and interests in volunteer work. Building a new social life based on your new reality means that the relationships aren't clouded by memories of the one who has died. You can do new things with new people and not find yourself remembering your loved one in that context.



*Do not stand at my grave and weep.
I am not there, I do not sleep.
I am a thousand winds that blow,
I am the diamond glints on snow,
I am the sunlight on ripened grain,
I am the gentle autumn rain.
When you awaken in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight.
I am the soft stars that shine at night.
Do not stand at my grave and cry,
I am not there. I did not die.
~ Mary E. Frye*

Don't be afraid of challenging your former assumptions about life. Often our values and priorities are determined by those around us and when a significant person in our life dies, many find their values change. Sometimes this is frightening. If you have lived a large part of your life with certain values, to have them challenged can be scary. However, if those priorities are no longer valid, then be willing to change for today and the future. As I said before, a death can be a wake-up call for us. Death can be a reminder that we aren't here forever. Many people discover they are thinking about spiritual questions in a way they haven't for a long time. Spirituality is the heartbeat of life. Serious questioning and re-evaluating life at this time can provide a good foundation for building a new future.

Dream and hope again! When someone you love dies, many of your hopes and dreams die with them. For a while it will seem

like you will never dream again. But in time you will – and don't be afraid when those new dreams begin to come to you. Dreams bring hope and without hope you can't carry on. So, hoping and dreaming go hand in hand.

One last thing. While it is true that we need friends and family to support us, I believe we all have a responsibility for how well we get through the difficulties of our life. To begin to work through our grief takes courage, hope and determination. Know that the sun will shine again and you will rebuild your life, and life will be good again.

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