

**LIVING AND
GRIEVING
TOGETHER**

PART 5 OF 6

Embracing Spirituality

Supporting families through the crazy early days and weeks following a loved one's death.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

In early grief, existential questions tend to arise naturally. Why did the person have to die? Why now? Why in this way? Why does anyone live and die? Why are we here? I often say “why” questions naturally precede “how” questions. “Why did this happen?” instinctively comes before “How will I survive that it did happen?”

It is normal for grievors to try to make sense of things, to try to understand. It is normal to wonder about and search for the meaning of life – the griever's life, the life of the person who died and life in general.

It is also normal to wrestle with the difficult feelings

that at times accompany these kinds of thoughts after a death. Anger, sadness, guilt, despair, frustration and even awe and joy often go hand in hand with searching, questioning and sometimes discovering insights about meaning.

Most “why” questions and concerns after a death are esoteric in nature. In other words, they're spiritual. They're spiritual because they can't be answered with concrete facts and hard science. Instead, they have to do with our innate sense that there may be something bigger or greater than us at work in our lives and in the universe. Perhaps, we think, there is something cosmic or divine that

we are all a part of in some hard-to-fathom or even unknowable way.

It is important to acknowledge that spirituality and religiosity are not synonymous. In some people's lives, they overlap completely – their religious life is their spiritual life. Others have a rich spiritual life with few or no ties to organized religion. Still others may not consider themselves “spiritual” but have a philosophy of life they live by.

Obviously, each of us needs to define our own spirituality in the depths of our hearts and minds. Regardless of grievors' beliefs, spiritual practices can help them survive the early months, as well as profoundly enrich the remainder of their days.

Searching for Answers And Learning to Live With Uncertainty

In the early weeks of grief, many people struggle with finding reasons to get out of bed in the morning. This is mostly a practical, not spiritual, kind of searching. Anything that helps grievors feel safe and comforted is probably also a reason to get out of bed in the morning. If the



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thought of a cup of their favorite tea or sitting outside in the sun gets them out of bed, great. If meeting a good friend for lunch appeals to them, excellent. I always urge grievers to be generously compassionate with themselves by sprinkling their days with activities and incentives that will help them get from one hour to the next.

The more spiritual kind of searching in grief, however, is the main theme of this article. There generally aren't easy answers to the grand "why" questions. Sometimes there aren't answers, period.

I like to say that instead of trying to pin down *understanding* in grief, they often have to get more comfortable with *standing under* the mystery. That's one of our chief challenges in grief, in fact – learning to live with not knowing and uncertainty.

But even if there aren't any answers, there's still a lot of value in the search. Simply by talking to other people about their search, exploring their questions, looking for answers and expressing their feelings about their frustrations, grievers are allowing themselves to mourn authentically.

You can help hold space for grievers in their search for meaning by being open to

whatever spiritual and/or religious impulses and ideas they bring to your funeral home. If they want to integrate certain spiritual concepts into the funeral experience, you can help them do so.

Caring for the Spiritual Self

When I'm counseling someone who's grieving, I always encourage them to build spiritual practices into their everyday routines. Even just 10 minutes a day devoted to caring for their spirit can have a profound impact on their healing and well-being.

Which spiritual practices will clear their head, help them feel grounded and nurture their divine sparks will vary from one griever to the next. But if you are ever asked to give ideas for spiritual nurturing and exploration, here's a list you can use:

- Go for a walk in nature.
- Attend religious or spiritual services.
- Speak with a clergy person or other spiritual leader.
- Sit outdoors somewhere beautiful.
- Breathe deeply.
- Listen to music that speaks to your soul.
- Write in a journal.
- Do something good for your body.
- Pay attention to your five senses in this moment.
- Pray.
- Meditate.
- Make something.
- Spend time with someone who loves you.
- Do something that makes you feel hopeful.

- Help someone else.
- Watch the sun rise or set.
- Read a spiritual text.
- Practice yoga.
- Garden.
- Get a massage.
- Give a gift.
- Read or write poetry.
- Express gratitude.

Grievers can be doing a spiritual practice and mourning at the same time. For example, they can pray about their loss or spend time talking about the loss with someone who cares. Grief and spiritual work dosed together are often a particularly powerful combination.

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Embracing Mystical Experiences

After a death, many grievers have mystical experiences, which often give comfort. And sometimes, because they fall into the realm of the supernatural, these experiences make some grievers feel crazy! You can help assure grievers who have mystical experiences that they are not crazy and that these encounters are common and normal.

It is not unusual for people experiencing grief to feel they're being contacted by the person who died, for example. If the person doesn't show up themselves in some way, such as in a dream or fleeting

glimpse, then a sign or symbol from them does.

Sometimes, this sign comes in the form of a bird or animal. When a cardinal, fox or butterfly, for example, suddenly appears in their yard or path,

they might take it as a sign from the person who died that they are safe and well.

Other times, the sign comes in the form of smells or sounds, found objects or natural phenomena such as rain-

bows. Such synchronicities often feel mystical when we are searching for meaning.

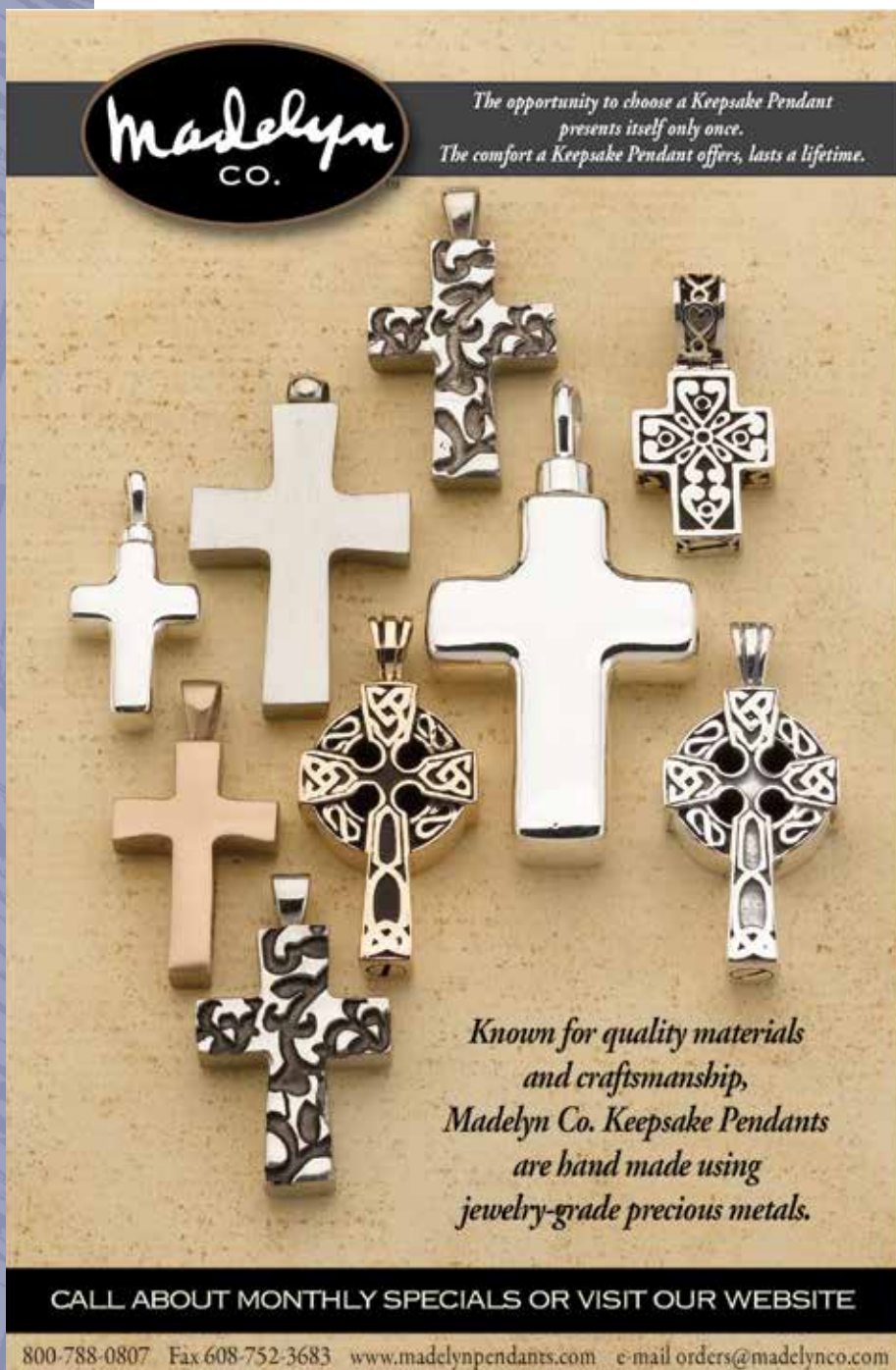
There are a few different ways for griever to think about these mystical experiences. One is that they are in fact receiving real communications from the beyond. The person who died or other spiritual beings are contacting them, usually to give reassurance that all is well.

Another way to think about these experiences is that mysterious happenings are just that – mysterious. We can't know why these things happen, but we can acknowledge that they do happen. We can stay open to the mystery without needing to fully understand.

As always, the griever gets to decide how to think about their mystical experiences. There is no wrong or right answer. If they share a mystical experience with you, listen attentively and let them know you appreciate their trust in you. Affirm that their experiences are normal and that whatever they choose to believe about the experience is the right answer for them.

Dealing With Dreams and Nightmares

We can think of grief dreams as a subset of



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mystical experiences. And as with all mystical experiences in grief, griever can choose to think of any grief dreams they might have however they would like.

Obviously, pleasant grief dreams are easier to live with than bad dreams or nightmares. Nightmares can make grievers feel especially crazy. If they're having bad dreams about the death or person who died, I always encourage grievers to talk about the dreams with people who care about them. If their nightmares are recurring and/or often intrude in their waking thoughts and feelings, I encourage them to see a grief counselor to help explore them. As we've discussed, getting good rest is essential for the body in early grief. If their dreams are preventing them from reaching restorative sleep, it's also a good idea to discuss this issue with their primary care provider.

Finding Healing in Rituals

I often find that additional rituals after the funeral can be helpful in surviving early grief. By rituals, I simply mean actions we perform in a certain way and in a certain sequence. We perform them for a purpose that has emotional and spiritual meaning and is greater than the sum of its parts.

As you know, the funeral

is a foundational grief ritual. It helps grievers begin to acknowledge the reality of loss, remember the person who died, activate social support, express feelings and search for meaning. Grief rituals don't have to be formal ceremonies, though. In fact, most can be brief, informal and simple.

One example is what I call the Ten-Minute Grief Encounter Ritual. Here's how grievers might use it:

- First, find a quiet space and center yourself.
- Then set your intention for the ritual on that day. For example, it might be to feel more calm or to appreciate the love you still have for the person who died. It can be anything you want.
- Next, while holding or looking at a symbol of the person who died (such as a photo or article of clothing), name the grief feelings you are having in that moment and acknowledge their normalcy. You might say something like, "I am feeling afraid. Fear is a natural part of grief."
- As you name each new thought and feeling, place your free hand over your heart, pressing gently, then allow your hand to fall to a resting position again.
- If you're someone who prays, you can pray these thoughts and feelings instead as you step through the ritual.
- Continue feeling, naming and exploring your emotions for five to 10 minutes. When the time is up, take a moment to express your gratitude for anything

authentic you thought, felt and acknowledged during the ritual.

- Close with an affirmation that restates the intention you set at the beginning of the ritual but this time as a present truth. For example, "I love [name of person who died]. I am capable of grieving and loving and healing at the same time."

An amazing thing about small grief rituals is that they naturally facilitate healing. This is especially true when they're done regularly, day in and day out. I have seen them work effectively many times in the lives and hearts of grieving people. In fact, ritual is so effective in grief that when I meet a griever who is especially struggling, I often recommend additional rituals, along with talk therapy.

For those not already comfortable with spiritual practices, the idea of grief rituals might sound a little crazy. But learning to embrace the crazy is what this article series is all about, right? Besides, grieving people aren't really crazy and neither are grief rituals. ☸

*Alan Wolfelt, Ph.D., is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people – including *You're Not Crazy – You're Grieving*, from which this article series is adapted—have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. He is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. 970-217-7069; drwolfelt@centerforloss.com; centerforloss.com.*