The aloneness of grief
by Kenneth J. Doka

“S”he was our Nana,” Greta remarked, “yet I seem to be the only one who grieves her death.” I knew enough about Greta to understand her comment. She was 12 years old when her mother died. Her grandmother stepped in to help raise her. When her beloved grandmother died years later, Greta felt alone mourning her. Nana had suffered from dementia for many years and, to most in the family, seemed a distant figure. Greta’s younger half-brother knew her only as a nice older lady who would sometimes visit and make pudding. Even Greta’s adolescent children only remembered her as a patient in an Alzheimer’s unit. There was no one to share stories or fully empathize with her grief.

Sometimes we may feel alone in our grief. Not because we are the only person affected by a loss, but rather because our grief reactions seem so different from those around us. Each of us is unique. Every relationship is different. We all grieve in our own way. One of my mentors, Rabbi Earl Grollman, liked to remind us that grief is like fingerprints or snowflakes; each individual reaction is different and distinctive. It is easy, then, even when others mourn alongside us, to feel that no one fully appreciates our loss.

When we feel alone in our grief, it helps to realize that such feelings are normal and natural. In reality, grief is always a singular experience; that is the nature of grief. To find the support that seems to be missing, it may help to speak with a grief counselor or join a support group.

We may want to explore, perhaps with a counselor or within a grief group, both our reactions and our relationship. That may offer some clarity as to why others in our support system have different reactions or seem to have trouble understanding our grief.

Perhaps then we can determine what can...continued on p. 4
Nothing endures but change,” wrote the Greek philosopher Heraclitus. We recognize truth in that statement as October arrives, bringing dramatic seasonal changes. Gone are the warm days of summer when the earth was green and the days were long. Nights are longer than days now. Flowers are fading away. Leaves on trees give up one colorful last “hurrah” before dropping to the ground to become compost for next year’s growth. There is a chill in the air that sends us scrambling for coats and blankets.

The drastic change from summer to winter is not unlike how our lives change when someone we love dies. We miss the warmth of that loved one’s presence. We want to hold on, but know we can’t. The world feels barren and bleak. Some tend to retreat and turn inward. Others want to huddle with others for warmth and comfort. Some rage against the cold and the passing of summer.

Death is a family affair and usually other family members are going through the process of grief with you. Yet, you are all different in how you cope with loss. A variety of grief reactions will likely be present within the same family. Differences are also due to the fact that each person had his or her own unique relationship with the deceased.

Even when you know that there is no right or wrong way to grieve, it is sometimes difficult to know how to support each other. Misunderstandings are common during this stressful time. When there are children involved, adults are often unsure how to help them.

October also means the holiday season is just around the corner. Perhaps the same holidays you used to look forward to with anticipation now leave you with a sense of dread. Death interrupts and changes everything. Sharing holiday as well as others to come, including the Valentine’s Day you mentioned.

You may not realize that Halloween practices actually have religious roots. Ancient and contemporary religions observe late autumn as a special time of year when life and death seem to walk hand in hand. Samhain is a Wiccan observance beginning October 31, when it is believed that the veil that separates the worlds of the living and of the dead is at its thinnest. For Christians, All Saints Day on November 1 and All Souls Day on November 2 are solemn holy days for prayer and reflection to draw close those who have died. The night before November 1, All Hallows Eve, evolved into the playful, if graphic, displays and the happy “Trick or Treaters” of Halloween. In many Hispanic cultures El Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead, celebrates this same closeness as well. A similar spiritual consolation is expressed in the acronym א.ה.ב.צ.נ.ת. found at the base of many Jewish gravestones, which stands for “May his/her soul be bound up with the souls of the living.”

Given these religious elements, perhaps you can tap into your personal and family spiritual traditions to draw comfort from Halloween activities. Focus on the fact that they are an attempt to dispel fear and create a strong bond with those who have died.

It’s also important to ask your mother if she’s open to hear your worries as well as share her ideas about how to approach the holiday. Together you may come up with a strategy, including the possibility that you may just need to shield yourself from too much exposure to Halloween this year. You can go out to a movie, take a trip out of town, or just keep your porch lights off and curtains pulled.

You did not mention young children, but if youngsters or teens are impacted by your dad’s death, they also need special attention and preparation. Hospice Foundation of America (www.hospicefoundation.org) and the National Center for Grieving Children & Families (www.dougy.org) both have good resources available.

Most of all, be confident that you have the inner resources and the support of friends, family and professionals to help you as you move into the future after the death of your dad.

The Rev. Paul A. Metzler, DMin, an Episcopal priest and psychotherapist, is semi-retired following over 40 years of service as a clergy, therapist and hospice-based grief counselor.

Email your questions for the experts to askjourneys@hospicefoundation.org.
memories and feelings among family and friends can help. Even happy memories may lead to tears. The only way to get to the other side of the pain is through it, so don’t avoid or try to shield each other too much. Even children heal better if included and informed, rather than unduly protected. Someone once said, “We are a family that was broken by death but mended by love.” May your family find healing through love as well.

- **Patti Anewalt, PhD, LPC, FT, is Director of the Pathways Center for Grief and Loss with Hospice and Community Care.**

---

**Our grief stories**

by Jane Williams

Each of us explains the death of someone we care about in our own unique way. We create a story, based on our personal history, which tries to make sense of our loss. Whether as short as a couple of sentences or as long as a book, we tell the story to ourselves; sometimes we tell it to others. Telling that story helps to make our loss “real.”

For some of us, the initial story is enough for accepting the death and making meaning of our loss. But sometimes the initial story is not enough. Often, the question of “why” remains in the story, making the final piece of the narrative difficult. Sometimes, during this process of constructing our story of loss, an awareness or unexpected thought comes to us that changes the course of grief. They are those “aha!” moments when, suddenly, we see the world differently, and our grief, in turn, seems altered in positive ways.

Here is a father’s story of how his grief was changed after experiencing an unexpected thought.

The father tells of his unending sadness after the death of his teenage son. The son had been his father’s delight: he was witty, bright, and had many friends. Two years after the death, the father remained angry. He blamed God for his son’s death. He was no longer able to enjoy the out-of-doors that he had shared with his son. Nothing in life gave him any particular joy.

Although the father loved his younger daughter, he was never close to her. Their relationship was different. She was artistic and not athletic; her boyfriends were not to his liking; and her behavior tended to “push the envelope.” She had not appeared overly sad about her brother’s death, and, to the father, this meant she did not care about her brother. However, one day, he found a note she had written about her chronic sorrow over her brother’s death. She referenced the idea of not wanting to live without her brother. The father was badly shaken, and he immediately found counseling for them both. At the counselor’s suggestion, he began spending more time with his daughter. They talked about many things, including her boyfriends—even ones he hadn’t particularly liked.

One day, while they were walking in the woods where he had hunted with his son, he suddenly realized that he had gained a wonderful daughter whom he had never taken the time to know. In that “aha” moment, he understood that he could have lost both of his children. Although he continued to mourn his son, he felt a newfound gratitude for his daughter, which lessened his distress. He now saw his loss in a new way.

- **Jane Williams, PhD, is is a clinical psychologist and author. Portions of this article are reprinted from her book, Mysterious Moments: Thoughts That Transform Grief. Copyright 2017 by Jane Williams. Published by Library Partners Press.**

---

**New grief resource**

Hospice Foundation of America celebrates the 25th Anniversary of its Living with Grief® educational series with a new program in March 2018, Transforming Loss: Finding Potential for Growth. In this inspirational video, you’ll hear from bereavement experts and people who have experienced post-traumatic growth. Based on the groundbreaking work of Richard Tedeschi, PhD, and Lawrence Calhoun, PhD, of the University of North Carolina, the topic is appropriate for counselors and anyone who has experienced loss. Many hospices, hospitals, colleges, faith organizations and funeral homes host the Living with Grief® program each year. Check HFA’s website (hospicefoundation.org) in early 2018 to find a viewing location near you.
The aloneness of grief ...continued from page 1

help us as we deal with our loss. Greta wrote a letter to Nana that she read in her support group. It reaffirmed their special relationship and allowed Greta to thank Nana for being there when she felt so alone. As Greta reflected on her grandmother’s support as she dealt with the loss of her mother, she recognized how that support would help her now.

Greta realized that the strengths she learned from Nana could help as she mourned her now. She remembered how her Nana reassured her, as they mourned together the loss of Greta’s mother and Nana’s daughter, that they did not need to feel the same. They simply needed to support each other. Greta acknowledged the legacy of her Nana; she could grieve her own loss in her own way and own time.

- Kenneth J. Doka, PhD, MDiv, is Senior Consultant to HFA and a Professor of Gerontology at The College of New Rochelle.