

No Time To Say “Good Bye?”

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I'd like to invite you to join me on my private journey of grief. I am going to share with you my attempts to make sense of what probably does not make sense at all. How can the death of any child make sense? I hope that some of you will share my views, and others who may have different views will share them with all of us.

In most cases, the death of a child is a traumatizing, life-altering event for that child's parent. We are never truly prepared for the death of our children even if we were told immediately at the moment of their birth that they are expected to die soon. But there are variations and degrees of intensity in every individual's trauma. The most intense reactions are those of parents whose child has died suddenly, painfully, and violently. With sudden separation, even when death was anticipated but the parent was not present at the moment of death, the parent is left with a strong feeling that he or she has to get closure by formally separating from their child. In other words, saying 'good bye.'

I ask you:

- ❖ Can a parent truly separate from his or her child alive or dead?
- ❖ Does a concrete or even a symbolic 'good bye' bring the parent any closer to 'closure'?
- ❖ Do these 'good byes' have any meaning? and Are they helpful?

Let us examine and challenge a few assumptions:

1. Every beginning has an end. We are conditioned to think in linear terms: where processes have a beginning, a middle and an end. Grief, as an example of a process, is thought of as having a beginning, a middle and an expected end.
2. But what if some processes evolve in a different pattern? Not in a linear Step-wise for example, but rather simultaneous – many events/emotions/ states of mind – occur at the same time, and we 'leap' to a new state of mind or a conclusion, rather than arrive at it gradually?

There are different theories and beliefs that claim that Life is a continuum; that Time is not linear but rather circular, or spiral. How would we define Present, Past or Future in a process then?

Can we still define then an end to grief?

And if we can define a beginning to a process, does it necessarily imply an end, or are there open-ended processes that last as long as the individual who experiences them, lives?

And if Life is eternal, is it possible that our experiences are as well?

3. Relationships end with separations.

Every relationship which does end, does so with a final separation.

But what if there are no true separations, only illusions of separation - especially from our children? Do we ever stop being 'parents' only because our children have died?

Look at the many grief behaviors of parents that indicate continuing attachment to their deceased children, the opposite of separation: Inward Steps of searching for answers; of looking for 'signs' and 'signals' for the survival of the essence (soul/spirit/personality) of their deceased children, of dreams, yearnings, longings, unbearable pain of missing the deceased child, and Outward Steps of commemoration, and attempts to readjust to a new reality.

Think of the 'dual image' that we develop of our deceased children as another indication of lack of separation: the real-concrete image of them that we carry with us, side-by-side with the shadow-imagined-what if-type of image that we develop? Can we ever stop imagining our children in different stages of a potential life? Can we completely erase from our minds the real/concrete memories of them?

We are socialized to say 'hello' when we meet, and 'good bye' when we depart. But if there are no true separations, Life is continual, and Time is not linear - do we still need to say 'good bye'? Or do we say 'good bye', only to the physical being?

4. Leaving 'issues' open is not good for our well being.

We are taught that leaving 'issues' (whatever they might be) open without seeking 'closure' is not good for our well being.

But what if leaving 'issues' open is the ONLY way for a grieving parent to survive? If Grief as an issue, becomes a new state of existence for a parent, and if a parent never stops grieving (although the intensity and expressions of that grief may vary), then Grief is an open issue, and it is therefore, the only way that that parent can survive – grieving is equal to living!

5. 'Good bye' means 'closure.' Closure is crucial, desirable and attainable.

We are taught to believe that the achievement of 'closure' is not only crucial in order to 'go on' with our lives, but that it is attainable. We are pressured (a more truthful description to 'encouraged') to say 'good bye' to held emotions, thoughts, behaviors, objects, people – alive, or especially if they are dead. Because only when we, supposedly, say 'good bye' we achieve 'closure.' Closure becomes a condition to the opening of a new chapter in our lives. But what if 'closure' in our held emotions, thoughts, objects, etc., especially in relation to our deceased children is not only unattainable, but it is also NOT desirable and may actually be damaging to the parent's well being? Why 'let go' of emotions, thoughts, objects, etc., that provide comfort (nobody can take away the pain anyway)? Is the bereaved parent's well being at heart of such 'encouragements' or rather the well being of the non-bereaved, the outside observers whom our grief makes them feel uncomfortable?

6. 'Good bye' is concrete.

We are taught to believe that the most effective 'good bye' is concrete – spoken words, preferably, face-to-face.

But what if we remind ourselves that most of our communications are non-verbal, and many of them are symbolic. Remember all the times that you have said the actual words of 'good bye,' 'I love you,' and so on, and the many more times that you knew that your child knows that you are blessing him/her without words; the many times you prepared a snack for your child – a symbolic act of loving and caring. You did not have to say: 'I love you' or 'I care about you therefore, I made this snack for you.' Think about the many gestures we make, the thoughts we send his/her way – all non-verbal, but nevertheless understood.

And if you have had a chance to hold your dead or dying child in your arms, would you have chosen to say 'good bye?' or rather: 'I love you?'

In conclusion,

Within the context of my theory as outlined in Gili's Book – it is my opinion that in the process of readjustment to living in a reality without his/her child, the parent will continue taking inward steps of searching for answers and signs – confirmations for the survival of some aspect of their child, as well as outward steps to reconnect to Life again. The bereaved parent does not sever his/her attachment to his/her child. That parent does not truly separate from the deceased child nor does he/she achieve closure in his/her relationship or his/her grief – both last (at least) a life time.

A concrete 'good bye' or a symbolic one, are meaningful only when they are expressed in reference to the physical, but not in reference to the soul or the spirit. In reference to the soul, we may say 'hello' instead of 'good bye,' since we are continuing our relationships with our children and greeting them in their new form. Regardless of your belief system, let me assure you that death does not bring to an end the attachment the parent feels to his/her child. No concrete nor symbolic 'good bye' brings a parent closer to closure. A 'good bye' is helpful and meaningful only to the parent who feels that it is needed for his/her particular reasons, and even then, a 'good bye' does not mean a final separation from the child.

However, if we can train ourselves to think that our children hear, feel, and know both our 'hellos' and 'good byes', know them in the many ways that we interacted, or interact, with them at every moment of their lives and deaths - then there is no need to designate a particular moment in time, nor a particular manner, in which we express our thoughts and emotions. We continue to interact with our children now in a symbolic, but nevertheless not less powerful, manner as we did when they were alive in the physical world.