

On Choice and Grief

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When Grief drags us down, leaving us breathlessly beat at the bottom of bottoms – we are confronted with a dilemma: should we stay ‘down under’? Or should we make an effort to surface, to breathe again? Staying ‘down under’ means to, eventually, die of suicide. Question: Is that what our living or dead children want or would have wanted us to do? If the answer is “no!” then there’s only one true option: Re-learn to breathe, re-learn to live, learn to find new meaning in life.

As described in Gili’s Book, when I realized that my grief for Gili was not a task to be completed, a stage or a phase to be over with, or a condition that I would eventually recover from, but rather a new existential state that will last a life time, I first perceived my condition as a punishment that I deserved – for failing to protect my child, for failing to save her life, for surviving her! The realization that grief is life long was tinted with self-blame and guilt, the closest I could get, emotionally, to feeling dead. But, using my bereavement model’s terminology, in my ongoing journey of readjustment to living without Gili, in the fluid motions/steps Inward, or soul searching, and Outward, or attempts of reconnection with life - my guilt and self-blame were eased off. I recognized the normalcy of this new state. I was not going crazy – feeling self-blame, guilt and shame, and wishing to drop dead; feeling rage at the ‘world’ who kept going as if nothing had happened, hearing Gili’s voice, feeling her presence, yearning to be with her, all that and much more, was common! I was not the only one feeling that. Other bereaved parents felt just like me regardless of the number of years that have passed since their child’s death. I carried with me Gili’s Real-Image. This is the past-oriented image. The actual memories of her imprinted on every cell of my being by her physical life, and to be stored for as long as I shall live. I, gradually, developed a Shadow-Image, a future-oriented image of Gili, characterized by ‘what if’ type thinking: What if she survived her injuries, what kind of life would she have lived today? I discovered that other parents were as attached to their deceased child as I am, again, regardless of the years that have passed since their child’s death. The realization that grief is life long and that all of its manifestations as exaggerated as they may appear both to the grieving parent and to the outside observer, and as prolonged as they may seem, are all normal – is comforting now. It was not a punishment any longer. Then, using again my Model’s terminology, I started noticing Turning Points in my mourning. Mental and physical energy shifted intentionally toward reconnection to the outside world – each one representing a step toward the definition of a new mission in life. My ultimate goal became to turn surviving into living by finding new meaning in my life. Finding new meaning had to include Gili’s dreams and assumed goals, redefining my relationships with my surviving son, with my spouse, with other family relatives, with colleagues and friends, new and old. I approached each one of these goals and relationships, with a mind frame that whatever they and I experience at the moment is temporary – it may change in time. I examined each relationship by asking myself: how important is this person to me, now? Is this person contributing to my well being or is he/she ‘sucking’ the little life I had left in me? Is the relationship reciprocal or one-sided? Do I ‘suck the life’ out of them? Do I have the energy or the motivation to change anything? Can I reassure those that were central to my existence that although Gili is at the center of my

visual field – after all, I was the self appointed family historian, that they are not forgotten. I knew that my grief needs ‘space’ and time to unfold. And still the question remained: How does it happen?

At our lowest point in our lives, we are faced with the greatest challenge of all: How to learn to live a meaningful life again?

When a child of ours dies we had no choice about the ‘event’ and about the grief we felt engulfing us immediately. We might have felt controlled by our grief. Within the first couple of years into grief, in our search for answers, we usually find all the ‘proof’ needed to affirm an existing belief we have about life and death, or to develop a new one. But whether we believe in the survival of the soul or that death is the end of all life, of all energy, we nevertheless, do not detach ourselves from our children.

Then, we could not detach ourselves from our grieving self. But, as time passes since our child’s death, we notice a change: As we readjust to life, we re-gain a new mastery on life. We engulf grief; we integrate it into daily living. We realize now that we have a choice of keeping our experience/ our memories of the ‘event’ – at any degree of closeness, attachment, or distance, detachment that we need or can bear at the moment. We can choose now when to turn ourselves in, and when to turn ourselves out/away. We know already that even when we allow ourselves to hit bottom, that we will somehow surface to catch our breath – that we will survive. The worst already happened.

When our grief is acute, we may experience great paradox: At the same time that we felt disassociated with life we were also most connected to life. Think of how acutely sensitive you were to sounds, sights, smells, and touch. How sharply you might have remembered everything that was connected to your child’s death but nothing that happened to you at the time.

It may feel as if grief causes us to be scattered, absent minded, but in fact, grief forces us to focus and preserve energy for what is truly important, or even crucial for our survival. It may seem as if we are more distracted, while in fact, we are more focused on what is relevant to our survival at the moment. We may appear forgetful, but we do remember only what is important to us now. It is as if we shifted events or people from the center of our visual field to our peripheral vision. We are still paying attention to those in our peripheral field, but less than to those at the center.

It is our intelligence, our creativity, our faith, our trust in ourselves and in others, our ability and willingness to accept a helping hand, our acknowledgment of our vulnerability, and our openness to the suffering of others around us, that will enable us, ultimately, to discover ways of reconstruction of new meaning in our lives.

Some will interpret information presented to them as ‘signs and signals’ thus uncover new meaning; others will pay attention to dreams and will derive strength from repeated themes. Others yet, will discover new pathways by re-defining new missions and re-directing their lives accordingly. The result of this search for new meaning may be in volunteering to help others in pain, in expanding or changing professional interests. I redirected my career to the

exclusive study and treatment of the bereaved. Some find new meaning in acts of commemoration of their children. I have been doing that too. It is as if we have made a choice to respond to a higher calling.

When we realize that Grief is not an external entity engulfing us, but rather an integral part of our self - we are relieved – not imprisoned by our grief any longer. This is not to say that we detach ourselves from our children. We, as parents, remain attached to our children whether living or dead. The sense of relief comes from our new ability to detach ourselves, temporarily, from the memory of the event of death – in order to catch our breath, to continue grieving, to make space to emotions additional to Deep Sadness. Grief is only one type of connection to our deceased children, a connection we don't want nor can we lose. Our grieving self, just like our loving self, constantly challenges us to grow, to expand, and to enlighten.