

Yes, I'm Still Grieving

If you or someone you care about has ever suffered a painful loss, you've likely heard, communicated, or thought something like the following:

- That earnest wish that a person could “move on” or “get over” the intensity of grief.
- The well-meaning concern that someone is “dwelling on,” “wallowing in,” or “stuck in” grief.
- That kind directive to “focus on the positive” or work to get one’s “life back.”

We often feel it, deeply, when friends or family members are grieving. Perhaps we experience their hurt empathically, or maybe we sense its weight because we wish for relief for them, or both. Whatever the circumstance, we may find ourselves hoping that people we care about might “move on” from or “get over” grieving and find some kind of “new normal” where living can happen. We might even impose this hope on ourselves, if we are the bereaved ones.

These usually well-intentioned sentiments insinuate that there is some sort of grief period, not unlike a maternity leave, after which you close the door on the worst of it and come back to something resembling the life you once knew. This can make the bereaved feel they *should* be happier and *should* be able to function better than they are, and *shouldn't* be taking so long getting to where they can live again. For me, the “shoulds” pave the way down into a pit of self-judgment where I feel like my experience isn't matching up to an ideal timeline, and I struggle to climb out.

One reason the idea of “moving on” or “getting over” a person is so problematic is because it seems to require leaving that person behind, like a decade or a stage of life – the exact opposite of what so many bereaved people want. When you have a connection that you never want to sever, you want nothing to do with moving on from it. To mourn is to keep the person you miss in your heart, as close as they can be now that they are no longer alive and breathing and standing right in front of you.

I've been thinking about this a lot, although not because someone said I should move on (no one has, although I wonder sometimes if some believe I spend a little too much time grieving). Actually, I've been thinking about it because something occurred to me: When I was born, I became a daughter. When I was two, I became a sister. After that time, I became a friend and a student, many times over. As an adult I became a spouse, and then a writer, and then a mother, and then a teacher. I am still, and will always be, each of these. Once you assume these roles you have them for life, even when you are not actively playing them. When I am leading a critical thinking workshop for instructors, I am still a mother. When I am comforting my kids, I am still a daughter. When I am walking with a friend, I am still a spouse. As I am writing these words, I am still a sister.

June 20 of 2014 was just another day in my life as a loving sister, but on June 21, I became a grieving sister as well. I cannot separate the grieving from the loving, and I cannot separate the sister from the self. To be myself and a sister is to love my brother and grieve his loss.

It might seem counterintuitive, but to live means that I have to grieve, in whatever way grief shows up every day. Grieving is now part of being me. It does not define me any more than my other roles define me, but it is an essential ingredient in the recipe of who I have become. Without it, everything would fall in on itself, like a cake without leavening, and I would be diminished, neither fully myself nor fully alive.

There's this idea floating around that to bring grieving to a close should allow love and life to flow as before, unburdened, but to me the opposite is true. Once it begins, grieving feeds into living like water from a new spring feeds a stream, then a river, then the ocean. It must flow freely to allow life to continue. To shut it off is to slow life to a trickle. In fact it seems that the more authentically we can experience grief's ebb and flow as it comes up, the more we are able to welcome everything that life still offers us.

Grieving in some form will always be a part of me now, as I am always a mother, always a daughter, always a sister. So yes, I'm "still" grieving. That means I'm also breathing, laughing, crying, thinking, striving, *living*. If you want your bereaved loved ones to live and feel joy and peace, accept the new configuration of who they are. If you help them face what they feel rather than shut it off or turn away, they may be more able to live.

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