

Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

Spring 2018



By Dr. Earl A. Grollman

Spirituality:

THE WISDOM OF

EDWIN H. "NED" CASSEM, SJ, MD

Even though it was decades ago, I will never forget that frigid snowy New England morning when I reluctantly went to the Cambridge YMCA. The facility was empty except for a single person whom I had never met. After choosing a nearby treadmill, I marvelled how this man was running so rapidly and effortlessly while I was struggling, sweating profusely. He later introduced himself, "Hi, I'm Ned." As they say, "It was the beginning of a beautiful relationship." In the many years that followed, Ned and I lectured together around the world on topics related to death and dying.

Ned was Father Edwin Cassem. For 40 years he was a physician at the Massachusetts General Hospital, including 11 years as chief of psychiatry. Under his leadership, his department received the highest rating for clinical performance according to the U.S. News & World Report. Ned's specialty was long-term counselling for the chronically ill and dying patients.

In addition, he established the Optimum Care Committee in 1973. This was one of the first in North America to address difficult questions about end-of-life decisions. Participants included clinicians, ethicists and legal counsels to confront difficult medical issues and decisions.

Unfortunately, my beloved colleague died on July 4, 2015 at age 80. But his profound teachings continue.

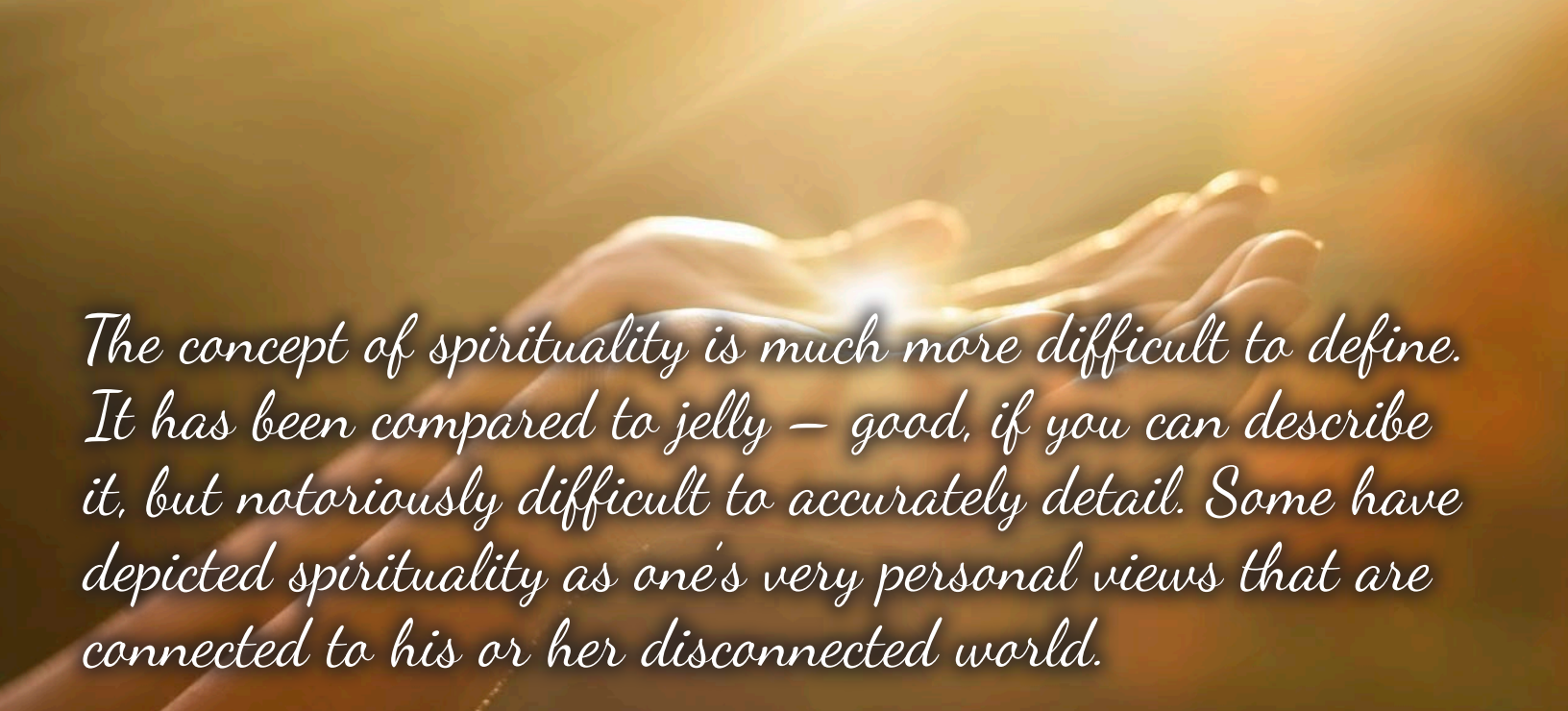
QUEST OF THE SPIRITUAL

Outside of my YMCA is a large sign with the words MIND/BODY/SPIRIT. As a highly-respected physician and an ordained priest, Father Cassem fully subscribed to this message. When asked, "What are you – a priest or a psychiatrist?" his answer was, "Doctor of body and doctor of feelings and spirit." He was an exemplar of the Jesuit principle of "spirituality for decision-makers."

Ned urged therapist sessions to include spirituality in their counselling. He quoted the World Health Organization as defining total suffering "to include the physical, psychological, social and spirituality components as having a strong impact on health and recovery from medical and psychiatric diseases." Dr. Cassem lamented the fact that spiritual concerns have a low priority in our health-care system.

SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION

It is necessary to define spirituality and religion. Religion is a prescribed set of beliefs that are usually associated with a particular organized institution. Each faith may have its own unique code of spiritual beliefs.



The concept of spirituality is much more difficult to define. It has been compared to jelly – good, if you can describe it, but notoriously difficult to accurately detail. Some have depicted spirituality as one’s very personal views that are connected to his or her disconnected world.

When asked whether one can be an atheist or agnostic and still be spiritual, Father Cassem wrote, “All atheists and agnostics have a history of contact with Western religion. In fact, it was usually that contact that made them atheists. It is always of interest to understand their point of view, provided of course, if they are willing to share their viewpoint. At any rate, they may never enter a church, synagogue or mosque and still have a profound spiritual core.”

The concept of spirituality is much more difficult to define. It has been compared to jelly – good, if you can describe it, but notoriously difficult to accurately detail. Some have depicted spirituality as one’s very personal views that are connected to his or her disconnected world. The meaning is best discovered not with positive assertions but by seeking answers to personal, profound questions such as:

- “If there were no tomorrow, what would I want to do today?”
- “What are my strengths to get me through these hard times?”
- “If I had three realistic wishes for the future, what would they be?”
- “What are the achievements that make me proud?”
- “Who am I?”
- “What does my future now hold for me?”
- “Is my life worth living?”
- “What frightens me the most?”
- “With whom can I share my innermost emotions?”
- “Do I deserve this agony?”
- “Am I being punished?”

- “Will I ever feel better?”
- “Is prayer and meditation beneficial at this time?”
(For those who indicate the importance of faith or spirituality)
- “What gives meaning to my suffering?”
- “What brings me joy?”
- “How can I discover contentment?”

The goal of the therapist is not only to uncover the clients’ painful dilemmas, but to help realize the blessings and rich experiences of the past while feeling hope for the future.

Father Cassem believed that however deep our belief in organized religion or spirituality, our goal is not to proselytize. Each of us comes from diverse ethnic, religious and spiritual backgrounds with differing insights. We should often recognize our limitations and make appropriate referrals when required. And Dr. Cassem would urge that the professionals take note of their own spiritual resources to live a more creative and fulfilled existence.

There is so much more to say about my dear friend. His influence is not only upon my life but countless others. His memory is a blessing!

About the Author

Rabbi Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is an acclaimed writer and lecturer. In 2013, the Association for Death Education and Counseling presented him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, only the fourth time in three decades. This award honours “his national and international impact on the improvement of death education, caring for the dying person, and grief counseling.” His books on coping with bereavement have sold more than a million copies. For further information, visit www.beacon.org/grollman.

Open to the Presence of Loss



By Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

When someone you love dies, you come to know your deepest pain. From my own experiences with loss as well as those of thousands of grieving people I have companioned over the years, I have learned that we cannot go around the pain that is the wilderness of our grief. Instead, we must journey through it, sometimes shuffling along the less strenuous side paths, sometimes plowing directly into the black centre.

In opening to the presence of the pain, in acknowledging the inevitability of the pain, and in being willing to gently embrace the pain, you in effect honour the pain. “What?” you naturally protest, “honour the pain?” Crazy as it may sound, pain is the key that opens the heart and ushers you on your way to healing.

In many ways, and as strange as it may seem, you need to honour your pain when grieving. Honouring means recognition and respect. It is not instinctive to see grief and the need to openly mourn as something to honour; yet the capacity to love requires the necessity to mourn. To honour your grief is not self-destructive or harmful; it is self-sustaining and life-giving!

You have probably been taught that pain is an indication that something is wrong and that you should find ways to alleviate the pain. In our culture, pain and feelings of loss are experiences most people try to avoid. Why? Because the role of pain and suffering is misunderstood. Normal thoughts and feelings after a loss are often seen as unnecessary and inappropriate.

You will learn over time that the pain of your grief will keep trying to get your attention until you have the courage to gently, and in small doses, open to its presence. The alternative – denying or suppressing your pain – is in fact more painful. I have learned the pain that surrounds the closed heart of grief is the pain of living against yourself, the pain of denying how the loss changes you,

the pain of feeling alone and isolated – unable to openly mourn, unable to love and be loved by those around you.

Instead of becoming dead while you are alive, you can choose to allow yourself to remain open to the pain, which, in large part, honours the love you feel for the person who has died. As an ancient Hebrew sage observed, “If you want life, you must expect suffering.” Paradoxically, it is gathering the courage to move toward the pain that ultimately leads to the healing of your wounded heart. Your integrity is engaged by your feelings and the commitment you make to honour the truth in them.

SETTING YOUR INTENTION TO HEAL

You are on a journey that is naturally frightening, painful and often lonely. No words, written or spoken, can take away the pain.

It takes a true commitment to heal in your grief. Yes, you are changed, but with commitment and intention, you can and will become whole again. Commitment goes hand in hand with the concept of “setting your intention.” Intention is defined as being conscious of what you want to experience. A close cousin to “affirmation,” it is using the power of positive thought to produce a desired result.

We often use the power of intention in our everyday lives. If you have an important presentation at work, you might focus your thoughts in the days before the presentation on speaking clearly and confidently. You might envision yourself being well received by your colleagues. You have set your intention to succeed in this presentation. By contrast, if you focus on the many ways your presentation can fail, and you succumb to your anxiety, you are much less likely to give a good presentation.



How can you use this in your journey through grief? By setting your intention to heal.

When you set your intention to heal, you make a true commitment to positively influence the course of your journey. You choose between being what I call a “passive witness” or an “active participant.” I’m sure you have heard this tired cliché: time heals all wounds. Yet, time alone has nothing to do with healing. To heal, you must be willing to learn about the mystery of the grief journey. It can’t be fixed or “resolved”; it can only be soothed and “reconciled” through actively experiencing the multitude of thoughts and feelings involved.

The concept of intention-setting presupposes that your outer reality is a direct reflection of your inner thoughts and beliefs. If you can change or mould some of your thoughts and beliefs, then you can influence your reality. And in journaling and speaking your intentions, you help “set” them.

You might tell yourself, “I can and will reach out for support in my grief. I will become filled with hope that I can and will survive this loss.” Together with these words, you might form mental pictures of hugging and talking to your friends and seeing your happier self in the future.

Setting your intent to heal is not only a way of surviving your loss (although it is indeed that!), it is a way of guiding your grief to the best possible outcome. Of course, you will still have to honour and embrace your pain during this time. By honouring the presence of your pain and understanding its appropriateness, you are committing to facing the pain. You are committing yourself to paying attention to your anguish in ways that allow you to begin to breathe life into your soul again. That is a very good reason to give attention to your intention. The alternative would be to shut down in an effort to avoid and deny your pain, which is to die while you are still alive.

MAKING GRIEF YOUR FRIEND

You cannot heal without mourning or expressing your grief outwardly. Denying your grief, running from it or minimizing it, only seems to make it more confusing and overwhelming. To lessen your hurt, you must embrace it. You must make it your friend.

When I reflect on making grief my friend, I think about my father. Sometimes when I fully acknowledge that I’ll never see him physically on this earth again, I am engulfed by an overwhelming sadness. Then I, with intention, try to give attention to what comes next. Yes, I feel his absence, but I also feel his presence. I realize that while my father has been dead for years, my love and admiration for him have continued to grow. With every day that passes, the love I have for my father grows larger, undeterred by the loss of his physical presence. My intention has been, and continues to be, to honour his presence, while acknowledging his absence. The beauty of this is that while I mourn, I can continue to love.

For more information, visit www.centerforloss.com.

About the Author

Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt is a noted author, educator and grief counsellor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, Colorado and presents many grief-related workshops each year across North America. This article is an excerpt from Dr. Wolfelt’s book, *Understanding Your Grief: Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing Your Heart*. For more information, write or call the Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado 80526, (970) 226-6050 or visit www.centerforloss.com.



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It is our hope that the information provided within this newsletter will assist you in working with families at a time of death. Your professionalism and understanding are so important to a family that has just experienced a loss.