

The Grief Revolution

(Excerpt)

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Chapter 1: The Beginning

The day which we fear as our last is but the birthday of eternity.

Lucius Annaeus Seneca

It was America. It was the twentieth century. No one died.

At least that is what the “talk” would tell you, or should we say the lack of talk at the time? There were catastrophes, casualties, and calamities, yet discussing the fact that people died was off limits. We had World Wars I and II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, and the Gulf War, and still the subject of death was unmentionable for most Americans. Even though history reveals that people have been dying for centuries, it was as if death didn’t really happen.

During the post–Korean War period (after 1953), even though thousands of Americans had just shed blood and given their lives, no one talked about the fact that people died. I know because I was growing up then, and talk about death was virtually taboo. Death was a subject considered impolite to discuss in public. It was the era in which my parents, especially my mother, would not even allow a discussion about death. If the subject came up, she would appear horrified, clam up, and look like she had seen a ghost [pun intended].

The concept that death was something that happened only to “bad” people was prevalent at the time. It was the ultimate punishment. “He or she shouldn’t be allowed to live” was the statement of the day for whatever infraction was deemed unfair. Given those standards in today’s world would put bank robbers, computer hackers, identity thieves, and scandalous politicians at risk as candidates for death.

A pretty common statement during that period of time was, “*If* you die” rather than “*When* you die.” Today, that same concept seems nonsensical. Perhaps this is a testament to how far we have come in realizing death is not a penalty but just a part of life.

However, there was a transition in phrasing during that period when death was discussed. People began to correct one another when someone said, “If you die....” It was usually some pseudo-enlightened person with an air of superiority (because he or she knew what the *proper* phrase should be) who’d say, “You mean, *when* you die.” Of course, the corrected version made everyone (except perhaps the speaker) feel uncomfortable. In general society, it just wasn’t polite or safe to say, “everyone dies” as a neutral fact.

Since then we’ve come some distance, but not too far. In the introduction to *A Book about Grief*, published in 2010 (note: twenty-first century), Ron Marasco and Brian Schuff received some interesting responses to their book topic. After being asked the subject of their book, they would respond that it was about grief. Inevitably people would mistakenly believe it was about Greece! Usually a book about Greece brought a delighted response such as “How interesting!” When the authors clarified and said it was about *grief*, not *Greece*, the reaction decidedly changed: “At which the person’s smile would fall, and we’d get ‘the grief look’—a kind of sizing up as to why two people, neither of whom seemed to have dark clouds wafting over their heads, would want to write about grief.”ⁱ

In 2010 were attitudes still the same as back in the 1950s? The next line in their book proves that it is the twenty-first century and not a return to twentieth century America: “After this initial reaction, though, people would lean forward, intrigued, wanting to know more.”ⁱⁱ

No, that experience would not have happened in the era of black and white TV, corded telephones, and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. In the world in which I grew up, there were not many people writing about grief, let alone talking about the writing they were doing about the subject.

The only person who had written *anything* about grief was Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her 1969 book, *On Death and Dying*. Actually, she wasn’t talking about death or grief; she was

talking about the process that she observed terminally ill people go through to come to terms with their prognosis and imminent death. The information in her book was not about grieving, or loss, or the aftermath of some difficult life-changing event. It was how people prepared themselves for the ultimate transition. Until Kübler-Ross did her writing, this was something “nice” people did not approach: the topic of the dying process and the dying people themselves. As mentioned before, people just didn’t die.

In spite of the fact that discussions about dying were unthinkable, once Kübler-Ross’s book was available, it was a topic that piqued my interest. I was curious about what it would say. My thinking was that reading about dying is not the same as actually dying. What could it hurt?

I remember when I brought that book home. Knowing it would frighten my mother, I tried to hide it from her. Nonetheless, she saw the title in the stack of books I was carrying. She pointed at the book with a bit of distance between it and her. With fear, irritation, and a slight accusation in her voice she said, “What are you doing with *that*?” as if having the book in my possession was an indication that I had a death wish. My answer was as short as I could make it: “Just curious.” I went to my room very quickly with my cache of books. I could tell my mother was shaken and worried about me. Her thinking was probably that she had a problem that she wasn’t too sure how to address: her daughter, a high school student, thinking about dying. Her fear of how to shield her daughter from this dreaded topic was palpable. It is unfortunate that the topic of death, being so far from general conversation, prohibited us from having a discussion about it.

Perhaps this situation was brought on especially because my mother may have thought about death and dying nearly every day since the sudden death of my father a few years before.

He had a ruptured aortic aneurysm and died during surgery. She possibly thought I had the same unrelenting thoughts. I did not.

I was curious about many things then. I guess I still am. Death was something the world did not talk about, but my thinking was “forewarned is forearmed.” Maybe if I learned something about death, it wouldn’t be so frightening. So I plunged forth and read Kübler-Ross’s book...and lived! Even if my mother was curious about the book, she never asked about it after that.

Discussing the concept of death was difficult enough, but the idea that there may be life after-death was unthinkable. Even so, my sister and I would ask one another (behind closed doors), “What do you think happens when we die?” During the first week after my father’s death (I was twelve years old, my sister was fourteen), both my sister and I had an “After-death Communication” with him. He made himself known to both of us. Of course, we didn’t call it that then. In fact we didn’t call it anything. As you might have guessed, we didn’t talk about it, at least not to each other. My mother heard about our experiences separately, and she did not reveal our stories. Even as sisters, we did not share our encounters until many years later.

One warm August evening, my family went out to visit some friends of my parents with whom they hadn’t visited in years. It was a festive night since my father, who had been ill, was able to get up and go out. He had been suffering for a while from debilitating migraines (not known as that then—just called bad headaches) and depression (likely caused by the headaches). We thought it was a wonderful turning point for him and us. During the ride back home, my father complained about a backache. When we passed the local hospital, my mother asked him if he wanted to stop at the emergency room. He declined.

The next morning the sun was streaming into our house through all of the windows. It felt like an intruder considering the somber mood within our walls. My father was lying on the bed nearly incoherent and moaning. My distressed mother was by his side attempting to talk with him. My sister, brother, and I were standing behind her. We kept looking at one another and shrugging our shoulders. She attempted to take his pulse. Either due to his condition, or because she was frantic, or maybe both, she could not get one. We had a neighbor, George, who was a volunteer fireman and used to helping in medical emergencies. Thinking he may help, my mother went to the phone to call him with me following right behind. I remember her being so distressed that she couldn't remember the number. I recall seeing her hands trembling. I was calmer, not because my emotions were better controlled, I just didn't have a full grasp of the dire situation. Anyhow, I remembered the number and dialed it for her. I felt like a hero—helping my mother when she was so upset.

It seemed as soon as we hung up, George was in our house. Living only two houses away, he showed up so quickly it was as if he'd materialized on the scene. George got a pulse, but it was weak. He called for an ambulance, and given George's influence, the ambulance got there in lightning speed. Everything was happening so fast. My father was rushed to the hospital and taken immediately into surgery to attempt to repair a ruptured aortic aneurysm. He died that morning during the procedure.

During the week after his passing, I had a dream in which I got up from my bed and “floated” into the living room where I met my father who had “floated” through the front door of our house to meet me in the middle of the room. There he hugged me and then turned and left. It was a wonderful, comforting feeling. When I woke up, it felt like he had been there. Even so, I asked myself if I had dreamt it. It felt so real. Perhaps it was his way of saying good-bye because

his departure was so sudden, and we did not get to say good-bye before his death. Much later, I learned that this was what a visit from the departed is like, and that it wasn't a dream.

During that same week, as my sister was ironing some clothes, my father appeared in full body, sitting on the end of the ironing board. She said he sat there without moving, motioning, or saying a word. He just made his presence known. He looked just like he did during his life here—fully clothed, balding hair, not transparent. He stayed for a few moments and then disappeared. She said she did not feel frightened, only a little startled to see him there.

It is not impossible, but also not that frequent, that people who've passed return in full body during waking hours to connect with their loved ones. Examples of more typical encounters with those in the spirit world include:

- seeing the person in a dream while we are sleeping,
- hearing that person's favorite song on the radio just when we are thinking of him or her,
or
- smelling an odor that is associated with that person (like the perfume or cologne he or she wore).

My sister and father were sometimes at odds with one another. With his appearance on the ironing board that day, he must have made a special effort to connect with her.

Many years later my sister and I compared stories about these events. My mother's response seemed incongruous with her purported beliefs about not discussing death and "only bad people die." She said to each of us, "Your father loves you. Your father would never hurt you," intimating that she believed the communication was truly from him. She never asked if I had received further communication from him. I suppose she thought, as I did, that it was his way of saying good-bye due to his abrupt departure. She seemed calm and collected outwardly,

but now after reflection, I do wonder how she internally processed that information. My hope is that it gave her some comfort also.

Today, it is much more common to discuss the communications we have with those who have passed. It seems, though, we still hold the idea that these communications are out-of-the-ordinary, and that they occur at special times and/or to special people. It is my belief, and the basis of this book, that these are not extraordinary happenings. Connecting with those in spirit is a part of the life experience and a way to heal the pain of grief. It may be hard to believe, but people in spirit *want* to connect with people in bodies. It's been documented in every age since humans have died that the departed have attempted to communicate with us. The real job of a medium, then, is to be the spokesperson for the departed.

When someone in our family dies, we turn to our ethnic and religious traditions to give us direction. Even when the deceased was not a religious practitioner, his or her family tends to follow conventional practices and turn to clergy to provide "a proper funeral." In culturally diverse countries, such as America, within a single neighborhood it is possible to see variations in funeral, burial, and grieving practices from one house to the next. Current cultural practices and cultural roots play a significant role when it comes to dying, death, and grieving. There is not one universal method for them. Even within a culture, there are modifications of the practices. Taking a look back also shows the response to the historic events of the era showing up during the time of bereavement. Additionally, as the world grows smaller through better transportation and communication methods, cultural customs blend, and pure traditions are harder to maintain.

In the twenty-first century, as new ideas are being generated and more appropriate ways of addressing grieving are being discovered, I hope we can respond with openness to this sensitive topic while including past history and cultural influences. Adcotherapy (~~A~~fter-death

COmunication **therapy**), the contemporary method to resolve grief, incorporates the realities of this era by including and appreciating the past, knowing the present, and looking forward to the future.

Chapter 1

ⁱ Ron Marasco and Brian Schuff. *About Grief: Insights, Setbacks, Grace Notes, Taboos* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishers, 2010), 3.

ⁱⁱ Ibid.