

Grief as a Rite of Passage: Wilderness as Teacher

Roy Remer

Though I have served in hospice for over thirteen years—an experience that has changed my life—I have learned more about my own death from time spent sitting quietly in nature, days on end with nothing more than water, a sleeping bag, and the clothes on my back. And though I have experienced Bar Mitzvah, graduations, and marriage, I feel that only recently have I begun consciously to mark the transitions from one stage of life to the next. I will forever be grateful to my friend and teacher Scott Eberle, hospice physician and author of *The Final Crossing: Learning to Die in Order to Live*, for introducing me to wilderness rites of passage.

I met Scott several years ago at a volunteer community meeting at Zen Hospice Project in San Francisco. I was already an avid backpacker and climber, and had achieved a high level of comfort venturing into wilderness areas. I heard in Scott's presentation that evening a way of marrying my passion for service in hospice with my joy of being outdoors. I immediately understood the inherent relationship between rites of passage and death and dying. I wanted to explore the ways wilderness rites of passage, in particular, can prepare us for death, and how the steps inherent in a rite of passage can guide us through the process of grief.

Since that time, I have experienced numerous rites-of-passage programs as both a participant and a leader. Solo fasting in wilderness has become my personal form of prayer. Again and again I return to the land to be held, and to turn toward my own suffering. The ordeal of sitting alone for days, foregoing food, acts as a doorway whereby I leave my old self behind and am “reborn” into something new. I feel a kinship with the ancients who sat quietly upon the land and died before me.

Throughout human history, our ancestors have honored the transitions from one phase of life to the next. In every society, until very recently, initiation and rites of passage were woven into the fabric of life. The passage from youth to adulthood, adulthood to elderhood, and elderhood to death were witnessed, celebrated, and held in community. Rites of passage—whether the Native American vision quest, tattooing in the Philippines, the walkabout in Australian Aboriginal culture, or lion hunting among the Masai, to name a few—marked one's place in the society.

Contemporary culture, particularly Western culture, has lost touch with these important ceremonies. We exist within an unbalanced and at times bizarre cultural context. Mortality is denied. We are obsessed with youthfulness and seem to have lost all respect for the wisdom and honor that comes with growing old. We look to technology to rescue us from the inevitability of old age, sickness, and death. Our primary way of relating to death is via the macabre or via dehumanizing images of violent death—computer generated or real. Many among us are no longer able to discern the difference between glorifying death and honoring it. Modern wilderness rites of passage can act as a powerful antidote to the dehumanizing influences of our contemporary culture.

The more I sit with the dying, the more I view death as a spiritual experience deserving our respect, love, and absolute attention. In hospice, I have learned that the life-changing experience of witnessing death often finds people unexpectedly. While unwelcome, the grief that follows the death of a loved one, a close friend, or even an animal companion can be one of life's most transformative experiences.

My practice in the wilderness has deepened my understanding and appreciation of grief. Anthropologists studying rites-of-passage practices have identified three stages common to all cultures: Severance, Threshold Experience, and Incorporation. By viewing loss as a rite of passage, I've come to believe that grief offers the potential for personal evolution, gifts for the people around us, and acceptance of our own eventual demise.

Following the death of a loved one, we often feel isolated from those around us, trapped in the unique storm of our emotions. Friends and family whom we usually count on for connection and comfort may feel helpless and unable to offer solace, or they may be swept away in their own grief. In grief, the once familiar becomes strange and unknown. The personal crisis that death brings is a severance from the life and people we have known. In this Severance stage, we find ourselves cast off into uncharted waters with no shore in sight and no one we can look to for rescue.

Cut off from the familiar by our loss, we experience intense suffering. We may feel as if we can't go on living. Like a sick infant, we are inconsolable and helpless. Simply making it through the day becomes an enormous effort, eating and sleeping seem impossibly challenging, and the simplest of tasks overwhelm us. We're incapable of imagining that the pain will ever end. In grief we are thrashed upon the rocks, broken and dismembered. This is the Threshold Experience of loss.

In any Threshold Experience, the suffering is the chrysalis of change; the more extreme the suffering, the more profound the transformation. When significant loss comes, we don't ask to be changed, but we do change. It is said that when a loved one dies, they take a bit of us with them. In grief, our self-identity shifts, and resistance only brings more pain. After loss, we simply are not the person we once were.

Weeks, months or even years after loss—sadly, there is no timetable—the overwhelming nature of grief begins to subside. Gradually, we become familiar with a new way of living life without our loved one. Connections with friends and family are renewed. Others find it easier to be around us. We are reunited with the body of our community. This is the Incorporation phase of our grief.

Any meaningful rite of passage offers insights and gifts. The suffering loss causes, though initially incapacitating, brings with it wisdom regarding the nature of our existence. The gifts of the ordeal are not ours to keep, and we are obliged to share them with our community.

Once grief subsides, we may feel inspired to serve others in need. In many hospices, countless caregiver volunteers were inspired to serve after suffering the death of a loved one. The Incorporation stage is about being seen in a new light, and giving back to one's community.

Grief also confronts us with the reality of death as a natural part of life. We are given an undeniable reminder of the importance of preparing for our own death. Coming to terms with our own mortality and preparing for death is a blessing to others in our life. Rather than resisting, we can model a peaceful acceptance of death. When we prepare for our own death we get to know our fears. Becoming intimate with our fears around death does not necessarily mean overcoming them; however, it can mean finding ease with being fearful, and this will serve at the end of life.

Embracing death as a natural part of life requires an embrace of all life's transitions. How we face the transitions in life leading up to death will determine the way we meet death when it comes. Although nothing can minimize the impact of the death of a loved one, we can still prepare for the overwhelming nature of grief. We can begin to understand that grief, and the intense suffering it brings, is an essential and unavoidable human experience. It is the portal through which we simply must pass to step into a new stage of life. We can take solace in the knowledge that grief leads to positive outcomes, which are of benefit to others around us, and which we will carry for the rest of our lives.

Roy Remer is the Facility/Volunteer Manager at Zen Hospice Project's Guest House facility in San Francisco (www.zenhospice.org). He also guides wilderness rites of passage programs with Earthways, based in Sebastopol, CA(www.earthways.info) .