

Day of the Dead
UUF

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Today, we celebrate the Day of the Dead. In many ways, celebrating those who have died is countercultural. We in this country are pretty horrible when it comes to dealing with death. We don't seem to know how to deal it. Maybe worse, we too often fail to help the living deal with their grief.

Perhaps the best example is the Terri Schiavo case. Some of you may remember, it was an ugly legal battle over an end-of-life decision. Terri had a heart attack, which left her comatose, with massive brain damage. After a number of months doctors labeled her as being in a persistent vegetative state. For two years doctors tried various experimental treatments that failed to show any change.

Some eight years after her heart attack, her husband, as her legal guardian, went to court to have her feeding tubes removed. Her parents fought it. From 1998 until 2005, the case bounced around the Florida courts. Tubes were removed and reinserted, then removed again. Both the Florida legislature and the US legislature passed laws to intervene and the case eventually went to the Supreme Court. It was a national disgrace, with strong political overtones.

Sadly, today, some ten years later, we as a nation still have been unable to allow people to die with dignity. There must be billions of dollars each year spent on medical procedures to extend the life of thousands who will, soon, no doubt die none-the-less. It seems as if, we are unwilling to accept that death is the price of life.

We in this country tend to deal with death as if it's a failure-- on someone's part-- for a person to die. Survivors often blame themselves, with stories of "if only I had...gotten them to the doctor sooner" or "if only I hadn't... insisted they go". Alternately, there's a tendency to blame the doctors, the EMTs, nurses,...somebody. It has to be someone's fault, they died!

Perhaps; but it's much more likely that death doesn't work according to our logic, it's not controlled by our plans. My father used to say "no-one is put on this earth to live forever". Yet, as common as death is, we just don't seem able to deal with death very well.

When the elderly die, it often doesn't come as a surprise, but it may leave us shaken. When someone younger dies, it can be a shock, we tend to assume we will all live to a ripe old age. When a parent faces the death of a child...that may be the hardest of all to accept...as it should be. Such a death doesn't fit the typical sequence of life.

Some of you may have heard me say this before. A Loss, Grief and Bereavement class had a profound impact on me. One, of a number of things, that stood out for me was how much damage we can do when society tries to dictate how one should grieve.

Our corporate environment has wholly unreasonable expectations of how people should deal with death. If the person who dies is a member of your immediate family, you might be allowed to take three days off with pay---if you are lucky. If it's a cousin, niece or uncle you might be given one day of paid leave.

The expectation is that you will return to work as if nothing happened---you had your time off! Even outside of the work environment, how often have we heard someone say, "ok, it's time to get over it, it's time to get on with your life"?

There was a time, when the world turned more slowly, women dressed in black for a year, people wore black arm bands. These were outward signs of mourning. Wearing black for a year reflected an historic understanding that the grieving process took an extended period of time. Just because society and the corporate world has decided how long one "should" grieve, it doesn't mean our natural grieving process will follow suit.

People grieve as they need to grieve. Some cry more than others, some don't cry at all. Some go into deep mourning, not wanting to leave the house, while others act as if nothing has changed. Social psychologists have identified a "typical" grieving sequence and timeframe. But you and I may not be "typical". We need to support our friends and family to grieve as they need to.

Because we as a society tend to avoid talk about death, we don't know much about the grieving process. We may have experiences that may not be at all unusual but fear saying anything about it for fear that there may be something odd about us. For example, while it may not be the norm, it is not an unusual occurrence for the living to hear or see the deceased.

From the outside looking in, we often don't know what to say to someone who has lost a friend or loved one. Even the word "lost" can mask our discomfort in facing the truth of death. Often, there are no "good words", there are no words to take away the pain. Offering words of caring, simply being empathetic may be all one can say or do.

Over the last few years I have heard newscasters and others talk about "finding closure" after someone's death. As if there is a point at which you can put the experience of death in a box, close the top and set it on the shelf. There is no such thing as closure. It's completely made up by the pundits, like a required happy ending of a movie.

As long as the living has an awareness of someone who has died, there is no closure. Death has been described as a hole in the fabric of life. Like a hole in your favorite sweater, it can't be repaired. But you can't throw it away because it represents so many memories, it means so much. So you learn to live with the hole in the fabric of your life that doesn't go away, that never really heals.

I want to say two more things before I close.

We, who work intimately with those who are grieving, encourage people to focus on the memories, focus on the stories that include the deceased, both good and bad. Ultimately, the grieving process is about finding a new homeostasis. Learning to live with the hole in the fabric of your life.

And we, who interact with someone who has had a friend or loved one die, we all too often fear mentioning the fact of the death. We do this with good intentions...not wanting to cause pain, open an old wound.

But quite often, we do a disservice. Remaining silent about someone who has died may give the impression that their life didn't matter...that they are gone and forgotten. Take the risk of remembering the person who has died. Let our friends and colleagues know we have not forgotten someone who was and is important to them.

Lets take the time now, to do exactly that, to remember those who have gone before. I want to introduce our time of reflection with a poem. Then I want to pass the mike so you can remember aloud the ones who are in your hearts this morning, maybe share a fond memory.

A Poem by anonymous:

In our own tone and key.
Each life we touch reflects a note
That forms the melody.
We choose the theme and chorus
Of the song to bear our name,
And each will have a special sound,
No two can be the same.
So when someone we love departs,
In memory we find
Their song plays on within the hearts
Of those they leave behind.