

Wellness Through Grief

By Molly Dean

To every *thing there* is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven:

A time to be born, and a time to die;
a time to plant, and a time to pluck up
that which is planted;...

A time to weep, and a time to laugh;
a time to mourn, and a time to dance;...

—Ecclesiastes 3:1 (King James)

Both individually and collectively, my friends and colleagues—including the State Bar staff and membership, whom I will refer to as the State Bar family—have sustained numerous losses in the recent past.

Some losses have been public and widely acknowledged and others have been more personal and private. Some have been anticipated and others have been unexpected and seemingly random. Some of our losses created cruel and jagged edges ripped by tragedy, and others, though seemingly kinder and gentler, have rendered us at least momentarily raw and vulnerable.

Though the losses we can count by death of loved ones and esteemed colleagues are most dramatic and profound, other losses have a rippling effect on our lives and the lives of those closest to us. Changes in employment and income levels, loss of status, loss of home, changes in health, divorce, children leaving (or in some cases returning) home, or the death of a pet are several examples of loss that generate feelings of grief. Though these changes can be natural parts of living, and feelings of grief in response to loss are not unique to an individual, ways of acknowledging, coping with, and expressing or processing the feelings of anger, sorrow, denial, and guilt that often accompany loss are not universal.

In the following article, Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program (LJAP) Case Mon-

itor Molly Dean addresses this issue with gentility and tact. Ms. Dean's holistic view of health and wellness is an excellent vehicle for the notion of the role and function of grief as an agent of healing and positive change, or rebirth.

We are delighted and honored to have Molly Dean as a part of the LJAP team.

If you or someone you know would like information or support surrounding issues of loss, LJAP is here to help; call (800) 996-5522.

—Martha D. Burkett,

LJAP Program Administrator

Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's research on death and dying helped bring the subject of death and the acknowledgement of its impact out from the shadows. Although death still remains a difficult topic and, at times, an unseemly one for our attention, thanks to Kubler-Ross it is no longer taboo to talk about loss and grief. We may be affected by a loss based on anticipation or unexpectedness, and our grief responses often vary according to the severity of the circumstances surrounding a loss; suicide, murder, natural disasters, or wars come with a number of complexities and challenges that may exacerbate a more "typical" grieving process. Kubler-Ross's grief model offers a *stage* process of addressing loss. From the moment a loss occurs, a bereaved person might progress through stages defined as *denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance*. Other thanatologists have offered similar models and explanations around grief.

A downside of grief models is the notion that the process is linear, suggesting that people move steadily on a continuum from one place to another and are always aware

of the distance from that point to the "finish line." In my experience as a grief counselor, the grief process is rarely, if ever, linear. From an initial point of loss, people spiral up and down on a disorderly journey that can zap energies and challenge values. However messy the journey is, when grief can be acknowledged as part of wellness and given its due in presence, time, and space, then recognition of wholeness and healing more readily emerge to help people again risk and reinvest in life.

At first glance, one might miss the connection between the concepts of wellness and grief. Wellness may denote trouble-free states of equilibrium while grief may represent troubled states of chaos or imbalance, with no apparent overlapping influences.

Practices of grief vary by culture, with societal influences usually dictating or influencing thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. In westernized cultures, there seems to be an incongruous message surrounding the subject of grief: acknowledge the loss but make a quick show of it, get back on track, and move on. Quick-fix messages such as these carry an underlying disrespect for death as a natural part of life's process and foster a belief that loss is an undesirable nuisance that can be managed away with a shift in attitude. Grief, however, is a necessary component of wellness, as complementary as shadow is to light.

Dealing with the reality of any loss, be it death, divorce, job, home, or a significant transition, provides us an opportunity—some would say forces us—to examine our fierce holds on control, acknowledge human vulnerability, and become more attuned to resilience. Wellness is the ability to allow *what is* while remaining open to an incorporation of the "new" and an eventual acceptance of a shift in circumstances and meaning.

Acknowledging loss, developing coping skills, and creating support networks can make a huge difference in sustaining wellness. Although the subject of death is discussed more openly, our society still colludes to keep expressions of grief in the background. Expressing feelings and thoughts of grief can be risky business, targeting grievers for potentially insensitive or ignorant treatment from those uncomfortable with loss or those who have yet to deeply experience it. But in the long run, ignoring or stifling our grief seems only to prolong our agony.

With the basic health habits of nutrition, sleep, exercise, and relaxation consistently (while not always perfectly) in place, grief responses may not feel insurmountable. Our ability to respond to loss is less stable if we are less well. Giving ourselves permission to healthfully manage or cope with grief not only builds our capacity for self-care but also strengthens our abilities to foster wellness in the wider world.

Humans are hard-wired for connection. Our survival as a species depends on our ability to cooperate with one another, and seeking support helps us remain safe and sane. Keeping company with those whose support offers appropriate doses of non-judgmental acceptance is important. In requesting or receiving help, we increase the potential of finding solace and comfort in the midst of our pain and affirming our wider connections.

By accident or design, loss will touch each of us. We would do well to accept human frailty in all its varied forms, opening ourselves to opportunities for growth. ■



Molly Dean earned an MA in counseling and a graduate certificate in holistic health from Western Michigan University in 2003. She is a licensed professional counselor in Michigan and currently

works as a case monitor for the State Bar of Michigan in the Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program. In addition to her SBM role, Ms. Dean offers ongoing support to grieving children and adults.