

Coping with Loss

Of all of life's multifaceted teachings, the experience of loss is among our most powerful vehicles for awakening. As much as we resist its sting, loss is omnipresent in the universe. The poet Yeats reminded us that no matter how solid anything appears, ultimately "...things fall apart." In a similar vein, modern physics' Law of Entropy proves that over time, everything loses coherence and tends toward disorder. In all forms of relationship, at some point in the future we will have to say good-bye to the physical form of everyone we now know.

With intimate relationships, we see loss everywhere around us in every possible form: passionate, seemingly transcendent romances suddenly crashing to the ground; old, distant, lifeless relationships finally acknowledging what has been obvious for a long time; unfulfilled lovers paralyzed by fear, unable to break through to deeper levels of intimacy; fragile new budding relationships that don't survive even the first disagreement; and friendships ending when one person never returns the call. And when a relationship ends, there are losses on many levels. We lose contact with the person, of course and all the gratification, real or imagined, that they brought to our lives. But even more painfully, we lose the vision of what this relationship has meant to us in the past and present and the hope of what it might mean for us in the future. We lose the story and the myth that embodied the relationship and for many of us this is the most difficult loss of all.

How do we react in the face of impending loss? We have several choices. If we are attached to a particular form of this relationship, by virtue of a belief we have about what should or must be rather than what is, we can hold on tightly, hoping to control a process that we intuitively know is out of our control. Holding on tightly usually only hastens our journey to aloneness by scaring off our partner with our rigid, suffocating energy.

We can also choose to prematurely let go, to check out, to disengage emotionally, preparing for the loss before it even happens, protecting our soft underbelly from the pain that lies ahead, numbing or distracting ourselves from the uncomfortable sensations surging through our hearts and minds through work, addictions or a new warm body. We can also retreat to victimhood, reassuring ourselves that this other person wasn't so great to begin with, that "we can do better" and that we have been treated poorly or unfairly, through no fault of our own.

But there is another path, the path of consciously being with and embracing our loss, responsibly, without judgment toward ourselves or our partner, being fully present with our feelings of sadness, despair, loneliness, grief, anger or whatever else comes up. There may be profound sadness that something beautiful or hopeful has died or was never even given a chance to live. There may be anger that we didn't try harder or that they didn't either. There may be fear that we will always be alone or despair that it seems too hard to connect with others. Regardless of what comes up, we can choose to be present with all of our feelings, lying in the rubble of our shattered dreams, perhaps confused and not sure

what to do next. There is nothing we have to "do" other than allow our feelings to move within and through us at their own pace and time.

We can honor the process by not needing to change or distract or distort or numb what is happening within us. And if we can stay with this process mindfully, eventually we will get to a place of acceptance and even understanding, where we can look back with gratitude at what was once a beautiful thing. We can honor the connection that allowed our spirit to soar and our loving presence to expand. We can review what we have learned from this journey and make notes about how we will do it differently the next time around.

Pathologist Beck Weathers was left for dead after lying completely exposed atop Mt. Everest for fifteen hours. Then, miraculously, his eyes opened and he awoke from his hypothermic coma and walked to camp. He lost both hands to frostbite and suffered many other physical deficits. He was brought back home from this terrible ordeal, only to discover that his wife was fed up with his mountain climbing and avoidance of intimacy and was leaving him for one year to let him figure out his priorities. Stunned, without hands, without a job and without a family, he began to look inside for the truth, which resulted in him completely transforming his life. He now considers his multiple losses to be the greatest blessing of his life. He realized how depressed and cut off he had been emotionally and he began to re-connect with his family and friends in a profound manner that would have been impossible before.

Like Weathers, we may initially be horrified at our losses. But losses aren't going to go away, ever. Nor would we want them to. As Judith Viorst discusses in her book *Necessary Losses*, regular losses are essential throughout our life spans for all growth to occur. Every loss creates a space for something new to be born: a new hope, a new beginning, a new vision, a new opening to loving ourselves and others more deeply. It is only when we fully embrace death that we can truly live. Likewise, it is only when we fully embrace loss that we can truly gain.

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