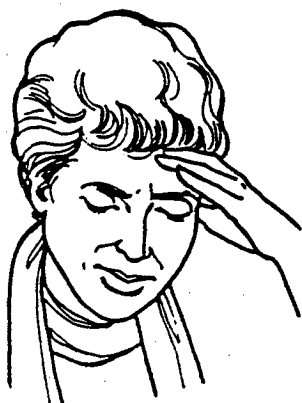
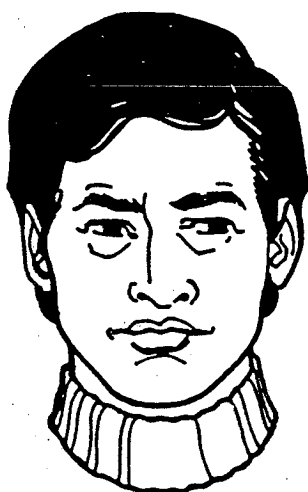


Grief and Unfinished Business

By Kathleen Braza



*If only I'd said 'I love you' before he died.
If only we had taken that trip to Hawaii.
If only Mother had received flowers when she was alive...*



Do any of these expressions sound familiar to you? Have you heard these words of regret and frustration from others? All too often, these expressions of "unfinished business" can become major obstacles to healing a grief and mourning process.

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross defined "unfinished business" as "something that is incomplete in our lives that deprives us of a sense of peace." It is almost always about relationships and includes things said or unsaid, done or not done. It is often reflected in statements preceded by the words "if only."

Bereaved individuals may share their unfinished business with comments such as "Why was I so concerned about being a perfect housekeeper? Why didn't I play more with my children instead?" Or, "Why didn't I just get him to the doctor for a complete physical?" and "Why didn't we go to Disneyland with the kids instead of re-carpeting the house this year?"

These expressions of guilt, remorse, and resentment often prolong or delay a healthy grief and mourning process. Often these individuals will appear "stuck" in

their grief, as if holding on to their pain can help them somehow atone for what they feel is still incomplete or unfinished.

Unfinished business can continue long after a death and make healthy reconciliation of grief seem impossible. Many of us are familiar with individuals who after ten years cannot speak of the deceased without fresh grief and great pain.

We can also "collect" unfinished business in our daily interactions with others by not expressing our honest feelings when they are appropriate and timely. How many of us are carrying around old hurts and resentments from a colleague or family member who offended or disappointed us in some way? How many of us have hearts that are weary from holding on to hurt or fear? Perhaps the concept of "letting go," so often used in grief work, also relates to letting go of the pain of unfinished business that can wear heavy on our hearts and, perhaps, even our souls.

Some unfinished business is centered around painful physical and emotional trauma such as child abuse and incest. These issues usually require professional intervention to help in the healing process.

However, in many cases, we can take care of our unfinished business — even with someone who has died. One profound way is to write a letter (or many letters) to the deceased and express all that is in your heart, painful as well as wonderful.

Then write a letter from the deceased person back to you, and listen for the healing messages you need to hear. If your unfinished business is with someone who is still alive, write the letters, but don't send them. The goal in completing unfinished business is to clear our hearts of pain, not for revenge or the hope to change someone else.

Daily journaling, making a tape, or mentally putting the deceased in a chair across from you and just talking things out are also healing strategies for dealing with unfinished business. Take a walk and mentally have the individual you need to talk to join you. Share what is in your heart.

The walk itself can also release the energy and anxiety that many build in the process.

Grief needs expression in healing ways. Grief unexpressed can lead to illness, substance abuse and lives of pain. You may have heard the expression "what we resist persists?" The more we resist our grief and the painful process of completing our unfinished business, the more it will persist in our lives, keeping us from living fully, loving completely, and experiencing peace.

Unfinished business can also keep us from opening our hearts to others who hurt. If someone else touches our old "wounds," we may shut down emotionally and have difficulty truly "being there" for another on a heart-to-heart level.

However, the most important aspect of finishing our unfinished business is not to collect it in the first place! Say, "I love you," today. Take that walk together in the hills, today. Send those flowers,

today. Express your feelings, today.

In spending time with people who are dying, often what is shared are either regrets or special, loving moments that were shared with another or with nature, or memories of trips and tender times. What would you find most important to share with someone at the end of your life? If at the end of our lives, what we reflect upon most are regrets and moments, perhaps we need to take care of our regrets now and collect more meaningful moments. As Charles Hodge aptly put it, "When we come to die, we have nothing to do but die."

Stephen Levine in his book "Who Dies?" writes "Finishing business means I open my heart to you, that whatever blocks my heart with resentment or fear, that what I still want from you is let go of, and I just send love. I let go of what obstructs our deepest sharing." 