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Along The Way

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Facing Your Demons

by Dr. Bill Webster

"The only way to get to the other side is through the door."

They say the only way to get past grief is to go through it. Helen Keller put it succinctly: "The only way to get to the other side is through the door."


Wendy and her husband, John, loved to travel. One of their favourite destinations had been a resort in Antigua, an island in the West Indies, where they had spent many wonderful vacations. It was their paradise with a lovely beach and great hospitality; Wendy described it as her "happy place."

But that changed in 2008. While they were staying at the resort, John fell ill, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer and admitted to the hospital. Wendy spent her days with him, returning to the resort for her evening meal and rest, and when their week came to an end, John was still too unwell to travel home. The management of the resort immediately extended Wendy's stay, and were extremely kind and supportive to her until she was finally, some

weeks later, able to get her husband back home. Sadly the tumour was untreatable and John died six months later. It was a devastating loss to Wendy and she attended one of our support programs in the months that followed his death.

Fast forward eight years. Wendy was on a Caribbean cruise with a number of our support group members this past January. One of the ports of call was Antigua, to which Wendy has never returned since John's death. In a conversation before we left, she told me she planned to stay on board ship that day and not even set foot on the island because the memories of that last visit were just so painful. That was fine, so that morning, after we docked, I set off with several members of our group to explore the island, returning to the ship around noon.

By divine coincidence, I bumped into Wendy as soon as I was on board, and she told me she had made a big decision that morn-



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ing. She wanted to go and visit the resort again, and she and her roommate were going to take a taxi out there. I asked her if she would like me to go with them, and she said yes. We found a taxi and arrived at the resort, where Wendy had to “talk” her way in by explaining the situation and the reason why she was there. Happily, the management agreed to grant us entrance.

As they escorted us through the property, I could see it was an emotional experience for Wendy but she handled it like a trooper. She wanted to see the dining room where they had eaten together and the villa overlooking the ocean where they had stayed. Then she had tears when she came to their beloved beach, as she remembered the sadness of that last time she was there. Our escort was absolutely lovely, allowing her to take all the time she needed. I offered to take photos of her in front of the villa, and then on the beach, and I could see Wendy was falling in love with the place all over again. The painful memories of their last time were being replaced by memories of all the good times they had shared together.

And just when we returned to the main reception area preparing to leave, a lady rushed out and said “Wendy!” It was one of the staff whom she had known over the years who had been so good to her in 2008. There was a tearful reunion which touched her – and me – deeply.

Never have I felt such a sense of privilege to have been allowed to witness all that transpired that afternoon. It can best be described as a ritual of reconciliation. Wendy had been haunted by the

memories of those difficult days in 2008, but something said to her that morning she had to face those demons and try to put them to rest. It was a difficult and courageous thing for her to do, and certainly tears were shed, but they were healing tears and afterwards she said, “Finally, I think I have put it to rest.”

It wasn’t the place itself that had haunted her; it was what had happened while at that place that had really been troubling. And she needed to go back to discover it really was (and still is) a wonderful place. She was able to see that although what had happened at that resort on their last visit had been difficult and painful, by being there again she remembered they also had many happy memories of the place and the times they spent together.

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By facing her fears and her hurt, Wendy transformed her way of thinking, and truly has put that traumatic experience behind her. We cannot allow the difficult memories of the death to overwhelm the positive and happy things that formed the good memories of the person’s life.

By the way, I have invited Wendy to help organize our next Among Friends holiday at a certain resort in Antigua, and she has enthusiastically agreed. You would be welcome to join us!



Just Getting Through the Day

by Dr. Bill Webster

"They just don't get it," lamented Robert, whose wife died a few weeks ago. "Everyone has all kinds of advice for me. They want me to 'pull myself together and get on with it.' But they just don't understand. I can't even begin to go there yet. My biggest challenge – and it takes all the energy I have right now – is just in deciding 'how can I get through the day?'"

I am sure we can identify with Robert. It is never easy to lose someone you have loved and cared about, and sometimes it can feel like your world has ended. We struggle to come to terms with a situation we did not want, we do not like, and worst of all, one we cannot change, as much as we would like to.

People mean well but sometimes their advice doesn't help. They try to encourage us with pronouncements like: "it's been three months, you ought to be over it by now." They attempt to comfort us with their "this is a good thing" statements, like "maybe it's for the best," "it's a blessing" and other clichés.

But sometimes their well-intentioned platitudes are less than helpful, because, put simply, the grieving person wants one thing and one thing only: they want their loved one back! They want their world to return to the way it was. And that, sadly, is the one thing neither they nor anyone else is able to accomplish.

People seem to want to get us back to normal, hopefully in as short a time as possible. But while we know life must go on, the challenge we face is to come to terms with a new normal; a world in which someone we love is no longer with us. And that is really what our grief is all about.

So, just like Robert, grieving people are often left wondering if others really understand what we are going through. And, to be honest, unless they have experienced it for themselves, they really don't.

No matter what anyone tells us about grief and how time heals all wounds, the reality is you may feel like all the meaning has gone out of life ... and you worry that will never change.

This feeling of grief in your heart hurts. It gathers up into tears in your eyes, a lump in your throat and that hollow feeling in your heart. You are grieving, and you don't like

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it. Yes, the loss of anyone we cared about can be one of life's most difficult and challenging experiences.

But it is important to understand something else that will help you to realize "why" we grieve. Put simply, grief is always about love.

Grief is the price we pay for love. It is not a sign of weakness but a sign we cared. Grief is a normal human reaction to what is always an unwelcome event. Grief is really just love with no place to go. It is all the love you want to give to that person but no longer can.

If you had not loved as much as you did, you would not be as broken-hearted as you are.

So grief really is the cost of caring. And we should always try to remember the reason grief never really ends is simply because love never really dies.

It is only when we understand this important truth we are able to embrace grief for what it really is: a healing process that enables us to adapt to a world in which the relationship we once shared is missing. Coming to terms with this new realm our bereavement has thrust us into is a life-changing process, one which usually we go through kicking and screaming, but one which enables us eventually to adjust to the new situation we find ourselves in.

After my wife died, I used to resent it when people tried to tell me this would be a learning experience. I smiled and thanked them of course, but inside I felt the next person who flippantly made the statement was in grave danger

of getting hurt! But as much as I hate to admit it, all these years later, the assertion has actually turned out to be accurate. Of course I couldn't see it at the time, but I now realize some of my biggest life lessons have come out of challenge; in the midst of struggle more than in the successful or easy times.

I have come to believe that even a good life has its share of heartaches and disappointments. A good life is never given to us. What we are given is life. What we do with that life and how we deal with the circumstances of it – the happy situations as well as the difficult experiences – is what determines whether, in the end, we define it as "good" or "not so great."

So while it is never easy going through bereavement, and while I wasn't happy about it at the time, I can honestly say from my own experience, it was the strength I found in the struggle that helped me find the determination and the stubbornness to keep on going. I was determined I was not going to be defeated by the struggle.

Life is never without struggle and courage only comes in the thick of the conflict. As Mary Tyler Moore once said, "You can't be brave and courageous if you've only had wonderful things happen to you." In the struggle we find strength, and in the process we find our true selves.

And so, as Christopher Robin famously remarked to Winnie the Pooh: "Promise me you'll always remember: You're braver than you believe, and stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think."

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