

Maximum Living Newsletter

“Dedicated To Our Families As They Take The Grief Journey”

Maximum Living Consultants, Inc. • August, September, October, 2006

CREMATION: YES OR NO?

The Story of Harold and Esther

by John D. Canine, Ed.D, Ph.D.

Harold was recently widowed after 41 years of marriage to Esther. The day he walked into my office, I knew I liked him. He was somewhat rotund, with a pleasant smile and piercing blue eyes. He called me “Doc,” and stated he had made the appointment to see if he was “normal.” After a few minutes of reminiscing about how he and Esther met, their wedding, and the birth of their three children, he started to cry.

“It was all so sudden,” he said through his tears. “I mean, Doc, she was the picture of health. We were walking back to the car after a movie, and right in the middle of a sentence she fell to the ground. Her eyes rolled back, and it was like she couldn’t get her breath. I called for help and then started CPR. It seemed like hours before the EMS unit arrived. When they got there, I could tell nothing was working. I jumped into my car and followed them to the hospital. A few hours later she was pronounced dead of a cardiac arrest.

“I can’t eat, I can’t sleep, I’m tired all the time, and when I start to cry I’m afraid I will never stop! Doc, am I going to be okay?” I spent most of the hour validating his feelings. Yes, Harold was experiencing normal grief, and was going to be alright.

“Is Esther Buried?”

We decided he would see me again in a couple of weeks. As I handed him his appointment card, I asked him a question that I had neglected to ask in the session. “Is Esther buried?”

Harold chuckled and replied, “Doc, that is an interesting story. Have you got an extra minute?” Since I was not seeing a patient after him, I said, “Sure, go ahead.”

“You see,” he started, “Esther never learned to drive a car, so I drove her everywhere. However, the fact that Esther did not have a license did not keep her from telling me how to drive. We had more arguments in the car than we ever did out if it. She would tell me I was going too fast, going too slow, following the car ahead too closely, driving recklessly, and sometimes she would even scream that without a license she could still drive better than me.

“Our time in the car was a real nightmare!! So, one day I said jokingly to Esther that when she died, I was going to have her cremated, put her ashes in an urn, and place them in the front seat of the car so I would not forget how to drive. I didn’t mean it, Doc, because I really thought I would die first. But you know, Esther picked up on what I said and

changed our will so that if she died first she was to be cremated, her ashes placed in an urn, and I was to carry them around in the front seat of the car until I died.”

I thought Harold’s story was extremely unique and humorous, and told him so. Then I said, “Harold, if you don’t mind, I would like to walk with you to your car and see the urn.” I was assuming Esther’s ashes were in the front seat at that very moment.

“Doc, that’s not possible,” he replied, “because she is not in the front seat anymore.” He said it with a smile on his face that made me think, for some reason, that he had put Esther in the back seat. You know, “Back seat driver.”

Esther is...?

“I’ll bet you moved her to the back seat,” I said. “That’s where she is.” By this time, I was outright laughing, but all of the sudden Harold got serious.

“You’re right, Doc, it was so awkward having that urn in the front seat. Why, every time I had a passenger, I had to move Esther to the back seat. So I finally decided to leave her there.”

Although amusing, I thought this conversation had gone on long enough. I looked at Harold and said, “Well, let’s go to the car and see her in the back seat.” Harold looked at the floor and said, “That’s not possible.”

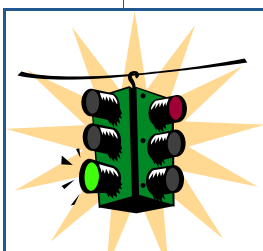
I consider myself a patient man, but by this time my lack of patience with Harold, mingled with confusion about where this conversation was going was producing irritation.

“Okay Harold,” I blurted out. “Where is Esther?” (We were no longer talking about Esther in the past tense.)

“Well, you see, Doc,” Harold continued, “I just didn’t like having Esther in the back seat. She never sat there, and besides, I wasn’t sure that I wanted to see the urn every time I got into the car. So, I moved Esther to the trunk.”

Trying to muster all the compassion I possibly could, I said, “Well, that’s alright, Harold. Esther is still in the

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“She would tell me I was going too fast, too slow....”

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Cremation

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car. Now let's go see her."

At this point, Harold's mood seemed to be elevated. It was like he was relieved that we finally had come to the end of the story. However, I was not prepared for his next statement.

"Esther's not in the trunk."

Have you ever been in a conversation that was going on, and on, and on...but going nowhere? This was it. Harold could sense my irritation. I stood up from behind my desk and silently walked to my office door. I was ready to end my time with Harold when he said, "You remember that horrible snow storm we had a few weeks ago?" I nodded in agreement.

"Well, I was stopped at the traffic light on north Woodward Avenue and 13 Mile Road. Unfortunately, the vehicle behind me did not, or should I say, could not stop. He smashed into the back of my car. And

now, Doc, Esther is all over Woodward Avenue."

I was stunned.

"Oh my God, Harold. I am so sorry," I said.

In his kind and thoughtful way, Harold replied, "I guess it will be alright, because I have a place to go to remember Esther (Woodward Avenue and 13 Mile Road), and God knows, Esther has a place where she can tell a whole lot of people how to drive!"

A Priceless Story

Harold's story is priceless! However, in a subtle way it does bring to our attention that cremation has its own set of problems. Before you make a decision for cremation—for yourself, or for a loved one who has died—it is important to seek advice from a funeral service counselor. Cremation is not for everyone.

Questions to consider:

1. What would cremation mean to you and your family?
2. Do family members have preferences? Do you know what they are? How might you find out?
3. Has our society in general changed its beliefs and preferences with regard to cremation? If so, in what ways?

This might be a good topic to talk about in support groups.



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SUPPORT GROUPS: HOW MEMBERS HELP, ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER

The following is written by Lori Poyer, LMSW, CFLE, group facilitator for Pray Funeral Home, in Charlotte, MI, and Estes Leadley Funeral Home, in Lansing, MI.

One of the June grief groups included six new people with very recent losses and three of the regular attendees. I ran into "S", one of the regulars, the next day in the grocery store. Her husband's death was three years before. She had disclosed the night before to

the group that she finally felt that she had "turned a corner" with his death. She remarked that she felt the group the night before had been a really good group and how much empathy she felt for the new visitors.



Support to Others

She then went on to say that maybe she herself shouldn't attend anymore in order to give new people room to attend. After assuring her that there is plenty of room for new people I told her that often people continue to attend the group not for the support they receive but for the support they can give to the others. I reminded her that she had a lot of wisdom and experience to offer someone just starting the grief journey. She beamed when I said that and said she would be back.

The encounter prompted me to think of the many reasons people attend the group and how valuable their contributions are. One gentleman attends because he wants to talk about his wife so that she will be remembered.

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Grief Resource Center

For Additional Resources, please visit the [GRIEF RESOURCE CENTER](http://www.maximumlivingconsult.com) at: www.maximumlivingconsult.com

SUGGESTED READINGS

The Challenge of Living. by John D. Canine, Ed.D., Ph.D. (call 866-540-0047 to order) Ball Publishers, 1983.

Being a Widow. by Lynn Caine. Penguin Books, 1990.

Helping Children Cope with the Loss of a Loved One: A Guide for Grown-Ups. by W. C. Kroen. Free Spirit Publishing, 1966. (www.freespirit.com to order)

Motherless Daughters: The Legacy of Loss. by Hope Edelman. Dell Publishing, 1994.

A Grief Observed. by C.S. Lewis. Bantam Books, 1961.

The Mourning Handbook, by H. Fitzgerald. Fireside, 1994.

Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief. by M. W. Hickman. Avon Books, 1994.

COUNSELOR RESOURCE

North Shore Wellness Services, Ltd., Northbrook, IL
Noah C. Weinstein, MA, LPC (312) 513-1629.
www.northshorewellness.com

Support Groups

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Another person lost a spouse in a car accident. This reminds us of how random death can be, and our responsibility to be conscientious drivers. Another woman I know lost first her mother and then her father. She was their primary caregiver and lived with them. Now that her parents are no longer alive, she finds she can't afford to remain in the family home. She brought up the rifts that occur in families when one person is the caregiver and other siblings don't help. Families change when parents are no longer there.

Death by suicide and the resulting hurt and anger is also a sensitive situation. I have encountered this three times in the past few months. The death of a child is another story as well.

"Simplify, Smooth, Lighten"

I am always aware that I am only the facilitator of the group and not the one who has to live the grief daily. To facilitate in Roget's Thesaurus says: "simplify, expedite, smooth, accelerate, lighten, promote". I would like to think that I assist in doing those things for the group. I hope that I smooth the way for someone starting the grief journey and help to lighten the load.

I hope that I promote building up a good support network to call on when they are having a tougher than usual time. I know that I am honored to share their stories and I am constantly in awe of their strength, love, and resilience. I am glad to be a "facilitator".

ORGANIZATIONS FOR SUPPORT

Compassionate Friends for Bereaved Parents
P.O. Box 3696 • Oak Brook, IL 60522 • 630-990-0010
www.compassionatefriends.org

Widowed Persons
1909 K Street, NW • Washington, DC 20049
WidowNet: www.fortnet.org/WidowNet

WEBSITES WORTH SURFIN'

Centering Corporation - www.centering.org

Willowgreen-(James E. Miller)- willowgreen.com

Grief Recovery - www.grief.net

Journey of Hearts - www.journeyofhearts.org

SHORT TERM RELIEF Does it work?

Often, in an effort to stop a buildup of emotional energy caused by losses of all kinds, people participate in STERBS. A STERB, according to Grief Recovery (see above website), is a Short Term Energy Relieving Behavior. The most common STERBs are eating, drinking alcohol, and taking drugs, including tranquilizers and sleep medications. There are other STERBS: intense exercise, isolation, anger, sex, gambling, workaholism, and shopping, otherwise known as Retail Therapy.

The bad news is they seem to work. They distract people from the underlying emotional issues that caused the energy buildup in the first place. The



really bad news is they only work short term. What's worse, STERBs can create new problems that cover up the original losses.

Overeating has its own consequences. There are more than 400,000 obesity-related deaths annually in the U.S. Substance abuse often replaces the original loss with a new presenting issue. A shopping binge is often followed by remorse over wasted money, and creates budget problems.

STERBs may produce a masked, or delayed grief response. They don't eliminate a healthy, but often painful, grief journey. They may simply postpone it. Remember, excess and distraction from needed grief work are the keys. A relaxing meal with a support group friend, walking as you talk with another widow who also misses her spouse, or buying new linens to spruce up your bedroom with your favorite style and color may be just what you need.

Maximum Living Support Groups

The purpose of the Support Group is to come together and draw strength and support from each other during this time of loss. The meetings are part of the community outreach program of our Funeral Home and are available at no charge. Please feel free to attend and know that your friends and family members are always welcome.

The following Support Group is available in your area, for a complete listing, please go to: www.maximumlivingconsult.com

A grief shared is halved, a joy shared is doubled.