In the Midst of Darkness, There is Light

E. Willis Partington, M.Div., LCSW-R, FT, Lead Bereavement Counselor

We have entered a season of darkness. Since November 6th when the clocks went back one hour with the return to standard time, there has been less and less light in the daytime. This external darkness, coupled with gray clouds and bleak weather, adds to an internal darkness that can be part of the experience of grief. For some, having the darkness come sooner can be a welcome change. It can mean going to bed even earlier and hoping for some respite while sleeping from the loneliness and yearning for their loved one who is not present.

We have also passed through the difficult and often painful days of the holiday season, starting with Thanksgiving and building up into a crescendo of “Happy”, “Jolly” and “Merry” through the month of December into Christmas, Hanukkah and New Year’s. The turning of the year can bring its own pain and sadness with the idea of moving into a new era, a new chapter which can be filled with uncertainty and a sense of leaving behind the life that existed before.

Yet on December 21st, something happened. It was something not easily perceptible at the time. But as you read these words, you may have noticed that the days are getting slightly longer. It is a paradox I have often enjoyed pondering, that in the midst of darkness, on the darkest day of the year, a subtle shift happens and the movement toward more light begins. Similar to the Taoist symbol of the Yin and Yang, there is a small white dot in the middle of a field of black.

Joseph Campbell once wrote, “The black moment is the moment when the real message of transformation is going to come. At the darkest moment comes the light.” This darkest moment can happen without us even realizing it. Grief is a gradual process where changes can happen so slowly that we may not notice them.

One of the things I often say in my role as a bereavement counselor is that our bodies know how to grieve. There is a natural process of healing that is going on, maybe more beneath the surface than as part of our conscious awareness. In the past I have used the example of the gaping hole that was left behind after the loss of the World Trade Center on 9/11.

Continued on next page
For many years, it seemed as if nothing was happening. But below the ground level, infrastructure work was being done. It took a long time for this work to be complete. But when it was, the new tower rose up very quickly into the sky.

It is my wish for you as we enter this New Year that the light in your days will gradually grow longer and that you will know that there is a brighter light within you, quietly doing its healing work. This issue has several articles (including one in Spanish) and our calendar of groups and workshops for the first part of 2017. I hope that this issue of Seasons of Life and the services and support of our bereavement program will be helpful to you in some way.

Sincerely,

E. Willis Partington
M. Div., LCSW-R, FT
Lead Bereavement Counselor

Dear Friend-in-Grief,

It’s difficult to know how to begin this letter. Over a year has passed since my husband, Joe, died, and like many who lose a loved one, I was numb at first. I cried a lot. I cried and cried. Everywhere I looked—around the apartment, in the neighborhood, I was reminded of him.

At the time, even though I knew Joe was going to die, I was unprepared for the loss. Nothing, it seems, can prepare you for such a death. Friends and family assured me that one day I would feel better. Time heals, they said. I knew they meant well, but I was sure they could not possibly be right. I was sure that I would never feel better.

At the beginning, I struggled to get back to daily life. Because I had been eating in the hospital cafeteria for those last weeks, there was little food in the apartment and I had to go shopping. In the grocery store produce department I saw one of Joe’s favorite fruits: soft, sweet Comice pears. For a fraction of a second, I said to myself, “I’ll buy some pears for Joe.” And then I remembered.

Some say the first year is the worst because there are so many “firsts.” Holidays and birthdays and anniversaries, whether celebrated in the past or not, seemed very different because Joe was no longer here. (Fortunately for me, Joe’s family made sure that I did not have to face a day like Thanksgiving alone.)

The experts say that grieving is “work” and I agree. And I have worked at it, both in bereavement groups and with one-on-one grief counseling. Much to my amazement, I can now say that those well-meaning folks were right. Time does heal.

Oh, from time to time I still cry. On TV a few nights ago, some familiar music came on, and I could hear Joe singing along with it. I had to turn off the TV—I just couldn’t bear it. But that happens less often now.

It’s taken time and effort, and at times I feel as if I have come back from being in exile, but I am making a new life for myself. Four days a week I go to a Y for a workout and a swim. I enjoy the monthly book discussion group at my local library. I have renewed the political activities that I had to give up in the past. I see friends and family as often as possible. My life will never be what it was while Joe was alive, but I no longer feel the way I did all those months ago right after he died. Despite my expectations, I do feel better. And I hope the same for you. Give yourself time—as much as you need. You will be able to do it.

My best wishes to you,

M.

HELPFUL RESOURCES
Recommended Reading:

Phyllis Kosminsky
Getting Back to Life When Grief Won’t Heal

This thoughtful book offers hope and encouragement to mourners coping with complicated grief responses. Kosminsky provides stories and insights into the many factors that can block a healthy grief journey. Her compassionate book is very helpful and will give those who are in mourning the confidence that their grief will have a good outcome.

To learn more about VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care, go to: http://www.vnsny.org/how-we-can-help/hospice-palliative-care/our-services/grief-support/
Saturday Matinee – Our Tenth Season

Movies often carry the most profound images and messages about grief and loss. They can be a mirror to our own lives and help us get in touch with feelings and thoughts that we might not be able to access in the course of our daily routine.

Those attending the film series watch the movie, enjoy popcorn and other cinema treats, and then talk about what the movie says to them about coping in bereavement. A movie can often break the ice, making it easier for everyone to explore their own grief, said one recent participant. The film series was designed to encourage those grieving to come together in a format outside of a traditional bereavement support group. Providing a variety of grief-related themes allows the participants to explore situations of loss that may parallel or differ greatly from their own. Limiting the workshop to ten people ensures that each person will have adequate opportunity to discuss the movie. A family-friendly film is always included on the schedule. All films are shown Saturdays at 1:30 PM.

The schedule for the 2017 film series is:

- 2/11 A Man Called Ove
- 2/25 Remember the Titans
- 3/4 Calendar Girls
- 3/25 Kubo and the Two Strings

Please note that these selections are subject to change.

All films are shown Saturdays at 1:30 PM.
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- 2/11 A Man Called Ove
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Please note that these selections are subject to change.

If you are interested in helping by becoming a volunteer in our “Vet to Vet” program, by supporting our fundraising efforts, or you just want to learn more, please contact Stefanie Steel at 212-609-7257 or stefanie.steel@vnsny.org

We Honor Veterans

Our VNSNY Veterans Program has now been fully underway since September 2015 caring for over 700 veterans!

Led by Joseph Vitti, a former Military Intelligence Commissioned Officer in the US Army, Joseph is providing Veteran-centric education for staff and volunteers, and developing relationships with Veterans organizations. The program also helps Veterans to access benefits through the VA healthcare system such as: additional hospice home health aide hours, service connected illnesses/injuries, death and survivor benefits, funeral benefits, and many other health service benefits. The Program also helps Veterans and their families expedite the recovery of misplaced military service records (discharge papers) which are critical for any Veteran benefit! Moreover, the program also provides bedside recognition by presenting certificates, blankets, pins, and sometimes even awarded service medals.

Recently, the Veterans program has established a close working partnership with the newly created agency of the NYC Mayor’s office of Veteran Affairs to provide burial assistance with full military honors within Calverton National Cemetery to Veterans with little or no economic resources or social supports. The Mayor’s office has even assisted with discharge paper recovery for Veterans.

As part of our Veterans Program, VNSNY is a participant in the national “We Honor Veterans” program. VNSNY recently attained Level Four status, the highest a hospice provider could be in the We Honor Veterans program, making VNSNY the only hospice provider with this ranking to service all boroughs of NYC. This is a collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Administration and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization. It was designed to help hospice professionals to meet the needs of dying Veterans by using respectful inquiry, compassionate listening and grateful acknowledgement to comfort patients with a history of military service and possibly physical or psychological trauma.

If you are interested in helping by becoming a volunteer in our “Vet to Vet” program, by supporting our fundraising efforts, or you just want to learn more, please contact Stefanie Steel at 212-609-7257 or stefanie.steel@vnsny.org

For more information or to register, contact Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929 or email her: Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org
“El Duelo: Construir un oasis en el desierto”
Rocio Lorena Ruiz, Bereavement Services Intern

Si Usted está leyendo estas líneas es porque acaba de perder a la persona que más significaba en su vida. Todo lo que compartía con ese ser querido se ha cortado de golpe y no hay manera de recuperar esa relación con nadie más. Las circunstancias literalmente le dejan en medio de un desierto. Siente que las personas que lo quieren y a quienes Usted quiere están a millas de distancia y no pueden acercarse más. Este desierto parece no terminar nunca, le congela de noche pero le abrasa de día anulando toda actividad porque hasta caminar en la arena tumbalea y no encontrar agua le debilita. La luz evidencia la oscuridad que lleva por dentro. Los espejismos aparecen y algunos días se presentan tolerables pero otros insuportables. Anhelaría encontrar un camello, una brújula o hasta un helicóptero pero sabe que es insuficiente porque el desierto lo lleva por dentro. Y para continuar tendrá que aprender a sobrevivir, ganar espacio al desierto y construir un oasis desde donde poco a poco empezará a recuperar esos sentimientos, capacidades, momentos y experiencias que el ser querido se llevó consigo.

El trabajo de duelo requiere mucha paciencia y comprensión hacia uno mismo porque la vida que conocíamos cambió radicalmente y no se puede volver hacia atrás. Lograr estabilidad, enfoque, sentido de control y significado de la propia vida requiere de un gran esfuerzo. Reacciones inesperadas a nivel fisiológico, cognitivo, conductual y afectivo fluctuarán. Adaptarnos significa avanzar y retroceder, pero cada tropiezo, dificultad o caída aunque no lo percibimos, sirve para tomar impulso y continuar.

Entonces, cómo podemos construir nuestro oasis?
Aqui algunas ideas...

1) Vivir de manera honesta y natural nuestro duelo. Permitirnos expresar nuestras emociones y sentimientos aunque sean abrumadores e intensos ya que evitarlos, suprimirlos o negarlos puede ser perjudicial. Estos podrán ser manejados con más eficacia en algún momento. Por eso es necesario llorar para aliviar la pena o la culpa, y permitirse momentos de calma y hasta pequeñas dosis de alegría.

2) Atender nuestra alma. Tal vez somos religiosos y nuestra fe nos conforta. O tal vez somos espirituales y preferimos meditar. Sea cual fuere nuestras creencias o tradiciones, asignemos tiempo para nuestro sosiego y crecimiento, meditando, leyendo, escuchando música, o realizando actividades que nos conforten y brinden paz a nuestro corazón.

3) Atender a los mensajes de nuestro cuerpo: Mientras fuimos cuidadores de nuestro ser querido estuvimos en gran tensión. Aliviemos el estrés comiendo sanamente, evitando el consumo excesivo de alcohol o sustancias no prescritas, durmiendo las horas necesarias, asistiendo a las citas médicas postergadas y haciendo ejercicio necesario. Es hora de que nuestro cuerpo se oxigene y recupere fuerzas.

4) Mantener y mejorar el soporte social. Tal vez no todos comprendan nuestra pena o no sepan cómo ayudarnos. Aprovechemos la oportunidad de alternar en diferentes espacios, y compartir tiempo de calidad con distintas personas. Pidamos ayuda si necesitamos, hablemos con las personas que nos generen confianza, sea un religioso, un profesional o asistamos a un grupo de ayuda para fortalecernos.

5) Valorar el tiempo compartido con el fallecido. Nuestro ser querido enfrentó duramente la última etapa de su vida y nosotros hiciemos lo posible para aliviar el sufrimiento y proveerle confort. Se valora el amor, la dedicación y la experiencia ganada. Se agradece haber conocido a una persona tan valiente y luchadora. Se le rinde honor por el regalo de su presencia.

6) Comprender que el duelo es un proceso. No se resuelve de la noche a la mañana y sabemos que “olvidar” no es posible. Hagamos sólo lo más cómodo e indispensable para mantener sentido de control, conectado y proactivo. Permitanse estar en duelo, dudar, reinventarse a sí mismos. Permitanse establecer una nueva relación con el ser querido, reforzando los lazos de amor y esperanza.

Construir el oasis no es fácil. Nuestro equipo de consejeros bilingües y latinos está disponible para acompañarlos por 13 meses contados a partir de la pérdida. No dude en contactarnos, estamos aquí para Usted.
Rocio Lorena Ruiz
e-mail: Rocio.Ruiz@vnsny.org
of 212 609 1994 — cel 646 398 1795
Bereavement Services Winter 2017 Calendar

The David and June Pelkey Grief Education Series

Presentations designed to support people on their journey of grief

• Registration is required •

How Long Does Grief Last?
Wednesday • January 18
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
E.Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

Organization and Moving Forward
Tuesday • January 24
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

A challenge for many bereaved is what to do with the items left behind after the death of a loved one. It can feel as if every article is a constant reminder of the person's absence, and letting go of these things can be challenging and difficult. Amelia Meena, a professional organizer, and bereavement counselor Debra Oryzysyn, will explore this sensitive area and find supportive ways in which individuals can assume this task, in ways that honor the memory of the person who has died.

An Introduction to Sound Therapy
Limit: 20 participants
Tuesday • February 7
5:00 p.m.—6:00 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

Learn how sound can assist in creating meditative moments for everyone including patients, families and caregivers

HEAL the Heart • Manhattan
Friday • February 10
6:00 p.m.—8:00 p.m.
Bereaved families with school-aged children are invited to join us for this special evening event. Dinner will be served.

You MUST register to attend by February 3
Register with Mary Safrai, VNSNY Consultant
Call 646-206-1429 or e-mail Mary.Safrai@vnsny.org

Saturday Matinee
A four-part film series to support you in the grieving process

Saturdays • February 11 and 25 and March 4 and 25
1:30 p.m.—4:00 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

Stress Management and Self-Care in Grief
Tuesday • March 14
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
E.Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

Qué Esperar Cuando Un Ser Querido Muere?
(What to Expect When a Loved One Dies)
Thursday • March 30
1:30 p.m.—3:00 p.m.
Rocío Ruíz • 646-398-1795 • Rocío.Ruíz@vnsny.org

How Long Does Grief Last?
Tuesday • April 18
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
E.Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

Partner Loss Panel Discussion
“Can I Develop a Loving Relationship Again?”
Thursday • April 27
6:00 p.m.—8:00 p.m.
Janet King • 212-609-1907 • Janet.King@vnsny.org

Workshop Testimonial
“The bereavement services offered by VNSNY were like an oasis in a desert. When I started the group I felt isolated and alone and I felt life had no meaning. When the group was over, I felt refreshed and on the path to healing.”
Bereavement Services Winter 2017 Calendar

- Registration is required -

**Weekly (Ongoing) Groups**

**First Year of Grief**
A Daytime Group for Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One on Hospice
- **Manhattan**
Mondays 11:00 a.m.—12:30 p.m.
Janet King • 212-609-1907
Janet.King@vnsny.org

**General Loss**
Chinese-Language Bereavement Support • **Manhattan**

善別輔導小組
Tuesdays • 2:30 p.m.—4:00 p.m
Pamela Yew Schwartz • 347-831-1811
Pamela.Schwartz@vnsny.org

**General Loss**
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One • **Manhattan**
Tuesdays • 6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
John Anderson • 212-760-3146
janderson@archcare.org

**Bi-Weekly Groups**

**Men Only**
Men Coping with Grief
- **Manhattan**
Mondays • January 9, 23, February 6, March 6, 20 and April 3, 17
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
E.Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

**General Loss**
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One
- **Brooklyn**
Tuesdays • January 3, 17, February 7, 21, March 7, 21 and April 4, 18
12:00 p.m.—1:30 p.m.
Dianna Sandiford • 718-787-3155
Dianna.Sandiford@vnsny.org

**En Español**
Spanish Bereavement Group
- **Manhattan**
Thursdays • January 5, 19, February 2, 16, March 2, 16, 30, and April 6, 20
1:30 p.m.—3:00 p.m.
Liz Santana • 917-608-7220
Elizabeth.Santana@vnsny.org

**Workshop Testimonial**
“This group helped me heal and take the next steps in life.”
—Y.K.

“What the heart has once owned and had it shall never lose.”
—Henry Ward Beecher

VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care • Seasons of Life
Bereavement Services Winter 2017 Calendar

• Registration is required •

Focused Groups

**Parent Loss**
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent • Manhattan
Wednesdays • January 11, 18, 25, February 1, 8, 15, 22 and March 1
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Pamela Yew Schwartz • 347-831-1811
Pamela.Schwartz@vnsny.org

**Spouse or Partner Loss**
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Spouse or Partner • Manhattan
Mondays – January 30, February 6, 13, 27, and March 6, 13
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Mary Kay King • 212-760-3138
MaryKay.King@vnsny.org

Spouse or Partner Loss
For Older Adults Grieving the Death of a Spouse or Partner
Tuesdays • January 17, 24, 31, February 7, 14, 21, 28 and March 7
11:00 a.m.—12:30 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

Monthly Groups

For Young Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent • Manhattan
Wednesday • January 4, Thursdays • February 2, March 2, and April 6
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Ben Weinstock • 718-888-6965
Benjamin.Weinstock@vnsny.org

For Young Adults Grieving the Death of a Parent • Manhattan
Wednesday • January 4, Thursdays • February 2, March 2, and April 6
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Ben Weinstock • 718-888-6965
Benjamin.Weinstock@vnsny.org

For Adults Grieving the Death of a Brother of Sister • Manhattan
Wednesdays • January 11, 18, 25, February 1, 8, 15, 22 and March 1
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Pamela Yew Schwartz • 347-831-1811
Pamela.Schwartz@vnsny.org

Spouse or Partner Loss
For Older Adults Grieving the Death of a Spouse or Partner
Tuesdays • January 17, 24, 31, February 7, 14, 21, 28 and March 7
11:00 a.m.—12:30 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

General Loss
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One • Brooklyn
Fridays • January 27 • February 24 • March 31 and April 28
2:00 p.m.—3:30 p.m.
Dianna Sandiford • 718-787-3155
Dianna.Sandiford@vnsny.org

Workshop Testimonial
“I was able to be strong because I had your support and knew I wasn’t alone.”
—A.K.

To learn more about VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care, go to: http://www.vnsny.org/how-we-can-help/hospice-palliative-care/our-services/grief-support/
Coming on April 27th

Special Topic: Partner Loss
Panel: “Can I Develop a Loving Relationship Again?”

This panel discussion is presented to support grieving partners/spouses who may have conflicting feelings when they contemplate the possibility of reinvesting themselves in another relationship. Questions may have come to mind such as: “Will I always feel married even though my partner has died?” “No one could ever replace my loved one but is it okay to seek companionship?” “It’s been a long time since I wasn’t a part of a couple and I feel awkward around other ‘singles.’” “Is it in the best interest of my children for me to consider having other relationships?” Even though we may know intellectually that love is boundless, it may be difficult to move forward.

We recognize that grief can be an isolating experience, however, it’s important to know that you are not alone with these conflicting feelings. Please join counselor Janet King and the panel of experts who have travelled this path. Janet can be reached at 212-609-1907 or Janet.King@vnsny.org.