In the Midst of Darkness, There is Light

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

We have entered a season of darkness. Since November 3rd 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 in the day can be a welcome change. It can mean going to sleep even earlier than normal and hoping for some respite from the loneliness and yearning for their loved one who is not present. For others, sleep can be a challenge or near impossible. Those who were caregivers may still be living out the rhythms of around the clock caregiving.

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. 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.

Continued on next page
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 2020. 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 Parlington
M. Div., LCSW-R, FT
Lead Bereavement Counselor

HELPFUL RESOURCES
Recommended Reading:

Lou LaGrand
Healing Grief, Finding Peace: 101 Ways to Cope with the Death of Your Loved One
Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, © 2011

This book is divided up into easy-to-read sections and is filled with practical advice. It provides a solid grounding in understanding how to face your grief and how to move toward healing. There is a special emphasis on the importance of resilience as well as many strategies for coping and managing grief. Highly recommended by a member of our Tuesday bereavement group, it has been helpful to members of that group and even been a turning point in their grief for some who have read it.

Dear Friend-in-Grief,

The shock of it! How can this be? How can I do this? What is the best I can be for my adult children?!!!

Eleven years ago my 37 year old son, Jason, died suddenly from an unknown heart defect. I believe that I was in shock for a very long time—most likely, years, robotically doing life on a daily basis but the life of me was missing. Eventually, I did, as I often tell clients, notice and become deeply aware of the feelings of overwhelming sadness and grief, loss and pain.

Sometimes I had to stop and breathe. One time I listened to the yearnings of my body and went to sleep for several days awakening to a different me. I felt as though something happened in the depth of exhausted sleep; somehow a process took place that refreshed me and let me become more and more aware of the coming and going of painful feelings. I noticed that respite time between the painful feelings lengthened and lifted.

On November 11, 2011 my mother, 93-years old, died and November 13th, 2011, Jason's brother, JK, age 41-years, died suddenly by a hit-and-run driver. He had three sons and a wife who had been diagnosed with terminal breast cancer in the third round of treatment. The shock and the protective shutdown of feeling body sensations that comes with that returned full force. Reeling from the fact that these two wonderful young men were suddenly missing from the earth was mind-boggling. I taught classes, saw clients, meditated, slept, used diversion such as movie marathons, reading less than stellar books that took no amount of intellectual ability, and walked endlessly. I tried to be in the present moment and said often in the day, “present moment, wonderful moment.” My heart was heavy. I did not want to go to the depths of despair that I had gone with Jason's death.

I tried to see the joy of life in each thing that I encountered—the trees became beautiful reminders of life, blooming and gracefully blowing in the wind reminding me of the sweetness of the earth; the children playing with such idealized hope; the beauty of the buildings that people struggled to either design or in which to live; I tried something different. The joy of life diminished, desperation set in but my openness to it had changed. The world around me gathered me in and encouraged me to be the most I could be without forgetting the love and exquisiteness of the three wonderful people I knew and cherished. I often feel my heart break at some point during the day, but I know it’s breaking open to be more present for and to be with those that are still physically present with me.

Warmly,
Jean

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/
Our VNSNY Veterans Program has now been fully underway since September 2015 caring for over 2,700 veterans and assisting them and their loved ones who have given so much to our country.

Led by Joseph Vitti, a former Military Intelligence Commissioned Officer in the US Army, the program has grown significantly since it started. In addition to our Bronx-based Veterans Liaison, Sung Yoon, we also have Erica Wigley who is a liaison working with our Veterans and the VA healthcare system such as additional hospice home health aide hours in Queens and Manhattan. Erica is a nurse who worked with both active duty Veterans returning from the battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan as well as retired Veterans at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, MD. She also is trained in Reiki which will assist in her healing work with Veterans. Most recently the team has been joined by Frank Quadrino who had a long and distinguished career at the VA in New Jersey. Frank’s focus will be to assist 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. He will also help Veterans and their families expedite the recovery of misplaced military service records (discharge papers) which are critical for any Veteran benefit. Our Veterans program also provides bedside recognition by presenting certificates, blankets, pins, and sometimes even awarded service medals.

As part of our Veterans Program, VNSNY is a participant in the national “We Honor Veterans” program. This is a collaboration between the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Administration and the National Hospice and Palliative Care Organization (NHPCO). VNSNY has recently obtained the new Level Five status. With this highest level program status, VNSNY’s “We Honor Veterans” program will include increased staff education with an emphasis on Soul Injury principles to assist in caring for Vietnam-era and combat Veterans. We’ll also play a role as a regional mentor to other “We Honor Veterans” partners who are working to enhance their program.

Saturday Matinee – Thirteenth 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 p.m.

The schedule for the 2019 film series is:
• 1/25: The Full Monty
• 2/8: The Station Agent
• 2/22: A Quiet Place
• 3/7: E. T.

Please note that these selections are subject to change.

For more information or to register, please contact: Debra Oryzysyn at 212-609-1929 or Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org
El Duelo: Construir un oasis en el desierto

Rocío Lorena Ruiz, former Bereavement Services Intern

Si Ud. 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 Ud. 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 insoportables. 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. Esto podrá ser manejado 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, asigüemos 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 sepamos 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 hicimos 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. Permanezcase estar en duelo, dudar, reinventarse a sí mismos. Permanezcase 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 Ud.

Rocío Lorena Ruiz
E-mail: Rocio.Ruiz@vnsny.org

"Construir un oasis en el desierto no es fácil, pero con ayuda se puede lograr."
Bereavement Services Winter/Early Spring 2020 Calendar

The David and June Pelkey Grief Education Series

Presentations designed to support people on their journey of grief
Registration is required • Manhattan location unless specified otherwise

How Long Does Grief Last?
Thursday • January 23
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

Bereavement Art Support Group • Staten Island
Each meeting will focus on creating a different art piece - no artistic skills required/all art materials will be provided.
Thursday • January 23, February 20, March 19, and April 23
10:30 a.m.—12:00 p.m.
Rosanne Sonatore • 646-276-4399
Rosanne.Sonatore@vnsny.org

Saturday Matinee
A four-part film series supports you in the grieving process
Saturdays • January 25, February 8, 22 and March 7
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 10
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Debra Oryzysyn • 212-609-1929
Debra.Oryzysyn@vnsny.org

Mindfulness Based Grief Reduction: A full day silent retreat
Finding Peace • 16 Breathing Exercises
Learning to meditate and to find peace and calmness in the process often results in grieving that lets go of anxiety helping the grieving process have purpose.
Sunday • March 22
10:30 a.m.—4:30 p.m.
Jean Metzker • 917-331-7819
Jean.Metzker@vnsny.org
Text or email preferred

Anger: Finding Peace
Planting & Watering Seeds of Calmness
Note: The "Mindfulness Based Grief Reduction: Finding Peace" workshop (March 22) is a prerequisite to register for this event.
Sunday • April 19
1:00 p.m.—3:00 p.m.
Jean Metzker • 917-331-7819
Jean.Metzker@vnsny.org
Text or email preferred
Follow-up process groups • May 3, 10, 17, 24

Partner Loss Panel Discussion
"Can I Develop a Loving Relationship Again?"
Thursday • April 23
6:00 p.m.—8:00 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

Tonglen
Tonglen is a deep process of healing through forgiveness; connecting with our own suffering and that which is around us, everywhere. For overcoming our fear of suffering and dissolving the tightness in our hearts.
Saturday • April 25
1:00 p.m.—3:00 p.m.
Jean Metzker • 917-331-7819
Jean.Metzker@vnsny.org
Text or email preferred

A Pocketful of Quiet: Pebble Meditation
Note: The "Mindfulness Based Grief Reduction: Finding Peace" workshop (March 22) is a prerequisite to register for this event.
Sunday • May 31
Jean Metzker • 917-331-7819
Jean.Metzker@vnsny.org
Text or email preferred

VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care • Seasons of Life
Bereavement Services Winter/Early Spring 2020 Calendar

Registration is required • Manhattan location unless specified otherwise

**Weekly (Ongoing) Groups**

**First Year of Grief**
A daytime group for those mourning the death of a hospice patient
Mondays • 11:00 a.m.—12:30 p.m.
Janet King • 212-609-1907
Janet.King@vnsny.org

**Chinese-Language Bereavement Support**
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

**For Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One**
Tuesdays • 6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

**Community Bereavement Support Groups • Staten Island**
The VNSNY Hospice & Palliative Guide to Staten Island Community Bereavement Support Groups can also be provided to you via email or hard copy upon request:
Rosanne Sonatore • 646-276-4399
Rosanne.Sonatore@vnsny.org

**Bi-Weekly Groups**

**Daytime General Loss Group/Upper East Side**
For Adults Whose Loved One Died on Hospice
Wednesdays • January 15, February 5, 19, and March 4, 18, and April 1, 15
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Janet King 212-609-1907 • Janet.King@vnsny.org

**Men Coping With Grief**
Mondays • January 6, 27, February 10, 24, March 9, March 23, and April 6, 20
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Willis Partington • 212-609-7992
Willis.Partington@vnsny.org

**Grupo de Soporte para Hispanos**
“Construyendo un Puente hacia una Vida Nueva” (Spanish Bereavement Group)
Bi-Weekly Thursdays • January 16, 30, February 13, 27, March 12, 26, and April 9, 23
1:30 p.m.—3:00 p.m.
Liz Santana • 917-608-7220
Elizabeth.Santana@vnsny.org

**For Adults Grieving the Death of a Loved One**
Brooklyn
Tuesdays • January 7, 21, February 4, 18, March 3, 17, and April 7, 21
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Dianna Sandiford • 718-787-3155 Cell: 646-430-4125
Dianna.Sandiford@vnsny.org

**Bereavement Support Group for those mourning the death of a hospice patient • Staten Island**
Tuesdays • February 11, 25, March 10, 24, and April 14, 28
2:00 p.m.—3:15 p.m.
Rosanne Sonatore • 646-276-4399
Rosanne.Sonatore@vnsny.org

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Workshop Testimonial
“The art workshop enabled me to express feelings that I could not put into words.”
—B.T.

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VNSNY Hospice and Palliative Care • Seasons of Life
Registration is required • Manhattan location unless specified otherwise

**Monthly Groups**

**For Adults Grieving the Death of a Brother or Sister**
Mondays • January 27, February 24, March 23, and April 27
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Gladys Ortiz-Alvarado • 917-923-6288
Gladys.Ortiz-Alvarado@vnsny.org

**Loss of an Adult Child**
For Parents Grieving the Death of an Adult Child
Wednesdays –January 8, February 12, March 11, and April 8
1:00 p.m.—2:30 p.m.
Pamela Yew Schwartz • 347-831-1811
Pamela.Schwartz@vnsny.org

**Focused Groups**

**Spouse or Partner Loss**
For Adults Grieving the Death of a Spouse or Partner
Mondays • March 16, 23, 30, and April 6, 13, 20
6:00 p.m.—7:30 p.m.
Mary Kay King • 212-760-3138
MaryKay.King@vnsny.org

**Workshop Testimonial**
“The group gives me a safe place to tell my story and learn from others.”
—W.B.

**Special Topic:**
Art as a Pathway to Healing
The Museum of Modern Art and VNSNY Hospice invite you to join regularly-scheduled programs this winter to learn about art and meet new people through interactive sessions and hands-on exploration of artists and themes in modern and contemporary art. No prior experience necessary! Family members who have had loved ones on VNSNY Hospice will be given priority. Contact MoMA Prime Time at (212) 333-1265 or primetime@moma.org for more information.

**Workshop Testimonial**
“Each time I attend the weekly group meeting, I am reminded of the importance of allowing myself to grieve.”
—W.B.

**Workshop Testimonial**
“When I started attending the group, I realized I was in the company of others on the same journey.”
—R.W.
Partner Loss Panel: “Can I Develop a Loving Relationship Again?”

This panel discussion is presented in an effort 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 Willis Partington and a panel of experts who have travelled this path. Willis can be reached at 212-609-7992 or email him at Willis.Partington@vnsny.org.