

Healing the Loss of a Dream Part I Rokelle Lerner

Jane has been divorced from Richard for three years. It was a difficult relationship and for ten years, Jane endured Richard's sexual addiction and his cruel outbursts. Her friends think it's time she got on with her life and she knows they're right, but she can't explain the loss she feels that keeps her from creating a new intimate relationship. The truth is that she's relieved that Richard is out of her life. But every time she starts to explain this, her friend thinks she's in denial. It's gotten to the point where Jane won't discuss her grief with anyone because she feels so misunderstood.

Tom is a pastor who worked at a hospital where he ministered to patients with AIDS. Eighteen months ago the hospital suffered budget cuts and had to let Tom go. Now he's employed as a pastor at a local college campus where he's paid more, has much better benefits, and works shorter hours. His wife is overjoyed at the change in their lifestyle. Unfortunately Tom is far from delighted. Their relationship has suffered because Tom has been in a mild depression since he left the hospital. Tom doesn't understand his despair. It's not that he wants his old job back, but there's an underlying loss that Tom just can't seem to shake.

The loss of a dream is difficult to articulate. When dreams are shattered it causes inexplicable grief that others may have difficulty comprehending. Why would Jane continue to grieve the ending of an emotionally abusive marriage? Why would Tom remain in despair about the loss of a job where he was underpaid and constantly exhausted? Both Jane and Tom are suffering the impatience and irritation of friends and loved ones who think they are indulging themselves in self-pity.

The death of a dream can mean the loss of a role in someone's life, the loss of meaning, the loss of control or even the loss of an image of oneself. For example, Jane can't seem to explain that it's not her ex-husband she misses it's the loss of the dream of the couple that was supposed to make it through time. Tom can't find the words to express the loss of meaning he feels in his life, the loss of the role he played in helping the sick. Both of them are facing the shattering of dreams that are contaminating their relationships because they haven't been acknowledged or grieved.

As a culture, we are much more adept at helping people grieve specific losses. Most often, support is available for those who suffer the loss of a parent, a home, or even a pet. However, as supportive as people around us can be, there's a limited time that they will tolerate our grief before they begin to lecture and prod us to return to life as usual.

We must understand that for every tangible loss we face, there's always a dream connected to it. And sometimes, it's that hidden expectation or dream that we continue to mourn. When dreams die we owe them recognition in their passing. In fact, until we face the loss of our dreams, our other losses will never come to resolution.

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A dream is a precious and private phenomenon. Our dreams contain our vision for the future and what we hold as our inspired potential. From our dreams comes the impetus to take action and to persevere despite obstacles. We also guard our dreams at all costs and resist anything or anyone that threatens to destroy them. There is no doubt that holding onto a dream can be life giving and enhance our spirit. So often our identity is wrapped up in our dreams. Our zest for life, our passion, and our creativity, all are fueled by the visions we deem as important. How could we ever think that when a dream dies, we'd smoothly let it go and step into a new one?

The passage from the death of one dream to a birth of another involves transition. In our culture transition is not honored and barely tolerated. We're trained to see the vision of where we want to go and somehow are led to believe that there's a fix or a fast lane that will bring us what we want without the effort it takes to get there. (And if we don't reach our dream, there must be something wrong with us!) There is little support for those who are in that confusion space of in-between.

Transition literally means letting go of an old dream, followed by confusion and distress, leading to the birth of new beginnings. It seems that we are required to let go of the old before we pick up the new. And when we let go it puts us in a state of chaos and pain. It's the natural process of disorientation to reorientation that most of us detest. None of us would disagree that this space in-between is an uncomfortable place that we hope to leave as soon as possible. But we need to remember that transition is that sacred space where the most healing and growth takes place. In fact, Martin Buber, the brilliant philosopher uses the term "space in-between" to describe God.

In order to explain the sacredness of transition, think back to a time when you were a child. Some of us used to go to the playground and swing on the monkey bars or the rings. Maybe you can remember what it was like to let go of the ring behind you in order to grab hold of the ring in front of you. In our own lives, there comes the moment when we have to let go of the past, even if the future isn't quite within our grasp. We hurl ourselves into space and we feel like we may drop into the abyss! This is where we have to summon all the faith, courage and support we can muster. If we can do this, we'll enter that miraculous state of transformations where our new dreams are born.

In the next newsletter I'll describe the specific steps necessary to healing the loss of a dream. Until then, it's my hope that this article inspires you to have patience and compassion for yourself as you go through your life's transitions.