

Grief and the Myth of Closure

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When faced with grief we often ask, “When will I begin to feel better? When will I return to normal? When will I be able to breathe again? When will I achieve some closure?” The idea of closure in our culture is one of tidy endings, a sense of completion. The reason we long for closure, of course, is because we would like to be rid of this pain. We would like to shut out the sad, confused, desperate, angry feelings from our lives, putting all of this pain behind us so that we can feel joy again.

For some of us, we expect “closure” to happen after the funeral or memorial service or after a loved one’s room has been cleared out. For others, we look for closure after a personal ritual, or after the first anniversary comes and goes. “Surely then, we will have closure,” we think. We pray.

But what an odd concept really, closure....as if we could turn the lock and throw away the key, as if we could truly close the door on our emotions and our love for someone lost. The truth, of course, is far more complex. The ‘closure’ that we all strive for loses its relevancy in the realms of loss and love.

Closure may work well in the world of practical matters – with business deals and real estate transactions. But closure does not apply to the human heart, not in a pure sense. It isn’t possible to permanently close the door on the past as if it didn’t exist. And why would we want to anyway . . . really? If we so thoroughly detached from our loss, we would not only close the door on the pain but we would also sever the connection to our loved one.

In losing someone dear to us, it's important to remember that the relationship itself is *not* over. Death cannot take away the love that weaves its way through every fiber of our being. Love will always triumph over death in this regard. We want to hold our cherished memories close to our heart, recognizing that our love is an essential part of us. In fact, we want to open the door, not close it, onto the reality of living with loss.

Perhaps it is better to drop the idea of closure and think instead in terms of healing and growth. We can process our pain and move to deeper and deeper levels of healing; we can find ways to move on while holding our relationship with our loved one forever in our hearts; we can channel our pain into meaningful activities to honor our loved ones; we can even learn to smile again, breathe again and love again.

Our loss becomes love transformed, transformed from that which relies on physical presence to something more pure. So let us not strive for closure. When we do that, we unwittingly close the door on all the love that we shared. And, truly, that would be a loss too terrible to bear.