

Living in the Village of Grief and Healing

A Guided Imagery based on “Living in the Village of Grief” by Axel Schwaigert, D. Min. in his doctoral thesis at Episcopal Divinity School, 2010.

Going through grief and mourning is a profound human experience. It is highly individual but also communal. Everyone experiences his/her grief differently and expresses her/his mourning in different ways. Some understand it as a *path* they have to go, some as different *stages* they have to go through. Some see mourning as a list of tasks that have to be worked through; some just see an overwhelming single task in front of them that with time becomes less overwhelming. Grief and mourning can be understood in different ways. They can be seen as psychological problems that need *therapeutic help*. They can be also understood as human problems that are best addressed with the methods of *self-help*. Or they can be understood as *spiritual experiences* that need guidance and/or counselling.

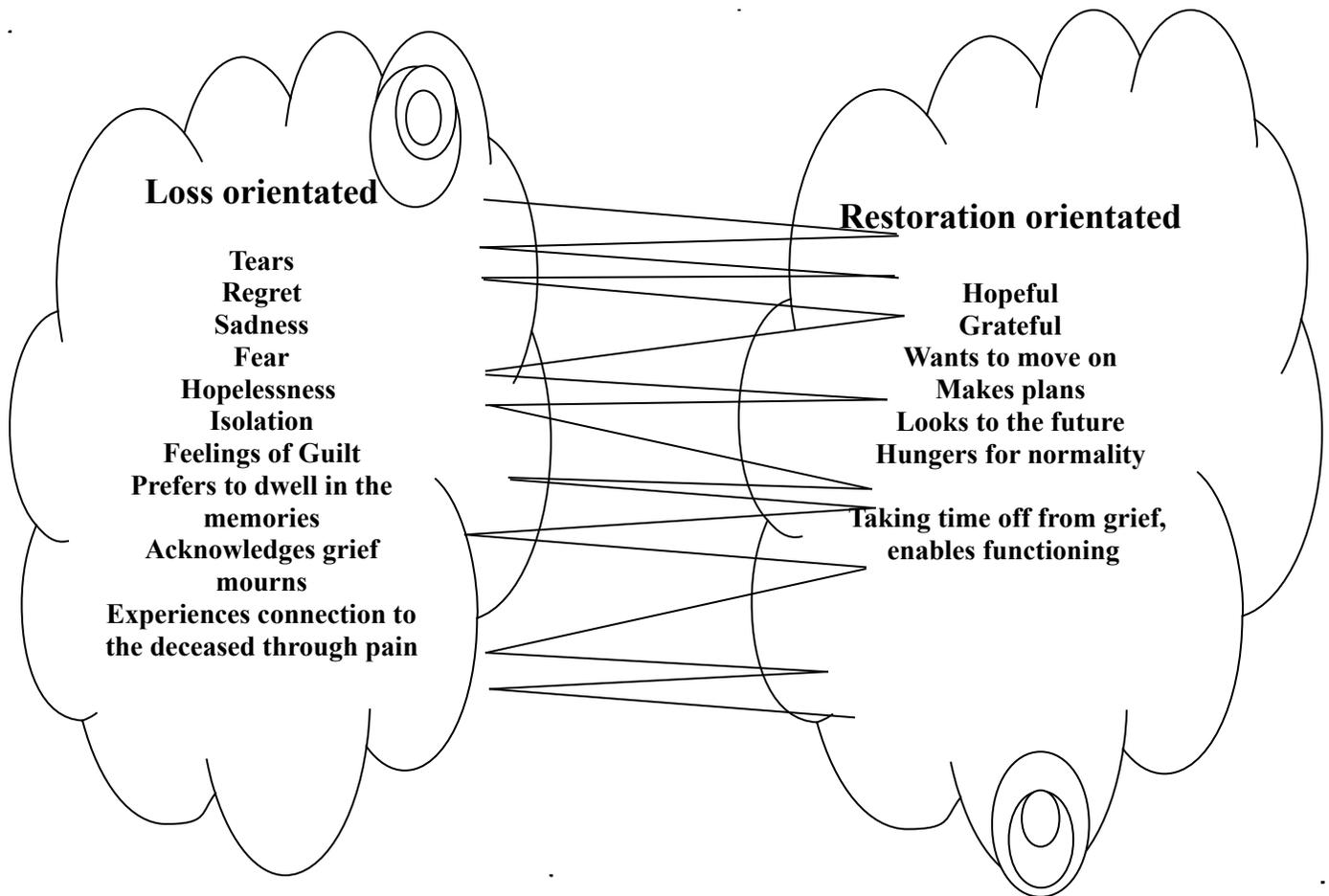
The Theory

This imagery is based on the dual process model of coping with bereavement by Ströbe. This model allows a lot of freedom of individual expressions and experiences of grief and mourning. Ströbe describes two main areas that a grieving person experiences: The “loss orientated” area and the “restoration oriented” area.

According to this model the grieving person moves freely between those two main areas and within those areas. Sometimes this movement can be very rapid and oscillating, sometimes the grieving person remains over a long period of time in one area or subarea. There is no set order or timeframe for this. One can also experience extreme changes from one to the other within very short periods of time.

Therefore this model is extremely helpful in looking at groups of grieving people. It allows the different individuals to position themselves in any given time at a specific place in this model, without needing to expect the others within the grieving group to be at the same emotional, intellectual or spiritual point. This model explains therefore very clearly why and how different individuals can experience grief very differently and live out there mourning in very different ways. They are just in a different space within this model.

(The oscillating or dual process model)



(The Illustration comes from: Grief groups for children and youth, the facilitator's manual from Khululeka, South Africa.)

“Living in the village of grief and healing” is the attempt to bring this model in the form of a narrative, finding different imaginary spaces for the different subcategories of the two main areas. Those different imaginative spaces tend to be situated more in one area than the other. But they all include elements of both. That means that if two persons find themselves in the same place, they still can have different experiences of that place.

“Living in the village of grief and healing” presents a narrative that gives a visual and imaginative background to different experiences of grief and mourning. The reader should be able to identify himself/herself and his/her experience in this narrative. This should help to identify one's own place in the larger experience of loss, grief and mourning. And the reader should be able to identify where others are in their experience of grief and mourning. *Very often people grieve together for the same loss, but they do it in different pace or different intensity.*

Although grieving is a highly individual experience, it is nevertheless an experience that happens with others. Especially in families, this duality of the individual and the communal often

leads to conflict. Different people deal with their grief differently, they mourn differently. What is appropriate and helpful for one, might look highly inappropriate and even irreverently to others. One might need a lot of quiet time to learn to understand the loss, needs a lot of time where nothing changes. Another might feel the need to be hyperactive, change a lot in the own life. Some people want to keep as much of the possessions of the deceased around for as long as possible, others might want to clean out everything as soon as possible, for everything is loaded with painful memories. There is no right or wrong in this, just difference. The story might serve as an explanation for this experience and hopefully as a way to communicate the own experience.

Grief is not single experience one has to go through, but it is a highly complex conglomerate of very different, often contradictory experiences. There is also no real end to it. The acute phase of grief and mourning will finish at one time, but the experience of grief will remain, as the loss will remain. The experience of grief changes over time.

Living in the Village of Grief and Healing (Guided Imagery)

Ask people to get comfortable and to close their eyes if they are comfortable with that.

Imagine yourself in a deep forest, surrounded by darkness. Tall trees stand around you, blocking of the sky and the sun. You do not know if it was day or night. You are caught in the grey of dusk or dawn. There was no path.. You start to walk, wandering aimlessly in the forest of your grief and loss. You are alone with no place to go, no reason to walk. Your bare feet felt the stones and the rough ground, every step hurts. Your hands, your face, your body feels the thorns and the hard twigs and the burning leaves. No part of your self seems whole, everything hurts. So you walk for a long, seemingly endless time, in loss and grief, in sorrow and loneliness.

Then the forest thins and you step out into open space. Soft grass leads you down towards a little village. Small houses nestled in a valley around a central square. Slowly you walk towards the houses. You can see light in the windows, smell the smoke from the chimneys. You can feel the peace. As you approach you see people coming towards you, smiling, greeting you. "Welcome," they say. "Welcome in your place of grief and healing. Here you can be, you can grieve and in that grieving heal. Here you can stay and just be." At first you don't understand what they mean. Did you not already walk a long way in sorrow and pain, were you not hurt enough? Should you live here forever, in this village of grief? The villagers smile at you, and say: "Come along, we will show you where you are." And they take you into the village, towards the central square. On the way you see people whom you seem to know. Your heart tells you that these people were part of your life, but you can not see them clearly through the tears in your eyes.

"This is the village of your grief." The guide says "everything you experience, everything you live, has a place here. After the confusion, the pain, the raw hurt of the forest, after being lost, you are here. Here are places you can go, with your grief, your anger, your tiredness. You are here with all the others who mourn with you, who grieve with you for your loss. Here you and they are free to go where you need to go, sometimes together, sometimes alone. You can go quickly from one place to the other, or stay for a long time in one place. You can be together with

others, or alone, just as you need it. There is no right or wrong, no correct or incorrect way to do your mourning. No one can tell you what you need to do; no one can walk your path. Here, in this village of your grief you can go where you need to go. You will be welcome wherever you will go. Stay as long as you want, as long as you need. Let us show you the different places of grief, of mourning, of healing, and of love.”

The Central Square

First, the guides lead you to the central square. Several old houses nestled around this place, cobblestones paved the ground. There is life, although you can not see the individuals here with you. All you can see for the moment is the center of the square. There is a fountain, a wellspring of fresh water, with three steps leading up to it. A narrow wall surrounds the pool of water and from several outlets on a central column that rises from its middle comes a constant flow of water. A small bush of red roses grows on one side. It is a peaceful place. But the most surprising of all is the central column. On the top, there is a statue. At first you did not recognise it. The light of the sun seems to be playing tricks with your eyes. But then you see: it is the beautiful image of your loved one, the one you lost.

With tears in your eyes, you turn to your guides, wondering, asking.

“Yes,” they said, “you see it right. It is your loved one, the one you mourn. This is your place, and here your loved one is at the center of it all. All your tears, the sorrow and the joy, flow from this fountain, and your tears water the roses of your love. Here is the center of your grieving, to here you can return as often as you like. From here you can go to all the other places. Here you can remember, here you can love. Do not be afraid, that the memory will fade. Others will meet you here, and you will share your memories with theirs. Your heart will see your loved one here, even if your eyes will be tired. Nobody can take this statue away, and you can keep it here, in the center, forever.”

The Town Hall

Next, your guides lead you to a building nearby. They look at you with love and sorrow in their eyes. “This is a place, where you will have to go, now and in the future. A place you will need to help organise your life without your lost love. We know no one wants to come here. It is perhaps the worst place of them all. The papers you will have to fill out, the decisions you will have to make: Shall you stay or shall you move? And where are all the papers, all the documents you need? All the decisions you have to make! You don’t know if you can do it, if you want to do it!

And worst of all: you don’t want to even think about the future. But still, there will be a future. A future for the next hours, days, and years. And that perhaps is the most difficult thing to accept.”

Then the guide lays his arm on your shoulder, leading you on and says: “Come, there is more to see, and no decisions to make now.”

The Pub

You then come to a place where you can hear laughter and joy coming from the door. A warm light shines from the windows, and you see people coming and going. You see friends shaking hands, smiling at each other. They laugh and joke. The happiness and the community are the absolute opposite of what you feel. There is nothing of the loneliness you experience. First you want to turn away, to be angry! What is this place of happiness, of joy? And why is it here, in your village of grief? How can they dare to be so full of life, so full of joy, when your loved one is no more? You want to turn to your guides, angry, full of rage. Why are they showing you this place?

But then you stop and watch. You see with desire in your heart this place, and everything in you longs to be part of it. To stop grieving, for just a moment, to forget your loss, for just a minute. To be part of life, once more. Suddenly you want to feel your body, your heart, your soul once more. You want to go in and celebrate. You do not care that I do not feel anything to celebrate. Just to be among those people, friends, in joy, as you have been together so often before.

Tears come in your eyes. You do not know what to feel anymore. Longing and loss fight in your heart. You feel a hand on your shoulder, comforting, and one of your guides speaks: "My friend, this place is also part of your village of grief. It is your longing for life as well as the reality that others might want to celebrate and be joyful. They will not have forgotten, they still might grieve, but life goes on, and days of joy will come. The circle of the year will bring the seasons of joy, and the ordinary day will bring the unexpected laughter.

The Smith-Shop

And then you move on. Already from far away you can hear where you are going. The sound of hammers, ringing high in the air, the beating of metal on hot metal welcomes you. "What shall I do in the smithy?" you shout in the ear of your guide. "I never worked with iron in my life!" "Yes," she answers, smiling, "Yes, I know. But still, this is your place of work. Where you really can beat it, hammer it out, sweat, be angry and rage! Here you can work all that you need to do, the hard work, the painful work. To this place you can come, when you feel that sitting around is not enough. When your body and your soul cry out for action you can come here and take the hammer, and swing it."

You see the hot fire, the tools, and all the work you want to do. You see what you need to do, for yourself and for others. Today you are too tired to start. You know that today the hammer would be too heavy. But you also know that tomorrow you could come back, take up the chore, and with tears and joy you could work.

The Church (Synagogue, Temple, Mosque, Sacred Place)

Then your guide leads you to a large, quiet building, a sacred place (*a church, temple, mosque, synagogue*). Quietness and serenity welcome you into the soft light of candles and the warm colors of stain glass windows. There seems to be music in the air, though you cannot tell where it comes from, nor what it is. You sit down on one of the benches, sat there for what seems to be forever. A deep feeling of peace fills your heart, more peace that you ever knew, a peace and quietness that brings tears to your eyes. Without any words you understand what your guides want to show you here. Here is a quiet place, a place to meditate. Here you can search for meaning in your life, and think. Here you can be free of all the chores that fill your life. Here you can even rest and sleep, and sleep the pain away. And here you can listen, listen to your heart and to the music of your soul. Here you can rest in the Divine.

The hospital

You can smell the next building, before you really see it. It is the antiseptic, sick smell of a hospital. Green walls in long hallways where every step has an echo and people only speaks in hushed voices. You know this smell, these sounds all too well. The memories of endless hours rise from my heart.

Your guide says: “This is not only a place for painful memories. It is also a place for you. Many things in you need healing. You are hurt, in body, mind, and soul. Take your time to feel your wounds, to acknowledge them, to let them heal. This will take time. And you will have to take good care of yourself. This is not something that happens by itself. In the time of grief sometimes your body does not speak clearly to you. You forget to eat, to drink. You have to be your caretaker, your nurse, and take good care.”

“And you will find others here as well, here in this place of pain and healing,” you’re your guide, “who are walking wounded, like yourself. There are times when you need to know your own pain, your own wounds, to understand how others are in pain. And sometimes neither the doctor, nor a nurse, no medicine and no hospital can help, but only those who grieve and suffer with you. They are the ones who have the patience to watch you get better.”

The Shop

Next you come to a small shop. It seems to be one of those little places that are horribly overcrowded, but where you can find everything. Where a nice old lady served you in your childhood and never let you go without a candy from a large jar on the counter. It is one of those places that hardly exists anymore.

“This is not an ordinary shop,” the guide tells you. “This is the shop where you can get the things you need to live now that your loved one is gone.”

“The life you knew, the life you loved has stopped, has come to an end. But your life itself has not stopped. Your life goes on. It is different, now. And therefore you will need different things; you will have to find new meaning, new ways to travel. And so it is all right to come here, to go out to shop, to find new things. Some of them you need, and some of them you might just want. You want them because they are good for you and you will enjoy them. All of it you can find here.”

The Cemetery

At last you come to a place where it is dark. A heavy iron gate guards the entrance. A high wall reaches to the horizon. Ivy grows among the bars of the gate. Under dark skies you can hear the calling of an owl, flying under the low branches of a weeping willow. You feel the cold. You can feel the thorns of the forest in your skin. You know this place. At the day of your loss it became your home, too. You stand at the gates of a cemetery. You know: here is my love and here I buried all my hopes, my dreams, my joy, my laughter.

Tears fill your eyes, you cannot speak, or hear. You sit down next to the grave, where you want to bury yourself. For a long time, you sit in silence, crying.

Then the guide says: “Yes, cry and grieve. Let no one tell you, that you have to leave this place. It is a dark place, yes, a place of mourning and of fear, of the unknown. You have to come here, even if it is hard. You have to come here and meet your fears and all that scares you, in death and life. Because only if you are here, and see what it is that scares and frightens you, can you deal with it. You can fight your fears and work through them. This cemetery can be a good and comforting place, a place of memories, but also a place for working through the fears. A place of healing.

People walking around blindfolded or with their hands in front of their eyes.

As you walk through the village, visiting all those different places, you may notice other people walking around. You may know some of these people and be glad that they are grieving with you. Some you will not know and you may wonder why they are grieving here. You may also see that some people are walking around blindfolded or with their hands in front of their eyes.

When you ask your guide about these people, she sighs and says: “They do not want to acknowledge their grief, they want to deny it or avoid it. Sometimes they wander in the wilderness, getting hurt in the forest. Some blind themselves and others wear blindfolds that were put on by others. And often they hurt others, falling over them or walking into sacred space. The saddest thing of all, though, is that they cannot see those who want to help them. So they are alone, without help. We can only hope that they will open their eyes one day, seeing what they grieve for and in that way find their own direction and the places they need.”

Ways leading out of the village....

Finally, you walk past the houses and all the places you have visited, and your guide shows you paths that lead out of the village—paths that run along small streams, through blooming meadows, over rolling hills and past friendly trees. She says: “We want you to know, that there are ways that lead from this place. They are not for you, yet. And perhaps it will take a long, long time before you will have the strength or the desire to walk them. Others might walk before you, some will walk with you and others still, will stay behind. You alone can decide when you will go, how far you’ll walk, how fast you’ll travel. Nobody can tell you when you have to go. Nobody will force you out of this place. For it this is your village of grief and healing.”

“And even if you go, walk one or two or many steps away from here, you can always return, visit the place you need. The doors to this place are always open, you are always welcome. But now let us return to the Central Square and the Fountain.”

When you are ready, I invite you leave the Village of Your Grief and Healing and to come back into this time and this place. Take your time. And when you are ready, open your eyes and sit for a few moments in silence.

Find two or three people—no more. If you wish, share something about this process that stood out for you.

How might this community (name it) function as a Village of Grief and Healing? What might we do to become guides for others in this Village?