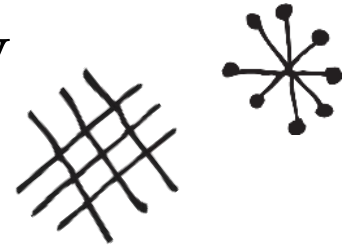


The World I No Longer Know

“It is unsurprising that one of the tasks involved in grief is adjusting to a world now changed by loss.”



by Kenneth J. Doka

A number of years ago, Marge, a 63 year old widow I was counseling, described her grief as “waking up in a world she no longer knew”. Her poignant statement reveals a significant truth about grief—major losses can change our life in momentous ways.

Everything now seems so different. Some of these differences may be as important as income or altered living arrangements. Others may be more subtle. Eating a meal or watching TV may no longer seem the same.

We may experience secondary losses as friendships change or we no longer participate in activities once shared. There may even be secondary gains in our journey through loss as we gain new insights, skills, or perhaps even new friends. It is unsurprising that one of the tasks involved in grief is adjusting to a world now changed by loss.

We can best begin by recognizing that these changes add stress to our lives. Taking good care of ourselves—getting enough nutritious food, adequate sleep, sufficient exercise, and doing whatever we can to manage stress—prepares us to cope with a different world. We may need to take stock. What has changed in our lives? Which of these changes is causing us the most difficulties? What can we do about them? These questions allow us to assess the situations, times, and events that are most difficult for us. Then we can decide how to adapt to these changes.

Marge, for example, found that Sunday

evenings were a difficult time for her. Both Marge and her husband worked. Many Saturdays, they did their own thing; she played golf and he participated in his leisure activities. Sundays were for church, family, and chores. Sunday night was their quiet time—a quiet time to sit, share supper, watch TV, and converse. It was Sundays, Marge realized, that were the most difficult. Here is where she most felt her husband’s absence. Recognizing that, Marge decided to make plans so she would remain active on Sunday nights.

We may even need to assess our own strengths and weaknesses. How have we adapted to change and loss in the past? What did we do well? What are some of the problematic ways we have coped in the past that we will now want to avoid? Who can we count on to help? As we review our support, we may want to avail ourselves of support groups, or perhaps even counselors. Both can assist us in this journey.

Catherine Sanders, a psychotherapist who was both a widow and bereaved parent, posed three questions to her clients. “What,” she would ask, “do you want to take from your old life into your new life? What do you want to leave behind? What do you need to add?”

Implicit in her question is the assumption that we are about to leave a world we no longer know. Also implicit is the promise that we can live in and build this different world—even with loss.

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