

Bereavement: Do We Really Have to Say “Goodbye”? On Re-connecting with our Lost Loved Ones

Many years ago, following a particularly painful bereavement, I consulted a psychotherapist. However instead of receiving the ‘sympathy’ I was hoping for, this person suggested to me that dead people can be a great resource to us, a comment which stopped me in my tracks at the time, and which has given me much food for thought since then. A year or two later I came across a remarkable article by Michael White entitled ‘Saying Hullo Again: The incorporation of the lost relationship in the resolution of grief.’ These two occurrences have been the main sources of inspiration for this short article.

The Mainstream Model of Grief

The mainstream model of grief suggests that we go through a predictable series of stages following the loss of a loved one (shock, anger, depression and so on), culminating in acceptance that the deceased person is no longer a part of our lives, or in other words we arrive at a fully experienced “goodbye”. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has been very influential with regard to this current thinking, which in turn informs how therapeutic efforts at grief resolution are directed. Freud also felt it important that those left behind develop a new reality; however he added that ‘full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and wellbeing as forfeiting memories.’ The ‘Saying Hullo Again’ metaphor does not, of course, seek to deny that a very real and tangible loss occurs on bereavement, rather – as I understand it – that one’s new life does not have to be completely disconnected from the deceased person. We will see shortly how by posing oneself certain types of question we can, in a sense, get back in touch with lost relatives and friends.

“Saying Hullo Again”

Michael White noticed that several of his clients diagnosed elsewhere as experiencing delayed grief or ‘pathological mourning’, had not responded to either intensive talking therapies or chemical approaches. In addition to their grief surrounding the loved one, they seemed typically to have lost all sense of themselves as persons, a feature compounded by a sense of failure at their inability to move on in their lives and relinquish the old attachment. In his role as psychotherapist he therefore felt it inappropriate to further emphasize forfeiture of the relationship, and decided on the very different approach of encouraging his clients to reclaim the connection with the lost loved one, in the hope of

empowering them and enriching their lives. Many people subsequently experienced a long desired release from their feelings of emptiness and despair.

So how can we go about re-incorporating the lost relationship into our current lives, or in other words say 'Hullo' again? Michael White formulated a range of questions which he posed to clients within the therapeutic context, and was surprised how effective these were in helping people to reposition themselves in relation to their lost loved ones and finally resolve their grief. What I will suggest later in this essay is that we don't necessarily need to be within a professional therapeutic relationship to find such relief. I believe that we can tailor-make our own questions, and pose them to ourselves, depending on our particular needs at a given time, and our unique relationship with the deceased person (or persons) in question. I also feel that we do not necessarily need to be in the throes of grief for this approach to be useful. For example when we reach one of those inevitable 'stuck' moments in our lives, unrelated to our loss, we can perhaps invite in the perspective of the departed to help us move on. We may call upon our memories of a particular person and then use them as a role model. Or we might simply seek validation from time to time, from someone who has known us intimately in the past, that we are doing the right things, or being who we want to be. (I will return to these ideas shortly)

Case Study 1

Let us first take a look at some of the kinds of questions Michael White actually posed to clients in therapy, and the results these produced. Mary was a client who had unexpectedly lost her husband, Ron, to a heart attack when she was only 37 years old. Six years later, her despair and numbness had survived a number of attempts by therapists to get her to 'accept' her loss and move on in her life. It was at this time that she consulted Michael White who - on recognising that the traditional approach to grief resolution (based on the 'Saying Goodbye' metaphor) clearly had not worked - decided instead to assist Mary in reclaiming the lost relationship, and in a sense reincorporate her departed husband into her current life. Here are three such questions extracted from his article:

"If you were seeing yourself through Ron's eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate?"

"What difference would it make to you if you kept this realisation about yourself alive on a day-to-day basis?"

"What difference would feeling this way make to the steps that you could take to get back into your life?"

Whilst these questions evoked much emotion in Mary at the time, they enabled her to emerge from her numbness and make some important rediscoveries about herself and her life. This is summed up by her statement one year later: 'It's strange, but when I discovered that Ron didn't have to die for me, that I didn't

have to separate from him, I became less preoccupied with him and life was richer’.

Case Study 2

A further client, John (aged 39), had suffered for many years from low self-esteem following his mother’s death when he was a young child. He was helped by White to retrieve the mother who had ‘gone missing’ from his life, and subsequently became more self-accepting. Questions that helped him to re-voke a sense of her presence included:

“What did your mother see when she looked at you through her loving eyes?”

“What can you now see in yourself that had been lost to you for many years?”

“What difference would it make to your relationships with others if you carried this knowledge with you in your daily life?”

In both the above studies, the client was invited to see themselves in the light of the deceased person’s positive experience of them. Rather than being asked for factual memories, questions were designed to re-voke a complete experience of the departed, and all the emotions involved. It was important to pose questions that produced a positive sense of the self which could then be incorporated in the here-and-now. By re-living the relationship to some extent, it seemed that clients were able to retrieve lost or neglected aspects of themselves, which in turn aided their sense of continuity and meaning in life. Furthermore the resurrected memories and perceptions could then be used to help the person see the way forwards in their day-to-day lives.

Can the Model be Extended?

I suggested earlier that we may be able to use the ‘Saying Hullo Again’ metaphor outside of therapy by posing ourselves certain types of questions along these lines. Can we indeed enrich our own lives and become more self-accepting by accessing key memories associated with lost loved ones, and then circulating them in our consciousness? Hopefully the questions I have selected to quote above illustrate how simple this can be to put into practice with a little adaptation, and it is likely that the individual is well placed to select and highlight those aspects of the relationship with the deceased most pertinent to them at a given time. (I am not suggesting this in place of talking therapy, but rather as a further application of the model).

Typical questions used by Michael White, whilst adapted to the individual, followed a rough sequence which I shall attempt to elucidate below. These have been somewhat modified for this purpose, and of course the individual can expand and adapt them as they wish.

“If you were seeing yourself through the eyes of ‘x’, what would you notice about yourself that you could appreciate right now?”

“What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that ‘x’ knew about you? How does this feel?”

This type of question brings back into consciousness positive aspects of the self that had been forgotten, and helps us to re-connect in a meaningful way to our past life before our loss.

“What difference would it make to you in your relationships with others, and in your life generally, if you carry this realisation with you on a day to day basis?”

The aim of this question is to see how we can then utilise this new perspective of ourselves in our current life situation.

“What could you do to introduce others to this new picture of yourself as a person that you have developed?”

This question then invites us to think about how we can make the people around us aware of our new sense of self.

“How would bringing others into this new picture of your person enable you to nurture/appreciate yourself more?”

Asking ourselves this question enables us to begin to picture how we will feel when other people’s perceptions of us change, and how we can use the consequent feedback to further enhance our sense of self.

“In what way would such an experience of nurturing yourself affect your relationship with yourself/your sense of self-appreciation?”

This question helps us to consider how actively caring for ourselves better will impact on our own self-acceptance.

“What difference will knowing what you now know about yourself make to your next step in life?”

Finally, this last question will help us to determine the way ahead in terms of the new possibilities and choices we can make in light of our self rediscovery.

Reasons, other than grief resolution, why we may wish to reconnect with lost loved ones

I noted earlier that we can perhaps utilise our memories of the departed, and the relationship we had with them, to help us to move out of those occasional stuck moments we all experience in our lives, or simply for validation that we are doing

OK as we are. In retrieving positive aspects of our lived experience with the deceased person, we can gain an alternative and enriching perspective on ourselves, and a renewed sense of continuity, meaning and at oneness with our history. With a firmer sense of who we are, we are then likely to make better life decisions. With the memory of a trusted and kindly person in our minds, we might ask ourselves questions such as “What is it about my development as a person that s/he would most appreciate?” and “Noticing this, would s/he encourage me to be someone else, or would s/he take me for who I am?” And if we have a difficult life decision to make we might ask ourselves something like “What can I do to side with this loving and accepting person’s attitude towards me?” We may then get a better sense of important issues such as whether we are really treating ourselves as well as we might, which path or paths in life we might take next, and whether our goals are in line with our true values. We might also bring to mind the strengths and attributes of a loved person who is now departed, and strive to emulate those qualities ourselves; if we can perhaps embody some of these positive memories, are we not then in some real sense keeping the person alive?

Conclusion

It seems to me that we often don’t think to call upon inspiration from deceased friends or relatives. We don’t think of them as participating in our lives any more just because they are dead. We sometimes fail to remember that their value is still potentially there to be called on, and can be a huge resource, whether in times of difficulty or simply at choice moments during our lives, much as my psychotherapist suggested to me all those years ago. We may simply call upon our memories and, in so doing, gain a different loving perspective on ourselves, and rediscover our uniqueness through the eyes of the person we have known intimately, and who has known us intimately. Arguably relationships themselves need never die.

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