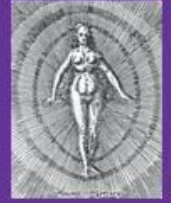


CHARLYNE GELT, PH.D.

Encouraging Self-Discovery and Empowerment

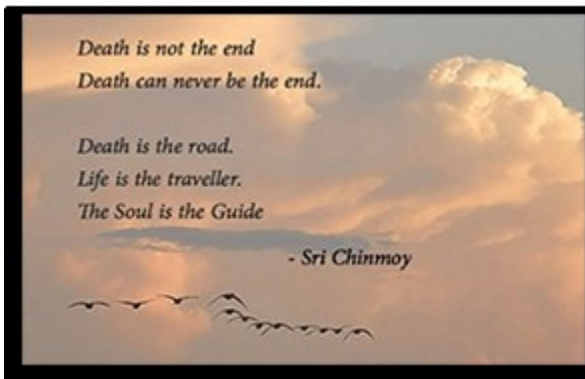


Grief, Loss, Rebirth and Renewal by Charlyne Gelt, Ph.D.

Tears water our growth.
William Shakespeare

Only months after the passing of her beloved husband, Erica discovered that her own health was failing. Shock waves gave way to thoughts of her young children's future— a future she might not be a part of — she became increasingly depressed, even embittered by her current and future loss: *Is grief the price we must pay for love?*

Nearly pushed to the end of her rope, Erica made an important decision: She would use whatever time she had left to focus on the daunting task of building a positive legacy and good memories for her children, even though she might not be around to witness the joy of their lives. She would focus on shifting life-long pattern of limiting herself and try to live more fully in the moment. It would be the best possible gift she could give her kids.



Most of us, like Erica, have been deeply affected by the death of someone important to us. Even though we know that death is part of the life process, coping with it is still daunting. How many of us actually feel ready to say goodbye to those we love when the time comes? Some grievors find comfort in the belief that there is life after death — so we'll meet again. Others try to escape their pain and sadness by retreating from life, or they'll do the opposite and desperately seek connection by throwing themselves into a new relationship too soon. Still others may seek solace by medicating the pain. These coping actions usually don't work because they don't allow the time for the griever to discover some

important lessons: *Love never dies*. Even the deepest losses can reveal moments of meaning and beauty and can reveal the seeds of an emerging new life. As Leo Buscaglia states, "Death is a challenge. It tells us not to waste time . . . It tells us to tell each other right now that we love each other."

Death and dying is often handled differently in other cultures. In the Hispanic tradition, there is a saying that if death sits down beside you, you are blessed because it is only from this experience that we can learn to appreciate the preciousness of life. *Dia Del Los Muertos* (Day of the Dead), dates back to the Aztecs who had a month-long celebration of death to honor *Mictecacihuatl*, the goddess of the underworld. Today, Hispanic families hold vigils, and bring offerings to the deceased. The spirits are thought to bless those who honor the dead. Ancient fertility cults held fertility rites in the spring that resulted not only in the flourishing of crops but in the flourishing of new life.

Learning about how other cultures honor life and death can be inspirational, and the more you learn raises the possibility that you'll get some new insights that could even change your perspective on the meaning of your life. How do *you* honor life and death?

Learning from the Movies

Folklore, stories, poetry, songs, and films often deal with themes of life and death. Films can act as a mirror and can offer helpful lessons on how to confront uncomfortable issues like grief and loss. This is lovingly handled in the film version of the best-selling book, *TUESDAYS WITH MORRIE*. It's the tender memoir to a man whose lessons on life teach us about ourselves. In the movie, the Academy Award-winning actor, Jack Lemmon, delivers an outstanding performance as Morrie Schwartz, the Brandeis University professor battling Lou Gehrig's disease. A former student of Morrie's, Mitch (played by actor Hank Azaria), who is now an accomplished journalist, is so driven by his job that he has little time or energy left for anything else. Mitch happens to catch Morrie's appearance on a national news program and learns of his illness for the first time. After the telecast, Mitch contacts Morrie, and what starts out as a visit turns into a pilgrimage as Mitch opens his heart to the lessons Morrie has to teach him. As the bond grows between these two men, Mitch learns that professional commitments don't mean anything without the love of family and friends.

The spiritual aspects of death and loss are exemplified in another film, *CITY OF ANGELS*, starring Nicolas Cage (as Seth) and Meg Ryan (as Maggie). Ryan's character is a pragmatic heart surgeon who believes in hard work: she doesn't believe in angels —that is, until she meets one, Seth. He falls in love with Maggie and he must choose between remaining a spiritual being and living forever or forsake his immortality on the chance that Maggie might love him in return.

In yet another film, *THE FIVE PEOPLE YOU MEET IN HEAVEN*, uses flashbacks to describe how we may unknowingly impact others while here on earth. In this Hallmark Hall of Fame production, Eddie (Jon Voight), an amusement park maintenance man and war veteran, ends up in Heaven after an accident takes his life. There he meets five people from his past and each one shows him how he impacted their lives — or they his — and not always for the better. The point of this film, though simplistic, is that everyone is connected.

Grief and Loss into Wisdom and Healing

When we are faced with the death of a loved one, as in Erica's case, or we are faced with our *own* impending death, the hardest feeling to overcome is our *anger* over the idea that we may never have allowed ourselves to live fully (death of "the self"), or, as in the case of a loved-one dying, that we may have inadvertently missed something about their illness, and early symptom perhaps, that allowed them to die. As Erica and others have learned, it's important to become proactive in banishing the ghosts that can haunt you. One you are blessed with the insight that you've been holding yourself back from living fully — most likely as the result of being put down or minimized by a negative parental environment — now is the time to challenge yourself to push beyond that limitation. If your "inner fire" was somehow smothered, and if your inner dialogues are all about not being "perfect enough," then start to come up with a new inner dialogue "language" that supports your emerging sense of *Self*. The sentence, "*I am*," is derived from developing your own value system rather than being burdened with the leftover values of other people. That's just "stale bread", — and it hasn't been properly nourishing you for years!

Beyond Stale Bread

Here's a suggestion to get you started on developing a new more positive stance when the time seems right to do so. Instead of thinking along the lines of, *Is grief the price we must pay for love?*, think more along the lines of what gifts can come from coping with grief and loss in a more proactive way, which is a positive legacy to leave behind. For example, did you learn how to take an action that stretched your previous self-limitations? Did you act courageously in some situation? Think of a time you took the risk of being real and ended up doing your personal best. In other words, have you been living more fully at last?" Despite loss and grief, you really can awaken that sense of inner life energy again!

Many blessings as we enter each new season of the year! May it be a time of your own renewal!

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