Dorothea Stockmar



From Grief to Relief

Experiences, Information and Insight addressing the Needs of the Bereaved and of those caring for the Bereaved



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Preface

Dorothea Stockmar's book of symbols reflecting grief is the fruit of her being both artist and bereaved mother. It is full of helpful insights. When grief is unspeakable in words, common symbols and metaphors can help to express personal anguish and, sometimes, give glimpses of future hope. Dorothea's chosen symbols voice her own experience and are deeply meaningful. They will also prompt each reader to reflect on their own unique collection of symbolic images of loss and hope.

For me, in coming to terms with the sudden death of our twenty-year-old son from Sudden Adult Death Syndrome, it was the gossamer threads spun by spiders that held most meaning. For gossamer, fragile and nearly invisible, is in fact exceptionally strong and contains healing properties. Roma Gypsies traditionally heal cuts by gathering dew-laden gossamer and placing it on wounds to bind them. In facing the rupture caused by Joshua's overwhelming absence, the thin invisible threads spun by friends bringing food, hugs and kindly words, and the threads of later strong friendship with a host of other bereaved parents, created a web of healing. Gossamer also refracts light to an astonishing degree – and light is what we bereaved parents most desperately need in the darkness of mourning.

Dorothea Stockmar's book can itself be a compass and companion on the long and arduous journey of grief.

Dr. Margaret Brearley,
Chair of Trustees of *The Compassionate Friends*(Support and friendship for bereaved parents and their families by those similarly bereaved)
www.tcf.org.uk

Symbols of grief



A person grieving can wake up feeling displaced and unconnected to this world. In such a state of mind, help can be found in symbols matching temporary grief-stricken and displaced thinking.

After being horrifically shaken by destiny, we feel grief from the depth of our hearts. Sometimes, we have the impression that we are standing beside ourselves. Especially after the loss of a close person, we often feel as if we have lost a part of ourselves. We attempt to describe this state of loss by using words such as disrupted, deeply shaken, heart-wrenching and amputated.

We may even long for a symbol that might help to capture a feeling for which we have not yet found the words to describe.

Pair of dice

A pair of dice could bring to mind the unavoidable impression of grief. The die is cast. A beloved person has passed away and will never ever come home again. The inability to act as usual is filled with great frustration. The pain we suffer could be described as being beyond everything.

Sunglasses

In bereavement, we may regard the external world as shrill and dazzling and put on sunglasses for shade, even when the weather is cloudy. Everything is filtered through darkened glasses of mourning. A person constantly hiding behind such glasses can easily give the impression of being stand-offish, cold or distant. Outsiders might feel insecure when talking to them. Some might even resist eye contact in order to avoid a mutual feeling of further discomfort.

Tuning fork

A tuning fork might be considered as a measuring device of sudden mood swings. Nothing, even nothing, sounds right any longer, like a musical instrument that has lost tune. The so-called life melody appears distorted, comparable to a piece of music having changed unexpectedly from major to minor.

Thread having been cut-off

Some people who are mourning compare their separation from a beloved person with a thread having been cut-off. The pain of loss will be felt at various levels; physically as a headache, an ache in the shoulder or neck, mentally as a dazed feeling, a sleep disorder, right down to depression.

On a social level the feeling of loss is felt as a cut-off relationship or partnership. We can feel displaced. Nothing seems to be in the right place any more. It is a long journey for a widow to feel like a single person, as well as for families to accept and understand their new role as bereaved parents, brotherless, sisterless or orphaned children.

Compass

Mourning seems to be disconnecting and disorientating. A compass needle going haywire might resemble the state of physical disorientation in one bereaved person's life. The derangement and disorder might be felt in any single moment. Mourning is an unexplored journey which cannot be navigated using simple directions as shown on a road map.

Dead Telephone Line

A bereaved person can be difficult to reach. Not only will a mourning person often not answer their phone, some even silence their doorbell. It seems as if they are living in a kind of *dead zone* – not just unreachable for friends and relatives, but hardly able to reclaim their own sanity.

GOOD BYE LYRICS

At the beginning, it is important to realise the loss and try to find an understanding of the overwhelming feeling of mourning. Short poems, comprehensive and clear in their complexity, might catch hold of the sensations of mourning.

over

you brushed the winds gently
saw it passing you by
life
now it's finished
over and done
with the last flap of your wings
silence came



a touch of hope

beyond everything try to find the missing in what remains



SYMBOLS OF RELIEF



Anyone who has suffered a loss is searching and becomes, more or less consciously, a seeker of that which was lost. In order to cope with this inevitable situation, we might feel comfort in picking up ordinary things like handkerchiefs, emergency numbers, warm blankets, pillows or even worn out objects like an old shoe.

Old shoe

As with a solitary old shoe, we can easily be seen to be reclusive when grieving. What positive progress could a shoe like this represent for us? Before finally letting go, we might use it as a visible reminder for every aspect of life in which we feel we have died too.

Our refusal to accept advice from others such as, "You should...", "You must...", "It is time to...", "Don't forget...", is wholly justified. It is important that we aren't coerced into following any path of mourning, except our own. So, we should not be afraid to cause insult by saying, "No".

Sunglasses

The sunglasses which were once useful while seeking shelter from shrill and dazzling situations can now be taken off in a sheltered place of shade where we are willing to look at the bright moments of life. For example, on a Sunday morning during an outing in a park filled with memories, when our feelings of great loss dissipate for the first time.

Tuning Fork

We can use the tuning fork as a measuring instrument for promoting the sound of a good musical ensemble, which could previously have revealed a discord within our lives. From a different angle, we might now use this to attune ourselves to our new situation. Like a musician, mourners may care for fine tuning, trying to match the sound of grief with the sound of trust.

MOURNING TRANSFORMED The Wheel of Mourning



The omnipresence of grief might be exhibited via a wheel of mourning. A wheel consisting of 24 spokes, each of which identifies a different sensation of mourning. The first six spokes refer to feelings in the beginning of our grieving such as: heartbroken, speechless, and exhausted. Subsequently, the following nine spokes represent complex inner mental states like enragement, jealousy, guilt but also settled feelings like comfort. The final nine spokes portray moments of soothing which can be described as approachable, open hearted, encouraged.

We seldom experience all of these emotions from a comfortable armchair, but rather from a kind of roller coaster of rapidly moving motions and emotions; motions of a wheel which might turn backward as well as forward. And from time to time, we may even get the impression that our wheel has fallen out of sync.

Nobody can predict when and into which direction the next spin may go. The wheel can rotate slowly, quickly or adjust its speed, and our own feelings of mourning will most probably be equally as changeable and unpredictable. The only certainty is the uncertainty of a repetitively moving carousel of emotions.

In the Garden



Many milestones between grief and relief might be discovered while comparing our mourning with an extended garden. A garden where sensations of grieving might be rearranged like cluttered flowers in a flowerbed. Between annual flower bedding, waste bins, hanging baskets and pot plants of all kinds, we can let our emotions grow slowly and continuously. Sensations such as bitterness, guilt or unspoken words seem to wait to be dug up, whereas other feelings will need shelter under a hedge or between thistles and nettles.

Mourning and Painting

While painting, grief deepens; bringing vital moments into one's mourning life. Mourning begins to flow, revealing that all is in a state of flux. Occasionally, a big wave of unexpected sensation can appear behind delicate lines, allowing one's emotions to play freely. An object making a recognisable depiction of our grief might be the house of mourning. Whilst painting this, we may unreservedly choose the shades of mourning with which we would like to adorn our homes.

Symbols of grief will develop into symbols of relief, opening space for memories, which will no longer linger in the narrow corners of our minds. With our new creations, we light-heartedly learn to replace mourning by colour, shape or image. Using these elements, we might discover our one and only creative style which can echo the way we try to live through mourning. Playing with shapes and colours of pure emotions, we will probably find essential methods to overcome periods of mourning.

Painting can become a means of unearthing more and more of one's feelings. As we enjoy the creative use of materials, we find easier ways to cope with unexpected sensations. This does not require a talented artist's hand. Astonishingly, an open mind is all that is needed to discover unspoken moments of wisdom and joy.

Images might come and go, revealing the power within our love of life, which had been covered under a guise of grief. On exiting the darkness, our emotions may still run wild, whereas many others seem to unlock impressions full of love and light, even in the faintest flickers of hope.

This progress might invite us to handle everyday life more carefully and with awareness. While constantly paying attention to creative processes, we learn to handle grief in such a way to benefit our own welfare. Through writing, painting and exchanging ideas



with others, we discover new expressions. Using creative means, we can explore new rooms: dark rooms, bright rooms, and spacious rooms like in a fairy tale. They have to be kept closed for some time, because they might be too wearisome or too insufferable to enter.

At the beginning, we often hesitate. However, after some brushstrokes, we are able to develop an endlessly flowing stream of enthusiasm and delight for paint and painting, which can be difficult to stop.

While creating our house of mourning, we become the masters of our own course of grieving. We may decide what the building will look like and how it might reflect our feelings.

Epilogue by Philip Wharton

What touched home in the chapter, *The Wheel of Mourning*, part of the book entitled, *From Grief to Relief* by Dorothea Stockmar, were the many familiar landmarks and stepping stones to where I am now. In the section *Touch of hope* I felt positively enlightened to explore each line for myself. And up until that moment, I truly hadn't been aware of how far I had come.

Here is what I thought my touch of hope.

If hope had a shape, it would be my latest work.

If hope had a colour, it would be white. The colour of an artwork by myself, entitled "Night Owl".

If hope could be touched, it would be the raw material of my art permitting myself to be happy as it was wished for me.

If hope had a smell, it would be that of freshly cut grass and fresh air.

If hope had a sound, it would be the sound of rustling leaves on a hot summer's evening.

If hope could move, it would be laid back and have loads of time.

If hope could have a temperature, it would be a relaxing warm soak in the bath.

Hope is the light around darkness waiting. If there is a *Rosetta Stone* as such to all this, it was my artwork, as it knew where I was when I didn't.

www.boxroom17.net (kunstleralexwerner.net)