

# Companioning the Bereaved: An Introduction

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by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

*Editor's note: The following article is excerpted from Dr. Wolfelt's book *Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers*, which presents a model for grief counseling based on his "companioning" principles. Companioning is not about assessing, analyzing, fixing or resolving another's grief. Instead, it is about being totally present to the mourner, even being a temporary guardian of his soul. To order this book or for more information, visit [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com).*

At the very heart of grief lies an irreducible mystery. I have come to discover that grief is a dimension of life experience that cannot be approached through rational thought. Instead, it responds more appropriately to humbled souls. In this spirit, I invite you to open your heart to what follows.

My tenets of "companioning" the bereaved were written several years ago as I sat in a gazebo on the sacred grounds of the Center for Loss and Life Transition. Since that time of grace in my life, which encouraged me to try to express in words what I do when I "companion" people in grief, I've been honored that many people have encouraged me to teach more about these tenets. I've written the following words with a humbled heart and a desire to help people help others during time of grief and loss.

I am very honored that there is now an international network of thousands of people who have trained with me surrounding the companioning philosophy of caregiving to people in grief. Yet, there seems to be a place for this book in that many of my colleagues have either had to imagine, question, project, and, honestly, at times even judge what I do. In part this book is a "coming out of the closet" as a "responsible rebel."

A responsible rebel is one who questions assumptive models surrounding grief and loss and challenges those very models. Rebels are not afraid to question established structures and forms. At the same time, rebels respect the rights of others to use different models of understanding, and provide leadership in ways that empower people rather than diminish them.

## Why A "Soulful" Guide?

When people have come to me for support in grief, the soul is present. When they try as best they can to wrap words around their grief, trusting me with their vulnerability, I know we are meeting at a soul level. To look into the eyes of someone mourning the death of someone precious is to look into the window of the soul.

Their willingness to allow me to walk with and learn from them has been an education of the heart and soul. "Soul" is discovered in the quality of what I'm experiencing when I'm honored to be present to them. If my intent is anchored in truth and integrity, if they are discovering a reason to go on living (redefining their worldview and searching for meaning), then they are rich in soul, and so am I. Therefore, for me, companioning another human being in grief means giving attention to those experiences that give my life, and the lives of those I attempt to help, a richness and depth of meaning.

Soul really has to do with a sense of the heart being touched by feelings. An open heart that is grieving is a "well of reception;" it is moved entirely by what it has perceived. Soul also has to do with the overall journey of life as a story, as a representation of deep inner meaning. Soul is not a thing, but a dimension of experiencing life and living. I see soul as the primary essence of our true nature, our spirit self, or our life force.

Being soulful as it relates to companioning people in grief is, in part, to acknowledge a need for people to have "safe places" to authentically mourn. Then, in order to respond to that need, it is to go within yourself and nurture and develop your soul in ways that give expression to your compassion. My hope is that this book helps you do just that!

## **Grief is Not an Illness: Inappropriate Assumptions Surrounding Our Modern Understanding of Grief and Loss**

As a teenager who had come to experience my own life losses, I set out to discover the principles that help bereaved people heal in grief. I hoped to communicate those principles to anyone interested in honoring my story. To my dismay, I discovered that the majority of caregiving models for grief counselors were intertwined with the medical model of mental health care.

For many caregivers, grief in contemporary society has been medicalized and perceived as if were an illness that with proper assessment, diagnosis, and treatment can be cured. This paradigm dictates that we as caregivers, having studied and absorbed a body of knowledge and become experts, are responsible for "curing" our patients. How arrogant!

The language we use to describe the practice of grief support exposes our attitudes and beliefs about counseling as well as determines our practices. Because numerous historical roots of psychotherapy are deeply grounded in a medical model, because the medical model appears more scientific than other alternatives, and because the economics of practice are interfaced in a healthcare delivery system, the natural tendency has been to adopt medical model language.

As I explored the words used in counseling the bereaved, I was taken aback: symptoms of pathology; disorders; diagnosis; and treatments. In my own search to learn so I could teach, I found that these more clinical, medical model approaches have limitations that are profound and far-reaching.

I discovered that our modern understanding of grief all too often projects that for "successful" mourning to take place, the person must "disengage from the deceased" and, by all means "let go." We even have all sorts of books full of techniques on how to help others "let go" or reach "closure."

At bottom, I discovered that our current models desperately needed what we could refer to as a "supplement of the soul." It seemed glaringly obvious to me that as fellow travelers in the journey into grief, we needed more life-giving, hope-filled models that incorporated not only the mind and body, but the soul and the spirit! I found myself resonating more with the writings of people like Ram Das, Stephen Levine, Victor Frankl, James Hillman, Thomas Moore and Carl Jung.

Actually it was Carl Jung's writing that helped me understand that every psychological struggle is ultimately a matter of spirituality. In the end, as we as human beings mourn, we must

discover meaning to go on living our tomorrows without the physical presence of someone we have loved. Death and grief are spiritual journeys of the heart and soul.

Yet, our modern Western culture's understanding of grief often urges mourners to deny any form of continued relationship with the person who died. For many mental health caregivers, the hallmark of so-called "pathology" has been rooted in terms of sustaining a relationship to the dead. In reality, the mourner actively shifts the relationship from one of presence to one of memory. Or, as the playwright Robert Anderson wisely noted, "Death ends a life; it does not end a relationship." In contrast, many other cultures throughout history have encouraged ongoing, interdependent relationships in some form after death. Beyond this recognition of a continued relationship of memory, most cultures provide bereaved people with rituals to encourage an appropriate relationship of memory, such as Mexico's "Day of the Dead."

Our modern understanding of grief all too often conveys that the end result of bereavement is a series of completed tasks, extinguished pain, and the establishment of new relationships. I discovered that many mental health caregivers, in attempting to make a science of grief, had compartmentalized complex emotions with neat clinical labels.

Our modern understanding of grief all too often uses a "recovery" or "resolution" definition to suggest a return to "normalcy." Recovery, as understood by some mourners and caregivers alike, is erroneously seen as an absolute, a perfect state of reestablishment. We seem to want to go around any so-called "negative" moods and emotions quickly and efficiently. Yet, it occurred to me that if our role as caregivers is to first observe the soul as it is, then we need to abolish what I call the "resolution wish."

Our modern understanding of grief for some is based on the model of crisis theory that purports that a person's life is in a state of homeostatic balance, then something comes along (like the death of someone loved) and knocks the person out of balance. Caregivers are taught intervention goals to reestablish the prior state of homeostasis and a return to "normal" functioning. There is only one major problem with this theory: it doesn't work. Why? Because a person's life is changed forever by the death of someone loved. We are transformed by grief and do not return to prior states of "normal" based on interventions by outside forces.

Our modern understanding of grief all too often "pathologizes" normal experiences. Traditional psychology has focused the majority of attention on the diagnosis and treatment of pathologies and in the quest for "fixes," little attention has been paid to the nature of emotional or spiritual health. As one author observed, "The exclusive focus on pathology that has dominated so much of our discipline results in a model of the human being lacking the positive features that make life worth living."

Our modern understanding of grief all too often privatizes grief as an isolated, individual experience. Mourning, by nature of its definition-"a shared social response to loss"-must be viewed in the broader context of social and family perspectives. In fact, the person often perceived as "not doing well" in grief is usually the one who is trying to get help for the family system.

In sum, I discovered in my twelve years of university-based training and in reading the available literature on grief counseling that our modern understanding of grief all too often lacks any appreciation for and attention to the spiritual, soul-based nature of the grief journey. As authors such as Frankl, Fromm, and Jung noted years ago (and Hillman and Moore more

recently), academic psychology has been too interfaced with the natural sciences and laboratory methods of working, counting and objective reporting.

Some of us, often through no fault of our own, but perhaps by the contamination of our formal training, have overlooked the journey into grief as a soul-based journey. We need to think and reflect about grief care differently than we now do. Because while its mission in our society is certainly important, our current misunderstanding of what its essence misinforms our capacity to reflect on it wisely.

This book seeks to undermine those practices that oppress grieving persons and families and provide interested people with food for reflective thought surrounding the importance of questioning the traditional medical model of mental health care. More important, the content presents an alternative model based on "companioning" versus "treating" one's fellow human beings in grief.

Critical self-observation would suggest that perhaps we rely too much on psychosocial, biological and psychodynamic constructs that we have been taught to "treat away," such as depression, anxiety, and loss of control. In our attempt to gain scientific credibility, we may have become our own worst enemies! In our attempt to be respected as part of established mental health care, we may be disrespecting the very people who need our compassionate care.

Without doubt, the grief journey requires contemplation and turning inward. In other words, it requires depression, anxiety and loss of control. It requires going to the wilderness. Quietness and emptiness invite the heart to observe signs of sacredness, to regain purpose, to rediscover love, to renew life! Searching for meaning, reasons to get one's feet out of bed, and understanding the pain of loss are not the domain of the medical model of bereavement care. Experience has taught me that it is the mysterious, spiritual dimension of grief that allows us to go on living until we, too, die.

### **An Invitation to "Read Between the Lines"**

I once heard someone say, "The truth comes in the silence between the words. It is grasped and experienced with the heart." My hope is that you, as the reader of this book, will attempt to do just that—to listen with your heart to the silence between the words. Listen to your heart and reflect on what the tenets of companioning the bereaved bring up for you. Use this opportunity to explore your own personal relationship with grief and loss.

When I was a teenager I had a dream of having a healing center where bereavement caregivers could come together and explore how we could be empowered to be agents of wholeness in the lives of the bereaved. I have taken that dream, clung to it, nurtured it and never let it go. That dream, shaped by losses in my youth, ultimately transformed my life and brought me tremendous meaning and joy in my life.

I truly believe we are all here to, in part, contribute love and care to those our lives touch—each of us in his own way. Supporting my fellow human beings in grief nourishes my soul. If you are attempting to support people in grief from a place of open-heartedness and love, you are indeed nourishing your own soul and the souls of those you touch.

A very wise person once said, "I just try to tell my own truth and sing my own song coherently, hoping that good things will come out of it. I hope others will join in singing their own song, too."

This book is one attempt to sing my song. Thanks for listening and I wish you well in singing yours.

## Related Resources

- [Healing Your Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas](#) (book)

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