

be seeing it on their son's wrist for years to come. All of these things can become part of a legacy that continues to serve and give pleasure to others long after your loved one is gone.

### Living On Online

One challenge that has arisen only in recent years is what to do about your loved ones' online legacies. Large parts of our lives are now spent online, and our deaths will make their way online one way or another, too. Figuring out how to handle social media after a death is a process that is still evolving.

Denise found out the hard way that this can be fraught with problems. She said, "My brother had a social media account that was very active. I knew that I would have to decide whether to keep it going or to turn it into a memorial page that clearly acknowledged his death. Turning it into a memorial page felt like one more finality."

Social media is grappling with what happens to our pages after we die and how these digital remembrances and tombstones will be viewed. A friend told me that after her mother died, she uploaded all the family portraits to her social media. She wanted it to be not be only a legacy but a history for her grandkids. Before she memorialized the social media page, she added all her photos, so it became a living, breathing photo album dedicated to her mother's life.

Think of this work as another way of building someone's legacy. Along with everything else you are doing—writing an obituary and/or eulogy, sorting through his possessions, revisiting the places he loved, talking to friends and family about him, sharing memories—you are shaping the way he will be remembered. You are also beginning the process of reconstructing your own life. Nothing will return you to the way you were before you lost your loved one. But everything you do to help his legacy to flourish and grow will help you grow, too. As I said earlier, your grief won't get smaller. But you will get bigger.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

# Grieving to Believing: The Afterlife

It is very beautiful over there.

—Thomas Edison's last words

Oh wow, oh wow, oh wow.

—Steve Jobs's last words

I often get called in by the authorities to help people in the most horrific situations. This particular call was about counseling the parents of a two-month-old baby, Ethan, who had been mauled to death by the family dogs. As I was on my way to their home, I wondered what I could possibly do to help them grieve the death of their child. When I got there, I sat on the floor with Jane, a woman in her midtwenties, who had just spent her first Mother's Day childless. She talked about how hard it was to comprehend it all. "I can't make sense of it," she said. "They were our family dogs. They've been around our son from the day he was born."

"I don't think anyone will ever be able to make sense of this," I said. "In this pain, have you found anything that has brought you a moment of peace or comfort since Ethan died?"

She gave me an animated, "Yes. Ethan is here with me, watching over me. I feel him all the time."

There was a time when that feeling of connection with Ethan would have been dismissed or viewed as some kind of

unhealthy denial of reality. But now there is a body of work that views it in a positive way, acting like a life raft that can support us in a turbulent sea of pain.

These ideas about connection and continuity have been influenced by Dennis Klass, PhD, a professor at Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri, whose interest in death, dying, and bereavement work began in 1968 when he was a graduate assistant in Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's death and dying seminar at the University of Chicago. Since then, Klass has written extensively about what he calls the continuing bonds model of grief, which was first introduced in 1996 in a collection of essays by various psychologists, academics, nurses, and others that he coedited with Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman. The twenty or so experts who contributed to *Continuing Bonds* viewed the natural course of bereavement as a process not of relinquishing bonds with the dead but of retaining them and having our lives enriched by them.

As I heard Phyllis Silverman explain once, the concept was controversial at first. She recounted an exchange she'd had with a colleague at a bereavement conference who insisted that healthy grieving required you to put the past behind you and let go of your relationship with the person who died. Silverman disagreed. Having recently experienced the birth of a grandson, she said that just as birth is about a change in the mother's connection to the infant who was once inside of her, so is death a change in our relationship to the person who is no longer here but still lives within us. Death does not end a relationship, she insisted. It changes it. I agree, and from what I've seen of people who are in grief, they are much better off because of that continuing relationship.

And yet there are still psychologists and counselors who try to discourage such relationships. Cynthia, whose son died, told me that she had seen a counselor about her grief. The counselor advised her to find closure by writing a farewell letter to her son, ending the relationship. She was horrified and never went back to that person. Luckily, she listened to her gut and found out that it didn't resonate with other counselors, either.

One of the reasons Elisabeth Kübler-Ross and I wanted to formally adopt her stages from dying to grief was because so many people misunderstood them. They saw them as a map of a relationship that would end when they finally accepted the death of their loved one. But the five stages of grief were never meant to be an end unto themselves, and completion of them wasn't supposed to signify the ending of the relationship or grief. Kübler-Ross herself felt connected to people who had died and did not believe that death was an ending. I hope that by offering a sixth stage of grief, I can encourage people to understand how the continuing evolution of their relationship with the person who died will help them find their way to meaning.

The mother of a friend of mine died a few years ago from cancer. I never got to know John's mother when she was alive, but I feel like I know her now because John has a unique way of carrying her with him into the world. The same way you and I might say, "My friend Cindy would love this restaurant," John might say, "My mom loves this place." If you didn't know she was dead, you might just think she's in Kansas. This is how he chooses to keep her with him. She is ever present in his reality.

John is not in denial about his mother's death. He went through an intense period of grief and mourning after she died. But now that he has accepted that she is gone, treating his mother as if she is still here is how he finds a meaningful relationship with her in death.

When someone dies, the relationship doesn't die with them. You have to learn how to have a new relationship with them. You can still keep learning from them in your everyday life. An instant will come up and remind you of something that happened between you and your deceased loved one, and now that he or she is gone, you can see it from a different point of view. As I get older, I understand my mother better because I have now lived the same number of years—and more—that she did. I can see things from her side more than I ever could when she was alive, since I was too young to be able to do that then.

I carry my mother with me. She lives within me. When a sub-

ject comes up, I might say something about what I think she would have thought about it. I bring the past into the present. I feel that I am still learning from her, which helps me to go back and see the past differently. That is how our relationship continues to evolve and grow. That is how our relationship keeps gaining in meaning.

In our last book together, *On Grief and Grieving*, Elisabeth and I wrote that we didn't believe in the concept of closure after death. When we speak about grief, there are two closures that come to mind: The first is the unrealistic wrap-up we expect after a loss. It has become an added burden not just to mourn and grieve the loss, but to find that closure, and find it quickly, so you can move on.

The second kind of closure involves doing things that help put the loss in perspective, such as reviewing what happened and why—or looking for missing pieces of the stories and filling in the gaps. It can range from finding the killer of a loved one to finding a way to say goodbye after a loved one died at the end of a long struggle with illness.

You're not closing the door on a relationship with the person who died. You don't ever bring the grief over a loved one to a close. You're opening the door to a different relationship. Remaining connected to your loved one in grief is not "unhealthy grieving." It's normal. In death, our attachments continue, as does the love. Research regarding continuing bonds speaks to what I've seen in decades of work with bereaved people. Their connections continue to evolve. I recently asked people on my social media who had experienced a loss to tell me if they still had a relationship with the person who died. The answer was a resounding yes. Here are some of their comments.

"I feel my husband watching over me all the time. Taking care of me."

"My daughter died. I talk to her all the time, both out loud and in my head. I write to her as well. It helps me feel closer to her."

"I visit my son's grave and talk to him like he was still alive. I celebrate his birthday and his death. I felt that I lost part of myself when he left, but I also feel like he's with me. I loved him before he was born and I'm learning to love him after his death. Grief will never end. The pain will be with me until I die, but I find comfort by talking about him and thinking of our lives together."

"My mother's and my relationship has improved a great deal in the twenty years since she passed away. I think I've learned to understand her and look at her with more compassion."

"Dad has been gone for eight months and Mom has been gone for a year. It still feels like yesterday. I so miss them. But I talk to Mom and Dad all the time. I have wonderful dreams about them. I will love them forever."

"The relationship definitely continues with my loved one. I speak to Jake and feel he is with me constantly. My older son got married in Canada a month ago, and as I was walking down the aisle with my older son, I felt him following us. I felt it was our sweet Jake letting us know he was with us at his brother's wedding."

When I was visiting my son's grave recently, I went into the gift shop to grab some flowers. I like to bring David stones from places I visit, but still I bring flowers from time to time. I said to the woman behind the counter, "I guess flowers are your biggest seller here."

"Yes, they are," she said.

"What's your second-biggest seller?"

She pointed to the birthday section. It was filled with happy birthday signs, balloons, and other items that people put on their loved ones' graves to commemorate their birthdays. I found it moving to see that even birthday wishes would continue after death.

In some religious circles, there is a belief that if you have a connection with your deceased loved one, you are actually in communication with a demon in disguise. I'm not a religious expert, but after decades of watching the bereaved continuing their bonds with their loved ones, my feeling is that those bonds have something sacred about them. They are the very opposite of evil.

Eighty percent of bereaved people say that they have felt a loved one's presence at some point after they died. Many times, it occurs around one of our senses. You're riding on a train when out of the blue, you smell vanilla candles. But there are no candles—just a fragrance in the air that makes you feel the presence of your grandmother, who always had vanilla candles burning in her home. Perhaps you think you see your loved one walking in the middle of a crowd. Or you hear the voice of the person who died, speaking to you, giving you advice that turns out to be helpful. Or you're anxious about a meeting and you feel your husband's hand touch your shoulder reassuringly as you walk through the door. Or maybe there is just a general feeling that the person is in the room.

Do all those kinds of phenomena mean that there is an afterlife? This is a question I am often asked during my TV interviews. As I mentioned earlier, I believe in the concept of the afterlife. I think many people are comforted to hear a grief expert validate that idea. They see that they are not crazy and that it is normal to have these continuing connections. But I don't think that you have to believe in the existence of the afterlife to experience such connections.

### Afterlife

I tell people up front that I speak many languages: Christian, evangelical Christian, Catholic, Jewish, atheist, agnostic, etc. In my work, I try to see people for who they are, and to meet them where they are. That means I have to be able to talk to them in

their own language to help with their grief, and if that language does not include a belief in the afterlife, I avoid all talk about it. Though many people find great meaning and consolation in their religious beliefs about the afterlife, if there is no such belief, there will be no comfort in hearing someone talk about it. In fact, it is likely to annoy or even enrage them. And as I discussed earlier, even those who are believers may not want to hear that kind of attempt to comfort them. It may feel too much like a Hallmark card, something people just say when they don't really acknowledge the other person's pain. I have learned to be circumspect in what I say.

Years ago, I was talking with a colleague who teaches ethics at Loyola Marymount University. She was about to begin a class on death and dying, and as we were discussing end-of-life issues, I thought about all the patients I've worked with who have had visions on their deathbed, and all the discussions I've had over the years about these visions with my colleagues. At hospice, palliative-care, and other end-of-life conferences, such visions never get mentioned during the formal sessions. They would be considered too woo-woo for serious discussion. But after a long day of lectures, over a drink or two, people often start opening up about the patients who were behind the studies and reports they had presented earlier. One person might recount a patient's deathbed vision, and then another person tells a similar story, and suddenly the whole group falls into an animated discussion about who and what we see before we die and what, if anything, it means.

I decided to mention to this highly respected, well-credentialed professor a recent patient of mine who had had one of these visions. When I brought up the phenomenon of deathbed visions, I knew she would have a strong reaction one way or another. My guess was that she would dismiss it as unworthy of serious consideration. But she surprised me by having the opposite reaction. "It's so rarely written about," she said, "let alone discussed in a formal classroom setting. Everyone has these stories, but no one seems willing to put them down on paper."

Her words stayed with me, and after that conversation I was inspired to write a book called *Visions, Trips, and Crowded Rooms: Who and What You See Before You Die*. Based on interviews with physicians, psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, nurses, priests, rabbis, and ministers, it discusses three unique phenomena encountered by many of the dying that challenge our ability to explain and fully understand the mystery of our final days.

The first phenomenon is "visions." As the dying lose sight of this world, some of them appear to be looking into the world to come.

The second experience is the feeling that they are getting ready to go on a "trip." During our loved ones' last hours, they may see their impending deaths as a transition or journey. These trips may seem to us to be all about leaving, but for the dying, they may be more about arriving. Mona Simpson, Steve Jobs's sister, said in the obituary she wrote for him that when she went to his deathbed, "His tone was affectionate, dear, loving, but like someone whose luggage was strapped onto the vehicle, who was already on the beginning of his journey, even as he was sorry, truly deeply sorry, to be leaving us."

The third phenomenon is "crowded rooms." The dying often repeat the word "crowded" over and over, as they talk about seeing many people filling the room where they await their death. They are people they have known in life who have died, as well as others we may not have known. Perhaps they were ancestors we never met in this life. In spiritual truth, we never die alone. In this world, we go to greet the new birth. What if there is another world where we go to greet the new death? Just as loving hands greeted us when we were born, so will loving arms embrace us when we die. In the tapestry of life and death, we may begin to see connections to the past that we missed in life. While death may look like a loss to the living, the last hours of a dying person may be full rather than empty.

Though the doctors and nurses and other people who are part of the health care establishment often bear witness to these

phenomena among the dying, how do they interpret them? Are such phenomena accepted as legitimate and formally discussed and written about, or are they dismissed as dubious, borderline experiences? In their last moments on earth, how are the patients with deathbed visions viewed? Those outside of hospice and end-of-life services have long minimized and discounted the experiences of the dying. They attribute deathbed visions to pain medication, fever, or lack of oxygen to the brain. Discounting a patient's experience has probably been around as long as the dying have had visions. The sense of the dead coming to greet the dying has also been with us as long as people have experienced it. It offers the possibility that the afterlife is real, which is a comfort to those who are about to step into the great unknown.

When I think about my own beliefs about the afterlife, I come back to three possible options for how to look at it, and the meaning one can find in each of those three views.

**Option one:** Your loved ones have died. They are in the afterlife and they have awareness of you. They see you grieving. They are aware of what's going on in your life. They continue to be in touch with this world. If this option is true, your loved ones have witnessed your pain and have seen how deeply you have grieved for them and how much you loved them. I believe that if that is the case, they would want to see you live again once some time has passed. I don't believe that your loved ones would be happy to see you stop living because they are gone. And if they are still aware of the physical world as you experience it, then I think you should want to show them a good time. When I went to Yosemite, I wanted my son to see it through my eyes because he never saw it when he was alive.

**Option two:** Your loved ones are in the afterlife, but they are no longer in touch with this world. They have other things to do that we can't even begin to understand.

From your perspective, all you can do is grieve fully and then, in time, live fully.

**Option three:** This is the atheist view. Your loved ones died, and their consciousness became nothing. There may be some comfort in that, especially if your loved ones had difficult lives or suffered a lot during their final illness and death. But in terms of how to live after their death, we're back in the same place as with the other two options—that we should grieve fully, then live fully.

This brief ride we call life will be over soon enough for all of us. My son, my parents, and my nephew are gone from this life. Nothing is going to change that. I long to see them again and I will never be the same until I do. But when I do, I don't want to have to tell them that my life lost all its meaning when they died. They loved me, and they wouldn't want that.

I have seen the worst life has to offer. I've been to concentration camps. I've seen the World Trade Towers smoldering. I've consoled parents after school shootings, and I've met with victims of horror who were present when bombs went off at public events. I've sat with thousands of people in grief and they have all taught me that there is life after loss. After they have experienced their sorrow in all its fullness, they are able to find meaning and go on living and loving.

When people ask me if I believe in life after death for our loved ones and I tell them yes, I often turn the question around: "Do you believe there is life after death for us the living as well?" That is the question we must all answer. While we wish with all our hearts that we could have our loved ones back with us for even one more day, what about us? We were put on this earth for such a short time and we will never get to experience this life again. So why don't we think about how much one more day would mean in our own lives?

In the face of our great losses, life goes on. The world keeps spinning. The seasons change, the dead of winter gives way

to the rebirth that occurs every spring. Every storm gives way to a clear new day. Despite our losses, we continue. We keep moving, taking in another breath. If we are still here when the new day dawns, it is an opportunity to explore the life that our loved ones had to leave behind. Love and life remain within us, and the potential for meaning is always there.