

In Memoriam
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I welcome you here for this honoring of life. We come here to remember, to mourn, and to say good-bye. We come to remember those we have lost, those who were our loved ones, our friends, our family. We remember them for their influence in our lives - be it loving, supportive and full of warmth or strained, difficult and painful. We honor them in their times of strength and in their times of need; we remember them in their times of joy and happiness and in their times of pain and difficulty. We come to remember them as they were, no more – no less. We honor them for who they were, not who we wished them to be.

In the honoring of those in our lives who shaped who we have become, we must look honestly at them and see the whole of who they were. We can only truly hold in reverence another's life if we recognize them as a whole person with strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, wisdom and prejudices. In this honest remembering we not only honor the lives of those we have lost but also what of their lives has meant something to us.

In Mitch Albom's *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Morrie says: "It's natural to die. The fact that we make such a big hullabaloo over it is all because we don't see ourselves as a part of nature. We think because we're human we're something above nature." He smiles at the plant on the table. "We're not. Everything that gets born, dies." "Do you accept that?" Yes. "All right." He whispered, "Now here's the pay off. Here is how we are different from these wonderful plants and animals."

"As long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you create is still there. All the

memories are still there. You live on in the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here...Death ends a life, not a relationship.”

Our ties to someone we loved are not severed simply because that person has died, in fact we often cling to their memory, honoring them for what they offered us and who they were in the world. We mark their anniversaries and hold onto their keepsakes, recognizing their importance, again and again claiming their place in our being. Our everyday living continues, and unexpectedly a scent, a song, a vision brings to vivid memory an image or thought of the one that is now no longer. So we tell their stories, ones they had told us, or ones in which they are central characters to keep them alive if only in a small way. We even look to succeeding generations for the traits of those now dead.

In my family we celebrate and anticipate how those traits may show up in the next generations, and even sometimes there are jokes made of the gestures and expressions, behaviors and affinities that reflect those who have died in our family. The puns that are shared around the table at a family dinner and the strong work ethic are my Granddad's; the quick wit is reminiscent of Great-Grandmother, the elegance and grace of movement and love of swimming from Aunt Hope. The temper comes from all sides and countless generations.

“Jiddu Krishnamurti... a revered spiritual teacher...once asked a small group of listeners what they would say to a close friend who is about to die. Their answers dealt with assurances, words about beginnings and endings, and various gestures of compassion. Krishnamurti stopped them short. There is only one thing you can say to

give the deepest comfort, he said. Tell him that in his death a part of you dies and goes with him. Wherever he goes, you go also. He will not be alone.”

In the loneliness following a loved one’s death we struggle to hold on to something of what was lost. We find reminders that help us feel closer to the ones who have died – her favorite flower, his favorite restaurant, their special song. That is what memorials are all about. We who are left behind to go on living need these reminders, these mementos, these little snapshots of the past. So that we are not always trapped by the past, attempting to relive it, we look forward to the future even in grief, and carrying with us some small piece of history. In remembering, we are celebrating the ones we have lost, remembering their struggles and their triumphs, keeping alive their passion, their strength, their laughter and tears. In this way they can never fully die to us.

These relationships that remain are not always ones filled with joy or warmth. We have not all come from families who knew how to love or offer kindness, some of us are not close to our families but rather find the supportive and meaningful relationships with friends and our spouses. The death of those who have hurt us or neglected us can leave us filled with mixed emotions of grief and great pain, ambivalence or anger, relief and maybe a sense of resolution.

“When sorrow comes, let us accept it simply, as a part of life,” writes A. Powell Davies, “Let the heart be open to the pain; let it be stretched by it. All the evidence we have says that this is the better way. An open heart never grows bitter. Or if it does, it cannot remain so. In the desolate hour, there is an outcry, a clenching of the hands upon emptiness, a burning pain of bereavement, a weary ache of loss. But anguish, like ecstasy, is not forever. There comes a gentleness, a returning quietness, a restoring

stillness. This too, is a door to life. Here, also is a deepening of meaning – and it can lead to dedication, a going forward to the triumph of the soul, the conquering of the wilderness. In the process will come a deepening inward knowledge that, in the final reckoning all shall be well.”

Death often leaves us with disappointment of what could have been, some are left with only angry and hurtful words instead of moments filled with love and acceptance. We are left with lessons of life regardless of the manner in which we learned them; whether through pain and anguish or guidance and wisdom; abuse and neglect or attentive affection and unconditional love. All lessons learned are ones that helped form who we are, who we have become and will continue to be. We may not be able to honor a life strictly for the positive of who they were, but we can honor that we have learned important lessons from them, even if painful, for all who have touched our lives have taught us something of life itself.

Maybe we learned how we want to be loved, or what kind of relationships we will choose to be a part of. Maybe we learned that we can take care of ourselves, that there is strength within us we never would have discovered otherwise. Maybe we learned our love for reading or the arts or history from someone who could not offer love in other ways. Maybe we learned to never compromise our ideals.

Some teaching will help us to create a happy and content life while other lessons will need to be overcome for us to be happy. Either way, these lessons are a way of connecting us to those who have taught us. If we are better people for the lessons we have learned, no matter the trials we endured to learn them, then we can honor those who helped us learn and, in doing so, continue to move on with our own lives.

So let us celebrate those who have touched and shaped our lives: those who offered wisdom and guidance, those who offered skills and talent, those who gave of themselves for the betterment of the world, or at least their small corner of it. Let us recognize those who offered us strength when we had none, and those who passed on their passion for reading, or gardening, building or fishing. We celebrate those with whom we could laugh and those with whom we could cry; those we shared joyous occasions with and those who were there in our most difficult hour. We recognize those who left us with many unanswered questions. We honor those who taught us how to cook or wash our clothes so they weren't all one color; and those who simply listened when we needed an ear. We celebrate all who helped us determine what we wanted to do with our lives or what we didn't want to do. We honor those who taught us how to change a tire or the oil of our first car; and those who we shared our secrets with. We honor those who made loving them difficult and those to whom loving came easily. We honor those who suffered in their lives and those who seemed always to find joy, no matter how small. We celebrate the lives of those who touched us and shaped us and assisted us in becoming the people we are today.

“I share with you the agony of your grief, the anguish of your heart finds echo in my own,” wrote Howard Thurman, “I know I cannot enter all you feel nor bear with you the burden of your pain; I cannot but offer what my love does give: the strength of caring, the warmth of one who seeks to understand, the silent storm-swept barrenness of so great a loss. This I do in quiet ways, that on your lonely path you may not walk alone.”

Mourning is not a one-time event that happens and then is over. It is an ongoing process of acknowledging and letting go and remembering. We will probably spend the

rest of our lives grieving, though not always with the same intensity. Through this process of remembering and honoring the lessons and gifts offered us by one who has influenced our lives we remain connected in the most positive sense to those we have lost. By acknowledging that which we learned and being thankful for what we have received we may begin to let go of the pain of our loss, or the confusion or even the ambiguity and hold onto what goodness remains.

While we know the space left by the death of a loved one shall never again be filled, we can exert courage and have faith that “time may not heal all pain, but it does change it and make it easier to live with.” So we continue to come together from the diversity of our sorrow, to gather in the warmth of this community, to share the grief we suffer. Together we give witness to our belief that in times of sadness there is room for love and even joy. In our separateness we can become one and together healing can begin.

“The world we know is passing:” wrote A. Powell Davies, “all things grow strange; all but the stout heart’s courage; all but the undiminished luster of an ancient dream – which we shall dream again as [people] have dreamed before us, pilgrims forever of a world forever new.

And what we loved and lost we lose to find how great a thing is loving and the power of it to make a dream come true.

For us, there is no haven of refuge; for us, there is the wilderness, wild and trackless, where we shall build a road and sing a song.

But after us there is the Promised Land, strong from our sorrows and shining from our joys, our gift to those who follow us along the road we build singing our song.”