

Recovering from Losses: Death, Dreams, and Undesirable Change

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I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you. —John 14:18

Passionate investment in life and in our relationships with others leaves us vulnerable to loss. So what happens to us when one of our dreams is not realized or we lose to death or grave circumstances the association of someone we love? How can we face another day? How can we go on? How can we help others who ask us these questions? This is one of our most challenging feats in life: to allow ourselves to feel comforted and go on living “joyfully” in the face of shattering loss. Heavenly Father expects us to go on and to even help others go on living joyfully, as we read in Mosiah 18:9: “Yea, and are willing to mourn with those that mourn; yea, comfort those that stand in need of comfort.”

Loss and learning how to successfully resolve loss has been an extremely interesting subject to me throughout my life. My own personal experience has encompassed losses suffered in my family of origin: losses of employment, death of relatives due to suicide, and the loss of both parents due to terminal illness. Divorce, addiction, same-sex orientation, and other losses are continuing to plague those I love. How we identify, communicate, and express loss; and, most importantly, helping others heal from losses

has been a focus of my professional work. Thus, this lecture will address the following four issues:

- 1) Types of losses
- 2) The effects of loss, focusing on unresolved loss
- 3) The complex process of healing from loss
- 4) The re-creation of ourselves in the face of loss

Literature Background

In general usage, loss is an act or instance of deprivation (through death, negligence, or accident) or of losing (through incapacity to maintain or keep or through failure to take advantage of). Loss is more technically defined as one of the consequences of any significant life change, thus making it a natural and pervasive occurrence in life (Kubler-Ross, 1975; Viorst, 1986). Judith Viorst (1986) asserts that “we lose not only through death, but also by leaving and being left; by changing, letting go, moving on; and by recognizing losses of romantic dreams or impossible expectations.” Loss can explain a multitude of experiences. For example, someone can be said to have experienced a loss when her mother died, when she was fired from a job, when she moved from her old neighborhood, when she did not apply for a promotion, or when she ended her marriage.

Many experts have spoken about loss and its impact on the individual (Lindemann, 1979, Paul & Grosser, 1965; Rando, 1984; Van der Hart, 1988). Loss is most commonly defined in the loss research as the absence, illness, or death of a significant person or family member; the termination of employment or other negative change in job status, including demotion; or divorce, separation, or other fragmentation of the family (Bloom-Feshbach & Bloom-Feshbach, 1987; Rando 1986; Weenolsen, 1988). The term “loss” has also been employed to define situations of physical or psychological illness such as cancer or depression (Bowlby, 1980; Mann, 1988; Montada et al., 1992).

The impact of loss on an individual, marital, or family system has been suggested by such theorists as Bowen (1978), Visher & Visher (1982), and Walsh & McGoldrick (1991). Bowen (1978) asserts that a family experiences a systemic emotional shock wave in the absence or death of a significant family member. Walsh and McGoldrick (1991) contend that there is tremendous denial of loss among Americans and that much of clinical depression revolves around loss, even when it is not the presenting problem.

The individual’s experience of loss, especially that associated with the evaporation of dreams and expectations, is often what motivates an individual, couple, or families to

seek psycho-therapy. The loss of dreams leaves individuals especially susceptible to distress and the resulting symptoms of depression. While most people expect that divorce or loss of employment will disrupt personal or familial equilibrium, few recognize or acknowledge that the loss of dreams can be equally disruptive.

Therese Rando's (1984) research on issues of caregiving, grief, and death shows that "loss is an inevitable part of life and that any loss initiates a process of grief." Suggesting the universal nature of loss, Rando posits the following categories of loss: 1) physical/tangible/object loss, including the loss of a desired possession or a significant person; 2) symbolic (psychosocial)/role loss, including divorce or job demotion or missed social opportunities; 3) competency-based loss, deriving changes due to one's competency such as graduating from college or earning a job promotion or being transferred because of positive job performance; and 4) deprivation-based loss, involving unwilling changes deriving from such setbacks as a financial loss or demotion, or employment termination. Rando argues that secondary losses develop as a consequence of these primary losses. In other words, secondary losses define a situation involving change in environment, loss of status, alteration of relationships with other family members, and so forth.

Walsh and McGoldrick (1991) address loss primarily as it relates to death, but other aspects of loss are acknowledged in support of the contention that there is tremendous denial of loss and the consequences of unresolved loss. In listing marital separation, divorce, displacement from a job or a home, and the lack of realization of dreams and expectations as loss experiences, Walsh and McGoldrick seem to agree with Rando (1984) and Kubler-Ross (1975) that all life changes, even those that are desired, involve loss to the extent that they require giving up something or altering certain relationships, roles, plans, and possibilities in deference to others. They also contend that all losses require a mourning or grieving process "which acknowledges the giving up of and transformation experience; so that we can take into ourselves what is essential and move on." Viorst (1986) describes this transformation experience as "the people we are and the lives we lead are determined by our loss experiences."

However loss is categorized or defined, researchers assert that the reaction to loss is grief. Marris (1974) goes even further, insisting that any significant loss necessitates a grieving process. Paul (1980) suggests that grief trauma may block the expression of intimacy or appropriate sexual behavior between a couple, potentially resulting in sexual withdrawal or dysfunction, extramarital affairs, or even incestuous involvement.

Rando (1984) and Kubler-Ross (1975) teach that grief is a process of psychological, social, and somatic reactions to the perception of loss—a process that involves a myriad

of emotions (anger, sadness, guilt, fear, relief, loneliness, apathy, depression, anxiety); negative social manifestations (lack of ability to initiate and maintain organized patterns of activity, social withdrawal behavior, restlessness, and inability to sit still); and negative physiological manifestations (undesirable weight loss or gain, inability to sleep, frequent crying, tendency to sigh, lack of strength, shortness of breath, physical exhaustion, heart palpitations and other indications of anxiety). Loss is “a craziness,” says Rando (1984), “but grievors are usually not crazy.”

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