

## Growth—The Final Step in the Grieving Process

By Ashley Berg

Grief may be one of the worst emotional experiences that a human being can go through in their life. It is caused by death, a complete separation from a loved one. Grief can be a slow process, such as anticipating the death of someone you know is dying and will die soon. Grief can also begin very abruptly, if someone you love who you thought would be in your life for many years to come dies very suddenly. There is an extreme variety of emotions felt within grief, which Lamott describes as a lazy Susan: "One day it is heavy and underwater, and the next day it spins and stops at loud and rageful, and the next day at wounded keening, and the next day numbness, silence" (p. 70). Some have defined the grieving process in a series of steps or phases to group this variety of emotions together. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's stages are the most well-known: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. This is not a complete list, however. Acceptance is not the last step in the grieving process. The last step is growth, and this growth is lightness and illumination that Lamott tells us about.

Throughout her life, Lamott has suffered from her fair share of grief. The losses she talks about most are her friend Pammy and her friend Bee's mother. It is evident in her writings that she has grown from both losses, in different ways. Lamott says that to grow from grief all the emotions that grief brings must be felt in the fullest. Grief is like an imprisonment. If a person does not allow themselves to feel the pain of grief, if they try to distract themselves from it and suppress their depression and sadness, then they will stay imprisoned for the rest of their lives. If they allow themselves to feel the "punishments" of grief, the deep sadness and anxieties that accompany it, then the sooner they will be able to escape this "imprisonment" and be free, a

person changed through their grief. Life is a little lighter and a little clearer. By feeling the grief fully, a person is eventually freed from the burdensome feelings. Otherwise the feelings remain, always just beneath the surface, eating away at the person and keeping them from moving on. Lamott explains: “. . .the bad news is that whatever you use to keep the pain at bay robs you of the flecks and nuggets of gold that feeling grief will give you. A fixation can keep you nicely defined and give you the illusion that your life has not fallen apart.” Unfortunately, simply *hiding* the fact of a life fallen apart does not mean it has not actually fallen apart. One must acknowledge their feelings of grief in order to mend a life that has fallen apart, rather than pretend things are fine and live the rest of their life with unresolved grief. Feeling the extent of grief, besides eventually freeing someone from those terrible feelings of loss, can also remind someone of the wonderful extent of their love. A grieving person can connect with others who are going through the same grief, and appreciate those who are still in their life, and thus have deeper connections and relationships. If a grieving person pretends everything is fine on the surface and suppresses their real feelings, they are not allowing themselves to feel those deeper, more meaningful feelings. In this way, true lightness is kept from entering into their life, and they instead are replacing it with artificially happy feelings.

I think a lot of the lightness and meaning in Lamott's writings and in her life comes out through her faith in God. This is *true* lightness, not her pretending to be happy. She truly allowed herself to feel her grief and has come out on the other side with more wisdom, and her faith in God has helped that. She is always discovering God working in her life, even through what appears to be the worst possible situations. When her car broke down, she was unable to visit her friend's dying mother. The delay in visiting caused a great deal of stress in her life, but in the end, she was able to be with her friend when she was needed most. She is always patient and

waiting and listening for an answer to her problems. I believe her faith has greatly helped her to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but grief does not necessarily have to be about faith. Even if someone does not believe in God, grief can still lead to an enriched life full of personal growth.

Grief leads to a renewed life. One sees more of life's blessings in comparison to their sufferings. One can enjoy and appreciate the little moments, and one can find a greater meaning in their life, leading to personal growth. For many people, the grieving process finally gives way to new energy that they can invest in the activities and relationships in their life. They can feel compassion that came from their suffering of grief, and be more empathetic towards others who are going through the same suffering. This means that the death of a loved one can lead to enriched relationships with loved ones still with us. Some people can find strength and independence that they did not have before. Loss, overall, leads to an enlightened life.

Grieving leads to many great things, especially an ending to the burden of feelings, a new energy to invest in life, and activities or relationships, a new purpose in life, and more. One last thing grief gives us is closure. By allowing ourselves to feel the extent of our grief, we can escape the imprisonment of grief, the denial, depression, and other steps of grief that lead you finally to growth. "I'm no longer convinced you're supposed to get over the death of certain people, but little by little, pale and swollen around the eyes, I began to feel a sense of reception, that I was beginning to receive the fact of Pammy's death, the finality. I let it enter me" (p. 72). Lamott has suffered grief many times in her life. She has taught us that the last step of grief is growth, that grief is not something to get over as soon as possible, and that the burden of grief will give way to a more meaningful life. The pain of grief is not something you can go around, or over, or under. It is something you must go *through* to attain that lightness and illumination that is evident in her life.