

Grief as a Gateway to Love in Teaching

Rachael Kessler

“To heal the world, we must feel the world...”
Jewish Prayer

Richard was a school psychologist, who told this story in a sharing circle about teachers who inspired us by positive or negative example to become the educators we are today:

I was in first grade. I can see her face, but I can't seem to remember her name. My brother had just died before I started school. She had a rocking chair in the classroom and on the first day of school, she picked me up on her lap in the rocker and began to rock me.

She rocked, and I sobbed. And sobbed and sobbed. It was something I couldn't do at home -- not the way my family handled these things. And you know, she did that for months, every day for minutes or sometimes what seemed like hours. She took me into the chair and rocked me for about five months, when my crying was done.

While he experienced the “American way of grief” at home, Richard had a rare encounter with an educator who was willing to help this little boy make friends with his grief.

My colleague John McCluskey was not so fortunate. After sobbing much of the way through his first encounter with a workshop on grief, John recalled:

I was the youngest of eight children living with a single mother. I was thirteen when my mom died. Suddenly I had to move in with my dad and his wife—I hadn't had much contact with these people before.

When I think back, I realize that not a single one of my teachers that year ever asked me about how I was doing with my mother's death, or with all the changes in my life. Not a single one. I didn't even realize that was strange.

In just these two stories, we begin to see the powerful impact of educators' responses to loss in their students. Adults in traditional American culture have little preparation for dealing with grief. “Like many people in our society, teachers often feel uncomfortable discussing death and loss. This reluctance can adversely affect the children in their charge, who look to their teachers for truth, knowledge and support.” (Naierman p.62)

Many parents and teachers are so uncomfortable with discussing loss that students feel they have no safe place to go with these feelings. Children have a keen sense of this discomfort in the adults in their lives. They see it, smell it,

hear it in its most subtle forms and protect their parents and teachers from their own feelings of loss. And when they don't, when they are so desperately needing care in their grief, they are often turned away. For children, the suppression of grief often results in numbing or depression, which in turn leads to shutting down of their capacity to care, to connect and to love. In its most extreme forms, numbed grief becomes a ground for violence to the self and others. For teachers who have had these experiences in an American childhood, unexpressed grief can cut off their capacity to bring love into teaching -- to be open and authentic with students, to have passion for a subject, and to care deeply about students. Lacking the guidance to make friends with our own grief, teachers often continue this cycle of discomfort and denial. We become the adults who convey by our very presence a wall that keeps most students from expressing any feelings of loss.

In this chapter, I will share what inspires me as an educator to strengthen my ability to deal with grief, and then present a model that has been useful in doing so. My primary emphasis throughout this essay is to describe a series of experiences that might enable educators to deal more adequately with this challenging emotion in ourselves and others, and move on to the terrain of love and hope.

Why should educators deal with grief?

Most of our students have a storehouse of unexpressed grief. Traumatic losses from death, divorce, geographic relocation and dislocation are common experiences for children and youth. Some students also experience the traumatic premature loss of childhood through experiences such as abuse or teen pregnancy. In addition, all students encounter the ordinary losses of growing up – saying good-bye at the end of each school year, leaving elementary school for middle school, middle for high school, and leaving high school, home and community. Leaving college—especially when it has provided meaningful community—is also a time of enormous loss for many young people. These experiences of ordinary loss not only trigger feelings of grief for what is happening in the present but often bring up significant unhealed losses from earlier in childhood.

The cycle of grief can be triggered by significant change of any kind, including “positive” changes such as a promotion, the completion of a project or the retirement of a colleague. All of these experiences provide the challenge and the opportunity of learning to say good-bye to an old

self -- a relationship to self, to others, and to the world as we have known it.

Today, as the immigrant population once again swells in our schools, we are working with children who have been wrenched from place and family, language and culture. Some of these children, in addition to all of these losses, are struggling with the grief of having watched the death and destruction of people and places in war-torn homelands. Newcomers, both children and parents, need educators who can hold an awareness of this grief even when it is unspoken. And, whenever possible, they need the opportunity to express the range of feelings that, bottled up inside, may be another impediment to learning.

When we consider the broad range of experiences that trigger grief in our students, we realize how vital our ability to respond with love may be. Writing not about grief, but about the need for social and emotional learning in the classroom, a teacher from a small town in Washington gives us a litany of loss:

In my classroom of twenty-four children ages 6-9, I have:

Two children going back and forth between divorced parents. Their homework, permission slips and after school needs are often left at one or the other house.

Two children going through messy and cruel divorces. One child has become a hypochondriac and has low reading scores. The other holds all her emotions in check. She's hard to read.

One child's father is battling an aggressive form of cancer.

Two children live without any contact from their fathers. One mother tries desperately to make up for the loss by giving her child everything asked for and blaming all failures on the child's loss. The other mother is too consumed with her own life to consistently help her son. This child at 7 is obese and has trouble focusing.

As a classroom teacher, how can I overlook their inner lives?

While there are many skills and resources a teacher can develop to respond to students with care, compassion and guidance, one of the most critical is an understanding of, and comfort with, the cycle of grief.

Searching for a Model

I was first introduced to the well-known "stages" of grief in the 80'. A workshop I attended on children and stress asserted that all change – negative and positive, ordinary and traumatic—produces feelings of loss, which arouses in the human heart the same cycle of emotions associated with the grief that follows a death of a loved

one. The degree and persistence of the emotion might be less, but the cycle is basically the same.

As I reflected on the "stages" of grieving presented, I was not satisfied.ⁱ I had lost a husband after seven years of marriage when I was only 26 years old. My own experience of grieving was not embraced by the Kubler-Ross model. I realized she had meant those stages for the dying, not for the living left behind.

A few years later, I was deeply moved by some mimeographed materials on grief developed by a native Eskimo teacher, Liz Sunnyboy. She believed that all of the psychological and social problems of her people came from unexpressed, unhealed grief. The model I offer in my workshops, and which I will provide here, is an adaptation of her framework.

A journey through the territory of grief

First, let's look at the map.

I. Protection

Shock
Denial

II. Feeling

Anger
Guilt/Shame
Fear
Sadness

III. Healing

Acceptance
Hope

Knowing some basic contours of this landscape prepare us to navigate this terrain:

- Time alone will not heal grief.
- The grieving process can actually transform grief into personal growth.
- There are two keys to healing through grieving:

Become conscious about the process and the range of feelings

Find opportunities to safely EXPRESS the whole range of feelings

ⁱ Based on the commonly known model of grief developed by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D. In her seminal book, On Death and Dying: What the Dying Have to Teach Doctors, Nurses, Clergy, and Their Own Families.

Their stages were: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance.

- Grief is not only the feeling of sadness. (“I never felt grief,” said one parent “I would just call it an acceptance process.”)
- Not everyone goes through all of these stages, or through these stages in this particular order. People grieve in ways that are different from other people suffering the same loss and from ways they themselves have grieved another loss.
- The stages of grief are not something that you necessarily complete and then fee; finished with.

The Wheel of Grief

Protection

The first phase of mourning involves a variety of strategies built into the psyche, mind and body designed to protect us from overwhelming pain: shock and denial. If we have had ample time to prepare for a death, this phase may be softer and shorter. But with a sudden death, especially the death of a person not yet elderly, we need protection. If we were to think the unthinkable and feel the unfeeling, the horror would destroy us. The wisdom of our ancient neurobiological systems take care of us by ensuring that we cannot think, feel, or even talk about this pain.

Shock

“Our whole being becomes numb, or stunned,” writes Liz Sunnyboy. “One can’t think, cry, talk, laugh, or feel. Shock is a temporary escape from reality.” Shock is the dimension of grieving that I have found least understood or recognized. The consequences of this ignorance can lead to isolation of the bereaved. Even worse, misunderstanding shock can lead to judgements and condemnation that create ongoing damage.

When I suffered the loss of my first love, I was blessed with an almost immediate instruction on shock that changed everything – for me, and for the people I teach. My husband Carl was a young doctor when he died of a lethal interaction between a glass of Scotch and one or two sleeping pills. Like everyone around him, I was totally unprepared for his sudden death.

In the years before this tragic loss, I had suffered from the persistent pain of a slipped disk. Nothing seemed to help. Weeks before his death, Carl learned that a neurologist was opening one of the first pain clinics in the nation at Yale for dealing with chronic pain. He scheduled an appointment for me.

That appointment came two days after his death. I chose to go, feeling utterly desperate. “How will I deal with this physical pain,” I wondered, “when I know I will have more emotional pain than I could ever imagine?” I knew I needed any help I could get.

The doctor greeted me with so much warmth and empathy that I felt immediately at ease. “I’m surprised you are here, but I am so glad. Now I can show you what shock really means. So few people actually understand.”

He took out tools that looked like they were meant for torture, not healing. Rolling devices with pins and needles, they were designed to discover where the body could detect sensation and where the nerves were dead or asleep. As he poked through skin on my limbs, I was startled to feel absolutely no pain. “That is shock,” he explained. “That’s your body protecting you against feeling. Because if it didn’t, if you could actually feel in a normal way, the pain you would feel right now in your heart could destroy you.... It’s not just the nerve-endings in your body that have gone numb; you won’t feel much emotion over these next weeks and months. It may be disorienting.

“The good news is that your back will probably heal. You will get a break from the pain and fear, so you can start to move actively again, which is the best thing for you at this point. You will also probably not have a period for many months. Your whole system is on hold.”

He was right. Right about my back-pain and about my menstrual cycle going on hold. And knowing about the mechanisms of shock, I could begin to understand some of the other strange experiences I was having – like difficulty driving and making ordinary conversation.

I didn’t cry much. I didn’t laugh. The only emotion I felt with strength in those first few months was fear. It would come to me only at night—as crippling terror, screaming nightmares as I looked into the jaws of my own death. I could not sleep in a house without others. Except for my fear, shock had wrapped me in a cocoon of protection. Years later, this allowed me to support my students through the mysteries of shock.

Cindy was on a freshman retreat at our high school when she learned that her father had dropped dead on the tennis court. When she returned to school after a week at home, her best friends were deeply troubled and angry. “What’s wrong with Cindy?” they asked their life skills teacher. “How can she be so cold? She’s just acting like nothing has happened. She never cries and she doesn’t even look sad. We can’t look at her without thinking about what just happened. We’re feeling so sad—and she’s not. Doesn’t she have a heart?” These deeply emotional 14-year-olds wanted to shower their friend with the love and compassion they knew they would want in this situation. Cindy’s loss awakened them to the fear that their own parents might not be invincible. They were quick to judge Cindy because of her stony demeanor, and would have backed away, leaving her with a double loss. Fortunately, their teacher explained to them that with their distance from this loss, they could afford to feel the depths of their grief, and that Cindy could not survive this level of feeling right now. Shock is what gets us through at first.

Americans often isolate the bereaved because we don’t know what to say or do around grief. Then isolation hits a second time because of our ignorance about shock: by the

time the numbing has begun to melt and the strong emotions begin to erupt, many friends have “moved on.” We have moved quickly through our milder grief and assume that the mourners should have completed their process as well. We are caught in a wild impatience about grief. Three or four months, we assume, should be enough to heal. If people take longer, we assume they are morbid, depressed, and self-indulgent. The grieving process can, and often does take years. It doesn’t really begin to move towards healing until the shock subsides and the deep feeling begins. But before we move ahead to that feeling, let’s explore “denial” – another form of protection.

Denial

Denial, says Sunnyboy, is about disbelief. “No, it is just not true,” says the mind. And like shock, in the early stages of grief, it is beyond our control. I have often heard the phrase “she’s in denial” as a form of put-down – a judgement that so-and-so should wake up and come to terms with reality. In the protection phase of mourning, we can’t afford to wake up. Denial is a necessary, healthy defense mechanism. Denial of grief can often be sustained for a long time after a first encounter with traumatic loss. A second loss usually opens the door. Unfortunately, when this occurs, there is a huge legacy of unexpressed grief that burdens the grieving process for the current situation.

Alan lost his father when he was in 8th grade. Denial was his only comfort. He began to build his personality around the refusal to feel. His main comfort after his father died was a relationship with his grandfather that grew stronger and stronger. I first met Alan at the beginning of 10th grade when his grandfather died. I could almost feel the scraping of the lid off his denial. He was still trying to hold it back and hold himself together. Unfortunately for Alan, Samantha was also in this human development class. Samantha had lost her dad in 9th grade. Unlike Alan, her coping style was to express, celebrate her dad, talk about her healing process, and share her grief. Alan despised Samantha. They had been childhood friends. But ever since she lost her dad, Alan could not bear to be around her. She was a trigger to Alan’s loaded gun. And now that his denial was being ripped off by his grandpa’s death, Alan needed more than ever to control the pace of his grief. He couldn’t do that with Samantha present.

As a teacher, I was too new and inexperienced to recognize that Alan needed to be moved out of that section. Eventually, after too much disruption from Alan doing his best to make our class unsafe for the expression of any authentic feeling, I got it. Meeting with Alan, his mother and the dean, I decided to grant him a waiver so he was not surrounded by students talking about feelings. He needed the respect that allowed him to move at his own pace.

I learned how important it is for me as a teacher not to take on what is not mine to handle, not to put “inclusion” above the actual needs of the child.

Denial may be unavoidable in the early months of a shocking loss. But at some point, there is more choice. There is a critical time when we either begin to go through the feeling stages of grief or shut down. Denial is the primary mechanism for this shutting down. Shutting down the grief also seems to shut down the capacity for deep feelings of any kind.

Denial may be a necessary form of protection, a healthy defense mechanism at a time when too much feeling is dangerous. And it may become an unhealthy dam, blocking the flow of feelings that will promote healing only when they are felt and expressed.

Moving into Feeling

Now comes the fork in the road. Do we find the support and the inner strength to move into our feelings or do we lock into protection, shutting down our capacity to feel deeply and stunting or delaying the healing process? The latter will often bring on a depression – which is not necessarily a phase of grief so much as it is an avoidance of grief. Grieving may include sadness, deep sadness. But the depression that comes from avoiding feelings is a flat, exhausted, isolated, hopeless and helpless place that settles in and is very difficult to lift.

If we choose the road of feeling, here are some of the emotions that may surface: sadness, anger, fear, or guilt. For each person, for each loss, a different set of feelings emerges, a different sequence. We all heal in different ways. And these differences can add another challenging dimension to grief. People who are grieving are often intolerant of those who are grieving the same loss in a different way. Husbands and wives often feel unsupported, misunderstood or riddled with judgement and anger because their spouse doesn’t seem to be “really grieving,” or seems to be “unwilling to move on.” Perhaps this is one of the reasons that couples who lose a child often lose their marriage as well.

Anger

When anger erupts in the cycle of grief, it finds many targets. Some people are angry at God for taking their loved one, or requiring this unwanted move or change. With suicide or divorce, anger is commonly felt and expressed towards the lost loved one. Even when the person did not choose to die, or had very legitimate reasons for moving across the world or leaving this job, we may feel anger towards them for lurching us into primal feelings of abandonment. When we are the ones required to leave, we may feel rage against life for making us lose a community or person or place that we love. That same anger can be directed against the very people from whom we have been separated.

Anger after loss may find its target in the people with whom we share our grief when they are grieving in another way. It may turn inward, a rage against the self we call guilt – which we will explore shortly as another phase of grief. And often, anger is simply an energy in the

system, simmering, boiling, spilling, erupting with no particular target in mind on anyone and anything. An assistant superintendent, Duneen Debruhl, shared a story about an extremely angry middle school student from her days as a principal.

I was the one in charge of discipline for the school, so I saw this boy again and again. He was angry all the time and it took little for him to erupt and cause trouble wherever he was. Grace allowed me to love that boy. Each time he came back expecting punishment and anger, I greeted him with love. One day, he just melted in my office. That poor boy had just lost his mother, his home, his place. He was in foster care now, and behind that firewall of anger was a blaze of grief.

Anger, unlike denial, is a strong emotion. But anger can also be a bridge, an intermediary step between denial and grief. It can be a protection against the sadness that is the most vulnerable place on the wheel of grief. While such protection may be necessary, like shock, in the early months after or preceding a loss, it can become dangerous when we become stuck there because we are too afraid to move into vulnerability. Such refusal to move through the stages of grief can lead to a personality change – a person for whom anger is a way of life, a lens through which all of life is experienced and expressed. But like the story above, deep caring and love for the angry mourner can melt that anger to expose the sadness underneath. And once the sadness is felt and expressed, healing and hope are possible.

Anger is a common emotional strategy among families who are preparing to lose a high school senior to the larger world. Unconsciously, someone in the family – student, parent or sibling – “decides” that it will be easier to say good bye and move on if there is distance, not closeness.

Guilt

Guilt is said to be a form of anger – turned inward against the self. Like anger, its pain can feel more bearable than the abject vulnerability of sadness or fear that lie on the other side of the protection phase. For in anger and guilt, human beings maintain some sense of control over life and death. Blame – whether it is against another or ourselves – presumes control. Without blame, we can feel ourselves at the mercy of a totally unpredictable world – an experience that is too vulnerable to be tolerated at some stages in life. But while it provides protection to the unconscious, guilt can be a torment for a mourner if it takes hold and prevents the flow into healing.

The curse of guilt is a well-known response of children to loss and grief. Developmentally, children are all too likely to see themselves at the causal center of all that happens in their lives. One of the most damaging effects of divorce is the guilt children take on because they

believe they must have caused the animosity between their parents.

Guilt can seize parents as an expression of grief when their child is born with a disability. Parents blame themselves for the genes they passed on, the diet or other substances they imbibed which may have caused the mysterious afflictions their child is born with. Through acts of omission or commission, they believe they have harmed their child. Or they are riddled with guilt for any moment of failure to accept the differences in their child, to accept everything that goes with the role of being a parent to a child with special needs. As I have listened to such parents, I discovered that redemption was deeply connected to an experience of forgiveness. Only when we can discover the strength to forgive ourselves, our lost or damaged loved one, God or fate, can we move back out of the inlets of anger and guilt and into the river of grief that will allow us to heal.

Fear

In 1972, when I saw my husband’s dead body, I felt for the first time the reality of death. For weeks and months after, I awoke screaming in the night from nightmares of my own death. A decade later, I watched my mother confront this same specter in a dream as we tried to sleep in the waiting room of the hospital the night after the surgery that killed my father.

When my friend Ken’s daughter Jenna died overseas, I worked to support a dozen of her sorority sisters. Virtually all were afraid to sleep alone. I assured them that this was a common reaction in the early weeks to the fear that arises after an unexpected death. I told them my own story and stories of three families I knew with independent adolescent sons or daughters who had each moved into their parents bedrooms for months after a sibling died.

Fear can take many forms in grieving. And the source is often not conscious or clear. We can be afraid of our own mortality. We can be afraid of ghosts, of guilt, of punishment, of succumbing to sadness or to the terrible vulnerability of helplessness and loss of control. We can be afraid that grief will drive us to madness or will drive away everyone that loves or cares for us.

This very last fear is so unnecessary and yet so true in a culture where we are averse to grief. People who are grieving do often lose friends, family and colleagues. The best antidote I have found to this very real fear is truth. Acknowledging the reality of avoidance that can greet mourners seems to ease some of the fear. Internal or transpersonal resources may come into play when we realize the rejection or abandonment from our community is not personal, not about us so much as it is about a person and a culture afraid to sit with the feelings of loss. Compassionate truth-telling is especially important for children and youth who may use this rejection to fuel their guilt, which we have seen can stop or stall the healing process.

Sadness

When we feel safe enough to be vulnerable, we can feel and express the sadness that is almost inevitable at some point in the journey towards healing from loss. Tears, hurt, loneliness – all of these may flow. Liz Sunnyboy suggests what she calls 7 natural healing processes that allow us to move into this vulnerability that will ultimately allow the feelings to move through and out of us. Talking, crying, sweating, shaking, laughing, yelling, yawning or sighing – this unlikely family of actions can release and express deep grief.

A fourth-grade teacher, Brian Geraghty found a strong current of sadness flowing in himself and his students as his first year of teaching came to an end.

It was my first year of teaching and the learning curve was extremely high. I had this great group of kids and we grew closer than I ever expected. It was the year of the Columbine tragedy, so we had to do a lot of talking. They were able to see a lot of my feelings. Just seeing your teacher cry and realizing it was okay for a teacher to show feelings in the classroom—it brought us so much closer.

They gave me so much. And when the end was coming, I felt such gratitude, I wanted to give something back. I had so much feeling. I didn't know how I was going to say good-bye.

I wanted to write a song for them. We were talking about stars, about constellations. And I was talking about that light -- how the star could have died in the time of the dinosaurs, but we can still see the light.

And then the words just came, "You're all stars, shining so bright. Keep shining on, so people can still see your light after your gone." I played and sang to them a few days before the end. I bought a package of glow-in-the dark stars and gave each one a star to remember our class. There were two big stars in the package, which I gave to the two kids moving out of state big "You need to burn brighter," I said, "because you'll be farther away."

I still get choked up thinking about it. I put one star on the end of my guitar – I keep it there as a reminder.

On the last day of school, the parents came too and we had a fun day. The parents asked me to sing the song – the kids had told them. I sang it and then, everyone was crying. I was crying, the kids were crying the parents were crying. Lots of hugs going around. It was my first year, so I didn't know if I'd ever see them again.

You know, it was definitely the most spiritually rewarding experience I've had in teaching so far. It was so fulfilling to be in that role and to touch their lives that way. I broke

down when I was talking to them in April about Columbine -- "I can't even imagine what would happen if something like this happened to you. I love all of you guys so much."

And I reminded them on the last day of school. I'm not afraid to tell my students that I love them. And sometimes I don't have to tell them; it just shows. I never thought I'd be telling my kids I loved them. None of my teachers would ever have said that.

I opened myself up so much to these kids. It was such a profound loss, such sadness when it was over. When you open yourself up for that, you're opening yourself up for everything. Then I was so surprised at the end – whoa, I didn't want it to end.

The willingness of this teacher to share his sadness – both in response to the traumatic losses in Littleton and the ordinary loss of ending the school year – opened wide the gateways to love in himself and his students. He brought an intention and creativity to good-bye that was an essential lesson for his students in the possibilities for real completion and commemoration when it's time to leave. How often can we bring such an undefended heart to our students? How sweet the communion and learning when we can.

Healing

Once the challenging feelings have had the opportunity to flow – at whatever pace they may need, healing becomes possible. Acceptance comes, and with it, hope. Liz Sunnyboy offers the voices of acceptance: "I am alright, I had a loss and I went through it and I'm not alone. I can make choices about how to care for myself. I have a new appreciation of life and my own life."

Acceptance can come after a long period of sorrow and anger, or can come in a flash. Two of the sorority girls were experiencing ecstatic joy when I met with their group just a few weeks after their loss. They had been blessed with the opportunity to fly to the memorial service and to share in a communal expression of profound grief and love. Returning home was a journey fraught with challenges graced by strangers providing solutions. They began to feel their friend was watching over them. They felt her ongoing presence in their lives and with that loving presence, an explosion of mystery and joy. While their sorority sisters were angry, accusing them of denial, I felt they had been catapulted through the stages of grief in an intense and rapid way that graced them with the acceptance and hope that usually come much later.

In my friends who lost children, I watched the first signs of acceptance come only after many years filled with turmoil and anguish. In each of these parents, I saw their own capacity to accept their loss deeply entwined with their ability to provide service to others in a way that grows out of the strength they have discovered in navigating this perilous journey of grief.

In these acts or service to others who are grieving, or who need to respond to someone in grief, or to young people with the same interests or illnesses as their deceased child, I see them rediscover hope. I cannot separate acceptance from hope in neat, clean categories. They flow together. "A ray of light after darkness of loss," says Sunnyboy, describing this stage of hope:

- I got help and others can be helped. I survived a loss and I can be supportive to others.
- I have new energy to look forward, to plan new things.
- I can **feel** again and I can accept reality.
- I am stronger now and I may have a better understanding of my purpose or of life's meaning
- I can live, love and laugh again!
- And I am not thinking so much about this loss.

Perhaps the greatest gift of fully experiencing the process of grief is this emergence into a stage of character in which we can feel more deeply, love more fully, serve more generously, and have a new clarity about why we are here and what matters deeply in life. The hope that can break through when one has fully lived the grief is not the Pollyannaish hope of innocence and naivete. It is an attitude towards life and the living that includes an awareness of limits, of the inevitability of endings, of the depth of human suffering and the possibilities of human strength

Endings and returns

I experienced melancholy beginning in September of every year for about ten years after Carl died. Often it was not until October when I would begin to see all the signs of Halloween coming in the stores that I would realize I was having an anniversary reaction. Once I knew what was going on, I was less frightened that depression was about to take hold. I was better able to manage the return of grief and find ways to express it and honor it so it could move through me.

"Like adults, children don't work through their grief on a particular timetable," writes Naomi Nairman in *Educational Leadership*. "...Young people may grieve intensely, but sporadically. A major loss in early childhood can reverberate through the years as the person progresses through life's milestones –first date, graduation, marriage and parenthood."

As educators, we must be sensitive to these anniversary reactions if we want to respond to our students with compassion and care. The child who lost his or her mother at four or twelve or sixteen may become moody and depressed or angry as he or she approaches these milestones without having any idea what is causing this suffering. Buried in the unconscious are feelings of immense regret that this parent can not be there, witness and support them as they navigate these joyful or

challenging events. And of course, it can be useful to know this about ourselves and our colleagues as well.

Using this model

I wrote this chapter primarily to support educators in making friends with their own grief so it does not block the door to the full flow of love possible with their students. I don't offer this model to be employed in a didactic way in response to a loss. People who are grieving do not feel loved when their feelings to be put in a box, a construct, a generalization. When you are working in a classroom with an immediate loss – be it personal, or what might be called tribal losses such as Columbine or September 11 that can touch an entire community or nation, you can choose from a number of ways to support the students deeply affected by grief. Let's look at some options.

Accommodation

"Accommodate these students," is a core piece of guidance to teachers from Ken Druck, executive director of the Jenna Druck Foundation. "You might liken it to accommodations in the workplace or for children with special needs. Invite the child to sit in the front of the room; allow her to reorient certain work projects to themes more in accord with the powerful experience that is commanding all of her attention." Ken speaks with gratitude about the high school teachers who were willing to "relax their standards" to accommodate the grief and disorientation of his younger daughter following the sudden death of her sister. He urges teachers to see such times as a "transient state of special need" and asks them to be willing to adjust their expectations for "a work product to a level she's capable of. Provide take-home tests. Understand that she's not going to be able to function at a certain level. And realize that students who have just sustained a traumatic loss will have a "rough edge socially – they're not going to be able to engage in ordinary conversations."

Commemorate

"Schools have an ability to commemorate and honor the loss of a child in a way that helps everyone cope with the grief with love and grace." Ken describes the cooperation between a school and his "Families Helping Families" program to provide this kind of conscious grieving for a child who died and all the mourners left behind.

One of our parents lost a 7-year-old daughter. It went from "I have a headache, Mommy," to seeing her child dead in 3 hours.

Our facilitators went in to the classroom and did a debriefing with all of the kids. We explored the idea of leaving her desk intact for the rest of the school year. The children

decorated it—it was a way they could express their grief.

Instead of “let’s cover this over and remove the desk quickly,” this teacher and her students created a sacred place in the classroom, where they could hold a place for her in their hearts, a physical place where she could be remembered and loved.

The parents picked up all the notes – they loved reading them.

Now we’ve created a program for helping teachers deal with the grief of the other kids when there’s a death—it’s called “Janelle’s Chair.”

The Jenna Druck Foundation also offers teachers the tools for helping students sort out what to say, and what not to say, to children returning to class immersed in grief.ⁱⁱ “The object is not to make someone feel better; it’s about being a loving presence. In the presence of someone who’s loving and free of judgement – we at least don’t feel alone. Alone is one of the most devastating social aspects of grief. We not only lost the person, we lost our world. And for children that world is their classroom.”

Expression

When our entire classroom is dealing with grief because of an experience like Columbine or when a student or teacher in the class or school has just died, we can create a safe structure for all the feelings to be shared. Alone, or with the support of a colleague or trained professional from the school or community, you can work with your students to set the ground rules that make such disclosure feel safe and appropriate. You can offer a sharing circle or council in which each person has the opportunity to speak without interruption for a brief period or to listen respectfully in silence.ⁱⁱⁱ The option to pass is essential. At the end, you may find a gentle, respectful and personal way to weave some information for your students about the way that each of us may find ourselves at different places on the wheel of grief at any particular moment and that they are all legitimate.

If you do choose to offer such a circle, your willingness to speak first, from your heart, about your own feelings, is a powerful foundation for the safety of your students. Your own tears and heartfelt sadness can help students feel safe. Uncontrollable hysteria will do the opposite.

ⁱⁱ Please see jennadruck.org for many resources for families and students, including “The Compassionate Classroom,” and the Teen Grief Curriculum for teachers and counselors, created by Scott Johnson, MA our Child Bereavement Specialist.

ⁱⁱⁱ Please see my website for information on methods and trainings that support teachers creating safe and respectful community in the classroom where feelings can be shared: www.passageways.org

So ultimately we come back around to the question of whether or not you have made friends with your own grief. If you are terrified of grief – your own and others – you may convey a stone-cold feeling that disallows the free flow of your students feeling. Or you may feel your grief erupt like a volcano that is completely beyond your control. If you have worked with your own grief – past and current—in the privacy of your own world or with colleagues outside the classroom, you can bring yourself to the grief of your students with the capacity for authentic and appropriate expression.

Conclusion: On to Hope and Love

When we know how to let ourselves grieve, we can lose a loved one or end a relationship, a class, or phase of life with a sense of completion and fullness that allows us to love again next time. When we are willing to feel the sadness of grief, we can afford to care deeply for those with whom we must eventually let go. When we have never had the support and guidance to grieve in a healthy way, endings of all kinds can feel like a vital piece of ourselves is being ripped away. Why would we ever want to be that close, care that much ever again? When we are so afraid of grief that we close our hearts to sadness, the doorways to love, to beauty, to joy are closed as well.

Educators can make the difference in the lives of students and colleagues who are struggling with challenges or reaping the harvest of meaning that come with grief. If we can make friends with all the feelings that may come, we can offer comfort and companionship when others are running and shunning in fear. We can learn to help ourselves, our students and our colleagues to roll on the whole wheel of grief through the landscape of change and trauma and the ordinary good-byes of moving from one stage of life to the next.

There is no “right” way to grieve. Everyone grieves in their own time and sequence of feelings. “To heal the world, we must feel the world,” counsels an ancient prayer. Whether it is our own personal world or the larger communities in which we participate, allowing ourselves and others to feel our grief is an act of courage that can transform wounds into gateways to love.