

On Letting Go in Summer

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Many of you may be familiar with Elizabeth Kubler-Ross's stages of grief: shock/denial, anger, bargaining, despair, acceptance. Kubler-Ross identified these stages as the process we go through as we struggle to accept our own powerlessness over death. I think we go through these stages to some extent with any loss of a relationship, including a divorce or separation. Most of the time, we make it through. Over time, we accept our powerlessness to prevent or reverse loss when it comes in this life.

Sometimes though, loss entails more than just the relationship we have given up. As hard as it can be to let go of the person we love(d), I think it is also difficult to let go of who we were in that relationship. It can be hard to live with what has happened to us. Nobody wants to think of himself or herself as a person who can get left by their spouse or as a person who can be cheated on by their partner. It may feel like accepting our situation is somehow condoning what happened to us. And so acceptance becomes a stage that we refuse to accept. We get stuck in anger, "if only that #&* hadn't done what he/she did" or denial, "maybe I was wrong to object to the ongoing affair" or bargaining, "if I never love anyone again, I'll never be hurt again" or even "if I refuse to take responsibility for my own happiness, then maybe someone will realize how unfair this has all been to me and FIX IT!" This last one can be particularly seductive. We feel paradoxically powerful in our refusal to move on.

The problem, of course, is that living angry, blaming yourself, or abdicating responsibility for your own life tends to beget more of the same. As we struggle against acceptance of what is true now, the struggle itself changes us. More of our attention becomes focused on holding on to the shreds of the past relationship, and we have less and less time and attention for anything else. Our outlook becomes smaller and smaller as we continually say no to new experiences and dig ever deeper into our emotional rut. We grow to like ourselves less. At some point, we become people that no one else wants to be around. Here is an excerpt from Honoring the Self, by Nathaniel Branden, that I like:

. . . If I can accept that I am who I am, that I feel what I feel, that I have done what I have done – if I can accept it whether I like all of it or not – then I can accept myself. I can accept my short-comings, my self-doubts, my poor self-esteem. And when I can accept all that, I have put myself on the side of reality rather than attempting to fight reality. I am no longer twisting my consciousness in knots to maintain delusions about my present condition.

Staying stuck and unhappy takes work to maintain over the long haul. We have to make the choice again and again to ruminate on the past and ignore the possibilities of the here and now.

The alternative is to *exhale, inhale, and repeat*, as often as necessary to relax and to begin thinking about the present. When we catch ourselves ruminating in our rut, we *exhale, inhale, and repeat* and consciously move our thoughts to the present. Summer offers a wealth of opportunities for connection and fun in the here and now – being outside, yard parties, swimming, playing hookey from work and lunching outdoors, reading novels by the swimming pool, communing with our dogs.

And so we clear the road and take our first steps back into life – *exhale, inhale, repeat . . .*