

Finishing Unfinished Business When Mourning

By Lou LaGrand

Was there something that was left unsaid before your loved one died? Or was there some act that was never apologized for, perhaps an argument, an old grudge, or an outright abuse? It is difficult in most human relationships not to look back and feel sorry for something that was said or left unsaid. And, if one person is no longer there to hear that you are sorry, your grief can grind to an unbearable halt. You feel as though weighed down by an anchor.

Getting unfinished business with a deceased loved one out in the open is often not an easy thing to do. However, achieving peace of mind and heart is always possible. It is essential to find ways to finish the unfinished--or that emotional baggage will prolong your suffering. It can also interfere with your present relationships that are extremely important as you cope with your loss.

Here is what you need to know to begin your journey to resolution.

1. Clarify exactly what you are feeling concerned about (or angry) with regard to the deceased. Write it down in detail for three reasons. First, it can help you more fully understand and think more deeply about the difficulty once it's on paper. Second, it can be useful if you decide to see a counselor to help you. Third, you can look back on it as the weeks and months go by, and you may well look at it from an altogether different perspective.
2. Decide if you are giving the problem more attention than it deserves. Try sharing your concern first with a close friend, one you trust and respect. Sometimes we feel bad about what might be a minor omission or really not an omission at all.

When my mother died, I could not remember the last time I had said to her, I love you. This bothered me to no end. A month after her death I finally went to a friend (a psychologist), who after listening intently said, "Lou, don't you think your mother knew how much you loved her?" That comment was a major factor in my gradually letting go of my anchor.

3. Become familiar with the ways that are commonly used to express the emotions in completing unfinished business. Talking to the deceased in what is called the empty chair technique, using art or poetry, writing a letter of apology or forgiveness (and later bury it at the grave or burn it and spread the ashes), using exercise or pillow pounding are all frequently used and accepted ways that can help you in your dilemma.
4. Give yourself and/or the deceased loved one the benefit of the doubt. Are you being realistic about the circumstances around which the incident occurred? We are all good at second guessing and using hindsight (like I should have taken him to another doctor or brought her home, or taken him to a different emergency room). Are your current feelings and emotions clouding your judgment? Look at the positive aspects of your loved one in light of the transgression. How

would he or she respond to your deep sense of unfinished business knowing all you did for him/her?

5. If you feel a sense of relief mixed in with your feelings, do not let guilt rob you of a normal human response. Yes, after all you have done, all the hard work, all the injections, all the lost sleep, all the problems with the medical establishment, and so on--it follows that a sense of relief is one common reaction. This guilt or other emotions associated with the sense of relief can exacerbate any unfinished business you may have.

6. Remember that finishing unfinished business sometimes means to forgive. Let the power of forgiveness play its role by forgiving yourself and/or the deceased. This act alone will change your life for the better. It is guaranteed, and I cannot emphasize this enough, you will be richer for it. And, you can assume, from the vantage point of where your deceased loved one is now--he/she forgives you. Truly forgiving takes time; keep saying it over and over out loud and silently, until in your heart you feel the truth.

Since unfinished business involves anything said or left unsaid that is considered an issue for you, search for a creative way to bring peace by saying exactly what you need to say to bring a sense of completion to the relationship. There is always something that can be done. If friends do not come up with an idea that helps, then go to a professional who can give many suggestions on how to reframe the issue and find release from your burden.

Although life is an unfinishedness, you have to establish a new relationship with the deceased. This is accomplished by using traditions, celebrations, and memories to keep him/her alive in your heart--and becoming an expert at loving in separation. That focus will also reduce the impact of any unfinished business.