Grief Relief: Looking For Laughter In Loss

By Allen Klein
Something to Laugh About

While I was writing my book, *The Courage to Laugh: Humor, Hope and Healing in the Face of Death and Dying*, my dad died. New Year’s Eve 1996, he was taken to the hospital. Nine days later, just hours after my mom called to tell me that he was looking better, my dad was no longer alive. After a frantic phone call to book a flight and only two hours of sleep, I got on a plane that took me from my California home to my mom’s condo in Florida and to the funeral.

I managed to hold back my tears until I was on the plane. There, however, amidst businessmen using telephones and the click of laptops, I sat sobbing.

So here I was, I thought, writing about humor and death while my dad died. The universe was testing me to see if I could find anything funny in the situation — and I was failing. I found nothing to laugh about as the shock of his death washed over me. Nothing funny, that is, until the flight attendant shoved a cup of hot liquid under my nose and demanded, “Here. Drink this. I guarantee it will help.”

“What is it?” I asked.

“Coffee and Bailey’s Irish Cream,” he said.

That’s when my tears mingled with laughter. First of all, it was seven o’clock in the morning — not exactly cocktail hour. Second, I laughed because I never drink coffee and, since I am lactose intolerant, I avoid dairy products — especially cream. I refused the attendant’s grief-relief remedy but there was something special about it anyway. The comic irony of it all made me laugh — not a laugh big enough to completely stop the tears but an inner laugh that felt comfortable and whispered that everything would be all right.

A Gift from the Universe

Then I had another cosmic chuckle. I realized that I was just handed the opening words for my book.

During the next few days, I cried a lot. I was feeling alone and very vulnerable. My mother kept saying not to cry but I allowed my tears to flow. I also noticed that in spite of the sadness of the situation, amusing incidents happened anyway. These drew me away from my tears and produced everything from a smile to a hearty guffaw.

One of the funniest incidents came as we were having a telephone conversation with the rabbi. In the Jewish religion, it is customary for the immediate family to sit Shivah for seven days after the funeral. Friends, relatives, and neighbors stop by to pay their condolences during this time. While informing the rabbi that my brother would be completing his Shivah in Connecticut, where he lives, my mom had a slip of the tongue. Instead of saying “Sitting Shivah,” she blurted out, “Shitting Sivah.” My brother and I immediately convulsed with laughter. My mom, realizing what she had said, shoved the phone in my hand. She was laughing too hard to speak.

For the next few days, as I was going through this roller coaster ride of tears and laughter, I learned several things about humor and grief.

I learned that it might take some time to find laughter after a loss. I learned, too, that it may not always be the fall-down-hold-your-belly kind of laughter that we had experienced when my mom got tongue-tied. Sometimes it’s only an inner chuckle. But whatever kind it is, it is there. It is there to provide a momentary respite from our grief. It is there to show us that indeed life goes on in spite of our loss. It is there to give us hope.

Nourishment for the Soul

If you have lost someone dear to you recently, I will not tell you to read *The Courage to Laugh* because, as the flight attendant told me, “I guarantee it will help.” No one can guarantee an instant grief remedy; I don’t think there is one. What I can say from my own experience, however, is that humor might help. Maybe it will give you hope to continue and a much-needed respite from your tears.

When a family is sitting Shivah, it is customary for condolence callers to bring food into the home so that the bereaved do not have to cook or prepare meals. While there, remembrances of the deceased are frequently discussed. Often it encompasses some lighthearted moments in the deceased’s life. Like the food that the condolence callers bring to provide nourishment for the body, I believe that the things they laugh about provide nourishment for the soul.
Fast Forward

It’s a dozen years, or so, after my father’s death and I’m attending a weeklong conference in San Diego, California. The phone in my hotel room rings at two-thirty in the morning. Without even answering it, I know exactly what has happened. My cousin Bernice has probably passed away. Just two weeks ago she was diagnosed with leukemia and she has been going downhill ever since.

Bernice had always been like the sister I never had. We grew up together, shared many a happy moment at a Broadway show, and enjoyed numerous fun-filled meals together. And even though she lived on the East Coast and I on the West, we were still very close.

Shortly after the phone call, I check out of the hotel and I’m on a plane to New York to arrange for the funeral and Bernice’s burial. I am in tears, but I’m thinking of the small picture hanging on my wall in the hallway that brings a small smile to my face every time I see it. It is of Bernice and some Disney-like character. The oversized bird’s bright yellow beak and Bernice’s nose are touching. Her face is glowing with laughter and joy. This photo is the essence of Bernice’s spirit — upbeat and playful. It is a wonderful reminder to me that, although Bernice’s body is gone, her bright spirit will remain forever.

For the next few days, I think of what Bernice once told me when I was a teenager. It was about her world excursions. She was the first person I knew who traveled by airplane. I used to stand on LaGuardia’s observation deck at the airport and wave to her as her plane took off. One day, I asked her if she was afraid that the plane might crash.

She said she wasn’t but that if it did, she would want it to be on the return flight so that she would not miss a moment of her vacation. That was Bernice, never missing a second of what life had to offer.

From Loss to Laughter

It was out of those thoughts and the lessons I learned from Bernice, about living fully, that came the impetus for my most recent book, Learning to Laugh When You Feel Like Crying. In that book, I show readers how to go from loss to laughter and how to embrace life after a loss. The five steps I talk about are losing, learning, letting go, living, and laughing.

Step One: LOSING

If you believe yourself unfortunate, because you have loved and lost, perish the thought. One who has loved truly, can never lose entirely.

— Napoleon Hill, American author

Losing a loved one is not easy. I know — I have had many losses in my life. The one that made the most impact on my life was my wife’s death when she was 34. In addition, my mother, my father, my four grandparents, my sister-in-law, several cousins, and both my mother-in-law and father-in-law have died, as well as over 40 friends and colleagues who are no longer here because of AIDS or cancer.

I don’t think we ever forget the people we lose. So in some sense, they are never gone. But, still, it hurts not to be able to see them, hear them, or hold them again.

Loss hurts. But it can also help us be stronger, wiser, and, if nothing else, more appreciative of every moment we have on this earth.

Step Two: LEARNING

Turn your wounds into wisdom.

— Oprah Winfrey, American television host

Every time you lose something, you are presented with an opportunity to acquire something new. With each loss, there is a golden opportunity for a new beginning. You may not realize it right now, but your loss is part of your growth process. In fact, your loss can be seen as a gift.

How could you possibly even think of loss as a gift? You have lost someone who was very dear to you. You have perhaps lost the one person in your life that meant everything to you. You have lost a significant part of who you were. It certainly doesn’t feel like a gift.

And yet, it is.

Your loss is serving you. It is helping you examine who you are, why you are on this earth, and how to live your life. Among other things, your loss has given you
• the gift of appreciating life more fully
• the gift of cleansing through mourning
• the gift of love.

The best thing you can do after reading this is to open the gift.
Step Three: LETTING GO

The longer we dwell on our misfortunes, the greater is their power to harm us.

— Voltaire, French philosopher

Crying is the body’s way of dealing with loss. It is unhealthy to squelch your tears. What you stifle today may come back in greater force tomorrow. But continuing to endlessly wallow in those tears is not healthy. At some point, you need to get on with your life.

There is a wonderful story in the Zen tradition about letting go. As two monks were walking down the road they noticed a woman waiting to cross a stream. To the dismay of one monk, the other went over to the woman, picked her up, and carried her across the stream. About a mile down the road, the monk who was aghast at his friend’s action remarked, “We are celibate, we are not supposed to even look at a woman, let alone pick one up and carry her across a stream. How could you possibly do that?”

The other monk replied, “I put the woman down a mile back. Are you still carrying her around with you?”

Today might be the day to take the first step, to let go, to move on.

Step Four: LIVING

I can choose to sit in perpetual sadness, immobilized by the gravity of my loss, or I can choose to rise from the pain and treasure the most precious gift I have … life itself.

— Walter Anderson, American magazine editor

The loss of someone close to you provides an opportunity for a new beginning and an enriched life. Once you start to work through your grief process, you can begin to fill the vacuum that was created by your loss with an even fuller sense of life.

Ultimately, in dealing with a loss, the choice is yours. No matter what the situation, you have a choice of how you react to it. You can remain in your grief and turn your face away from life or you can move on and embrace life.

Choose life.

Step Five: LAUGHING

Tragedy and comedy are but two aspects of what is real, and whether we see the tragic or the humorous is a matter of perspective.

— Arnold Beisser, American polio-disabled author

It may seem ludicrous putting laughter and loss in the same sentence. How can you possibly laugh after losing a loved one? Yet recent research by Dacher Keltner and George A. Bonanno shows that “the more widows and widowers laughed and smiled during the early months after their spouse’s death, the better their mental health was over the first two years of bereavement.”

Laughter is a great coping mechanism. Finding the humor in anything and laughing about it gives you a break from the pain of loss. It allows for a breath of fresh air at a time when everything seems dark and heavy.

Many of the world’s top comedians intuitively knew this when they experienced a major loss in their life. They turned to humor to cope and eventually perfected their craft and made comedy their career.

Your goal is probably not to become a stand-up comic, but you can take a lesson from these renowned comedians and use humor and laughter to help you to cope with your loss.

Laughter and humor are one of God’s gifts to help you overcome your trials and tribulations.

P.S. Need a laugh? Here are some humorous thoughts about death and dying from Woody Allen:

“I’m not afraid of dying; I just don’t want to be there when it happens.”

“I don’t believe in an afterlife, although I am bringing a change of underwear.”

“Birth is a fatal disease.”

About the Author: Allen Klein, MS, CPS
Comedian Jerry Lewis has said that Allen Klein is “a noble and vital force watching over the human condition.” Klein is the world’s only “Jolliologist,” and author of 17 books that have sold over 500,000 copies. They include: The Healing Power of Humor, The Courage to Laugh, Learning to Laugh When You Feel Like Crying, Inspiration for a Lifetime, and, Change Your Life!: A Little Book of Big Ideas. Klein is the recipient of a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Association for Applied and Therapeutic Humor, a Certified Speaking Professional designation from the National Speakers Association, and a Toastmaster’s Communication and Leadership Award. More information about Klein and his work can be found at www.allenklein.com.