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**ELEMENT: CREATING CONNECTIONS THAT HEAL**

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*“I suppose that since most of our hurts come through relationships so will our healing, and I know that grace rarely makes sense for those looking in from the outside.”*

—Wm. Paul Young,  
*The Shack*<sup>18</sup>

Like most things I’ve experienced in life, I’ve had to learn the hard way about how to integrate loss into my life. One of the biggest lessons I received after feeling so alone for so long after Brandon died was that grief doesn’t have to be lonely. It’s only lonely if you allow it to be so because there are actually people who understand the exact pain you’re feeling—there are people who have literally been there.

Almost immediately after Brandon died, I took very swift action to begin isolating myself. Unfortunately, a lot of people do this. My mind and broken heart were swimming—well, drowning—in unfamiliar emotions, and it seemed any amount of stimulus was overwhelming. My isolation began as a way to make sense of what felt out of control, but I also felt as if there was absolutely no one who could possibly understand what I was going through. So, with a finite amount of energy to expend, it was more energy-efficient to retreat than to try explaining what I was feeling.

Life has a way of preparing you for what is to come. Back when I was alongside my son Daniel in his struggles with drug use, I never dreamed how those experiences would teach me some of my go-to healing tools for integrating Brandon’s death into my life. As I look back on all the people, theories, practical advice, wisdom, and healing work that happened in the years leading up to Brandon’s death, it’s easy to believe there was a higher power at work making sure my family got what we needed for the upcoming chapter in our story.

One of the most insightful lessons I learned was shared with me by the family coach we hired when Daniel came home. Michael was equal parts wise shaman and gentle butt-kicker. His role was primarily to help Daniel successfully transition into “normal” life, but also to work with the family unit to make sure there was support for everyone. The funny thing about Michael was that I connected with him much more than Daniel ever did. As it turns out, I believe that was exactly the way the universe wanted it to work out. And let me tell you why.

It’s funny how flickers of time are imprinted into our memories that we later learn have major significance. One of my first memories of Michael is a time he had come to our house to visit

with Daniel. My little guy, Sam, was only a few months old. I remember holding Sam as Michael was getting up to leave, and Sam began to fuss a little bit. Michael threw him a look I will never forget—it was a dark look full of anger and disgust. It happened in a flash, but it was so pronounced and it was at such odds with the man I thought I was getting to know that it took my breath away. I remember thinking it was a good thing Michael didn't work with babies if that was his reaction to a fussing infant.

Two years later, I would learn what I really witnessed was the raw, fresh, cutting grief of a father who had lost his baby daughter (and almost his wife) during childbirth just a few months earlier, and his daughter would've been about the same age as Sam. It was very painful for him to see Sam while he was still in the throes of his own deep grief.

Then, when we found out about Brandon's death, I immediately reached out to the support system we had in place, but hadn't really used in almost two years. Michael was the first one to get back to me, and in my horrible raw grief, his words were like water to a five-alarm fire. I will never forget standing in my dining room on the phone with him, and him saying, "Paula, I get it. I lost my daughter two years ago." In that moment it was as if he had literally given me a resuscitation breath. My mind raced with questions of how Michael had not only survived, but was able to care for my family while in the throes of his own grief.

To this day when I talk to other parents who've lost children, I say the same thing to them that Michael said to me when we met up a few days later. "I promise you, you will feel differently. Right now, your child is in every thought and every moment. Over time, you will begin to go one moment without feeling your grief and thinking of your child, then two and three moments, until one day you will realize you've strung an entire hour together." It was true and it gave me something to measure and hold on to when it didn't feel like anything would ever change.

Whatever the type of loss you are facing, there are people who share your experience. Like my connection to Michael, there are people who've travelled this path ahead of you and others who will be alongside you. When you find the people who can sympathize with the kind of pain and emotional experience of your loss, it allows you to have hope and it gives you people with whom you can share the rest of your story.

Even though I was learning the value of connection after Brandon's death, I chose not to join a child loss support group right away. The truth is, and I'm not proud to say this, I didn't want to be "one of them." Remember how I went to Google for sage advice? The Google gods told me my loss was horrible and awful and child loss was a lifelong sentence of misery. With that mindset, and already feeling hopeless, it made no sense to me why I would go surround myself with "those people." Never mind the fact that they could have taught me so much and given me so much hope in a seemingly endless string of hopeless moments.

In Chapter 1, I shared with you the idea of Parts Work. One of my parts is what I refer to as my Lone Wolf. This part of me is very comfortable emotionally isolating myself, staying disconnected from people, and doing my own thing. Like all our parts, my Lone Wolf started

out as a way to help me navigate the isolation after my father died, but as time went on and I didn't integrate my father's loss well, the Lone Wolf became an easy place to go when emotions got tough. Lone Wolf always made sure that I was protected from ever getting my heart broken again—the way it did when my Dad died—by never really letting me get too deeply connected to anyone.

Most people have urges to isolate themselves in grief. It's instinctual and it takes effort to find ways to break the isolation and create connection. In this chapter I am going to share with you three different types of connections that propel our healing forward, often at light speed:

1. Connecting with a community of like loss.
2. Connecting with friends and family.
3. Connecting with your inner wisdom.

I learned the value of connection the hard way, and I wish that early on someone would've laid out the value of connections for me like I'm doing for you. It would've given me an outline of who to connect with when and what each group of people has to offer. It would've saved me a lot of heartache and hurt had I understood the importance of connection in our healing process.

Healing is a beautiful, sacred journey. As such, you get the privilege of carefully selecting the people who will support not just your healing, but your growth through this process. You will never be the same person you were before your loss—you are in a state of growth and integration. As a result, your grief is for the loss of your loved one, but also the loss of your old self. When you connect to others along this path, be mindful of what you need. As your healing journey unfolds, the type of connection that moves you will change. To help you start thinking about how you want your connections to look, let's consider three roles.

1. **The Guru:** This person is considered an expert in your area of need. It could be grief and loss, a specific type of loss (for example, suicide or cancer) or relationship (such as sibling, spouse, or child). A therapist, counselor or life coach is an example, but it could also be someone who has found another way to be of service and has education, tools, and resources for you.
2. **The Big Sister/Brother:** This person is someone who has experienced a similar loss, but might be a few steps ahead of you in their healing journey. You can have a mentoring relationship with this person.
3. **The Companion:** This person provides compassion, walks alongside you, but is also still learning and finding their own way after experiencing some type of loss. They can bring reassurance that you're not alone and what you're experiencing is normal.

You may also find yourself eventually acting in these roles at some point. When we give, we receive, and there is tremendous healing value in sharing what we've learned. Regardless of

the role you take and the support you seek, be aware that these are always positive relationships that don't get you stuck in someone else's grief spiral.

## CONNECTING WITH A COMMUNITY OF LIKE LOSS

One of the most incredible things about being connected to our healing needs by listening to our inner knowing is that it simultaneously supports our connections to others. As you know, I am a huge fan of Brené Brown's work. In her book, *Rising Strong: The Reckoning. The Rumble. The Revolution*,<sup>9</sup> she says this about the importance of connections:

*"The more difficult it is for us to articulate our experiences of loss, longing, and feeling lost to the people around us, the more disconnected and alone we feel. Of the coping strategies my research participants have shared with me, writing down experiences of heartbreak and grief have emerged as the most helpful in making clear to themselves what they were feeling so they could articulate it to others."*

My favorite part of that quote are the last six words, "so they could articulate it to others." Creating a deeper connection to ourselves is not enough when we are up against the huge task of integrating grief and loss. We must connect with others, but we must be somewhat strategic in how we do this so that we receive the biggest return on our investment of time and energy. The second concept of using connections for healing is that of connecting to a community of what I call, "like loss."

Like-loss communities are the people who most closely mirror our own experience in the way we need to express it. It is vital to our healing that we establish a connection with people who get our "after." Once you've experienced a loss, your life is divided into "before" and "after" your loss. Prior to your loss, you had no reason to be connected to these people; they were not a part of who you were or how you identify yourself. You might've even had opinions or judgments about the people who are in these like-loss communities.

For example, if you have lost a loved one to suicide, before your loss you might have had an opinion about the type of person who would take their own life, or what the surviving family members must be like. But now, these are your people—and that's good news! These are the people who are most likely to understand your experience—they get your "after."

One of the reasons support groups exist is that they provide an instant community of people with whom you share a life-changing experience. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, often becomes more important to a person striving for sobriety than the family members who love them. Although their family loves them and doesn't want to see them suffer, it's their community of like loss that can fully appreciate the struggles and pain of the day-to-day in maintaining sobriety.

You need people—sometimes a small army—who don't need an explanation when you show up, throw your hands in the air, pound your hands and feet on the ground, or hang your head,

and say, “This sucks.” They just nod their heads knowing what that means in the context of your life experience.

It’s also valuable to have people you can go to and share how you’re feeling and find out that what you’re experiencing or feeling is normal. I have a group of friends with whom I can let my guard down, make irreverent comments, and make jokes about my situation that would make outsiders bristle and feel uncomfortable.

A like-loss community could be a local support group that meets live on a weekly or monthly basis, but it could also be a Facebook group or other online community. And you can expect to have to try a few before you find the one that fits you perfectly. A little bit like Goldielocks!

For example, I have gotten to know an incredible mom who lost her son in a very public mass shooting. Her situation is so unique and multi-dimensional she could fit into many different types of like-loss communities—child loss, gun violence, loss to murder, etc. She has had to be very selective about the communities she becomes involved with, in part because of the public nature of her situation, but all of what makes this so complicated is also the very reason finding a community who understands her “after” is essential to creating the support she needs to move forward.

Another example is of a woman I recently met who had lost her veteran husband to suicide. For the first couple years after her husband died, she attended a support group for suicide loss. She said that at first she felt like, although they weren’t military, she needed the support of people who understood the uniqueness of a loss to suicide. After a while she didn’t feel like this group was helping her anymore and that she needed something different to continue to integrate her grief. She found a group that provides support for military loss and began to connect with them online and at local events (TAPS: Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors). In this group she said she felt more connected with people who had also lost a person who had served in the military. And, who knows, as time goes on, she might need to explore other options.

This woman’s story also brings up an essential element of like-loss communities. In order for you to benefit from this connection, it must be allowing and encouraging you to grow and integrate your experience into your life. One of the major complaints I hear about child loss support groups is that they get stuck simply ruminating over how horrible child loss is and don’t allow for productive and positive healing opportunities. This was the very thing that turned me away from finding a group for four years after losing Brandon—my initial Google search of surviving child loss led me to some depressive, stagnant, wallowing groups that weren’t uplifting. This could be true for any support group, not just child loss.

Later, I found that there were groups that fit exactly what I needed. Evaluating the culture of a group is very important when deciding if it’s a good fit for where you are and what you need. Another consideration is where you are along your journey. What you need in the way of support will be different in your early grief than it will be later on. It would be a totally normal

progression for you to join a group that feels wonderful at the time, but then over time you outgrow it.

Like-loss communities can also provide you with an opportunity to give back to others who come after you. I am a strong proponent of the idea that helping others helps heal ourselves. I believe that getting to the place in our loss integration where we are able to extend support and share knowledge or wisdom can be a huge turning point in our healing journey.

I would encourage you to begin to use the mindset that arriving at a place where you feel you can give back is an important milestone along this journey. I don't believe we should aspire to heal quickly, but to heal thoroughly. Healing thoroughly means we are self-reliant enough in the healing work we've done that setting aside our own pain to help another doesn't threaten to throw us off course in our own healing journey. Helping another doesn't mean we've mastered our own work or that we are finished; it simply means that we are able to recognize the value in helping someone else along this path.

## **CONNECTING WITH FRIENDS AND FAMILY**

Relationships with friends and family often become treacherous terrain after a loss. What our like-loss communities are to our "after," our friends and family are to our "before." These are the people who often knew us at our happiest and have been a part of our lives for years. We feel like they know us better than anyone. It's easy to make the assumption that, if they know us better than anyone and have been part of our lives for a long time, they automatically know what this experience is like for us. The result in our mind is that they will behave exactly the way we want and need them to and provide us with exactly the type of support we want.

Unfortunately, this is not how it works, and when you expect this you are setting yourself up for hurt. The family and friends in our lives do provide an essential element of support and healing, but sometimes we have to get out of our own way so that these incredible people can support us. Let me explain what I mean.

Too many times I have heard the sadness in someone's voice when they share with me about losing a best friend or about a family member who says something like, "We'd love to have you come for Thanksgiving, but it's time you move on. We just can't take your sadness anymore." I had a mom at one of my retreats share about how a best friend of 25 years just vanished after the death of her daughter. Then when she bumped into at the grocery store, the friend told her to call, "When you're back to your old self and we can have fun again."

Of course I have also heard incredible stories of families coming together and relationships being mended because of the loss of a loved one. Loss often reminds us life is too short to hold grudges and resentments.

My own experience with friends and family has been very positive. As you could've guessed, I was no joy to be around and it's a reflection of how amazing my friends are that I still have any friends at all. Actually, one of my greatest blessings in my healing process has been the deepening of my friendships. My friend Beth and I were always close before Brandon died,

and she had been along for all of Daniel's adventures as well. But it was in her tenacity to bear down and hold on to me at my absolute lowest points that has really deepened our friendship. And believe you me—I gave it my best shot to be mean, nasty, and downright hateful in an effort to fulfill my belief that she didn't have what it took to withstand this storm.

At every step of the way, however, Beth kept showing up and providing love when I was totally unlovable. Recently she described how she imagined our relationship during the hardest times. She imagined having a string tied between us and she would let me go deep into my grief—she intuitively knew I had to go there—but then she would tug on the string and pull me back to safety.

Today Beth and I are closer than ever and I am deeply grateful that she didn't run away screaming when I did everything I could to push her away.

I did lose one friend during the process. When I was in the deepest, darkest part of my early grief, this friend lashed out at me over a comment that I made on Facebook. This is a friend I had had for years who knew my family intimately. Her reaction was hurtful and unsupportive. It was painful to let the friendship go, but it was clear she was incapable of providing the love and support I needed to move through my experience.

*It's very important to give yourself permission to filter who is worthy of your grief journey.*

It doesn't have to mean the permanent end to the relationship, and you can be kind about it, but you deserve to select your team of supporters.

Most of our friends and family mean well and are doing the best they know how with the skills they have. The skills any of us have at any given moment are a culmination of our life experiences. We need to let go of wondering why they can't just say and do the perfect thing—they might not have the experiences they need to allow them to do that.

In addition to expecting others to know what we need, we use OUR life experiences as the reference point. The perfect example of using our own life to scale others' experiences is the comment, "I know how you feel, I lost my: dog/cat/goldfish/great-aunt/teddy bear/etc." The person who uses this line is trying to connect with you based on his/her own experience of loss. That is the best that person can do with the experiences they have, even though the comment might not otherwise resonate well with you in that moment.

Be realistic about what your friends' strengths are and how they can support you. Perhaps you have a dear friend who is terrible at being able to sit in the fire with you when your grief is burning hot, but she is the number one person you call when you need a babysitter or a last minute favor. She is showing up in the best way she can; honor that in her and don't make her the bad guy when she can't do what she doesn't know how to do.

Another perspective we need to acknowledge is that our loss can possibly bring up some scary realities for our family and friends, including unresolved grief they may have. The loss of a

child, spouse, parent, or friend has the potential to make other people feel weak, defenseless, and helpless. It challenges their sense of control and makes them face their own greatest fears of losing a loved one. For them to stand with our pain, they must touch a place in themselves that could be very painful and they don't want to go to.

I was guilty of being this person before my son died, and I'm sure I didn't show up in the best way possible for friends who needed me. Back then, like your friends now, I had a choice of how much reality I let into my world. But after we lose a loved one, we no longer get to choose the amount of vulnerability we expose ourselves to; the death of a loved one mandates that we step fully into vulnerability and fear. And I'm not talking putting our toe in the water—it's a cannonball-type of immersion!

As I'm sure you've experienced, the death of a loved one can shatter deeply-held beliefs about how life is supposed to happen. When cancer slowly draws the last breath out of a young person or a freak accident happens in less than a wink of the Grim Reaper's eye and steals someone's sister or brother, we have no choice but to inhale the vulnerability of being human.

A while back, I reached out to a core group of friends who went through my grief with me. I asked them what that was like. The answers I got were astounding and shed some light on what it was like for those around me to bear witness to my pain. One of the answers I got was so unexpected that it took me quite a while to process it.

I knew that I had been a horrible person to be around and that my anger and depression must have felt like spending time locked in a cage with a Tasmanian Devil. But what I didn't expect is what one friend shared about bringing up her own unresolved grief. Here is what Shonna said:

*“As time went on, I felt it was more and more difficult to see you. We had gotten together and talked about the details of Brandon's death; I was completely blown away when the description of the night he died was so similar to my brother Ryan's passing. This threw me into a tailspin with my own unprocessed grief. I felt like we were both so very damaged, like we both carried a terrible secret, and being in the presence of one another was a mirror that reflected our secret to the rest of the world. It was unbearable.*

*Time passed. I think it was as much as a year before I saw you again. It was good to see you and the rawness of everything had dulled. I think I got to get to know you again as the changed person you had become, and I could understand that because I knew I was also changing and that you would understand it, without me needing to explain or even mention it.*

*Now when I see you I'm so proud of who you've become and you still reflect my own experience but the reflection is that of two amazing, strong women who have been through the fire, true survivors.”*

Until I read Shonna's comments, it never occurred to me that she and I had lost touch during that time because my experience had brought up her unresolved grief around her brother's death. Lucky for both of us, we have since rekindled a wonderful friendship and she is one of the most deeply soulful, beautiful women I know.

I realize it might not fit with the dynamics of your friends and family to send out a questionnaire like I did—by now my friends expect this sort of weirdness—and ask them what it's like for them to witness your loss experience. The bigger lesson to incorporate is to extend your thinking beyond your own experience. Rather than get angry at friends or family who can't or don't support you the way you need, consider acknowledging that 1) they are doing the best they can do with the experience they have, and 2) your experience might be bringing up unresolved issues for them.

## **HOW TO GET OTHERS TO UNDERSTAND**

You don't. And frankly, it's not your responsibility to get them to understand, and it's not their job to try to understand that which they cannot. Your job is to continue to do the hard work of healing the rest of your life and reap the benefits of doing the work. Their job is to be there only in ways they know how.

Your job is NOT to make your grief journey about what or how other people respond to you. If you want to make it about how other people are reacting, then do that by your own actions. Your authenticity and truth about what heals you and owning your journey will make people take notice—in a positive, cultural paradigm-shifting way.

Being angry, resentful, bitter, and complaining that people don't act the way you want does two things:

1. It prevents you from getting curious about your own process and learning the lessons you need to heal.
2. You create your own suffering by expecting other people's validation of your hurt and healing to be what cures you.

Demonstrate how vulnerability can create deeper empathy for others' suffering by embracing your healing. This journey isn't about changing other people—it's about changing yourself for the better. Work to become a better, more compassionate citizen of the world because of your loss.

*Yours is a sacred healing journey, not a Disneyland vacation. Choose your companions wisely.*

You could go to Disneyland with just about anyone and everything would be ponies and rainbows. The sacred journey of deep healing decrees that we carefully select our cohorts. For these types of journeys, it's better to have a small group of fierce healing warriors—your like-loss community—who intimately know the battle you're fighting, than a thousand fans cheering you on from the sideline. And the truth is, we need both.

I am not suggesting that you unfriend people who aren't able to stand in the fire with you. Rather, cast the characters in your life story in the roles they can best play. We need all types of people in our healing journey.

We need our friends and family as they are the bridge to our life before our loss. These people can share stories and memories of our loved one. They can help us remember the good times and the tough ones, and they help us remember who we are underneath our loss.

Most importantly, seek to surround yourself with those who can stand in the fire with you. Join a support group or an online community, attend a retreat, or do whatever you need to do to cast the other roles that your current friends and family can't fill.

### **CONNECTING WITH YOUR INNER WISDOM**

Early in loss, the feelings of grief are physically and emotionally so overwhelming that it's next to impossible to feel anything except the grief. As time moves on and you begin to integrate your loss into your day-to-day life, it's important you begin to build space in your life to create an intimate connection with your inner wisdom. Cultivating this touch point will guide you toward what you need to integrate this experience.

Inner wisdom is our internal compass, or you could call it your "gut reaction." Except that most of us only listen to our gut when it's a big decision or when the stakes are high and we forget that our inner wisdom is guiding us in everyday decisions. When we look at the Parts Work concept, our inner wisdom sits at the right hand of our soul's purpose. When we are in tune with all the parts that make us who we are, we are healing, growing, and integrating from a place of authenticity and our inner wisdom helps us determine the best next step to keep us on course.

We all have a map in our minds of where we want to go in life. In the case of integrating our loss into our life, the journey on the map is about navigating life after loss and finding joy again. But having a map and a destination does not guarantee success if you don't have tools, like a compass, that will show you what direction you need to move in order to progress through your journey. Without seeking to connect to our inner wisdom, our map is just a piece of paper with no real value.

My favorite example of the importance of using our inner guidance system is Cheryl Strayed's book *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*.<sup>20</sup> If you missed the book, perhaps you saw the movie with Reese Witherspoon. Cheryl shares the raw story of how, after losing her mother in her early twenties and self-medicating and numbing herself into almost ruining her life, she sets off to hike the entire length of the Pacific Crest Trail (2,650 miles). She had gotten so completely disconnected from her inner wisdom that she took extreme measures to reconnect to that guidance system and find a way to use it to guide her towards the healing she needed to integrate her loss—and subsequent string of bad choices—into her life now and move forward in a way that allowed her to find joy again.

In the book Cheryl says, “I’d finally come to understand what it had been: a yearning for a way out, when actually what I had wanted to find was a way in.” I’m hopeful that you are not so far off course that you need to go for a 2,650-mile hike, but if you do, please send a postcard!

In our grief, we might be tempted to go outside of ourselves to escape. We might be tempted to do things that are out of character to disconnect with our inner wisdom and hide from our sad realities. These instincts occur at times when we need to connect with our inner wisdom the most—when our inner wisdom is gently tapping us on the shoulder and whispering to us what we really need to heal.

Connecting with your inner wisdom starts small. It starts with accepting you already possess all the wisdom and knowledge you need to heal. I know you might not feel this way; I know that your lack of belief in this truth is probably why you bought this book. You probably bought this book because you hoped I would give you “the secret” to a happy life after loss, or because you thought I held some special key that you lack. But I see your desire to heal differently than you do. I see you seeking a way to tap into your own wisdom to do what you already know how to do.

You see, I have this belief that we are only attracted to the things that, in some form, already exist in us. If you are reading this book, I believe that on some level there is a familiarity about these ideas that invites you to explore further because it resonates with something deep within you.

Using this thinking, I want you to begin to shift your thinking from believing that you don’t have what you need to heal to believing you *do*—you just haven’t quite uncovered it yet. This is a powerful mindset shift that allows you to plug in to and bring to light what already exists in you.

When you are able to carve out intentional space to listen and feel for your sweet, quiet voice of inner wisdom, you will begin to take back control of your life. You will improve and reestablish this vital connection when you engage in activities that reduce outside distractions. You begin to not just give yourself permission to speak your truth to yourself, but also take action on that truth, own it, and bring it to life.

Your inner wisdom has not left you, it’s always been there for you. As you begin to explore how to elevate this power for healing, consider how you best receive information. Do you learn best when you hear information (auditory), see it (visual), or use movement to process it (kinesthetic)? Use this type of information processing to jumpstart a conversation with your inner wisdom. Some suggestions to get you started:

- Go for a walk—bonus points if you can get into nature.
- Journal
- Connect to your breath
- Doodle or create art (think adult coloring books!)

- Meditate

Start small when connecting to your inner wisdom, maybe with only a few minutes of these activities. While doing these activities pay attention to the presence of a "gut feeling" or "little voice" that feels vaguely familiar and comforting. As you become re-acquainted with your inner wisdom you will naturally want to spend more time opening up the lines of communication.

A simple next step is to ask it very basic yes/no questions. For example, "Do I need to eat a second serving of ice cream?" Or perhaps you're approaching a special day that would have been spent with your loved one. With a simple yes/no question, ask what your inner wisdom wants you to know. For example, "Should I spend my loved one's birthday alone with my feelings? Do I need family and friends for support?" You will feel the right answer. When you get the answer, tune into how you knew it was right. Was it a feeling in your belly or heart space? What is a voice? How did it make you feel to get the answer?

The other way we improve our connection with our inner wisdom is to reduce the amount of self-medicating and numbing activities that we do to go outside of ourselves. As I have already shared, I did more than my fair share of these self-medicating activities early in my grief. With so many angry outbursts, emotional eating, and booze, my poor little inner voice wasn't ever going to be heard over my pounding headaches, stomach aches, and hangovers! But when I began to lessen the grip of these activities and create space and peace for my inner knowing to speak up, the weight of my grief immediately shifted and I began to find clarity about what I really needed to heal.

When we overindulge in self-medicating activities, we are distancing ourselves from our inner wisdom. Remember that this is our grief trying to help, but we know better. It's a cry for help we must pay attention to. The real reason we do this is because we are afraid of what our inner wisdom will say to us. But our inner wisdom will never tell us anything that will hurt us. Yes, the healing process is often painful and our inner wisdom is our greatest healer, but believe me when I say that avoiding our inner wisdom will lead to deeper and more strenuous pain.

### **HOW THE CONNECTION TO SELF, LIKE LOSS, AND FRIENDS AND FAMILY OVERLAP**

I just shared with you the three main areas of connection— like loss, friends and family, and inner wisdom. These three connections do not act independently, nor do you work sequentially through them; there is definite overlap. This is a good thing. Each one supports the other and as our grief evolves and we continue to develop our relationship with it, we will find the time we spend in each type of these connections is fluid and ever changing.

For example, a woman in my Crazy Good Grief community (an example of like-loss connection) participated in a series of live conference calls I hosted. In one of the calls, we had a guest speaker who shared her thoughts regarding what happens to us after a tragedy and how we recover. Our speaker was a well-respected PhD in the area of growth after tragedy.

A few days later, the woman who was listening emailed me and said she hoped I didn't take offense, but she didn't agree with what the woman had said about how we recover from tragedy. The information didn't align with her spiritual beliefs and she didn't feel it was helpful for how she thought about the topic. What she had done was use her connection to a like-loss community for support and to learn something new, then she had taken that information back to process it using her inner wisdom. The result was a better understanding of what heals her and how she can find support. She didn't agree, but the important part was that she was listening to her inner wisdom.

Although I didn't hear from other people on that call, it's safe to assume that others heard the message, bounced it off their inner wisdom and had a different result. Or that someone wasn't feeling clear with their inner wisdom, but the guest speaker brought up thoughts or ideas that helped clarify something for them.

We need all of these connections to move us through the healing process and we need to be open to the evolution of these connections.

**ELEMENT IN ACTION:**

- To connect with your inner wisdom, you must reduce outside distractions and noise. List three activities you enjoy or would like to try that calm your mind.
- List the types of like-loss communities you might fit into. For example: groups for widows, sibling support, suicide, military, child loss, overdose death, gun violence, depression, etc.
  - Now research local and online resources that sound interesting to you.
- List three or four ways you can use your family for support that doesn't include them "getting it."
- Affirmations to shift your mindset:
  - My inner wisdom will guide me.
  - I have all the answers within me.
  - I am stronger when surrounded by love.
  - We are all doing the best we can with what we know.
  - Write your own!

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