

The Capacity to Love The Reason We Grieve

By Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD

“Every time we make the decision to love someone, we open ourselves to great suffering, because those we most love cause us not only great joy, but also great pain. The greatest pain comes from leaving... the pain of the leaving can tear us apart. Still, if we want to avoid the suffering of leaving, we will never experience the joy of loving. And love is stronger than fear, life stronger than death, hope stronger than despair. We have to trust that the risk of loving is always worth taking.”—Henri Nouwen

“All you need is love,” famously sang the Beatles. I couldn’t agree more. We come into the world yearning to give and receive love. Authentic love is God’s greatest gift to us as human beings. Love is the one human experience that invites us to feel beautifully connected and forces us to acknowledge that meaning and purpose are anchored not in isolation and aloneness, but in union and togetherness.

What higher purpose is there in life but to give and receive love? Love is the essence of a life of abundance and joy. No matter what life brings our way, love is our highest goal, our most passionate quest. Yes, we have a tremendous need for love—love that captures our hearts and nourishes our spirits.

In fact, our capacity to give and receive love is what ultimately defines us. Nothing we have “accomplished” in our lifetime matters as much as the way we have loved one another.

Yet love inevitably leads to grief. You see, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin. One does not—and cannot—exist without the other. People sometimes say that grief is the price we pay for the joy of having loved. This also means that grief is not a universal experience. Grief is predicated on our capacity to give and receive love. Some people choose not to love and so never grieve. If we allow ourselves the grace that comes with love, however, we must allow ourselves the grace that is required to mourn.

The experience of grief is only felt when someone of great value, purpose, and meaning has been a part of your life. To mourn your loss is required if you are to befriend the love you have been granted. To honor your grief is not self-destructive or harmful, it is life-sustaining and life-giving, and it ultimately leads you back to love again. In this way, love is both the cause and the antidote. Just as our greatest gift from God is our capacity to give and receive love, it is a great gift that we can openly mourn our life losses.

It is important to understand that grief and mourning are not the same thing, however. Grief is the constellation of thoughts and feelings we have when

someone we love dies. We can think of it as the container. It holds our thoughts, feelings, and images of our experience when someone we love dies. In other words, grief is the internal meaning given to the experience of loss. Mourning is taking the grief we have on the inside and expressing it outside of ourselves.

Making the choice not just to grieve, but to authentically mourn, provides us the courage to live through the pain of loss and be transformed by it. How ironic that to ultimately go on to live well and love well we must allow ourselves to mourn well. You have loved from the outside in, and now you must learn to mourn from the inside out. ★

About the Author



Dr. Alan Wolfelt is a respected author and educator on the topic of healing in grief. He serves as Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is on the faculty at the University of Colorado’s School of Medicine. Dr. Wolfelt has written many books designed to help people mourn well so they can continue to love and live well, including *Loving from the Outside In*, *Mourning from the Inside Out*, from which this article is excerpted. Visit www.centerforloss.com to order Dr. Wolfelt’s books.