

## CHAPTER 8

# Saying Hello Again When We Have Lost Someone We Love

THE CONCEPT OF “saying hello again” to a lost loved one can transform the experience of grief. It can also assist us to see how we are carrying on the legacies of those we have loved. This chapter invites you to experience a different way of relating to grief and loss. It offers you the chance to “say hello again” to the person who has passed away and to see yourself, once again, through their loving eyes. To introduce this idea, let’s meet Mary and then John, two people who spoke with Michael White in therapy. Here is what Michael says about Mary:<sup>1</sup>

*Mary was forty-three years old when she sought help for what she described as “unresolved loss.” Some six years earlier, her husband, Ron, had died suddenly from heart failure. This was entirely unexpected. Until that time, everything had been fine for Mary. She and Ron had enjoyed a “rich and loving” friendship, one that they both valued very highly.*

*Upon Ron’s death, Mary’s world fell apart. Grief-stricken and feeling “numbed,” she “simply went through the motions of life,” not experiencing consolation from any quarter. Her*

*numbness survived a number of attempts to “work through” her grief via counselling. Medication had not provided relief. Despite this, Mary persisted in her attempts to achieve some sense of well-being by consulting therapists and “working on acceptance” over the next five years.*

*At my first meeting with Mary, she said that she had all but given up hope that she would ever regain even a semblance of well-being. She thought she would never be able to say good-bye. After Mary put me in touch with her despair, I invited her to escape the “deadly serious” consequences of Ron’s death.*

*I wondered aloud whether saying good-bye was a helpful idea anyway, and about whether it might be a better idea to say hello to Ron. Further, I told Mary that the desolation she so keenly experienced might mean that she had said good-bye just too well. Mary’s response was one of puzzlement and surprise. Had she heard what she thought she had? I repeated my thoughts and saw, for the first time, a spark in her.*

*I then asked if she would be interested in experimenting with saying hello to Ron, or if she thought he was buried too deep for her to entertain this idea. Mary began to sob; it was easy sobbing, not desperate. I waited. After ten or fifteen minutes, she suddenly said, “Yes, he’s been buried too deep for me.” She smiled and then said that it might be helpful to “dig him up a bit.” So I began to ask some questions:*

- If you were seeing yourself through Ron’s eyes right now, what would you be noticing about yourself that you could appreciate?
- What difference would it make to how you feel if you were appreciating this in yourself right now?

- What do you know about yourself that you are awakened to when you bring alive the enjoyable things that Ron knew about you?
- What difference would it make to you if you kept this realization about yourself alive on a day-to-day basis?
- What difference would feeling this way make in the steps that you could take to get back into life?
- How could you let others know that you have reclaimed some of the discoveries about yourself that were clearly visible to Ron, and that you personally find attractive?
- How would being aware of that which has not been visible to you for the past six years enable you to intervene in your life?
- What difference will knowing what you now know about yourself make in the next step you take?
- In taking this next step, what else do you think you might find out about yourself that could be important for you to know?

*Mary struggled with these questions through alternating bursts of sadness and joy. Over the two subsequent sessions, she shared with me the important rediscoveries that she was making about herself and life. At follow-up some twelve months later, Mary said, "It's strange, but when I discovered that Ron didn't have to die for me, that I didn't have to separate from him, I became less preoccupied with him and life was richer."*

When John came to therapy with Michael, the problem he initially came to speak about was not grief at all.<sup>2</sup>

*John was thirty-nine years old when he consulted me about long-standing "difficulties with self-esteem." He couldn't recall not having a critical attitude toward himself. Throughout his life he had hungered for approval and recognition from others. For this,*

*he hated himself all the more, believing that he lacked substance as a person and that this was clearly apparent to others.*

*John considered himself loved by his wife and children and believed that his experience of parenting had gone some way toward countering his nagging self-doubt—but it never went far enough. His self-doubt was so easily triggered by what he considered to be the most trivial of circumstances. On various occasions he had sought professional advice, but he had not experienced the relief that he was seeking.*

*In view of the long history of John's self-rejection, I asked for further details about his life. He told me that, as far as he knew, he had had a happy childhood until the death of his mother at the tender age of seven, just before his eighth birthday. No one in the family had coped with this at all well and, for a time, John's father had been a lost person to everyone, including himself. John had vivid recall of the events surrounding his mother's death. He had experienced disbelief for a considerable time, always expecting that she would show up around the next corner. He then became entirely heartbroken. Eventually his father remarried to a caring person, "but things were never really the same again."*

*I asked John what difference it would have made in how he felt about himself now if his mother hadn't died. At this point, he began to get tearful. I asked him, didn't he think she might have gone missing from his life for too long? Was it really helpful for her to remain absent from his life? He looked surprised. Would he mind if I asked more questions? "No, that would be fine." I proceeded with the following:*

- What did your mother see when she looked at you through her loving eyes?

- How did she know these things about you?
- What can you now see in yourself that had been lost to you for many years?
- What difference would it make in your relationships with others if you carried this knowledge with you in your daily life?
- How would this make it easier for you to be your own person rather than a person who exists for others?
- What could you do to introduce others to this new picture of yourself as a person?
- How would bringing others into this new picture of your person enable you to nurture yourself more?
- In what way would such an experience of nurturing yourself affect your relationship with yourself?

*I met with John on three further occasions at two-week intervals, and then for a follow-up eight months later. Over this time, he took various steps to keep his mother's "picture" of him in circulation, and arrived at a new relationship with himself, one that was self-accepting rather than self-rejecting. He no longer felt vulnerable to those events that had previously driven him into self-doubt.*

Mary's and John's stories are two examples of "saying hello again" conversations. Is there someone who was dear to you but is no longer alive? Have you taken steps to say good-bye to this person, as we are encouraged to do in Western culture? Would you be interested in saying hello to them again?

I am referring here to people who were good to us while they were alive. If we have lost people we love who were good to us some of the time but abusive to us at other times, then



## About Saying Hello Again

The idea of “saying hello again” to someone who has passed away may sound strange. In recent times, within Western culture, the dominant metaphor of grieving has involved only “saying good-bye.” We are often invited to undertake a step-by-step process of saying good-bye, moving on, and accepting a reality that no longer includes the lost loved one. In his work as a therapist, however, Michael White discovered that some people struggle profoundly with trying to say good-bye to those who have died, and that, in these circumstances, saying hello again can be highly significant. This idea is supported by the work of anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1982):

Freud . . . suggests that the completion of the mourning process requires that those left behind develop a new reality which no longer includes what has been lost. But . . . it must be added that full recovery from mourning may restore what has been lost, maintaining it through incorporation into the present. Full recollection and retention may be as vital to recovery and wellbeing as forfeiting memories. (p. 111)

Of course, when someone we love dies, there is much to say good-bye to, including a material reality, hopes and expectations, and so on. So perhaps what we are really discussing here is a process of “saying good-bye and then saying hello again.”

## We Are Not Alone

One of the effects of grief and loss can be a sense of profound loneliness and isolation. As well as saying hello again to those we have lost, sometimes it can make a difference to share and exchange different ways that people have responded to losses. Perhaps what you have learned about

grief could assist someone else who is going through difficult times now.

Because of past and current injustices, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in Australia face unbearable losses of loved ones. In recent years, these communities have begun to share some of their special skills in responding to these losses. Stories, documents, and songs are being shared across the nation to offer company, solace, solidarity, and valuable ideas about how to get through times of profound sorrow.

One of the most influential documents came from the Port Augusta Aboriginal community. Carolynanha Johnson played a key part in its development<sup>3</sup> and has given her permission for this extract to be shared here:

### **Responding to So Many Losses**

#### **Special Skills of the Port Augusta Aboriginal Community**

*Recently, there have been so many losses in our families and in our community. Some of these deaths have been particularly difficult as they have been deaths of young people, and death through suicide or violence. We have experienced so many losses, one after the other. It has been a real struggle to get through. There has been too much sadness. This document has been created from a discussion we had together in Port Augusta to talk about our grief, what is important to us, and the ways in which we have been responding to so many losses.*

#### **Asking Questions**

*When some deaths seem particularly unfair, when it seems so very wrong, it can make it harder to continue with life.*



*When the person who has died should still be with us, this can leave us not knowing where to look, not knowing where to go or who to turn to. At times like this, all we have left are questions: Why did this happen? What is going wrong if our young people are having such a hard time? How can we support other young people? What steps can be put in place to ensure this doesn't happen to others? These are important questions. They show respect for the person who has died. They show respect for all young people. They show respect for life.*

### **Dreams**

*Some of us have dreams in which our loved ones visit us. Even though they have passed away, they come to us in our dreams. We dream of walking together again across the land. These images sustain us; they convince us that we will walk together again one day. Sometimes we also have a sense that our lost loved one is communicating with us—telling us that everything is all right. On the anniversary of people's deaths, sometimes our loved one comes back to us in our dreams to tell us they are going now and not to worry about them. This can lift a weight from our shoulders. We know they are now okay. Sometimes our dreams have a different sort of message. One of us even dreamt that a lost loved one saw us at the pokies [poker machines at a casino]. He gave one of us a slap and then left! That seems a pretty clear message! Mostly, though, our loved ones offer us comfort through dreams. Even though they are no longer with us here on earth, they are still offering us comfort. Sometimes we also feel a touch on our shoulders and know it is our mother's touch. Or we feel her rubbing our back as she always did when we were children. Feeling the*

*kindness of loved ones in our dreams or through their touch helps us to continue with our lives.*

### **Spirituality**

*For some of us, spiritual beliefs and practices are what help us to get through. Faith that one day we will meet again with those who have passed away sustains us. Acts of prayer are also significant. Knowing that someone is listening and will answer our prayers can make a difference.*

### **Crying Together**

*When one of us is feeling low, others feel it too. We have skills in feeling each other's pain and suffering. In this way we share grief. I remember one time, I was sitting in front of a photograph of my mother and crying when my relatives walked in. They sat down beside me, put their arms around me, and started to cry too. "What are we crying about?" they said. I told them, and we sat in sadness together.*

### **Tears and Laughter**

*For us, tears and laughter go together. As well as sharing sorrow together, we also re-tell the funny stories from a person's life. It's important we don't forget these funny stories. We talk about the good times, we laugh; this makes us feel sad, and then we laugh again. Sometimes looking at a particular photograph might bring tears, another time a burst of laughter! For us, tears and laughter go together. There are many very funny stories. For instance, when we asked one of our young ones if he could remember his grandfather's voice and what he used to say, this young one said, "Yes, sure, I remember him. I remember him saying, 'Can you shut up, you bastard!'" It*

*was very funny! Another time, we were coming back from a funeral on a bus and there was a lot of laughter as we hurried along. As the bus was going a little too fast, one young guy yelled out, "I don't think Grandpa wants to see us again quite so soon; we only just said good-bye to him!" There are many ways in which we grieve with tears and laughter.*

### **They Are With Us Forever**

*Because we love them so much, we may grieve forever for those who have died. But we will never forget them. They might not be here with us, but we have them in our hearts and in our minds.*

### **Exchanging Stories and Knowledge**

These stories from Port Augusta were shared not only with other Aboriginal communities in Australia but also in the United States. Messages have been sent back and forth, including the following words from Julie Moss of the Keetoowah Band of the Cherokee:

*My name is Julie Moss. I am an Indigenous woman of North America. I am a Keetoowah Cherokee. We came originally from the Southeast of the USA but were forcibly removed just a few short generations ago and marched to Oklahoma Indian Territory, which is where we are now. We still follow and practice traditional ways. I am the wife of one of the leaders of our ceremonies. We have this message for you.*

*We send greetings and good tidings to you from here in Indian country, Oklahoma. I send greetings on behalf of the Keetoowah Band of the Cherokee.*

*Our hearts go out to your community, including your elders and ancestors. Thank you for sharing with us your visions*

*and dreams. We honor these. In your words we have sensed a strength in traditions and ceremonies and a beautiful view of life.*

*We stand in solidarity with you and hold you in our prayers. We are also using our traditions and our dreams and visions as a firebreak in tough times.*

*We are reading and telling your stories all the way over here in Indian country. Your stories are a teaching just like our dreams are a teaching. Your stories about remaining connected to those who have passed away are a teaching for other peoples. This is something to be honored, acknowledged, and treated as sacred.*

*When we have a sudden or violent death or a suicide here, it leaves a lot of pain and questions behind. It's like someone has been snatched from life and our people are still reaching out to that person. Many times, in order to achieve peace for ourselves and our community, we hold a sweat lodge ceremony. Our sweat house is considered sacred and holy. We fast before we enter, and inside we sing tribal songs and offer prayers. It is our holy place, and this is where our healing happens. Peace is achieved in the doorway between this world and the next. The person who has gone comes to that doorway, and then after the ceremony they move on, and we are allowed to go on with our lives.*

*The next time that we hold our ceremony we will remember you all in our prayers. We will pray for you inside our sweat lodge. We will speak of how you sent your stories to us and what this has meant to us. We will request prayers for you in our lodge.*

*Thank you for your teachings and your beautiful way of looking at life.*

## **Sending Messages and Sharing Forms of Remembrance**

Have you also experienced too many losses? As you read the words and stories from Port Augusta, do any of their themes resonate for you? If so, perhaps you or others you know would be interested in sending a message back to this community. The Port Augusta Aboriginal community continues to face profound losses, and they are interested in sharing their knowledge with others, no matter where you may be reading their words.

The process of sharing knowledge about ways of responding to grief can play a part in reducing the sense of loneliness in loss. What you have learned through your losses may be able to make a contribution to somebody who is grieving now.

If you would like to send a response to the people of Port Augusta,<sup>4</sup> here are some questions to use as a guide:

- When you read the document from Port Augusta, which of their words or stories were significant to you? Was there a particular part that stood out? Does this connect with something that is important to you in your own life?
- Have their words made you think about anything differently, or remember what is important to you? What contribution have their words made to you?
- What are some of your special skills in dealing with losses? Can you share a story of one special skill that you use in your life, or one way that you offer solace or comfort to others in times of loss? In your culture, are there particular ways of grieving that are significant to you?

## **When Grief Is Raw**

You may be reading these words because you have recently lost a loved one. In recognition of this, I wish to share with

you the story of Almas Jeninie, a colleague who lives in Ramallah, Palestine. One day, I received an email from Almas telling me that her husband, Daim, had died unexpectedly and that she was struggling terribly as a consequence. I was on the other side of the world, but it seemed important to create a context in which Almas could speak about her loss, her love, her lament. So I sent to her a series of questions and asked her to write responses to whichever ones she chose. I told her that I would share her written responses with other women who were also experiencing grief.

Here are the questions that I sent to Almas:<sup>5</sup>

### **Physical places associated with comfort**

- Are there particular places that you go to that bring comfort in relation to loss?
- Why are these places special? Can you tell a story about these places?
- What do you do at these places?

### **Memories**

- Are there particular memories that you deliberately revisit and that bring you comfort?
- If so, could you share a story about some of these?
- Are there other memories that you know it's better not to think about? How do you keep these memories at bay?

### **Your own history**

- Have there been other times, earlier in your life, when you have had to deal with loss or grief?
- If so, how did you go about this? Please tell us a story about this.

- What were the hardest parts then?
- Were there others who supported you through this time? If so, what did they do? And what would they do if they were with you now?

### **Missing and lamenting**

- What are some of the things that you miss the most in relation to the person who has died?
- Why are these the things that matter most at this time? Why are these things important to you?
- Have they always been important to you? How did they come to be so significant?
- Who else would know that these are some of the things that matter most to you in life?

### **The spiritual**

- As you are dealing with issues of grief and loss, are you also engaged in spiritual matters in some way?
- If so, what are the sorts of “spiritual conversations” you are having at the moment—with God, with yourself, with others?
- What do you think these spiritual conversations say about what is important to you?
- Has this always been important to you in life? Who did you learn these spiritual values from?

### **Culture**

- Are there particular ways of responding to grief and loss within your culture that are significant to you?
- Why are these significant? How do you participate in these?
- Are there aspects of your culture’s ways of responding to grief and loss that do not fit so well for you?
- If so, how do you find ways to grieve in your own ways?

### **Different realms of expression**

- At this time of loss, are there particular smells, sounds, songs, textures, tastes, dances, and so forth that are particularly important to you?
- If so, can you explain why these are especially important to you now?
- Are there rituals that you are finding helpful? These might be rituals that celebrate the person's life, or rituals of memory, or any other sorts of rituals.

### **Life looking different**

- Is there anything about life that looks different because of your loss?
- Are there things you are noticing differently or doing differently?
- Are there ways in which you want to live the rest of your life differently?

### **Legacy**

- Are there any things about the person who has died that you want to "carry on" in your life?
- Are there particular values, dreams, or ways of being that you wish to continue?
- Are there ways in which you are already doing this? If so, can you share a story about this?
- What things do you think the person would want you to continue in your life?
- What stories about them do you think they would want to see passed on in your family?
- Whom might they choose to be the keeper and teller of these stories?



## **Others**

- Are there ways in which you are trying to support others in coming to terms with this loss? How? Can you tell us a story about this?
- Where did you learn these ways of trying to take care of others at times like this?
- What is the history of these skills?
- Who would be least surprised to know that you have these skills, even when you yourself are struggling?
- Are there ways in which others (your friends, children, colleagues) are trying to support you? If so, have there been certain actions that have meant a lot to you? Can you tell a story about this?
- Why were these actions significant to you?
- Were you able to receive their care? How?

## **Contributions to each other's lives**

- When you think about the person who has died, what difference did they make to your life?
- What has that contribution made possible that would otherwise not have been possible?
- How do you think that person would feel if they knew this?
- What did you bring to their life that made a difference to them?

## **If the person who has died could be there with you now**

- If the person who has died could be there with you now, what do you think they would say about how you are trying to deal with their dying?
- What would they notice about your grief and loss? What would they think of your special ways of dealing with this?

- What would they say to you at this time? And how would they say it?

Over a number of weeks, Almas considered these questions and wrote responses to me. With her agreement, I will share some of these responses here:<sup>6</sup>

### **Physical Places Associated with Comfort**

*Over the last few months, my room (our room; Daim's and mine) has somehow turned into a shrine. It wasn't anything I planned to do. I found a really great picture of him pulling at a cigarette with his eyes all scrunched up—a very "Marlboro/cowboy/rugged man" type of picture—and blew it up. I hung it right over my side of the bed. The sides of the bureau mirror are all stuffed with pictures. A wedding picture of ours hangs—has always hung—on another wall. My screensaver is a picture of Daim up in a tangerine tree with dew all over him, and he's looking great with a devilish smile and sparkly eyes. His side of the bed still has his glasses, pack of cigarettes, and cell phone on the nightstand. His robe hangs, as it always has, behind the door. He was a university professor, so his pile of books and papers still lies right by the computer. When he first died, I refused to go into the room for over a month. Having others bring me out clothes got impractical, so I eventually braved the space, but until about a month ago I slept on the couch.*

*Then one day, Mom came over and sat on the edge of the bed while I worked on the computer. After she left, I began smoothing out the covers, and his smell rose up. I tore back the covers, buried my face in his pillow and slept—my first real sleep in months. So, I moved back in. I sincerely doubt that the pillows and sheets still smell like him, but somehow,*

*he's there. I did a 180-degree turn—instead of sleeping on the couch and avoiding the entire room, I began looking forward to being there. I don't know if turning the room into a shrine—and the fact that time, in some ways, stopped in that room—is very “healthy,” but I did, and it has. My brother-in-law is uncomfortable with Daim's eyes smiling down from every wall, as well as his clothes and books, but right now, it's a comfort to me.*

### **Memories That Are Deliberately Revisited and Those You Try to Keep at Bay**

*I have so many good memories. I remember calling him at work the very day he died and telling him, “Hey, there's a picture of me on our work website!” He asked for the address and opened it up while we were on the phone. He printed it out and showed it to all his colleagues. He brought it home with him that day and sat and read the text. When I asked him why he was so absorbed in the article, he said, “Because you're in it. I'm interested in everything you do.” That memory always makes me smile!*

*I remember once my youngest son, Sharif, asked Daim, “Why do you and Mom fight sometimes?” Without missing a beat, he threw Sharif over his shoulder and said, “So that we can make up!”*

*So many times he'd actually hide my makeup bag, and when I'd begin the search for it he'd always say, “I really don't think there's room for improvement.”*

*During the month of Ramadan, he would wake the kids up before dawn and prepare an elaborate breakfast for them. I never could fathom the idea of waking up at 3 a.m., eating a huge meal, and going back to sleep, so he took over. Right*

*before daybreak, he'd bring a glass of water to me, gently wake me up, and say, "Just please drink this."*

*I could probably go on forever about memories that I deliberately revisit; I have sixteen years of memories that bring me comfort. Sometimes I spend too much time there and worry that I'm not dealing with reality. The other day I was off in la-la land and my daughter walked by and touched my face. She said, "You look so pretty with that smile on your face; what're you thinking about?"*

*There are other memories that I don't want to think about that relate to the days before he died. Four days before he died we sat around talking and just being until about midnight and then headed off to bed. I managed to beat him in and watched him take off his clothes so that he could get his pajamas on. Suddenly, he turned his back to me and put both hands on the bureau. He motioned for me to be quiet. I practically stopped breathing and listened. I was expecting a military incursion, shooting, something like that. After about thirty seconds, I whispered that I couldn't hear anything. He turned around, and I was out of bed in less than a second. He was lemon yellow and his undershirt, fresh less than sixty seconds before, was literally soaked. He looked like someone had poured a bucket of water on him. His hair, wet with sweat, began to curl. In short, he looked like he'd taken a shower with his clothes on. But his color. It was a color I had never seen before, and my father died from cancer—so that's saying a lot.*

*I got him to the hospital, but after many hours and various tests, the doctors released him and said he was fine. Why didn't I scream, "How stupid are you?" I didn't. I insisted that*

*he be admitted and went home. Two hours later he had been discharged. By 8 a.m. the next morning, we were back at the hospital, but again the doctors said there was nothing wrong—perhaps a gas attack from eating an okra dish, or a speck of sand in his urinary tract. A third doctor we consulted said that he should stay away from air-conditioning.*

*Two days later, Daim died as a result of a massive heart attack when driving his car. There were way too many signs. I knew he was sick. I could have screamed louder, insisted harder. Forced him to a hospital in Israel or Jordan. He died from massive heart failure in less than thirty seconds. He was forty-four.*

*I don't like to go back to those four days because it hurts so very, very badly. But Guilt is really powerful and demands attention. It will never let me forget. Guilt can sometimes make the memory of those four days override the memories I've made over sixteen years. But Guilt understands that I have three children to care for, and tries to visit only at night when the kids are sleeping and everything's quiet.*

### **Your Own History of Dealing With Loss and Grief**

*There is a story about the history of grief and loss that I must tell. It is about my father and me. Now that I've lost my husband, this story about my father is even more meaningful. My father actually died twice. I spent the last forty-eight hours of his life sitting behind him holding him at an angle that was comfortable for him. He couldn't lie down because he felt he was suffocating, and he couldn't sit up on his own—he kept sliding down. So, I sat behind him, on the bed, and kept him comfortable. People kept coming to say good-bye, and when*

*they'd see him and cry, I'd hate them. They were destroying his spirit.*

*The doctor came in to check him at 4 p.m. and carried him out of my arms and set him on a chair. I used the time to straighten the bed; the doctor was fumbling in his bag. When we looked up, Dad had stopped breathing. Everyone had been so impressed with my strength and practicality, but I went crazy then. I ran over and began to shake him and scream, "No, yaba, not now, not yet; I have to tell you—I still didn't tell you. Please, yaba, please, the boys will be here soon; don't do this, not now, please not now . . ." The doctor literally poured a bottle of water over his head and punched him in the chest. He woke up and was clearly disoriented. I'll never forget what he said, and others heard him say it too: "But I was home. I want to go back home; please let me go back home." I got really close to his face and began gently wiping the water off. I said, "Yaba, you are home. The boys will be here in a couple of hours. Please wait for the boys."*

*He did. As soon as the boys came in, they rushed upstairs. Dad looked at them and recognized them. They cried softly and kneeled before him while I was still holding him. I motioned for them not to cry, but they couldn't help it. They had seen him less than two months ago and couldn't believe how quickly he had deteriorated. He kissed their heads and said, "Why are you crying? I should be crying for you. I get to go home while you're still here. It's so beautiful. I get to go home; don't cry for me." Of course, by then, everyone was bawling. But the conviction in his face was amazing: There was absolutely no fear or reluctance; he actually seemed eager. He turned his head back as much as possible and said*

to me, "I want to sleep now. Please lay me down; I want to go back home." So, I did. We took turns monitoring his breathing until 11:30 p.m., when he passed away.

Sometimes my father visits me in my dreams. The first time, I actually sleepwalked. About a week after my father died, I heard a knock at the front door. When I got to the front door, there was a really powerful bright light as well as a string of lights at the front door. A group of similar lights were in the back. The light at the front was my dad—I heard his voice, but I knew it was him before he spoke. I asked him what he was doing outside the front door—to come in, it was cold and windy. He said, "We come here every morning to check on you, but yaba, if you keep this up, I won't come anymore." He was referring to my crying, shock, and withdrawal—I knew exactly what he meant. I said, "Yeah, okay, fine, but come in; it's so cold." He said that he couldn't; he was "all over" and couldn't stay too long in any one place. He said he wouldn't wake me up anymore, but he knew I'd remember this visit (and I always have, like it was yesterday), and that I should know that he was always around.

It was actually very cold, and my crazy-with-fear husband found me at about 5:30 a.m. on the front porch, which is glassed in, sitting on the couch in a long T-shirt. There were leaves everywhere and the front door was open.

He still visits in my dreams occasionally, and I say it: I tell him that I love him, that I understand, that I forgive him for being so distant. I thank him for taking so much care of me. I thank him for instilling pride in my culture in me. I tell him I respect him for being so brave, for leaving his country to secure a future for his children without ever forgetting who he

*was. But that's just in my dreams; I don't know if he can hear me. I do know though that I will never, ever forget the peaceful smile on his face when he stopped breathing.*

### **The Spiritual**

*My spirituality is currently on a roller-coaster ride. My religion was instilled in me, pretty much by force, as a child—so it never really had any true meaning. I tried to keep it up right after I got married, but Daim wasn't really religious at the time either, so we had weak attempts. The “break down and fall on your knees believing to the marrow of your bone in God” happened to us both at the same time, when our first child, Mimi, was born. I know a lot of people explain life scientifically, but I truly believe that God had everything to do with that perfect creation. I was astounded. I treated her like a miracle, and not at all because we had trouble having her. I truly believe that giving life is a miracle. I again believed in God when I lost my father; he was so comfortable about passing away.*

*After Daim's death, though, my beliefs have become like a roller coaster. Daim didn't want to die. When I took him to the hospital a couple of days before he died, he actually said that the angel of death had come for him and he turned him away saying that his wife and children still needed him. We talked about going to the kids' graduations and weddings. We talked about being grandparents. We joked about who would take care of whom. We had plans and dreams; he had plans and dreams. I wonder why God didn't take me instead of Daim. I wonder why God thinks I can bear this pain; I wonder how I will. People try to console me by reciting infor-*



*mation on predestination. I can't swallow that yet. Daim died from medical negligence—God had nothing to do with it. God can't possibly be so cruel.*

*I believe that Daim is now in a better place. I believe he is at peace and comfortable. That is reassuring in many ways, but then I think, "But he was at peace here, he was comfortable here, he wanted to be here." If I have to look for things to be grateful for, I am grateful that he didn't suffer. We traced his phone calls and movements, and he died in less than a minute; when I saw him, he looked like he was sleeping.*

*I think my loss has shaken my spirit and my faith. It's inside of me though, like a bunch of butterflies in a closed jar. If you shake the jar, they'll flutter around for a while, even panic. But eventually, they'll all settle down again. It shook me hard, really hard, to think that God is cruel. I just hope that the butterflies settle down before the moral of the story flashes by and I miss it in a whirl of wings.*

### **Particular Smells, Sounds, Songs, Textures, Tastes, Dances That Are Important . . .**

*I really like these questions. Sometimes something will remind me, and people around me will have no idea, and I'll smile—or pull away to control my tears. I've started smoking. Not really. I'm not addicted or anything; sometimes I'll light one up and just let it burn down in the ashtray. Not a lovely or romantic smell I must admit, but it reminds me of him. He also has a pack of cherry vanilla cigars by his bedstand. I won't dare burn them; then they'd be gone. But sometimes I just open up the tin and smell them. I remember how his hands and clothes would smell. I'd complain, of course, but now it reminds me.*

*As for sounds, Daim set me up for a nightmare right before he left! Sharif's our little monkey; very sly, sweet, and smooth. Daim had taken him to music school during the summer, about a month before he died. Sharif tried out all the instruments and kept going back to the cello. About two hours later, they came home with a cello and promises of music lessons to begin within a month. I was really confused—why the cello? Not very Eastern, not very Arabic, not what we expected! So now, six months later, I get to deal with the whine and squeal of the cello as Sharif “practices.” I get to tell him how wonderfully he’s progressing. I look up at the sky and mumble, “Thanks, Daim! Hope you can hear this!” I imagine he can; it is loud and horrible enough to wake the dead!*

### **Cultural Ways of Grieving: Those That Fit and Those That Do Not**

*I spent much of my childhood in the United States, so I have lived in two cultures. Here in Palestine, we have some interesting cultural responses to loss. Some are beautiful, some infuriate me, and some I will never forgive.*

*The Islamic culture has a very practical view on death. We believe that, from the moment you are born, it is predetermined when exactly you will die. There is absolutely nothing you can do about it. You may have some effect on how you die—for example, by not smoking you may prevent death by lung cancer—but you’re still going to die on that day. I don’t think this is actually in the Koran, so this may be more cultural than religious, but a lot of speculation is also given on how one dies. For example, my dad was such a generous, respected figure that when he died from lung cancer two months after diagnosis, and only really suffered for about five*

*days, no one was surprised. Dying from cancer can be very drawn out and painful, but Dad didn't really suffer extensively, supposedly because he was "a good man." I don't really buy into this idea, because a lot of incredible people suffer immensely while dying, but our culture believes that a torturous death is God's way of speeding up the punishment you are sure to receive in the afterworld. A lot of people here also talk about "punishment in the grave"—horror stories about how the grave caves in on you and angels torture you as you await judgment day. These are horrific ideas to me and I try to stay away from them.*

*Anyway, when a person dies, it is supposedly predestined, and therefore excessive grief is frowned on. Some people actually say that wailing and lamentation will cause the dead pain, as if you're protesting God's will. This a very final, very practical way of looking at death, but it doesn't necessarily create room for expressions of pain, hurt, and sudden love loss.*

*Another religious custom involves the immediate burial of the dead. We have a saying, "Respect for the dead is in the burial." The body is bathed, wrapped in a sheet, prayed over, and put in the ground. Ideally, it should be in the ground by the next call to prayer, or within twenty-four hours maximum. Usually the burial takes place at the noon prayers—these are the biggest prayers, where the largest amount of people join in, so it's the most honoring.*

*Throughout the entire condolence period (three days), men and women are kept very, very separated. There are very different rituals for men and women. For instance, once Daim had been bathed for burial, I was not allowed to touch him. Those women whom he can't marry—like his mother, daughter, and niece—can hug, kiss, and touch all they want, but as his*

wife, I would “dirty” him. I would make him “unclean.” I really can’t comment on how I feel about that little bit of culture right now. It’s still way too much for me to comprehend.

During the three-day funeral reception, recordings of the Koran being recited are supposed to be played nonstop and bitter coffee is served. Daim’s mom refused to do either. She refused to believe that this was a funeral. She refused to believe that her son was dead. I felt so much pain for her but was caught in a crossroads. My daughter, Mimi, wanted the Koran. She told me it would help her dad get into heaven. I wanted the Koran because I felt that if the Koran was being recited, well-wishers would be quiet. I was amazed that people came, each for ten minutes maximum, and were actually swapping recipes and talking about their children, cooking, and cleaning. Even at times of death, life goes on.

I spent a whole lot of time in the bedroom with Mimi. People kept coming in to tell me that people wanted to offer me condolences, that I should be outside, that I was being rude. That’s when I pulled my “bicultural” card: I didn’t understand; I meant no harm.

After the three-day reception in Jenin, we went back to Ramallah. We had another three-day reception there. Believe it or not, we had to rent a hall in the municipality! Police were called in to close roads. Still, when I think about the thousands of people who came, I well up with tears. This is an aspect of our culture that still surprises me. The president sent a telegram. Everyone from Birzeit University, including staff from all departments and students, came every day. Representative groups from the Palestinian Authority, everyone (parents, teachers) from my kids’ schools, everyone from my workplace, and swarms of people I didn’t even know. We hired

*someone to serve the bitter coffee, and he told us that he was going through over 2,000 plastic coffee cups a day. Bear in mind that we only accepted guests from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m. There were people outside, inside, everywhere. The newspaper was plastered with condolences for over a week (the normal time is three days). We were all grieving, but I can't deny that I felt somehow proud.*

*Less than ten days later, I had to start dealing with legal things. Of course, if I had seen a mental health doctor, I would definitely have been diagnosed as being "in shock," among other things. I was going to Sharia court and signing things. I wanted to give all of my inheritance to my children, but stopped at the last moment. I decided that I would inherit, and while I was alive, divide it equally among my three children in the form of gifts. I don't like the Islamic rule that girls inherit one-half of what boys inherit. So, somehow, I had the sense of mind to straighten that out.*

*Another cultural ritual is "cleaning up." We are supposed to give away the possessions of the deceased to those who are needy. I decided not to participate in this. At least, not yet. So many people have encouraged me to give away Daim's things; poor people would benefit greatly. Well, sorry to be selfish, but I'm not there yet. How can I give away sweaters that smell like him? How can I give away his shorts with splotches of paint all over them, that he wore around the house, that were missing the top button (we'd joke that his growing belly helped keep the shorts in place and that a button would only restrict the growth!)?*

*Right now, culture is encouraging me to move on. Get out of black, put some makeup on, cut my hair. I don't wear black on purpose, and I do wear colors, but as my friend noticed,*

*I no longer dress to impress, I dress to cover my body, and my hand is attracted to dark colors. I can't even imagine looking at myself in the mirror and caring long enough to put makeup on, and don't think I will ever, ever cut my hair. Daim used to spend hours running his hands through it and smelling it. When I would lie on his lap at night, he would smooth it over his thigh. I don't think I can ever cut it. Of course, the culture doesn't care if I cut it; everyone just wants me to cover my hair, to wear the headscarf, but Daim was really against that too, so I don't think I'll be doing that either!*

*As I wrote at the very beginning of this piece, Daim is everywhere in my house. I won't dispose of him, or give him away. I grieve for him every minute, for what he's missed. Nothing will ever fill up the trench that he's left behind, but he was so proud of me, and I can't let him down. Some days, when I'm too tired to open my eyes, I push myself for him. He's a part of me, so even though I grieve, I believe he's still there. He's in his children, in me, in his house, his car; he's everywhere.*

### **Life looking different**

*To be honest, everything about life looks different now. So much has lost meaning; other things have so much meaning that I can't touch or look at them. For the time being, I've given up on changing the world. Worse, sometimes I'm noticing an ugly bitterness that comes to visit. Sick people who come out fine, for example. My first thought is, how come they get a miracle and I didn't? At times it can feel like I have an internal battle of good versus evil going on. I consciously shake my head and remind myself of the sixteen years I spent with Daim. Our three beautiful children are beyond the definition of miracle.*

*And I have found a strength. I'm going to try and see where that takes me. Right after Daim's death, my brother-in-law sat down with me and tried to explain property and financial issues. I just kept shaking my head and telling him I didn't care, I was fine with any decisions he made; I asked him to take care of everything. He held my hand, looked me straight in the eye, and said, very firmly, "I'm sorry, but you no longer have that luxury. You have to understand everything so you can take care of everything." I didn't get it at the time, but now, every time I just want to give up, I can hear him saying, "You no longer have that luxury." Daim was my luxury. There are husbands, and then there are soul mates and best friends who happen to be your husband. I lost so much more than my husband, but I think I'm starting to see Strength. Our house is literally falling apart right now, and sometimes I spend the whole day filling up cracks and sweeping up debris, but somewhere along the line I found Strength. I'm not too sure I want to deal with Strength right now, because she's really weak and needs a lot of attention that I can't give her right now. I heard, though, that Strength gets strong on her own, when you're not looking. I hope that, even if I neglect her, I'll find her when I need her the most.*

### **The Present and the Project**

Almas did find and continues to find Strength. In fact, over the last few years she has worked for a groundbreaking Palestinian women's organization dedicated to supporting women's financial independence. Her writings about her grief have also supported women in different parts of the world as part of a broader project.

If you are in the midst of grief, we would like to invite you to be part of this continuing project. Please consider any of

the questions that I initially sent to Almas (pp. 216–220) and write your own responses. If you know of others in your local context who are also grieving, you may choose to do this process with them and share your writings with each other.

Alternatively, you may be interested in lodging your writings with our “responding to grief” project. We will separate your name and address from your writings so that your words will be anonymous. They will then be made available to others who are grieving, just as Almas has made her words available to others.<sup>7</sup>

Please return to the questions that I sent to Almas and choose whichever ones appeal to you at this time. There is no need to respond to them in any particular order. Almas decided she would respond to one theme each week, but everyone’s time frame is different and everyone has their own way of grieving.

### **Two Important Considerations**

Experiences of grief are not separate from the rest of life. All the complications and complexities of daily life, including issues of gender and power, are present in how we grieve. For instance, over time, Almas came to realize that some aspects of her experience of grief were powerfully influenced by the degree to which she was dependent upon first her father and then her husband. If women’s lives are socially and financially dependent on the men in their lives, then this will influence experiences of grief. It may be that some women who lose a male partner will wish to say good-bye to or rethink certain aspects of past dependence while still cherishing the person who has died. This has been true for Almas. Her decision to change jobs and work for an organization dedicated to sup-



porting women's financial independence is not separate from her experience of grief.

It is also significant to acknowledge that people's grief is sometimes complicated by experiences of violence or other forms of abuse. If the person who has died tyrannized other people, or if there was a lot of conflict or misunderstanding, then relating to the person's death can be complex. Responses to death in these circumstances can be quite different, as death may have brought a sense of relief as well as other responses. If this has been true for you, the following questions may be relevant to consider:

- Are there things you are relieved to be no longer experiencing? Can you share a story about these? Why are you relieved to be no longer experiencing this?
- If another person was trying to work out how to relate to the memory of a loved one who had been cruel to them (or with whom they had been in conflict), would there be any story from your own life that you would be willing to share with them?
- If you had a chance to say something now to the person who has died, would you want to? If so, what would it be? Has this changed over time?
- Is there anything about the person's life or the person's death that has led you to want to live your life in a different way? Why is this important to you? Can you share a story about how you put this into practice in your life?

### **The Expectations of Others**

Sometimes, after a death or loss, the expectations of how one "should" grieve can be confusing. Expressions of sadness are socially accepted and expected, while expressions of rage

or regret may be less welcomed. It may be seen as strange if the grieving person does not express certain feelings in particular ways. At the same time, for those who have been in a hidden or illicit relationship with someone who has died, the experience of loss can be a very private one.

- Have there been ways in which your responses to death or loss have been outside the expectations of others?
- How have you been able to craft your own ways of responding? How do these ways reflect what is important to you?
- Can you share a story about some of your unique forms of response?

### **Transition**

Times of grief and loss are often times of transition.

- Are there certain parts of life that you have moved away from as a result of this transition? Are there things you are no longer interested in doing, being a part of, or participating in? If so, what are they?
- Are there aspects of life that you have become more engaged in or moved toward as a result of this transition? If so, can you share a story about what this means to you?

The following story was sent to us by Judy, who hopes that her experience of complicated grief will be of assistance to others<sup>8</sup>.

*When the relationship has been fraught with conflict or violence, this creates another dimension to the grief process. In my own situation, there was a feeling of relief—relief that I no longer had to live with fear. In the previous few months, I had been stalked and had had threats made on my life. Fear was*

*something that I had lived with for many years, and it has traveled with me through most of my life. Then, after the initial shock and feeling of relief, I found fear in my life again and it was hard to let it go. I thought that there was nothing stopping him from getting to me now that he was dead. I thought he was haunting my family home. So, after a while, I sold my house, and that was helpful in allowing me to feel safe again.*

*The greatest challenge has been dealing with guilt. He had told me many times if I didn't take him back he would either kill me or himself. I felt responsible for his death. I thought, "If I had taken him back he would still be alive." Guilt was a major restraint to my moving on. For a long time I believed that I could have done more, been a better wife. Now I think, "Yes, I could have done things differently, but I did the best I knew how at the time."*

*Because of the circumstances of his death, people would avoid me. I have since heard they didn't know what to say. I interpreted that behavior as blaming me for his death. I had many irrational ideas. My experience, however, has shown me the way to a better life. I have moved from desperation, and then hope, to a life of achievement. I still have my struggles, but I move through them much more quickly. I have accomplished more than I ever believed I would both personally and professionally; this has only happened because of my experience. I am now in the privileged position of hearing the stories of others and assisting them in seeing other ways of being—of helping them move forward in their lives to a place that they want to be.*

*My experience has given me the understanding to support other women dealing with situations like mine. On a personal note, I have four beautiful adult children, two boys and two girls, all in healthy, respectful, long-term relationships, and*

*seven beautiful granddaughters. Some people say that children repeat the patterns of their parents. This may be true in some cases, but many choose healthy, happy lifestyles. I believe my direction in life has added to their lives and made them more compassionate, stronger, and self-assured, too.*

If you have experienced complicated grief, perhaps you would like to consider writing a response to the questions listed above. If so, we would welcome your contribution to the grief project. It seems vitally important that people find company and acknowledgment in complex experiences of grief.

### **Looking Back, Looking Forward**

This chapter has offered a number of different ways of “saying hello again” to those we have lost, as well as ways of sharing special skills and knowledge about grief.<sup>9</sup> How we think about death and those who have died makes a real difference in how we think about our lives. It also makes a difference in how we think about our own mortality, which is the theme of the next chapter.

### **Notes**

1. Mary’s story was first published in the groundbreaking paper “Saying Hello Again: The Incorporation of the Lost Relationship in the Resolution of Grief” (White, 1988).
2. John’s story was also first published in White, 1988.
3. Aunty Barbara Wingard, Djapirri Mununggirritj, and Cheryl White have also played key roles in this process. To read more about the ways in which Aboriginal Australian communities are exchanging knowledge and stories about ways of responding to

grief, see <http://www.dulwichcentre.com.au/linking-stories-and-initiatives.pdf>

4. You can email a message to us at [dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au), and we will then send it back to Port Augusta via Carolynanha Johnson.
5. I drafted these questions, and several colleagues contributed to them: Margie Pitcher from Australia, Gitta Leibeher from Switzerland, and Lorraine Hedtke from the United States.
6. Almas's writings first appeared in Dulwich Centre, 2008b.
7. You can send writings via email ([dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au](mailto:dulwich@dulwichcentre.com.au)) or post (Dulwich Centre, Hutt St., P.O. Box 7192, Adelaide 5000, South Australia). If you do choose to send your writings, we will send you an acknowledgment that we have received them.
8. Judy's story first appeared in Dulwich Centre, 2008b.
9. To read more about narrative approaches to grief, see Hedtke and Winslade, 2004.