

Perceptual Positions and Dealing with Loss

We've heard the expression; "walk a mile in another's shoes." With each unique experience I have in my life, I collect the empathy for someone else who subsequently goes through a similar experience. I can't think of a single person who has escaped some tragic situation which has brought pain and suffering into their life. In each of these situations there are usually those who come to our side to help us and guide us and comfort us in our sorrow. They not only have empathy, they also have compassion and are able to act to comfort those who need comforting. My friend Julie was like this after my surgery last year. She became my self-appointed guardian during the day to make sure that I got out and had companionship.

The reason all of this is coming to mind, is that I was struck by two distinct situations in the wake of JFK, Jr.'s tragic accident. The first was a radio talk show host who railed about the insignificance of this event in our lives compared to other events which were getting no press and would likely effect us long term. He said, "Yes, it's tragic. Yes, it's terrible, but....." Then there was a columnist in the Sunday's Dallas Morning News who said, "I truly, truly mourn the death of John Kennedy Jr. and family, but..." I didn't get the sense to true empathy.

Do we really mourn the death of these people? Did anyone that reads this newsletter even know them personally? Or does the tragedy remind us of our own mortality? Does understanding the details of their death help us to let go of the fear we have of our own passing or losing someone close to us? Do those of us who have lost family members, even children, empathize with the family of these people?

I learned much about the process of dealing with sudden death through the JFK accident.

It has helped me understand the process I am still going through as I seek to understand the sudden death of my wonderful, loving companion, Kaci. Kaci, by dog's standards was elderly. She lived a full life. It doesn't make it easier to say that she was 84 in human terms when she seemed so healthy one morning and that afternoon was dead.

The pain of her going has been excruciating at times. And it has been interesting to notice the outpouring of empathy from my friends, some who knew Kaci and some who didn't. It was quite clear to me those who truly felt the pain I was feeling and those who had no reference experience of losing someone or a pet through sudden death. Several years ago, a client and friend lost her dog suddenly. I could sympathize but couldn't empathize. I had no idea what she was going through until now. The flowers she sent had special meaning for me because I knew she knew the pain I was feeling at the time. I don't know what is like to lose a child or a parent. I can know the shock and grief of losing someone close to me suddenly. I don't know what it is like to lose everything I own through a flood or fire or tornado. I did imagine what it was like for those people in Oklahoma earlier this year. What would it be like if I had no dishes or towels or sheets (or even a bed)? What would it be like if all of my photos or all of the precious items that have been given to me over the years were gone? I spent two days collecting things out of my house, asking neighbors for donations and going to local businesses for donations. I took them over to one of the churches who were collecting items for these people. I know it won't be the same for these people, but it is a start. I do know the helpless feeling of being unable to change the situation I am experiencing and the resolve that I must develop to get myself through this and go on with my life.

People who suffer the loss of someone through sudden death experience the five stages of grief, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. They also have the high need to know in detail what happened as if the knowing helps us to understand and make sense of something that doesn't make sense at all, and to heal. People also go through a litany of what they could have done differently to prevent the tragedy, "If I had only done this... or this..., she/he would be alive today," as if we could change the course of Providence. There is nothing wrong with this, it is all part of the process.

True communication comes largely from being able to do "other position", to be able to step into another person's experience and know what it is like to be that person in that experience. It is important to understand that those people who criticized the reaction to the JFK tragedy or had no reaction to it at all are not bad people. They simply, in my mind, had no reason to become "other" to the event and empathize with those whose lives it touched directly. Or maybe it was too painful to deal with it by becoming associated with the situation. I might not have paid as much attention to it, had I not been grieving my own loss.

The true humanitarian is not only able to empathize but is able to jump in and actively make a difference for someone who is suffering. Too often we don't reach out even when we know what the person is feeling because we have been through a similar situation. Make the effort to connect with someone who needs your kind words of compassion. It is healing to both of you.