

## Cracked Open: The Nature of Grief, Loss and Illness - by Petra Lentz-Snow

Death and dying are hard topics to bring up in modern day life. Society prefers to navigate around the truth of our impermanence with an unspoken yet powerful “don’t ask, don’t tell” attitude, leaving those confronted directly with death and dying feeling isolated, singled out and without a place in the so called ‘normal’ workings of everyday life. So where do we turn when life has delivered us a blow from which we fear we may never recover?

Last August the school hosted an offering called Grief, Loss and Illness: Journeys into Healing. For the first time added to the ‘Practice of Living and Dying’ curriculum of the school in 2013, the seven-day course is specifically designed for people whose lives are changed by a personal brush with death.

Some of the participants had encountered a life threatening trauma or a debilitating illness. Some of them had met death’s irrevocable repercussions through the loss of a loved one. All of them were cracked open in some way that changed their lives so profoundly, that they could no longer return to the person they once were.

The changes that take place when we experience a trauma that changes the story of who we are always ask of us to grow into a deeper, fuller version of our humanness. In earlier indigenous cultures such events may have been viewed as initiations and people struck by trauma not as victims but as initiates. According to anthropologists, rite of passage ceremonies arose out of direct experience with the initiatory patterns in nature. Change that was precipitated by an ordeal had the potential to be an initiation into a greater wholeness, or deeper wisdom that, if successfully navigated, the initiate was able to offer back to the community for the good of the tribe.

Floods, droughts, forest fires, earthquakes, and other natural disasters, while potentially devastating, and sometimes altering the landscape permanently, at the same time create fertile soil for new life forms to come. Nature is our blue print for how to adapt, how to be with change, how to die to what was and birth into what will be, over and over again, form after impermanent form. Since the early days of human kind, initiatory ceremonies have helped us mark major life changes and enabled our psyche to track its journey around the wheel of an ever-evolving becoming-ness.

Although forms of ritual vary greatly all over the world, most rite of passage ceremonies recognize 3 classic phases, severance, threshold and re-incorporation, to formally navigate major archetypical phases of change. The healing journey carries many of the same characteristics by different names, such as diagnosis, treatment, and recovery. It makes us aware, that in a very real way, life itself is initiating us all the time.

As humans have become more disconnected from nature, these rites have slowly become lost. With most of this knowledge absent in modern day culture, a major healing modality has gone missing. One that has the potential, not to medicate, fix or suppress, but instead to validate and

partner the journey through grief, loss, or life-changing illness. Tapping into the power of an initiatory experience, old grief can find release and a new life phase or stage can be consciously marked.

Holding the death of lovers, children, and parents as well as life threatening illnesses in the Grief Program, the intimacy and mutual support within the group becomes palpable within a very short time. For some participants, the grief that brought them is raw and fresh. Others mark poignant life changes or losses that occurred a long time ago, and have been held in the deep tissues of their living for many years. For seven days we alternate nature walks and solo time on the land with story council and time in circle, culminating in an optional 24-hour solo in the high desert expanse of the Inyo Mountains, a place sacred to the Paiutes who call it the “dwelling place of a great spirit”.

Participants go out on various nature assignments with the freedom to explore the territory of their grief witnessed and held by the ancient presence of the wild alone. During their time on the land, each person is inevitably met and mirrored by nature’s uncanny wisdom in form of unexpected encounters or meaningful symbols stumbled upon, evoking the very conversation that is waiting to happen. It might be the sudden buzz of a hummingbird swooping in, to hover just inches away from our face. It might be the heart-opening sight of an exquisite wildflower at a special moment in time. Or the shape of a gnarled juniper tree, chosen spontaneously for a nice rest in its shade, triggers an important memory. Nature meets, mirrors and witnesses us every step of the way.

Ceremonial time on the earth has met, held and partnered humans for eons. Deep in our bones, we know this way. In the natural world, even the unbearable somehow finds a place to just be. For the earth, no feeling is ‘too much’, not the flood of seemingly endless tears or the overwhelming grief cry that longs to be set free. Nature has no need to recoil from the density of pain and grief. Here, death is simply a part of life, as much as birth is. Unexpected, exquisite beauty may emerge right next to intense suffering. It doesn’t have to make sense. No matter how lost we may feel, when we are out on the earth, we are always found. When we immerse ourselves in nature, we can’t help but remember our own nature. In the quiet and spaciousness of the wild, we naturally turn into a deeper listening, to the tender voice of our heart, to the truth at the center of our being, where a vision, a new insight, a new way of being in the world may be born.

What does it mean to come fully alive in the face of death and dying? For the young woman, who’s lover and soul mate drowned a few months ago during a river rafting trip, it is spending her first night alone after the accident, beneath the thin veils of her tent, under the vast desert sky, rekindling her tender connection to life. A cancer survivor is baring his surgery scar as he steps across the threshold, claiming a new life, in the midst of medical uncertainty, with the deep knowing that all is well with him, no matter the outcome of his next screening. For a mother grieving the tragic loss of her precious toddler son it is connecting with an ancient bristlecone tree, marked with the blackened lightening scar from many years past, and finding she is given the deep roots needed for what this new life is asking of her now.

There are stories of beauty born when turning into the grief of our living. Being able to simply be with what is in the ceremonial container of the natural world can provide a touchstone from which to turn into a healing process that we live forward for the rest of our lives. It doesn't mean that it gets any easier or that it hurts any less. Sometimes it may hurt more, as we are able to feel more. But paradoxically, as we acknowledge and admit our pain, and as we continue to turn into the raw truth of this wild dance with impermanence lightness, humor, joy and compassion are born right alongside our anguish. The pain never goes away. The fears never go away. It is our resistance to our feelings and losses that changes, our relationship with them. More than 'letting it go', which implies that we could somehow get out of the territory we're in, it is about letting things be and finding the heart to live them into wholeness and healing. It is right here, that the potential for an awakened and initiated life awaits us, that we can choose to hone for the rest of our lives.

Note: Grief, Loss and Illness: Journeys into Healing will be offered again August 14 – 21, 2016. For more information email [petra@lostborders.org](mailto:petra@lostborders.org) or go to [www.schooloflostborders.org](http://www.schooloflostborders.org)