

The Awesome Power of "Telling The Story":

Why I'm Proud to be a Grief Counselor

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

As my father lay in his hospital bed recovering from cancer surgery recently, it was my privilege to honor his life story. My wonderful father recognized in his head and heart that his days on this earth were limited. Rest did not come easy, but his need to "story" did.

His love of family flowed out of stories from his childhood. He told me how his mother inspired his love for baseball. He told me how his father wasn't very emotionally or physically available to him as he grew from childhood to adolescence. He told me of his deep love for his older brothers and sisters.

In the midst of my awareness that I would soon not have my father in my life, I listened and I learned. I affirmed that his love for me was true and abiding. I learned of his fears about my mother, who will survive him. I learned what I already knew-my father is a great man, a loving husband and a wonderful father.

I also learned about the awesome power of "telling the story." As he shifted from topic to topic, he didn't need me to get in the way. As he at times struggled with a specific detail of a long-ago memory, he didn't need me to get in the way. As he was brought to tears by his love-filled memories of life and living, he didn't need me to get in the way.

I'm writing these words on the airplane as I leave him for what may be one of the last times. As I reflect on my all-night vigil of honoring his story, I'm once again humbled by the remarkable importance of how "storying" brings meaning and purpose to our life and death experiences.

For you see, I'm a grief counselor and I commit much of my life's vocation to honoring stories. Stories of love and loss. Stories of pain and joy. Stories of hopes fulfilled and dreams lost.

My heightened awareness of story's power comes to be at a moment of need. I recently was called upon to do a series of media interviews ranging from daily newspapers to TIME magazine. Surprisingly, I was put in the position of defending my chosen profession. You see, following the highly publicized Columbine High School tragedy, the media had many leads to pursue. Yet, when the flawed analysis of the causes, the emotional interviews with those most impacted, and the coverage of the funerals was over, the media felt the urge to find more story lines. After all, anything connected to Columbine seemed to capture readers.

So, in the frenzy to search out and create more stories they found me-a grief counselor; a person who founded a Center for Loss & Life Transition years ago in an effort to help people devastated by loss; a person who loves to educate and train others about the importance and value of companioning each other in times of grief.

It didn't take me long in talking to the media to understand that the stories would not be friendly. All I had to do was ponder the nature of the questions: "Don't you think these kids would be better off just putting this tragedy behind them?" "Why do all these grief counselors think they have to rush to the scene?" "What is the value of what you do?" "Aren't you just listening and getting paid for it?"

Re-Affirming Our Value

Thanks to my loving father and his need to "tell the story," I've given more thought to the many reasons why I'm proud to be a grief educator and counselor. Among the many benefits of "honoring the stories" of our fellow human beings are the following:

- We can search for wholeness among our fractured parts.
- We can come to know who we are in new and unexpected ways.

- We can explore our past, and come to a more profound understanding of our origins and our future directions.
- We can tentatively explain our view of the world and come to understand who we are.
- We can explore how love experienced and how love lost have influenced our time on this earth.
- We can discover how a life without "story" is like a book without pages-nice to see, but lacking in substance.
- We can seek forgiveness and be humbled by our mortality.
- We can determine how adversity has enriched our meaning and purpose of life.
- We can journey inward and discover connections previously not understood or acknowledged.
- We can create an awareness of how the past interfaces with the present, and how the present ebbs back into the past.
- We can discover that the route to healing lies not only in the physical realm, but in the emotional and spiritual realms.
- We can find that the fulfillment of a life well lived is bestowed through the translation of our past into experiences that are expressed through the oral or written word.
- We can come to understand that in our pain and suffering lies the awareness of the preciousness of each day on this earth.
- We can discover our truth in this present moment of time and space.

In part, we heal ourselves as we tell the tale. And this is the awesome power of the story.

Yet, in our fast-paced, efficiency-based culture, which lacks an understanding of the role of hurt in healing, many people do not understand the value of "telling the story." Honoring stories would require that we slow down, turn inward and embrace our own and others' pain. Listening to stories filled with sadness and grief are intolerable in a culture that collectively avoids these emotions whenever possible.

So, a number of media-types recently tried to suggest that grief counselors are unnecessary, perhaps even damaging. They might have you believe that those most impacted by the Columbine tragedy would be better off if they bucked-up, carried on and kept their chins up. One of my interviewers even asked, "Don't you think traumatic pain like this is better off denied?" In an effort to create a story, the media tried to become "story-killers."

But the need to "tell the story" and have it heard prevails. The need to have safe places to acknowledge the reality of loss, embrace pain, secure memories, search for meaning, and have ongoing support is more powerful than the media, which has been contaminated by a culture that has lost its sense of community.

I hope you are as proud as I am to be a grief counselor. Though some may question the need for what you and I do to help people in grief, I suggest we stand tall and proud. Of course, you and I understand that grief counseling and therapy is much more complex than honoring mourners' stories. Still, it is primarily through having places to "story" that people have the opportunity to try to make sense of the senseless, to embrace what needs to be embraced, and to reveal that the human spirit prevails.

A Sacred Moment

Honoring my father's story also blessed me with a sacred moment. As I was helping him prepare to leave the hospital, he gave me a "high five," and with a glint in his eye he said, "Thanks for listening. Thanks for helping me make a plan to go home." Oh, yes, the awesome power of the story.

Thanks Dad for reminding me not only of your love for me and our family, but of how all of us need to stop-to listen-and to honor stories about life and death. Thanks for making me proud to be a grief counselor and companion to my fellow human beings. But most of all, thanks for making me proud to be your son.