

Grief Meditation: A Subterranean Pathway to “Higher Power” Consciousness

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Tackling the question, “What is higher power?” in my allegorical saga, “The Spider and the Butterfly”, is facilitating uncharted poetic imagery. It is also encouraging further reflection on a mystifying experience in psychoanalysis many moons ago. The uncommon imagery can be found directly below this essay in Part IX (a and b) of the ongoing poetic allegory. (See Linked-In for the previous eight segments). Actually, the poem captures pretty vividly most of the key mind-body-spirit components of the actual “mystical-like” experience. Presently, I want to explore some intriguing differences between the general notion of “Meditation” and my concept/model of “Grief Meditation”. As a means of illustration, this essay will examine the paradoxical notion of: 1) the self-labeled “Grief Meditation”, a nine-month process of lying on a couch, grieving deeply in a free associative state, and 2) when the timing was right, the unexpected insertion of meditation into the therapeutic regimen, which resulted in, 3) both “oceanic” and “out-of-body” experiences, that, ultimately illuminated my calling as an iconoclastic word artist and Psychohumorist™.

Meditation Defined and Elaborated

Let’s start with a general definition of “meditation” and some specific neurocognitive research health benefits. According to Psychology Today, “Meditation” is the practice of turning your attention to a single point of reference. It can involve focusing on the breath, on bodily sensations, or on a word or phrase known as a mantra. In other words, meditation means turning your attention away from distracting thoughts and focusing on the present moment (Psychology Today).

The article, “Meditation Will Make You Smarter (and Happier)”, by Robert Puff Ph.D. (posted Sep 2013), cited a UCLA study on meditation. “Researchers used high-resolution magnetic resonance imaging (MRI’s) to scan the brains of a group of subjects who were long-time meditators. They found that these individuals’ brains were larger than their non-meditating counterparts. Another study found that aging people who meditate regularly don’t lose their gray matter as fast as non-meditators. Apparently, the meditators’ brains have noticeably thicker tissue in the prefrontal cortex, which is the region of the brain responsible for attention and control”.

“Imagine the implications of these discoveries!” Not only can meditation prevent brain cells from dying, which typically happens as we age, it can boost a person’s brain size in several crucial regions. Furthermore, researchers have concluded that meditation can actually make a person more intelligent. Evidence is also demonstrating that people who meditate regularly are able to focus more deeply and deal with stress better than non-meditators.

“Science is describing what long time meditators have known all along: A consistent meditative practice decreases stress and increases well-being”.

Meditation vs. Grief Meditation: Conceptual-Practical Complementarity

For me, “Grief Meditation” (GM) is the Yin to the Yang of “Meditation”. As mentioned earlier, “meditation means turning your attention away from distracting thoughts and focusing on the present moment” to reduce angst and achieve a more peaceful state. One shortcoming heard from many who have struggled with meditation is the inability to quiet one’s mind, to distract the ever racing, crisscrossing jumble of thoughts and feelings for that one-point reference meditative state. In addition to those with genuine ADD diagnoses, I suspect it’s often bottled up, repressed, or numbed emotions interfering with achieving a state of mind-body serenity.

Key Components of Grief Meditation

- 1. Grief Meditation as Alternative Quieting Path:** Grief Meditation is an alternative path for quieting the brain as well as calming the heart: diving into those underlying and distracting painful, if not traumatic, thoughts, memories and emotions; it's a cleansing process through deeper and deeper levels of grief work. First one floods the mind (head and heart) before attempting to achieve one-point focus. Opening the heart is as vital as quieting the brain for stress relief and stress resilience.
- 2. Grief Meditation as Ebb and Flow Process:** GM begins by creating a quiet, private space for generating a free-associative state. It takes practice to quiet the mind enough to tune into your emotional memory channel. This tuning in allows charged memories and relevant painful feelings to percolate up from the recesses of your unconscious and subconscious, setting the stage for the subsequent grief work. And sustained grieving calms and clears a path for meditative access to deeper parts of the brain, to Jung's higher Self.
- 3. Grief Meditation as Therapeutic Tool for Trauma:** Grief Meditation of course is a vital therapeutic tool for dealing with lingering early trauma issues, chronic childhood taunting or bullying, the loss of significant others, career paths, or dreams, at any stage of life that have not been sufficiently grieved. It is needed for situations where stress has been denied, or allowed to build up and, finally, there's a psychic implosion/burnout or eruption/burn up. Not surprisingly, GM is valuable when one has grown up in a “Don't Talk, Don't Trust, Don't Feel” family environment.
- 4. Grief Meditation's Relevance for a TNT, 24/7 World:** Grief Meditation seems especially relevant in a 24/7, TNT - Times-Numbers-Technology - Driven and Distracted World, a world of constant upgrading and reorganizing. And, of course, this means the challenge of dealing with loss of control and predictability; forever coping with uncertainty and adapting to change. Combined with trying to “do more with less” ...remember, burnout is less a sign of failure and more that you gave yourself away! And mourning loss is a vital part of recovery regarding a sense of lost identity and finding one's true voice.
- 5. Grief Meditation's Healing and Harmonizing Experience:** And finally, whether hours, days, weeks, or months, such emotional immersion - recalling the trials or traumas, the flood of tears, an empathetic ear - helps clean out old wounds. This process of purposefully surrendering to the pain, whimpering or wailing, crying out or howling freely, breaks down defensive walls. Defenses don't have to work so hard blocking or numbing feelings; new energy is being freed. The shadow side is no longer so unimaginable or frightening. Having access to your unconscious and emotional memories means being able to psychologically integrate the conscious self with your subterranean mind and dreamscape. This strengthens all kinds of cognitive functioning - from use of intuition and blending divergent and convergent thinking to paradoxical conceptualization, metaphoric imagery, and holistic synthesis.

Grief Purification: Mystifying Moment, Healing Splits, and Envisioning Wholeness

Eventually, both healing wounds and a state of psychic harmony can be achieved through the percolation, reliving, and embracing of painful memories - what I call grief purification. The simultaneous engagement of past-present-future prepares the mind-body/heart-soul for more than a one-point frame of reference. Based on personal experience, if the critical grief work has been sufficiently engaged, there's a readiness for an uncommon meditative experience. Let me explain. After the symbolic nine months of continuous grieving in 3 times/week psychoanalysis, one day, very uncharacteristically, I had nothing to say. My Psychiatry Resident made his greatest intervention: “Don't say anything”. Initially puzzled, not having been a meditator, I simply lay quietly, my mind went blank...for thirty seconds. Then, suddenly...All I can say is the meditative state can quickly morph into a mystical-like unfolding: the one-point now may spread to a sense of cosmic consciousness (what pioneering psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, would call the greater Self): one feels connected to an all-encompassing universe.

Out-of-Body Potential

There’s also potential for an “out-of-body” experience - whether dream-like or hallucinatory in nature. (Personally, just not into astral or soul travel). I soon understood that a dream-like image of myself looking down from the ceiling while I lay upon the couch captured the critical and shame-based divisions within. And while I had carried around these divisions (and feelings of guilt and humiliation) for decades, this unprecedented moment was reflective of growth; it was also a spur for further healing. For the first time, I perceived myself as a holistic human being, composed of strengths and weaknesses or vulnerabilities, admirable qualities and defects. I did not have to deny my complex, double-edged nature. It was possible to accept who I was at this juncture in my life, still knowing that much head work, heart work, and homework remained. Reducing the warring, “good vs. bad” splits in personality helps close the psychic chasm. I had my first taste of an integrated sense of Self. And I wanted more.

From the Mystical to the Mandala Moment

In fact, hours later, reflecting on both the psychic harmony and curious wonderment, I began to unconsciously create a Mandala, one of Jung’s symbols of psychic integration and “Higher Self” awareness. (The Mandala, as noted in the poem notes below, is also a tool for generating deep meditative states). And perhaps the most important consequence of the Grief Meditation process and mystical-like moment: breaking down decades of denial. I no longer could dismiss the presence of an energy, a consciousness, but even more so, a creative unconsciousness that I felt compelled to explore and express...I had my life’s calling! And it is this same meditative, trance-like state, plumbing the depths of my shadow world, that I return to over and over again in both my speaking, but especially in my creative writing.

Closing Summary

A synergistic model of therapeutic healing, for realizing profounder levels of consciousness, and holistic integration has been presented: combining deep-seated grief work with properly timed meditation. Grief Meditation (GM) certainly encourages working through painful memories. But it also creates a readiness for both focus and flow. Extended free associative grieving leading to a state of quiet and calm, when combined with purposefully surrendering to a meditative state, has the potential for an unfolding experience of cosmic consciousness. One feels connected to everything. An out-of-body, dream-like experience, may well signal that interior psychic splits are being acknowledged and healing has begun. And, such a startling experience may reveal a sense of one’s calling: to explore and express the heretofore unconscious or subterranean psychic world within. And this state of focus and flow, mourning and mania, of having your conscious and unconscious worlds battle and dance with each other is a foundation for “Touched with Fire”-like **creativity. Grief Meditation is a therapeutic model that encourages the creative synthesis of chaos and calm.

** The title of renowned psychologist and expert on manic depression, Kaye Redfield Jamison’s book about how certain individuals with various degrees of bipolarity or intense mood swings often produce uncommon, blazing creativity. A key driving force is having to grapple with and make sense of the dynamic and disruptive, seemingly contradictory states - energy, flow of ideas, etc. of mania and melancholia.

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