

You Must Go Backward Before You Can Go Forward

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

A paradox is a seemingly self-contradictory statement or situation that is in fact often true. The paradox of mourning we will consider together in this article might, at first glance, seem self-contradictory, but as I will reveal, it is actually a forgotten Truth with a capital T. It's a Truth we must rediscover because it is essential to healing in the aftermath of significant loss.

Since your loss, well-meaning but misinformed friends and family members have probably been telling you some version of:

"He/she would want you to keep living your life."

"Time heals all wounds."

"Just keep putting one foot in front of the other."

"You need to put the past in the past."

Not only do these oft-offered clichés diminish your significant and unique loss, they imply that moving forward—in your life and in time—is what will ease your suffering. The truth is, paradoxically, in grief you have to go backward before you can go forward.

Our cultural misconception about moving forward in grief stems in part from the concept of the "stages of grief," popularized in 1969 by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross's landmark text, *On Death and Dying*. In this important book, Dr. Kubler-Ross lists the five stages of grief that she saw terminally ill patients experience in the face of their own impending deaths: denial; anger; bargaining; depression; and acceptance. However, she never intended for her five stages to be interpreted as a rigid, linear sequence to be followed by all mourners.

Grief is not a train track toward acceptance. Instead, it is more of a "getting lost in the woods" and almost always gives rise to a mixture of many thoughts and feelings at once. A feeling that predominates at any given time, anger, say, may dissipate for a while but then later return full force. Grief is not even a two steps forward, one step backward kind of journey—it is often a one step forward, two steps in a circle, one step backward process. It takes time, patience, and, yes, lots of backward motion before forward motion predominates.

Going backward through ritual

Throughout history, when the import of an event or transition in our lives is more profound than everyday words and actions can capture, we have had the wisdom to turn to ritual. And in our rituals, we often looked backward first—to our ancestors, to our holy or touchstone texts, to our traditions—before we celebrated what would come next.

Yet in contemporary times, as we pare down and even abandon more and more of the rituals that have long imbued our lives with meaning and purpose, we seem to be forgetting the need to go backward before going forward during rites of passage—including the death of a loved one.

Here and there, though, backward-looking rituals persist. In New York City, a stream of police cars pulls up to the 9/11 terrorist-disaster site early every morning. They flash their emergency lights but do not turn on their sirens. The police officers park, get out of their cars, and stand shoulder to shoulder in silence for a moment before returning to their vehicles and beginning their day of public service. What the officers seem to subconsciously understand is that this simple, quiet, backward-looking mourning ritual grounds their presents and their futures. When it comes to grief and mourning, we would all be well served to resurrect old rituals, sustain existing rituals, and create new rituals that honor the natural and necessary need to look backward before going forward.

Going backward through memory

For the survivors, the loss created by death is the loss of the physical presence of the person who died. In the physical plane, your relationship with the person has ended. And so you grieve. But on the emotional and spiritual planes, your relationship with the person who died continues *because you will always have a relationship of memory*. Precious memories, dreams reflecting the significance of the relationship, and objects that link you to the person who died are examples of some of the things that give testimony to a different form of a continued relationship.

And so you must look backward through the lens of memory. Talking about or write out favorite memories. Give yourself permission to keep some special belongings of the person who died. Display photos of the person who died. Visit places of special significance that stimulate memories of times shared together. Review photo albums at special times, such as holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries.

In my experience, remembering the past is the very thing that eventually makes hoping for the future possible. Your life will open to renewed hope, love, and joy only to the extent that you first embrace the past. Those who fail to go backward before marching forward after a loss often find themselves stuck in the morass of carried grief.

Going backward to your beginnings

The person you are today is the sum total of all the experiences that have touched your life. While your genetics also come into play, all the things that happen to you and all the people you interact with shape you. And because time is linear, your core is shaped in your earliest years—in childhood.

Reflect on your past. The word “reflect” comes from the Latin words *re*, meaning “back,” and *flectere*, meaning “to bend.” When you reflect on your past, you bend backward. You turn your gaze to that which is behind you—because it is not actually behind you, it is still a part of you.

Consider, too, the ways in which your family of origin handled loss, grief, and mourning. Were there open, loving discussions about death and loss? Did your parents mourn openly and support you in your need to mourn? If not, what were the “rules,” spoken or unspoken, about emotions and their expression in your household? And how did your parents’ cultural and ethnic backgrounds contribute to these rules?

In his book *The Act of Creation*, author Arthur Koestler referred to psychotherapy as *reculer pour mieux sauter*—French for, roughly, “going backward to be able to leap forward better.” The process of going backward to your beginnings, whether you do it on your own, in a support group, or with the help of a psychotherapist, can in effect give you a running start when you turn around to go forward again.

Going backward to tell your story

A vital part of mourning is often “telling the story” over and over again. And the story of your love and loss is a backward-looking process.

You might find yourself telling the story of the death. You might find yourself telling the story of the relationship. You might find yourself wanting to talk about particular parts of the story more than others. Do you keep thinking about a certain moment or time period? If so, this means you should share this part of the story with others.

Find people who are willing to listen to you tell your story, over and over again if necessary, without judgment. These are often “fellow strugglers” who have had similar losses. Look for listeners who can be present to your pain without trying to diminish it, “solve” it, or take it away.

Because stories of love and loss take time, patience, and unconditional love, they serve as powerful antidotes to a modern society that is all too often preoccupied with getting you to go forward. Whether you share your story with a friend, a family member, a coworker, or a fellow traveler in grief whom you’ve met through a support group, having others bear witness to the telling of your unique story is one way to go backward on the pathway to eventually going forward.

Going backward to name your gratitude

Studies have shown that the process of writing down what you are grateful is a practice that creates lasting, positive change. Consider starting a gratitude journal. In your work going backward, take time to write down thoughts and memories for which you are grateful.

Which relationships in your life are you most grateful for and why? Write about them. Or if you'd rather, tell the story of those relationships to someone who cares about you. And most important of all, express your gratitude directly to those people. If they are still alive, write them personal and detailed letters of thanks. Or take them out to lunch or dinner for the express purpose of telling them how much they mean to you and thanking them. Even for the special people in your life who have passed on, it is not too late to express your gratitude. Write them letters and read them aloud at their gravesites.

When you fill your life with gratitude, you invoke a self-fulfilling prophecy. What you pay attention to will be magnified and repeated. When you are grateful, you train your brain to look for the good in life, and you prepare the way for inner peace.

Going backward to begin anew

You know how in board games you sometimes land on an unfortunate square that sends you all the way back to the beginning? The death of someone you love can be like that. It can—indeed, it usually needs to—send you backward in all of the ways we've been talking about in Paradox 3.

When you go backward through ritual and memory, when you go backward to your beginnings, to re-story your life and to heal old griefs, you are doing a kind of starting over. You are pressing the reset button. That makes now a good time to reassess your priorities and reconsider how you want to spend the rest of your precious life.

You've witnessed a life come to an end. Was it a rich, satisfying life? What can you learn from it? What gives *your* life meaning? What doesn't? Take steps to spend more of your time on the former and less on the latter.

Now may be the time to reconfigure your life. Choose a satisfying new career. Go back to school. Begin volunteering. Move closer to your family. Be kinder and more compassionate. The key is to go backward and dig deep to uncover your true passions—whatever they may be—and your true self. Then, move forward to manifest them.

Going forward in grief

I hope you are beginning to understand the necessity of going backward in grief before you can go forward. But as we've also explored, the going-forward nature of grief is itself a paradox. "Progress" in grief is difficult to pinpoint. Grief is something we never truly get over. Instead, it is an ongoing, recursive process that unfolds over many, many months and years.

Something you *can* hold onto after you have put time and energy into your backward grief work, though, is hope. Hope is an expectation of a good that is yet to be. Hope is about the future. Going forward in grief means, in part, fostering hope.

How do you foster hope? You can write down your intentions for the future. You can make plans with friends and family so that you always have things to look forward to. You can craft a vision board—a piece of poster board covered with photos and images that capture what you want your future to be like. You can make goals and achieve them. Start with small, easy goals that are only a few days out, then work toward longer-term goals.

And remember, as long as you are doing the work of grief—actively expressing your grief and living the Paradoxes—you are going forward in grief, even though it may not always feel that way. You may not notice that you are going forward as it is happening, but one day you will look up and find that you have indeed moved and changed.