

You Must Say Hello Before You Say Goodbye

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.

Love inevitably leads to grief. You see, love and grief are two sides of the same precious coin. One does not—and cannot—exist without the other. They are the yin and yang of our lives.

From the moment we are born, we say hello to love in our lives by seeking it out, by acknowledging it when it unfolds, by welcoming it, and by nurturing it so that it will continue.

We must also say hello to loss and grief in our lives. To be sure, we do not seek it out, but when it unfolds, we must acknowledge it. I would even say that we must welcome our grief. After all, the hurt we feel is the consequence of the love we were privileged to experience.

Yes, we must simultaneously “work at” and “surrender to” the grief journey. This is, in itself, a paradox. As the griever comes to know this paradox, he can, very slowly, discover the soothing of his soul.

Saying hello to the physical reality of death

In centuries past, our actions and rituals made it clear that we understood the necessity of saying hello to the reality of death. We have always—from the time of Neanderthals, even, anthropologists suggest—honored the body of the person who died through the moment it was laid in its final resting place.

The body of the person who died was the focal part of the entire funeral process, from the procession into the church to the procession out of the church to the procession to the cemetery through to the burial. The body never for a moment left the family's sight—or heart.

In recent decades, conversely, the trend has been toward body-absent funeral ceremonies. Today, bodies are often cremated immediately, often without loved ones having spent time with them or even having looked at them beforehand. While historically we understood the essential, universal need to honor and affirm the life of the person who died with the body present throughout the entire funeral process, now the guest of honor is often missing in action.

If you have ever watched someone die, cared for a dead body, or visited the body of a loved one in an open casket, you have said hello to the reality of that person's death. I believe the more time you spent bearing witness to and even feeling the fact of their death with your own two hands, the more deeply you were able to acknowledge the reality of their death.

Saying hello to the reality of the death after the funeral

Being honest with yourself about your grief is one way you continue to say hello. Remember, grief is what you think and fill on the inside after you experience a loss. Find a place to be quiet and alone with your thoughts and feelings. In these moments of solitude, learn to check in with yourself about the death. Ask yourself, “What am I thinking and feeling right now about this loss?” Allow your thoughts and feelings to surface without judgment. Look your grief in the face and say hello to it.

In the Buddhist tradition, the concept of *bodhicitta*, which means “awakened heart,” teaches us that it is essential for us to not be afraid of who we really are or how we are feeling. Instead, we must awaken to the truth of our own thoughts and feelings. We must, in other words, say hello to them.

The next level of hello after a death is the expression of the authentic thoughts and feelings you have allowed to surface. Expressing grief is called mourning, and mourning is essential to your eventual healing. And learning to express your grief—especially if you are not naturally comfortable with sharing your innermost thoughts and feelings—is how you say hello to the need to mourn.

What's more, mourning is the public hello we give to our grief. It is the coming out with our truth. "Attention!" we say. "Something important happened to me. I loved and I lost. Now I am broken. World, say hello to my inner experience of grief. Grief, say hello to the world."

Saying hello to the new self you are becoming

Loving someone changes us forever. So does losing them.

After the death of someone loved, we are different than we were before the death. We are injured, and while we can work to heal the injury, it will forever leave a scar that marks both the love and the loss. Along the way, say hello to the new you.

You see, your self-identity will change. Your personal identity, or self-perception, is the result of the ongoing process of establishing a sense of who you are. Part of your self-identity comes from the relationships you have with other people. When someone with whom you have a relationship dies, your self-identity, or the way you see yourself, naturally changes.

You may have gone from being a "wife" or "husband" to a "widow" or "widower." You may have gone from being a "parent" to a "bereaved parent." The way you define yourself and the way society defines you is changed. A death often requires you to take on new roles that had been filled by the person who died. You confront your changed identity every time you do something that used to be done by or with the person who died. The person who died was a part of you. This death means you mourn a loss not only outside of yourself, but inside of yourself as well. I often say that we love from the outside in, but we mourn from the inside out.

Saying goodbye

Grief never truly ends because love never ends. People do not "get over" grief because they do not "get over" the love that caused the grief. After someone we love dies, we step through a doorway into a new reality, but we never fully close and lock the door behind us.

Still, if you say hello to your loss, grief, mourning, and changing self in all the ways we've reviewed, over time and with the support of others you will more and more come to find that you have ultimately said a kind of final goodbye to the person who died. No, you do not forget, get over, resolve, or recover from the death, but you become reconciled to it. Reconciliation literally means "to make life good again." In reconciliation, you come to integrate the new reality of moving forward in life without the physical presence of the person who died. With reconciliation comes a renewed sense of energy and confidence and a capacity to become re-involved in the activities of living. There is also an acknowledgment that pain and grief are difficult, yet necessary, parts of life.

You will find that as you achieve reconciliation, the sharp, ever-present pain of grief will give rise to a renewed sense of meaning and purpose. Your feelings of loss will not completely disappear, yet they will soften, and the intense pangs of grief will become less frequent. Hope for a continued life will emerge as you are able to make commitments to the future, realizing that the person you have given love to and received love from will never be forgotten. The unfolding of this journey is not intended to create a return to an "old normal" but instead the discovery of a "new normal."

Along the road to reconciliation, if you are openly, honestly, and actively mourning, you will be saying lots of hellos. Oh hello, this death. Oh hello, this thought. Oh hello, this feeling. Oh hello, this change. Oh hello, this me. Oh hello, this doubt. Oh hello, this new belief. But you will also be saying many goodbyes. Goodbye, this voice, this kiss, this body. Goodbye, this routine. Goodbye, this me. Goodbye, this belief. Goodbye, this ever-present pain. Your hellos

and goodbyes will overlap one another, with more hellos needed at the start of your journey and more goodbyes in the later days.

Saying goodbye is not the same as “closure.” As I said, you never fully close the door on the love and grief you feel for someone who has died. But you can achieve a sense of peace. The days of intense and constant turmoil can be replaced by serene acceptance as well as days of love, hope, and joy.

So yes, work on saying your goodbyes. But first, work on saying your hellos.