

Yvonne Hess, Walking the Walk, 03/16/10

My counseling practice has brought in hundreds of people struggling with grief or trauma or both. Lives devastated by traumatic emotions and memories, these wounded souls were boiling pots of unresolved pain.

They spent years in desperate attempts to cover it, hide from it, suppress it, medicate it, run from it and pretend it never happened. Their lives were so obsessed with the past that there was no present. Lives led by the rearview mirror — and you can't move forward if you're driving by looking backward.

March is a month of gratitude for me. It's been a month filled with loss and emotional trauma. How can a season of loss and trauma be connected with gratitude? In March 2007 my parents unexpectedly died within a week of each other. I was suddenly overwhelmed by all the past issues, conflicting memories, the should-haves and shouldn't-haves, the lost time and, most of all, the lost chance of resolution.

All the things I'd tried to "get past" or pretend didn't matter anymore emerged from my emotional depths like a raging storm that almost drowned me. I found myself on the edge of an emotional cliff, the rocks slipping away from my footholds. A boiling sea of past anger, resentment, sadness, mourning, confusion and distress was swirling just below me. For the first time in many years, thoughts of relapse to escape the pain became an option.

I had become wrapped up and warped by the all-consuming negativity of my situation. My thoughts were defeated, self-serving, self-pitying, and like those clients who came to me for counseling, I was unable to see beyond the pain. I became a victim of my own circumstances.

My self-talk was dominated by sadness and disbelief. I berated myself for thoughts of not being a good enough daughter or them not being good enough parents. I was tormented by "if only" statements in an attempt to rationalize blame for the bad times, the turmoil and conflict we had caused each other.

I began to see how at risk I was and reached out to the one safe person in my life — my husband. I started using the tools I give to clients on myself and seeking peace while holding tightly onto his love. I realized how blessed I was for his strength and started building on that platform a new emotion — gratitude. I've walked many clients through this exercise and now I was to travel the path myself.

Gratitude is a process of seeking peace and perspective for life events. It's becoming aware of the context of circumstances and how to unlock the fullness of experience. At first this seems trite and clichéd, but it works! Slow down the inner turmoil and accept emotions as gifts, even the negative ones. Being thankful that there is breath to breathe and feelings to feel is an important step.

The goal is to adopt an attitude that acknowledges the chaos and failure and sorrow as part of the past that made this day, then to bring about peace for the present, finally growing a greater vision for the future. This process brings about a perspective of forgiveness — of self, of others and of circumstances.

I'm thankful for March. I spent many months after my parents' deaths rethinking, re-feeling, and rewriting my relationship with them. Clarity came slowly like the rise of a springtime sun dispersing mists from nighttime shadows.

I have peace, acceptance, perspective, memories, forgiveness and, most of all, love.

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