

LOSS

By G. Raymond McCullough

For the purposes of this article the process of experiencing loss and grieving are interchangeable. Please don't confuse the word loss with the word lost. Although many people feel lost when confronted with loss.

There is no one moment in life that is more poignant than our first significant loss. Ironically, the first loss for most of us is a far and distant fact of our life. It's likely this loss has become obscured and overshadowed by the many more losses we have experienced. Nonetheless, it is our response to the first most significant loss that sets the stage for how we deal with future losses.

Experiencing loss is an unavoidable fact of life. Like a young child that loses their favorite toy. The utter terror and panic the child feels when they realize the toy is missing to the frenetic searching, to the anger, fear and rage that ensues when the inevitable loss appears to be permanent. At this point the child might be subjected to ridicule and blame for losing the toy. To complicate the matter, the parents' in their infinite wisdom attempt to bring their child's agony to a quick resolution by conjuring a bargain to replace the toy. However, there is the possibility that the calamitous event will compel the loving parent (mother or father) to console the grief stricken child. With the latter, the stage is now set for the child to begin accepting that their loss is real.

Losses can be temporary or permanent. They can be tangible (a person, place or thing) or intangible (self respect, dignity, the failure as a parent, friend, co-worker etc). It is the process we move through when we experience a loss that is significant.

In my work as a counselor and life coach I have seen the struggles people experience with the loss of self and their identity. This is especially devastating when a community, a group, or culture losses their

sense of identity and self. It is my belief that many of the problems experienced by the African American and Native American communities are due to a loss of self and identity. Although both of these groups over the years have made strides to regain their identity as individuals and as a people, it calls for confronting and experiencing losses head on. This task requires courage, determination, and a resolve by the communities.

At this stage it may be helpful to take a look at some basic information regarding the grief process. The chart below presents a sequential response to loss.

- **Shock stage:** Initial paralysis at hearing the bad news.
- **Denial stage:** Trying to avoid the inevitable.
- **Anger stage:** Frustrated outpouring of bottled-up emotion.
- **Bargaining stage:** Seeking in vain for a way out.
- **Depression stage:** Final realization of the inevitable.
- **Testing stage:** Seeking realistic solutions.
- **Acceptance stage:** Finally finding the way forward.

Individuals may go back and forth between the stages or stay stuck at a stage for years. A final stage that I believe is critical in the process, but not mentioned in this chart, is Integration. Integration is when we learn from experiencing our losses and integrate these lessons into our lives in a way that reflects wisdom.

One thing becomes clear with loss, there is always the possibility that fear, anger, guilt, and shame will permeate our feelings, lasting for years or even decades.

It's only when depression takes over that we feel the full toll of a loss and we have an opportunity to move toward surrendering.



Surrender to who or what? Surrender can be an act of courage. Why (?), because we are making a conscious choice to give over our power and/or control to someone or something without being 100% certain of the outcome. This is where the power of one's faith becomes critical.

Surrender to one's highest self is an integral aspect of spiritual progress. Surrender of our lower nature enables us to grow into our true inner self.

As an addiction counselor I have become aware of the powerful connection between loss and addiction:

- Addiction and the likelihood of experiencing an unusual number of losses in our lives is inevitable. It's a foregone conclusion that addiction will increase the likelihood that we experience events that will evoke grief. Unfortunately it's also inevitable that those wrapped in a cloak of addiction will not fully grieve their many losses. In fact it is very likely that they are stuck somewhere in the grief process...whether it be in a state of shock/disbelief, denial, depression, anger, or somewhere in between.

- Learning how to grieve is one of the most important life-coping skills we can develop. It is of dire importance for the recovering person if they are to have any chance of long-term success. First and foremost the recovering person must grieve their relationship with alcohol and other drugs. Failure to do so keeps the recovering person lock step in the fatal dance of addiction. Just as we must grieve failed relationships that have been the source of much anguish and pain so too we must grieve our disastrous relationship with alcohol and other drugs...we **MUST** say goodbye to alcohol and other drugs. We must also say goodbye to the people, places and things that were associated with our use.
- We must grieve any remnants of our past life that will draw us back into our fatal addiction! We must say Goodbye to **THE LIFESTYLE!**

Being clean and sober...changing your life...will elude you without learning to experience loss.

Learning to experience our losses is a life skill of paramount importance. Although it takes a great deal of courage, our inability to experience our losses can rob us of the opportunity to have happiness, fulfillment, and joy in our life. If we don't allow ourselves to experience our losses we paint ourselves into a box of despair, depression, sadness, and anger. Learning to experience loss will allow you to bring new joy, success, fulfillment, and happiness into your life!