

The (Child's) Bereavement Caregiver as Gardener:

A Parable

by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.

One spring morning a gardener noticed an unfamiliar seedling poking through the ground near the rocky, untended edge of his garden. He knelt to examine its first fragile leaves. Though he had cared for many others during his long life, the gardener was unsure what this new seedling was to become. Still, it looked forlorn and in need of his encouragement, so the gardener removed the largest stones near the seedling's tender stalk and bathed it in rainwater from his worn tin watering can.

In the coming days the gardener watched the seedling struggle to live and grow in its new, sometimes hostile home. When weeds threatened to choke the seedling, he dug them out, careful not to disturb the seedling's delicate roots. He spooned dark, rich compost around its base. One cold April night he even fashioned a special cover for the seedling from an old canning jar so that it would not freeze.

But the gardener also believed in the seedling's natural capacity to adapt and survive. He did not water it too frequently. He did not stimulate its growth with chemicals. Nor did he succumb to the urge to lift the seedling from its unfriendly setting and transplant it in the rich, sheltered center of the garden. Instead the gardener watched and waited.

Day by day the seedling grew taller, stronger. Its slender yet sturdy stalk reached for the heavens and its blue-green leaves stretched to either side as if to welcome the gardener as he arrived each morning.

Soon a flower bud appeared atop the young plant's stem. Then one warm June afternoon the tightly wrapped, purple-blue petals unfurled, revealing a paler blue ring of petals inside and a tiny bouquet of yellow stamens at its center.

A columbine – the gentle wildflower whose name means "dovelike." A single, perfect columbine.

The gardener smiled. He knew then that the columbine would continue to grow and flourish, still needing his presence but no longer requiring the daily companionship it had during its tenuous early days.

The gardener crouched next to the lovely blossom and cupped its head in his rough palm. "Congratulations," he whispered to the columbine. "You have not only survived, you have grown beautiful and strong."

The gardener stood and turned to walk back to his gardening shed. Suddenly a gust of wind lifted his straw hat and as he bent to retrieve it, a small voice whispered back, "Without your help I could not have. Thank you."

The gardener looked up but no one was there. Just the blue columbine nodding happily in the breeze. . .

Wolfelt writes (adapted by HSCD):

The more bereaved people I have the privilege to work with, the more I see myself not as a counselor but as a gardener. Too often, counselors are taught (and subsequently internalize) the medical model of bereavement care, which suggests that bereaved people are "sick" and need to be "cured." This same mindset implies that the goal in bereavement caregiving is to help the person "resolve" or "recover from" the illness that is grief.

The medical model of understanding human behavior actually damages bereaved families because it takes responsibility for healing away from the bereaved person (child, adolescent or adult) and puts it in the hands of the doctor or caregiver who "treats" the "patient." Look up the word "treat" in the dictionary and you'll find it derives from the Latin tractare, which means, interestingly enough, to drag. The word patient, defined as a noun, refers to a sick person who is being cured by a professional. As compassionate caregivers, we cannot (and should not try to) "drag" our "patients" into being "cured."

Grief gardeners, on the other hand, believe that grief is organic. That grief is as natural as the setting of the sun and as elemental as gravity. To us, grief is a complex but perfectly natural and necessary mixture of human emotions. **Grief gardeners do not cure the grieving; instead we create conditions that allow the bereaved to mourn. Our work is more art than science, more heart than head. The bereaved is not our patient but instead our companion.**

The seedling in this parable represents, of course, the bereaved. The seedling is struggling to live in its new, hostile environment much as a bereaved person struggles to cope with their new, scary world. A world without someone they loved very much. A world that does not understand the need to mourn. A world that does not compassionately support its bereaved.

This person needs the love and attention of caring companions if they are to heal and grow. It is the bereavement caregiver's role to create conditions that allow for such healing and growth. In the parable, the gardener removes stones near the seedling's tender stalk and offers it life-sustaining water. In the real world, the grief gardener might simply listen as the mourner talks or acts out their feelings of pain or sadness, in effect removing a heavy weight from their shoulders. Instead of water, the grief gardener offers empathy, helping quench the mourner's thirst for companionship.

The gardener in the parable also dug out weeds that threatened to choke the young seedling; the grief gardener might attempt to squelch those who threaten the child's healing, such as a dysfunctional or grief-avoiding family member. The grief gardener's compost is the nourishment of play – that necessary work that feeds the souls of all children.

But notice, too, that the gardener in the parable does not take complete control of the seedling's existence, but rather trusts in the seedling's inner capacity to heal and grow. The gardener does not water the seedling too frequently; the grief gardener does not offer companionship to the point of codependency. The gardener does not use chemical fertilizers; the grief gardener does not advocate the use of pharmaceuticals (unless made necessary by a medical condition, of course) or other inorganic therapies for the bereaved. The gardener does not transplant the seedling but instead allows it to struggle where it has landed; the grief gardener does not seek to rescue the bereaved from their pain.

Largely, as a result of its own arduous work, the seedling in the parable grows into a beautiful columbine. Those bereaved, with time and the loving care of companions, also have inside themselves the potential for this same kind of transformation. The greatest joy of grief gardening,

in fact, is witnessing this growth and new beauty in the bereaved who have learned to reconcile their grief.

What an honor to garden in such rich soil.

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