

# Worden's Tasks of Mourning: A Spiritual Exercise

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Resident in each of us is sacred space: the soul. The spirit expresses what is in the soul. Separation and loss draw us into that space to process our thoughts, emotions and actions. Nurturance of that space guides us from pain to acceptance, from doubt to faith and from despair to hope. Mature beliefs hold us as we work through the tasks of grief.

J. W. Worden identifies four tasks in grieving: accept the loss, acknowledge the pain of the loss, adjust to a new environment and reinvest in the reality of a new life (Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy: A Handbook for the Mental Health Practitioner, 2nd edition. London: Springer, 1991). The tasks of grief are not states of achievement but a fluctuating process to accommodate a new normal lifestyle without what was lost.

Consider that the pain of loss is a part of the process of spiritual formation and strength just as exercise is a part of physical fitness. Some invite their higher spiritual being to bring comfort. Others intensify efforts to rise above it. Still others incorporate it into their life system. A few ignore it hoping it will go away.

Autumn is the process of remembering and yearning, a spiritual partnership with the existential reality of loss. Spiritual presence sustains comfort during the winter of emotional reorganization. Spring validates spiritual resurrection of adjustment to living without what was lost. Spiritual care in the summer of grief reinvests emotional energy in other relationships.

Grief affects the whole person. It changes sleep, nutrition and exercise habits. It triggers sad emotions. It determines some actions that must be done to take care of business and life in a different manner.

Inclusion of spirituality in the tasks of mourning impacts thoughts, emotions and actions, not simply the feelings. Healthy spirituality and faith keeps the bigger picture in view. It circumvents unhealthy accumulation of emotions. Hope leads one into an uncertain future with confidence.

Worden's tasks invite a spiritual component.

## Task 1: Accept the reality of the loss.

Grief is a natural process of life.” It is a sign of love not wanting to let go” (Earl A. Grollman in Living with Loss). The ancient proverb acknowledged there is a time for every purpose: give and take away, weep and laugh, mourn and dance. No one likes to lose something or someone. The foundation of spiritual care begins with acceptance final control rests in the hands of someone greater. Mourning is the process of remembering, memorializing, and laying the loved one to rest. Bereavement activity about the loss to which one is trying to adapt means healing a broken heart.

## Task 2: Experience the pain of the grief.

“The cycle of grief has its own timetable. Until that cycle is honored and completed we are moving along life’s path with an anchor down” Ann Linnea in Deep Water Passage. Pour out your grief. The story is told of an English professor whose close friend died. He went home, played the saddest music he knew, plunged into his grief and poured it out with intensity. “When tears come . . . I am swimming in a hallowed stream . . . My heart is at work. My soul is awake” (Mary Margaret Funk in Thoughts Matter). The gift of tears means sharing in a story. As a priest took his morning walk with his companion, he heard crying from within a house. He inquired only to find out that their child had died and the family was grieving. Without hesitation he sat down with the family and cried with them. On the way back to the monastery the companion asked if his master knew the family. He answered, “No.” Puzzled the companion inquired why the priest cried with him. “So that I may share their sorrow” (Aaron Zerah in As You Grieve: Consoling Words From Around the World)

## Task 3: Adjust to an environment without the deceased.

Grief can be a burden or a gift. The permanency of being without what has been lost can be overwhelming. Western culture conditions individuals to possess, not let go. It bespeaks loneliness, helplessness, isolation, loss of identity, and relational engagement. There is nothing that we can possess forever in this world. Spirituality provides reason to look beyond materiality.

## Task 4: Withdraw emotional energy and reinvest it in other relationships.

“Grief is a sign that we loved something more than ourselves . . . [It] makes us worthy to suffer with the rest of the world” (Joan Chittister in Gospel Days). Understanding a divine viewpoint moves one from life time sorrow to a larger view of how life can be experienced in a different way.

Here are some statements to ponder:

- May I fully face life and death, loss and sorrow.
- May I be open to the pain of grief.
- May I find the inner resources to be present for my sorrow.
- May loving kindness sustain me.
- May I accept my sadness, knowing that I am not my sadness.
- May I accept my human limitations with compassion.
- May I accept my anger, fear, anxiety, and sorrow.
- May I forgive myself for not meeting my loved one's needs.
- May I forgive myself for mistakes made and things left undone.
- May sorrow show me the way to compassion
- May I be open with others and myself about my experience of suffering and loss.
- May I receive love and compassion of others.
- May I find peace and strength that I may use my resources to help others.
- May all those who grieve be released from their sorrow.

Inevitably, spirituality comes into play when one experiences loss. It affects grief, and grief affects sanctity. Faith can be challenged, dashed, comforting or a new exploration. Spiritual practice allows the search for meaning after a loss. It comforts through the expressions of grief through rituals and relationships. It stabilizes during adjustment without what is lost. It directs relearning through new experiences and relationships. It fortifies preparation for personal immortality.

Envision divinity as being on your side. Take comfort and receive renewal from your sacred space. Accept grief's spiritual lessons of appreciation for life, closer relationships and transformative growth.