

# Frontline

This newsletter is dedicated to professional caregivers. It is our hope that this newsletter will help you give comfort and strength to those you serve.

Winter 2008

## Scriptotherapy The Tapestries of a Life



by Dr. Earl A Grollman

After the Alfred P. Murrah Building was bombed on April 19, 1995, I traveled to Oklahoma City and on that day addressed a large audience. To my surprise the majority of the attendees were Vietnam veterans. After witnessing on television the shredded metal and pulverized concrete of rubble and then the horrendous massacre of 169 people, they had just relived the carnage of a war that they had experienced many years before.

Often when professionals counsel the bereaved, we may focus solely upon the death of their loved ones. We then ignore other trials, which could compound their present crisis. Vulnerabilities encompass not only prior deaths, but other turning points such as divorce, job loss, relocation, molestation, physical disability, mental challenges, and a host of other previous individual, family and community complications.

Our busy schedules may demand that when we do investigate a family history we may grant but casual and scant importance

to yesteryear's obstacles. Our goal is to reveal the immediate source of their present pain and sorrow. Besides, we may rationalize, they may not be capable of coherently restructuring the emotional tragedies that had so long ago befallen them.

That's why scriptotherapy can be so beneficial and enlightening. The word comes from the Latin root, "scriptum" meaning "things written" and "therapia," "to nurse." We all know that the term "bibliotherapy" refers to written material to assist those in extremity to better understand and resolve their thorny quandaries.

Recalling earlier events is a cathartic expression of self-help. The mission of scriptotherapy is to stimulate and identify previous memories, process them, and synthesize the past with the present. Not only are the clients able to have flashbacks revealed, but also, the counselor has a greater comprehension of earlier encumbrances and challenges that have unwoven the tapestries of their lives.





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### **What is Needed**

Clients should choose those appropriate and convenient materials that would help them feel the most relaxed such as:

- A journal, a notebook, a spiral three-ring notebook with blank pages.
- A pen that writes freely, a pencil, a laptop computer. If a cassette recorder is selected, they should speak naturally and perhaps take notes to go along with the recordings.
- A comfortable setting or settings where they are at ease to express themselves.

### **Starting with Such Triggers as**

- Centering techniques to get the launch ready.
- Lighting a candle, having a cup of tea, a glass of wine.
- Viewing old photos and mementos to kindle the recollections.
- Talking with others who may have been observers or participants in the happening (Clients are often amazed when others may dwell upon the same situation and the client then questions if they were at the identical place.)
- Sitting quietly to allow the experience to “return to them” and then start to write it down.

### **Writing Loss Response - Past and Present**

- **START SMALL.** Concentrate on a single event at a time, one memory at a time, piece by piece to formulate the tapestry.
- **BE A STORYTELLER.** While writing “The divorce took place when I was a child,” bring the episode to life by responding to personal details: “How old were you?” “Describe the scene.” “How did you first respond?” “What were your later reactions?” “Who

else was involved?” “What was most difficult?” “Why?” “How better might you have coped with it?” “What have you learned as a result?” “How does it compare with your present loss?”

### **Help Them to Pinpoint Their Emotions**

- empty • encouraged • frantic • relieved
- embarrassed • ignored • trapped • angry
- confused • scared • peaceful • guilty
- numb • bitter • uncertain • restless
- happy • disbelief • determined • outraged
- exhausted • lonely • serene

### **Completing Sentences May Assist in Weaving the Tapestry**

- I miss...
- If only I had...
- It's hard to believe that...
- My friends and family didn't understand...
- I acted differently by...
- What made me furious was...
- It's a relief that...
- I had changed by...
- What helped me then...
- What might help me now...
- Comparing that loss to my present crisis, I think that...

Scriptotherapy can be a valuable tool to help our clients to rediscover the tapestries of their inner selves. At the same time, what a service to counselors to gain keener insights of the traumas of their past as we become more equipped to restore the psychological health for their present.

These were some of their comments after writing down their thoughts:

- “By penetrating through unknown layers of unknown things, I better understand my present sorrow.”
- “How good it is to get out my repressed feelings and finally bring them to the light of day.”
- “I mourn not only for the death of my beloved but I can now grieve for my other losses as well.”
- “I didn't know how I felt until I saw what I had written down on paper.”



### **About the Author**

*Dr. Earl A. Grollman, a pioneer in crisis management, is internationally acclaimed as writer and lecturer. A recipient of the Death Education Award by the Association for Death Education and Counseling, his books on coping with bereavement have sold over 750,000 copies. A list of his award-winning books on grief and loss may be obtained at [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*

*For further information, visit [www.beacon.org/grollman](http://www.beacon.org/grollman)*

# Companioning Tenet One



by Alan D. Wolfelt, Ph.D.



*Companioning is about being present to another person's pain; it is not about taking away the pain.*

To be bereaved literally means to be “torn apart.” When someone is torn apart, there is a natural need to embrace the heartfelt pain of the loss. There is no pill we can take to relieve the pain and suffering, and no surgery that can reassemble the pieces of a broken heart. The way in which we care for fellow humans who are suffering the pain of loss has much to do with the ways in which we will be able to supportively companion others.

Sadly, current North American culture often makes the person in grief feel intense shame and embarrassment about feelings of pain and suffering. People who are perceived as “doing well” with their grief are considered “strong” and “under control.” Society erroneously implies that if grieving people openly express feelings of pain and suffering, they are immature or overly emotional.

In contemporary North American culture, pain and feelings of loss are experiences most people try to avoid. Why? Because the role of suffering is misunderstood. Normal thoughts and feelings that result from loss are typically seen as unnecessary and inappropriate. Yet, only in gathering courage to move toward this hurt is anyone able to ultimately heal.

## Grief Is Not Shameful

As the bereaved experience grief, they are often greeted with what I call “buck-up therapy” – messages like “carry on,” “keep your chin up,” or “just keep busy.” And combined with these messages is often another unstated but strong belief: “You have a right not to hurt – so do whatever is necessary to avoid it.” In sum, the person in grief is often encouraged to deny, avoid, or numb themselves to the pain of the experience.

When personal feelings of grief are met with shame-based messages or silent indifference, discovering how to integrate the loss becomes all but impossible. If the bereaved person internalizes stated and unstated messages that encourage the repression, avoidance, or numbing of grief, they often become powerless to help themselves. I often say that finding the way into and through grief is often more difficult than finding a way beyond it. In fact, internalizing the belief that mourning is wrong or bad tempts many people to act as if they feel better than they really do. Ultimately, denying the grief denies one

the essence of life and puts one at risk for living in the “shadow of the ghosts of grief.”

When we as caregivers experience the pain and suffering of a fellow human being, we instinctively want to take the pain away. Yet, to truly companion another human being requires that we sit with the pain as we overcome the instinct to want to “fix.” We may discover that we want to fix another’s pain because it is hurting us too much.

Suffering doesn’t mean something is wrong. It isn’t happening because we made the wrong move or said the wrong thing. As Thomas Moore wisely noted, “The basic intention of any caring – physical or psychological – is to alleviate suffering. But in relation to the symptom itself, observance means first of all listening and looking carefully at what is being revealed in the suffering. An intent to heal can get in the way of seeing. By doing less, more is accomplished.”

Ultimately, if we rush in to take away a person’s grief pain, we also take away the opportunity for her to integrate the loss into her life. To truly be a healing presence, we must be able to share another person’s pain while realizing there is nothing we can do to instantly relieve it. Knowing that we are not responsible for it is essential, all the while seeking to empathetically understand what the pain feels like. The paradox of entering into the pain lies in the truth that as you affirm someone’s feelings of suffering, you are also affirming their eventual capacity to move beyond those feelings. As Helen Keller taught us years ago, “The only way to the other side is through.”

## The Wisdom of the Soul

Yes, sometimes it may seem as if you are doing very little as you open your heart to a fellow struggler. And yet this is an example of how companioning inspires an attribute of the soul: wisdom. Wisdom is the sense of recognizing that in your helplessness you ultimately become helpful. A wise caregiver will have the wisdom to know what she can do, accept what she can’t do, and have the spirit of the heart engaged in ways that can and do make a difference.

In providing a soulful response to another person’s pain, we must discover and nurture two qualities that are within us: humility and unknowing. We must first be present with an

open mind and an open heart. To be open in this way of being is not an absence of thought, however. In fact, it is a clear, focused attentiveness to the moment. It is about immediacy – being present in the here and now.

When we as caregivers focus the power of our attention on the suffering of another human being, the full measure of our soul becomes available to her or him. Releasing any preconceptions of the need to take away pain allows our hearts to open wide and be infinitely more present, loving and compassionate. Presence in the fullness of the moment is where the soul resides.

And being present to people in the pain of their grief is about being present to them in their “soul work.” There is a lovely Jungian distinction between “soul work” and “spirit work.”

Soul work: a downward movement in the psyche; a willingness to connect with what is dark, deep, and not necessarily pleasant.

Spirit work: a quality of moving toward the light; upward, ascending.

In part, being present to another person’s pain of grief is about being willing to descend with them into their soul work – which precedes their spirit work. A large part of being present to someone in soul work is to bear witness to the pain and suffering and not to think of it as a door to someplace else. This can help keep you in the moment. Dark, deep and unpleasant emotions need to be held in the same way happiness and joy need to be held – with respect and humility.

## Acknowledging Our Own Suffering

As our hearts begin to open to the presence of suffering, challenging thoughts may creep in. Can I really help this person? Is the pain of his loss touching my own losses? If I reach out to support, what will happen to me? In the push-pull this experience triggers, there is little wonder that being present to the suffering of others seems so difficult.

The capacity to acknowledge our own discomfort when confronted with suffering is usually less overwhelming when it is no longer minimized or denied. To give attention to our helplessness can free us to open more fully to another as well as to our own pain and suffering. We no longer find ourselves wanting to run away. We can slow down, be still and open to the presence of the pain. We can witness what is without feeling the need to fix it!



When we become conscious that any part of us wants to run away from the pain, we can gently embrace it; an entire new level of receptiveness becomes possible. As we become the companion, we begin to see what is being asked of us that is not so much about “doing” but instead about “being.” We discover what anxieties and fears might be inhibiting our helping hearts, and come to trust the healing power of presence.

Finally, we can begin to listen – truly listen and give honor to the pain. Instead of pushing away suffering or merely releasing the need to fix it, we are able to enter into it. We are not indifferent or passive; we are fully available and open. We are truly being hospitable to the pain of another person.

In opening to our own suffering from life losses, we enhance our desire to be of service to those around us. We become truly available at deeper levels of our souls. We do not deny pain but open to it and learn what it is trying to teach us. In becoming more sensitive and responsive to one’s own pain as well as the pain of others, we continue to see ourselves as students always learning to become more heartfelt companions to our fellow strugglers. What an honor!

This article is excerpted from Dr. Alan Wolfelt’s book *Companioning the Bereaved: A Soulful Guide for Caregivers*, available at bookstores and at Dr. Wolfelt’s website, [www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com). Dr. Wolfelt is an internationally noted author, teacher and grief counselor. He serves as director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and is an educational consultant to funeral homes, hospices, hospitals, schools and a variety of community agencies across North America.

### About the Author

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*Dr. Wolfelt is known internationally for his outstanding work in the areas of adult and childhood grief. Among his publications are the books:*

*Healing a Friend’s Grieving Heart  
Understanding Grief: Helping Yourself Heal*

*For more information, visit his website:  
[www.centerforloss.com](http://www.centerforloss.com)*

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