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The Roadblocks on the Path through Grief

By John Kennedy Saynor

You have undoubtedly taken a trip that seems to have no end of hindrances in getting to your destination. This is especially true in large urban areas, but obstacles to travel occur in rural locales where we often encounter slow moving farm vehicles or large wild animals running out on the road and interrupting our travel. There are, of course, days when things run smoothly and we get to where we want to go in good time feeling like we had a good trip.

The path through grief is similar to any journey we take. There are things that help make it smoother and things that make the road a lot more bumpy. I want to consider some of the influences on our lives that can either help us or hinder us on our path through grief.

Your family: When I listen to the stories of people who are grieving and hear about how their family contributes to a difficult journey through grief, I am amazed at the courage they show in pursuing the relationships. The fact is, if you have had difficulty with family relationships before a death occurs, it is very rare that things improve after the death.

Many people expect that after a death occurs, the family will be the first there to help and support them. This is not always the case and there are many reasons for that. One of them is that other family members may also be grieving the loss and don't have the energy to offer support to each other. The other factor that may impact how much support family members give to each other is the potential negative effect of the "will."

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Your friends: Friends are another source of support that often disappoints those who are grieving. As is the case with family members, the reason may be that friends are also grieving the loss of the one who died and may not have anything to offer the bereaved. Those whom you once thought were close friends may soon become a thing of the past. And that is hard.

Your culture: Different cultures respond to a death in different ways and we are all affected by the culture into which we are born. Religious traditions, the manner of dress, the attitude towards life and moving on with life play a big role in how people grieve. How do you respond to the death of your loved one? How do you think people expect you to act? Do you want to act the way others want or do you have a different idea of how you should be carrying on with life? Expectations of others can actually be a hindrance to how you move through your grief.

Your philosophy of life: That is a fancy way of talking about your belief system. What helps you to make sense out of life? Do you have a strong faith? Do you have a very non-traditional

belief system? Are you a humanist? Oftentimes our belief system is not a help. If, for instance you believe in a God who is somehow involved in your daily life and either influences or orders the way things are to be, then your belief in this God may be challenged. This will present you with the opportunity to ask some serious, sometimes scary questions that have the potential of affecting how you look at your life in the future.

Your basic attitude towards life: By this I mean whether you are basically a positive or a negative person. Recently, in the introductions at a support group that I facilitated, an 82-year-old woman said, "I've come here for help. I know I will make it. I have no choice." That told me she would make it and that her journey through her grief would be successful. And it has been.

If you have a negative attitude towards life, if nothing ever goes right and you don't expect things to get better, then they won't. Of course, if you are willing to change your outlook, things will get better.

Clearing the Roadblocks

While many influences in our lives make our journey through grief more difficult, the same influences can also help us and make our journey somewhat less complicated.

Your family: There are many people in the world who have a very close family. These are families that for whatever reason stick together through the good and bad times and support each other no matter what. If your family is like that, then you are truly fortunate. When you have known people all your life, like you do your family, there are likely to be fewer surprises. You probably have an unspoken understanding of life and your expectations for the future.

To maintain good relationships with your family it is important, as always, to be open and honest. When you are having a bad day, let them know. If things are going well, celebrate with them the fact that you can also have good days. There are times family members may seem overprotective and smothering. Let them know when you need space and let them know you will ask them if and when you need help.

Your friends: Albert Schweitzer once said, "In everyone's life, at some time, our inner fire goes out. It is then burst into flame by an encounter with another human being. We should all be thankful for those people who rekindle the inner spirit."

The journey through grief is one that should not be taken alone. Nurture the relationship you have with friends. Some friends may fall to the side of the road, but you will almost certainly find new friends who may share the journey you are on.

Your culture: It takes courage to understand what it is about your community and the culture of your community that isn't being helpful. Some cultures have distinct ideas of how a bereaved person should behave during the first months or years after a death.

A woman came to see me one day and said, "I am having a hard time learning how to be a widow." My response to her was, "Well you have come to the wrong person because I will not help you become a widow, but I will help you move on with your life."

Although this death is a significant event in your life, it is important not to let it define who you are. During the first months and years following the death of your loved one, you are given the opportunity to recreate your life. You have a chance to redraw the road map of your life that you previously envisioned. This road map may no longer be useful. You may choose to go in a new direction. For some this is easier than others, but for everyone it is a possibility.

Your philosophy of life: What you believe about life and what is important to you about life is the foundation of your life. It may be that the belief system that has brought you this far is meeting your needs. Perhaps your belief system is being challenged. If that is the case, be brave and let yourself explore new ideas. It can't hurt and may lead you to a new place of understanding what is important and what is not.

This is not something that is easily done alone. Find a group of people with whom you can meet to discuss honestly some of the things that you are questioning. A bereavement support group will often provide this kind of environment for discussion.

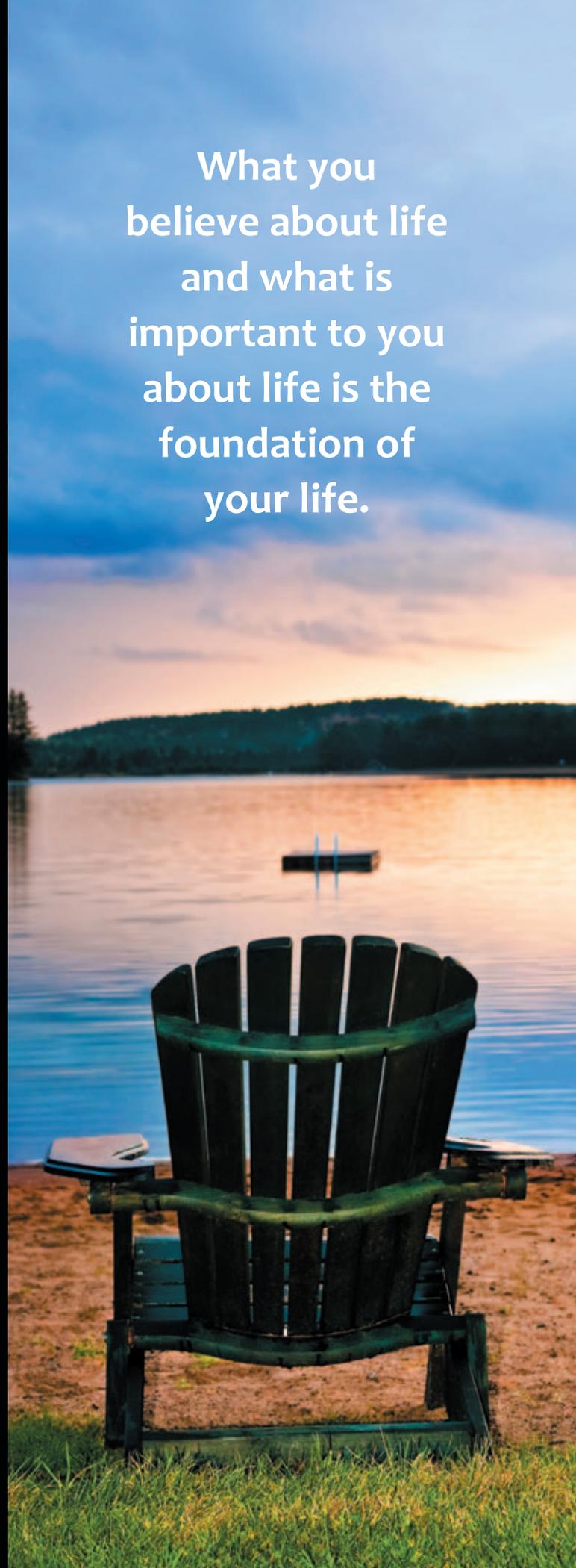
Your basic attitude towards life: The American philosopher, William James, said, "Human beings can alter their lives by altering their attitudes of mind."

Although it is difficult to change lifelong patterns of thinking and belief, it is possible. If you recognize a basically negative approach to life in yourself, determine to change that and to approach the next chapter in your life with a more positive and hopeful attitude.

Canadian author, Brian Tracy, puts it this way: "Develop an attitude of gratitude, and give thanks for everything that happens to you, knowing that every step forward is a step toward achieving something bigger and better than your current situation."

While you probably don't feel thankful for the death of your loved one, you may find a great deal in your life for which to be thankful. Think about your life with the one who has died and what that person gave you in the gifts of love, support, etc. It is helpful to make a list of those things for which you are thankful. This could be the first step in developing a more positive attitude towards life and your future.

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Quick Tips

The following are some tips that may help you clear the way for a more successful journey through grief.

1. Towards the end of the first year following the death, you may find your head beginning to clear and the fog lifting. Don't resist the urge to begin to set new goals. These goals will be the foundation stones for your new life.
2. Distance yourself from all negative people and situations. Anything that saps your energy from the recovery that you are making will only hold you back. Negativity also distracts you from the goals you have set for yourself.
3. Take risks. Do things you have never done but have always wanted to do. People who are grieving often tell me, "I feel so old." Doing new things will rejuvenate you. Congratulate yourself when you do something you have never done before.
4. Get in touch with others who are on the same journey as you. People who have joined a support group say things like, "I feel stronger, not so helpless. I have found some of the confidence I had lost. I'm beginning to plan ahead regarding things I'd like to do."
5. Be in touch with your emotions. Understand that for the first few months you will have big swings in your emotions. One day you will feel like you can take on the world, the next you will feel like the world has taken on you. This is normal. The swings will lessen with time.
6. Don't give up! This process takes time. If you persevere with thought and determination, new life will emerge. And a new you will emerge with it!

John Kennedy Saynor is the founder of GENESIS Bereavement Resources. He can be reached through his website: www.genesis-resources.com.

Paradise Row
111 Paradise Row
Saint John, N.B. E2K 3H6
506-634-7424

Brenan's
 **FUNERAL HOMES
& CREMATORIUM**
www.BrenansFH.com

Bay View
1461 Manawagonish Road
West Saint John, N.B. E2M 3X8
506-634-7425