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Using Movies to Transform Grief

A 3-Step Process for Healing

by Birgit Wolz, Ph.D., M.F.T.

A Sufi master once said: "If you think your work in life is finished and you are still alive, it isn't." What this simple statement acknowledges is that no matter how we manage our lives they will always be beset by challenges, which can often be difficult and painful. The trick is this: how to avoid becoming unbearably burdened and wounded by them?

Though life may feel precarious at times, it is also made up of a series of wonderful events: we are hired for the job we've always wanted, the man or woman of our dreams falls head over heels in love with us, a child is born. Life is good. Finally, we find ourselves just where we want to be. Things seem perfect and settled. Somewhere in our heart, we know they will remain this way forever.

But life by definition is a constant series of changes. Change is inevitable, permanence, an illusion. In fact, if our secret desire for permanence ever were fulfilled, the result would be akin to death. "Happily" life refuses to let us to forget this fact for long.

Crises often seem to happen to us just when things are going their best. Just when we feel we've finally "gotten it right" our bubble of bliss bursts. The thing we thought would never happen to us happens. And in the empty aftermath, our future seems not only unclear and uncertain, it looks completely unacceptable.

Be it the death of a parent, a divorce, the loss of an important job, a serious illness or disability, this change can be a psychological cataclysm. Suddenly nothing seems fixed or stable any more. We feel deeply hurt and disoriented, as if our very emotional survival is at stake. It seems there is no way we can possibly bear the pain. At such times it's easy to wonder if we will ever find the hope necessary to continue on and heal our wounds or will we be emotionally crippled for the rest of our life?

Such fears can even be aroused by smaller, everyday disappointments. Somebody rear-ends our car, we miss a plane, critical computer data is lost. Plans get changed, promises get broke, no one avoids learning what it means to loose in the game of life. As a result we can easily become sad or angry. Our future can seem bleak and dark. If a string of such losses runs on for a while, we might despair of ever seeing a brighter future. At such times the important question to ask is how do we go about each death of these individual expectations without giving in to the death of our spirit?

Step 1. — Changing Negative Beliefs

Surprisingly, the crux of our healing lies in the very act of asking our self this crucial question. The first step is to look closely at the story we tell our self about our self. What explanation do we hold for our seemingly unending struggle with loss and disappointment? Becoming conscious of these explanations or negative beliefs about our self can put us on the road to healing and growth.

These negative beliefs can take many forms but typically they fall into one of the following three categories:

- I am suffering because I'm a "victim."
- If it hurts, it must be good for me.
- I deserve this pain because I made mistakes.

Such beliefs can actually injure us if we accept them. They can make us deeply depressed or anxious. Therefore we need to examine our beliefs about our self and if we find we hold some version of these beliefs, we must change them. But sometimes, such beliefs can be so deeply ingrained in our view of the world we don't even know they are there. The first step to changing them is to become aware of them.

One way to accomplish this is to look at the feedback you are already probably receiving. Think back through your life carefully. Perhaps friends have talked to you about this belief and told you that it is distorted and untrue. Perhaps your own intuition has given you similar messages.

The following is an exercise I sometimes give my clients to assist them in examining ingrained negative beliefs about themselves.

Exercise 1. Negative Belief Cost-Benefit Analysis

If you find you hold a negative, self-defeating belief about yourself and would like to learn how to let go of it, start by investigating its advantages and disadvantages. Use this form to guide you. If you find you have more than one negative belief, start with the most obvious, then repeat the process for the others.

Name the belief you want to change:

Advantages of believing this:

Disadvantages of believing This:

If you could believe something else, it would be:

You may discover that there are some important reasons why you have held on to your negative belief(s). But those reasons, no matter how right they may feel, don't make the negative beliefs true. Whenever one of them pops up in your mind again, remember why it is there, and let it gently go. Try weighing it against the alternate belief you entered in the bottom box. Open your mind to the possibility that the alternate view may be a truer representation of your reality. Be patient. By continually questioning yourself about your negative beliefs and weighing them against more positive explanations for your lot in life, change is possible. But change won't take place overnight. Like moving into a new house or city, changing your beliefs about yourself may take some getting used to. Asking the right questions can be a crucial first step toward learning to live a fuller, more rewarding life despite your losses and disappointments.

Step 2. — Processing Grief

After examining how your mind reacts to loss, an important second step is to examine how your body reacts as well. You need to understand how you grieve. First, open your mind to the idea that grief is

a necessary part of any healthy human life. Consider the following facts:

- Grief is an inevitable part of living.
- Grief is a natural consequence of small or large losses and disappointments.
- Though we share common grief reactions, each person's experience of loss and grief is unique.
- Grief can appear in different kinds of emotional experiences, such as sadness, depression, despair, anger, irritability, frustration and more. *Underneath* these feelings usually lies a hurt about someone or something we need to let go of, to detach from.
- Grief - whether it's about small or large losses - is a process that unfolds naturally when we become aware of this underlying pain. Grieving can become a healing and even *transformative* process when we acknowledge, experience, and express this pain with a compassionate heart.

For some, grieving comes naturally. But for others, grief is like a strange and frightening landscape, seldom if ever visited. If it feels like grief is unnaturally difficult for you, there are many ways to support the grieving process, such as counseling with a therapist, joining a support group, talking to a good friend, reading a book about your specific struggle, sitting in meditation or taking a walk in nature.

Another method you may not have considered is to watch a movie with conscious intent. You may be surprised at how a simple movie viewing experience can help dissolve blocked up emotions and aid us in exploring our grief with compassion, especially if done with the proper "set and setting".

Exercise 2. Learning to be with Your Pain in a Compassionate Way

Watching a sad movie can be a powerful catalyst. If you feel you need to get more in touch with your pain about a loss or disappointment and have a good cry, try watching a movie with conscious awareness.

Preparing for each viewing session is critical. Sit comfortably. Let your attention move effortlessly, without strain, first to your body then to your breath. Simply inhale and exhale naturally. Follow your breath in this innocent, watchful way for a while. Notice any spots where there's tension or holding. As you grow aware of them, let your breath travel into these spots. To release tension you may experiment with "breathing into" any part of your body that feels strained. Never force your breath.

Your gentle attention is sufficient to help you become more present and balanced, as it spontaneously deepens and corrects your breathing if it is constricted. Experience your condition without inner criticizing or comment. If you notice yourself judging or narrating, simply listen to the tone of your inner dialog as you come back to your breath. Lay aside all judgments and worries.

As soon as you are calm and centered, start watching the movie. Most deeper insights arrive when you pay attention to the story and to yourself. While viewing, bring your inner attention to a holistic bodily awareness (felt sense). This means you are aware of "all of you" — head, heart, belly, etc. Occasionally, you might notice your breathing from an inner vantage point — from your subtle, always-present intuitive core. Observe how the movie images, ideas, conversations and characters affect your breath. Don't analyze anything while you are watching. Be

fully present with your experience.

Choose a movie you watched before, one that you remember moved you deeply. If none come to mind, visit <http://www.cinematherapy.com> for a list of suggestions.

Make yourself very comfortable at home and let yourself cry as much as you like. Allow your heart to open up. By feeling compassion with the characters' pain, you might develop compassion with your own struggle. As you watch the film, keep in mind the above guidelines for conscious movie viewing. If you don't want to be by yourself, invite a trusted friend to watch the movie with you and talk about your feelings afterwards.

Immediately following the film: without interrupting your stream of consciousness, write about your feelings. The film's story and your reaction to it may be important, but focus your writing as much as possible on the loss or disappointment you suffered in real life, and your reaction to that.

This process is an important step toward owning our pain and deeply understanding its dimensions and demands. Grieving is necessary so that we eventually come to find the deeper meaning of what might otherwise destroy us. By opening to our pain we learn that we can grieve and live at the same time.

Step 3. — Transforming toward health and wholeness

An ancient people tell the story about an elder who was talking to his disciples about tragedy. The elder said, "I feel as if I have two wolves fighting in my heart. One wolf is the vengeful, angry, despairing one. The other wolf is the strong and hopeful one." And the disciples asked, "Which one will win the fight in your heart, the despairing one or the hopeful one?" The wise elder answered, "It depends on which wolf I feed."

We need to feed the hope that can grow out of despair. At the same time, we need to stay in the struggle, whatever our situation, until it is transformed into new life.

No one comes out of deep suffering the same kind of person they were when they went into it. It is possible, of course that we come out of it worse than when we went in. Grief can sour us. But it is equally possible, if we reflect on our pain, to come out stronger and wiser than when our suffering began. What is not possible, however, is to stay the same. One way or the other, struggle is guaranteed to change us.

As much as our struggle with pain sometimes seems to be a mystery, it can also be a gift. The changes it brings in us can be a call to conversion, to grow up. Our struggle with grief can be the springboard for a healing transformation.

We usually think about hope as being grounded in the future. This is what I call "wishful" hope. But there is another kind of hope — one fulfilled in the future but born from fully remembering our past. I call this kind of hope "transformative."

Unlike "wishful" hope, this other kind of hope depends on our ability to remember that we have survived everything in this life so far, and because of that, odds are we will be able to master this latest challenge too. Transformative hope is not a denial of reality; it is not a matter of waiting for things of us to get better. Instead, it

focuses our energy on getting better *inside* by taking a series of small actions that transform darkness into light. No longer is hope a hedge against suffering, now suffering is the foundation for our hope.

Many movies have been made that begin in despair and end in triumph. These films can help you get in touch with this kind of transformative hope. If you can identify with characters trapped in their circumstances, and share their disappointments as well as their unsteady steps toward liberation, you may find reason for optimism in your own situation. You can gain the courage to do what is necessary to change your reactions to loss. Let yourself get inspired to learn how to survive grief it without succumbing to it, how to bear struggle without being defeated but rather to be transformed by it.

Below is a series of four exercises aimed at awakening this sense of transformative hope. Perform the exercises after watching a film you chose specifically for its modeling of transformative qualities. Look for and focus on strength, courage, endurance and determination in the main characters.

A good example of one such film is "Frida," based on the 1983 book by Hayden Herrera, a biography of the iconic, passionate, communist, bisexual Mexican painter, Frida Kahlo. As with many films and stories, the values and beliefs of the main characters in "Frida" may differ from yours but try to view it as an opportunity to "step inside another person's shoes". However your lifestyle may differ from that of the film's main characters, it is, nonetheless, a good example of how pain and disappointment can transform a life.

Analysis of the Movie "Frida"

The movie "Frida" shows the many big challenges the woman faces with strength and courage throughout her life of 47 years. She grows up in Mexico City, at a time when it was teeming with famous exiles like Leon Trotsky. In her family "It was with great difficulty that a livelihood was earned" and her parents have a relationship filled with conflict. Despite financial constraints, she demonstrates what in her time and culture is an unusual confidence, by going to school to become a doctor.

Frida's studies are cut short by a horrific traffic accident that almost kills her. A trolley crash shatters her back, pierces her body with a steel rod and leaves her with several broken bones in her spine and pelvis, a broken collarbone, several broken ribs, a broken leg and foot. While recovering in bed, her young lover leaves her. Frida goes through anguish and despair. Isolated in a cast in bed — "Bored as hell," she recalls — she begins to paint. Throughout her life Frida has multiple surgeries and is never free of pain. For long periods she has to wear a body cast and suffers from multiple medical complications.

As the trolley crashes plays out on screen, the director cuts to a shot of a bluebird flying out of Frida's hand. Later, in another instance of "magic realism," a gold leaf falls earthward, lighting on her cast. These elements of magic realism suggest how Frida, through art and imagination, found the strength to live despite her constant pain. She paints with the same bold courage that helps her to survive. Art transforms both Frida and her pain.

Feeling better, Frida falls in love and marries her mentor, the muralist Diego Rivera. Rivera is already a legend when she meets him. Frida, who had been such a serious student and confident young woman, is suddenly completely dependent on her husband, painting almost exclusively

for him. And this, once again, causes her pain that gets reflected in her art: most of her paintings from this time show Frida either alone or with Diego. His work dwarfs the scale of her paintings, overshadows them. But slowly, with much endurance, she rises out of that shadow as her own works begin to garner recognition.

At the beginning of their relationship Frida tells Diego Rivera she expects him to be "not faithful, but loyal." Both view fidelity as "bourgeois." But both also know the green passion of jealousy, and both have a double standard — though each has affairs, they blame the other for theirs. As if Frida's physical wounds aren't enough, Rivera's extramarital affairs, especially with Frida's sister, make her marriage a great source of ongoing pain.

The film shows how Frida uses bodily wounds in her art to suggest these psychic injuries. The greater the pain she wishes to convey — especially pain caused by rejection from Diego — the bloodier her paintings become. The peculiar intensity of her paintings suggests that they are therapeutic, crucial to the artist's wellbeing. Many of her paintings are linked in the film to the specific emotional event that served as the catalyst for the painting.

Both, Frida and Diego eventually demonstrate emotional endurance and a willingness to discover whom the other person is as well as discovering their own true identity. When the film ends with Frida's death, the impression remains that despite the many crises in her life, she never lost her passion and remained full of courage to be who she was, take life as it came, even the suffering.

Choose a film you've already seen, one that touched you when you saw it the first time, one that has characters who undergo this kind of transformation. It is not crucial that the plot matches your situation exactly. More important is that you get a sense of the strength that the characters find in themselves that helps them prevail. Focus on this aspect of the film.

The following list might refresh your memory or give you some ideas about a movie to choose:

Groundhog Day: a cynical TV reporter (Bill Murray) is transformed by his experiences after he is caught in a time warp.

Shine: a brilliant but broken pianist (Geoffrey Rush, Noah Taylor, Alex Rafalowicz) overcomes a long-standing mental breakdown with help from his friends and an understanding lover (Lynn Redgrave).

Out of Rosenheim (Baghdad CafŽ): a down-and-out desert cafŽ owner and her "family" are transformed by the magic of an overweight and irrepressible German tourist (Marianne Spgebrecht) suddenly stranded in their midst.

Kramer vs. Kramer: divorcŽs (Dustin Hoffman and Meryl Streep) find that the custody battle over their child brings them to a healing understanding of themselves and each other.

Ordinary People: a suicidal teen's (Timothy Hutton) struggle to overcome his survivor's guilt forces his suburban family to come to grips with their stifling roles.

A Town Like Alice: a young Aussie (Bryon Brown) man falls for a British nurse when both are POW's in Japanese occupied Malaysia. The man is apparently tortured to death for aiding the nurse, but

years later the two are reunited in the Australian outback only to face new hardships as they rekindle their love and accept their very different expectations.

Norma Rae: a young widow (Sally Field) rises above her impoverished circumstances and against stiff opposition to lead fellow textile factory workers in efforts to unionize.

On Golden Pond: a patriarch (Henry Fonda) and his family heal ancient hurts when a lifetime of stifled emotions erupts during a traditional summer holiday.

My Left Foot: a marvelously gifted but horribly handicapped Irishman (Daniel Day Lewis) overcomes cerebral palsy, learning write with the only part of his body that unscathed by his wasting disease, his left foot.

Further examples can be found at cinematherapy.com.

Whichever film you choose, watch it with conscious awareness as explained above. After you have finished watching the movie, take a couple of deep breaths and let the impressions of the film help you with the following exercises.

Exercise 3. Acceptance

In order to heal and transform we need to first accept ourselves: admit that we are wounded. We need to take powerlessness and reclaim it as surrender. We need to take vulnerability and draw out of it the freedom that comes with self-acceptance. Our strength and hope lies in the acceptance of our limitations. In the acceptance of our limitations we become, ironically, a fuller self.

Without interrupting your stream of consciousness, write about how these thoughts relate to you and your own struggle.

Exercise 4. Small Acts of Courage in Spite of Fear

Though fear can paralyze the spirit it also calls us to the access one tiny act of courage to keep hope alive. These acts can start put us back in control of our lives. We need to take fear and move it into courage. Did you see a character in the film take some small acts of courage in spite of fear? Have you done this in the past?

Without interrupting your stream of consciousness, describe how you felt when you did this and how it helped you prevail.

Exercise 5. Determination and Endurance

It is ironically the very process of responding with determination to each element in struggle that nourishes hope. We need to face the exhaustion struggle brings and endure to the end.

We need not to give in to the thing that defeated us. We need to refuse to give up, either on ourselves or on the world around us. Endurance is the light of hope in a continuing darkness that must somehow some way give way to the light of dawn. Endurance makes transformation imperative. Did you see examples in the film, which show that determination and endurance helped certain characters get stronger? Have you experienced this in the past? Without interrupting your stream of consciousness, describe your experience and how it could apply to your

current situation and potential future.

Exercise 6. Transformation

Struggle with loss and disappointment can scar us, but it can vitalize us too. A hole we feel inside us needs to be filled with something better. Out of all this can come new strength, a new sense of self, new compassion, and a new sense of the very purpose of our life. There are some parts of the human character that are best honed under tension. The hard thing to understand is that it is the becoming that counts, not the achievements or the roles in which we manage to mantle ourselves.

Struggle can transform us from our small, puny, self-centered selves into people with compassion. It not only can heal us; it can make us healers as well. For this to happen we need to learn to listen better. We cannot walk quickly, so we learn to wait.

Did you see examples in the film, which show this kind of transformation? Have you experienced this in the past? Take a couple of slow breaths and listen inwardly. Without interrupting your stream of consciousness, describe your experience and how it could apply to your current situation and potential future.

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Further Reading

Grief and Transformation

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