

Your Personal Coach

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Last week I said goodbye to my best friend. My beloved yellow Labrador Retriever, Dorothy, lost her courageous battle with bone cancer. My grief is so “utter,” as Emily Dickinson once called that deep pain that defies words. There were no personal recriminations or guilt about whether we had made good or bad choices along the course of Dorothy’s illness. Supported by exceptionally wise and compassionate veterinary care, we made every decision with a single intent: to secure the highest quality of life for her, for as long as possible. Pure love guided us, and no unresolved issues stood in the face of our raw grief. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our grief for the loss of human family members was as clean and clear as for our four-legged ones?

The loss of Dorothy reminded me that when you love a lot, you have a lot to lose. We can’t avoid the ravages of living a human life. The losses. The suffering. We can only choose how we will respond to these dark nights of the soul. Will we become bitter or better?

To choose to be bitter is to shut down your heart, to become jaded and hard. Bitter is to excuse yourself from the great chain of being, and to believe that no one else could ever understand your pain. “Why me?” we scream into the darkness. Bitter is to be alone in your suffering, and to hide away from risk and love because loss will happen – inevitably happen – again.

To choose to be better as a result of tragic loss is to open your heart. It means discovering anew this wisdom about the reality of life: If you just live long enough, you will lose everything and anyone you’ve ever loved. This might strike you as a particularly pessimistic worldview. But it’s the truth, and better yet, it contains gifts. Buddhism teaches that it is precisely this broken open heart that lets in the light of compassion. Compassion – which literally means, “to suffer with” – is the absolute understanding that we are all in this together. We will all suffer in life.

But how can one live optimistically and fully with the thought that death and loss are just around the corner? I’m afraid it’s the only way one can really truly live a conscious life, rich in spiritual meaning and joyful in each moment. It’s the only way we can truly appreciate the blessings in our lives, and realize that every day – every second – is a gift. Real suffering is uninvited and unwelcome, but it is a gift. The thirteenth-century Sufi mystic, Rumi, realized this when he said, “pain is a treasure because it contains mercies.” The Bible is also clear on this point, “Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us...”

Real suffering is an authentic and realistic response to the ragged wounds of living a human life. It’s also unavoidable and an essential part of every human life. Illness, loss of loved ones, disappointment, decline, death, limitations, and imperfections startle and shake us. But they awaken us to find meaning, dignity, and significance in our lives.

Through my tears, the memories of my dear Dorothy, the healing power of time, and the love of good friends, I know I will live into a day when my loss is not so visceral, not so all-consuming. I hope to risk again, and to treasure every day given me. I hope to

become better. Just another lesson – among many others -- taught by my sweet Dorothy. Godspeed, my dearest friend.

Postscript: Our heart-felt thanks to Dr. Mark Grossman, Dr. Mary Burkart, Melissa Cooper and the staff at Roanoke Island Animal Clinic for their great compassion, support, and wonderful medical care for our old girl.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2004 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) Columns are archived at www.fullpotentialliving.com.