When meaning seems lost

Our world is a world of stories. At any given moment we are steeped in the daily telling of story. Films, plays, television drama and comedy, newspapers, books, magazines and art are but a few of the many places we encounter story each day. Perhaps more importantly, each of us is caught up in an endless telling and re-telling of personal story as we relate the events of the days of our lives to friends, family members, or simply anyone who might be willing to listen. The telling of story is an ongoing, never ending process that becomes central to the ‘who’ of who we are.

Why story? Why the need to recount events to ourselves and to those who will listen? Beginning as children, and throughout our lifespan, we consistently utilize story to create meaning in our lives. Seemingly unrelated events can be placed together to create a sense of meaning from the past, to the present, and into the future. It is a place of safety and comfort filled with a sense of security.

When your world is shattered by the death of someone you love, that secure place of safety, comfort and meaning may seem to vanish as grief ripples through your life. The ache of loss that resides within the brokenness of your world becomes a constant reminder of that which was, and that which is no longer. What made sense yesterday, may no longer make sense in the light of a new world defined by loss. Meaning can simply disappear.

When meaning seems lost, it is in story that you can begin to take the first steps toward what Thomas Attig describes as re-learning the world — “learning again how to be and act in the world without those we love by our sides.” Story not only provides us the opportunity to re-learn, but the opportunity to re-member, re-store, re-claim and re-new.

How your story of remembering and renewal is lived or told may be reflected in a variety of ways. The telling may come through the spoken word, a visual image, journaling, photography, musical rhythm, life review, or ritual. The possibilities for the telling and living of story are endless. It is a process that restores connection both to the self and to others. Continued...
When meaning seems lost (continued)

And in that connection a sense of meaning begins to reawaken. The great poet Rumi wrote “Don’t turn away. Keep your gaze on the bandaged place. That’s where the light enters you.” By returning to story, you have the opportunity to reflect upon the “bandaged place” and the wound of loss that lies beneath it. The light entering that wound is the light of meaning and potential growth. It is a place often filled with questions that may have no apparent answers.

Meaning doesn’t necessarily come easy. No matter how much meaning you find, it doesn’t erase your emotions or explain away the death. And meaning isn’t simply something that exists — it’s something to be discovered or created.

In the days to come as you begin to re-learn the world and seek to find meaning in it, I challenge you to find a place where your story may be told, lived and honored. Be grateful for what your story has to teach, both to yourself and others. Remember that all stories have life and that when they are told they shape both the person who hears the story and the one who tells it. It is in that shaping where life is renewed, meaning begins to emerge, and your loved one lives on.

Supporting your child:
Ways that parents can help their child find meaning

It is often easy to lose meaning when a significant loved one has died. How does a young child or teen comprehend that “meaning” can be attached to something as painful as the loss of a loved one? With guidance and love, a parent can provide a framework for a child to have an understanding about the grief they are experiencing, and also how to honor the significance of the impact the death has had on their lives.

One very simple family activity utilizes natural and readily accessible materials: rocks and stones. In our grief support program for children, counselors use rocks to symbolize the many, varied and often intense feelings which make up a grief response. Rough-surfaced or sharp-edged rocks can represent feelings that are big, hard or painful. Rocks that are smooth and round, with softened edges that have been tumbled through time, can suggest that, with time and processing of experiences and feelings, intense or painful feelings can be softened.

Some rocks have an inherent beauty – shiny, glittery particles that might represent the joy and happiness that still exists in the world for each child, despite the pain of the death of a loved one. This beauty encompasses hope for a happy and healthy future. The varied coloration in the rocks can represent people or things that are supportive.

Children can be invited to collect rocks, given the above information, and identify a small container to hold these special rocks. This activity can carry tremendous meaning by acknowledging the significance of each individual’s relationship with the loved one who has died, and the feelings attached to the death.