

## Good grief - it's play doh! ...

Can you imagine my curiosity on reading those words? A number of years ago, this was one of the choices of workshops that jumped out at me from a list of options at a conference sponsored by the Hospice Association of Ontario.

When we entered the room, each participant was given 3 marble-sized pieces of play doh - blue, white and yellow. As the session began, we were asked to roll together into one ball, the blue piece (symbolizing ourselves) and the white piece (symbolizing something or someone that had been part of our life, but was no longer). The two colours began to meld together, taking on a marbled appearance.

The facilitator Sue MacDonald, a wonderful hospice nurse, then invited us to create from our two-coloured ball, a shape that for us represented the unique relationship that had existed but was no longer. The results were many - a ring, a cup, a heart. "Is it possible to take out one of the colours without disturbing the shape?" she asked, and then directed us to take out the white colour.

For a while, we worked away in silence; taking apart the shape we had created. "How does your shape look now?" she wondered. Broken, destroyed, in pieces, were some of the responses, and we felt again a wave of the grief we experienced when faced with our loss.

"Take out more of the white colour." she directed. This was harder - literally (have you ever tried to pick apart two colours of play doh that have become mixed?) and figuratively (this was a painful reminder of the process of picking up the pieces after a loss - of living without what had become familiar in our lives).

In fact what we discovered was that it was an impossible task. Try as I might, there was some of the blue of 'me' left in the white of 'the other' - in the loss, I had quite literally lost a part of me, AND, there was some white that I was unable to extricate from the 'blue of me'.

This was the 'aha' - the whole body learning moment for me! As the exercise continued, I remembered reading in her book *Seven Choices*<sup>1</sup>, Elizabeth Harper Neeld's writing about the process of 'making meaning of the memories' as a way of having the person or thing we have lost remain in our lives forever.

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<sup>1</sup>Seven Choices, Elizabeth Harper Neeld (Clarkson N. Potter, 1990)

A way of moving from the place where memories torment to the place where they bring comfort<sup>2</sup> of coming to a place that honours that which we have lost, and makes room for more in our life. A place where we can wonder about and discover the things which we now 'carry in our beings' (that white play doh that remains) that are part of our lives as a result of our relationship that no longer exists. Those values, ideals, insights, pleasures, awareness which have become part of the fabric of our life, that nothing and no one can erase.

It is this process of learning, this knowing 'in our beings', that allows us to begin to 'loosen our grip' on the past, because we no longer fear losing our connection with that which is precious to us. And, over time (and this DOES take time!), come to a place where we are ready to consider incorporating new things into our lives - that yellow marble of play doh - and continuing the creativity of adding our now blue and white and yellow play doh to the world.

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<sup>2</sup> A Grace Disguised - How the Soul Grows Through Loss, Gerald L. Sittser (Zondervan Publishing, 1996)