

# MOVING FROM THE WOUNDED, ADAPTIVE CHILD TO THE FUNCTIONAL ADULT

## A RELATIONAL LIFE THERAPY TECHNIQUE

*By Gail Winemaker, M.A.*

When a spouse passes away, it can open the deepest wound of one's life. For many, the grief and loss puts them on a journey to an entirely new and unexpected chapter. In Relational Life Therapy (RLT), we help adults reconnect with the coping strategies they successfully used as children to deal with wounding experiences in order to become the functional adults they are today. We call this connecting with one's adaptive child, while applying more emotionally mature adult reasoning skills. RLT helps people to moderate their emotions and more effectively deal with their grief.

### **The Story of Grace & Edward**

A client name Grace lost her husband after forty-one years of marriage. She was hopelessly lost in grief after losing him to the disease of ALS, more commonly known as Lou Gherig's Disease. They had enjoyed a deep and abiding love for many years that was fraught with the flaws and limitations of most marriages. At the time of his death, they had been through a process of rebuilding and reconnecting in a deep and intimate way; one they described as soul to soul. Even though Grace knew her husband was withering away and that it was only a matter of time that he would be gone from her life, she was able to cope as if they were going to continue on forever.

As Grace watched her husband draw his last breath, she began to realize that her life would take on a new definition that would undoubtedly make her feel out of control. She sought counselling to help her sort out these feelings. As I worked with Grace, I learned that her sensation of being out of control was a very familiar theme from her childhood. As I helped her look back, however, we discovered that whenever she felt out of control as a child, she would regroup and take control; and not always in the most healthy ways, rather in the only way in which she knew how to cope. The fears she experienced in early childhood from her parents' vicious verbal arguments were indelible. She used to experience anxiety and fear when she heard them talk about divorce, and her ultimate fear would be about abandonment.

In Relational Life Therapy we often recommend that a client write a letter to his or her adaptive child to express thanks and appreciation for teaching the coping strategies needed to deal with the fears and uncontrollable feelings of childhood. A second letter is then recommended to announce that the functional adult is here to take over for, protect and take care of that adaptive child. We have found that this exercise palpably gives the functional adult new healthy coping strategies that enable them to deal more appropriately with the feelings of being out of control, anxiety-ridden, afraid or abandoned.

As I helped Grace through her grieving process, I suggested that she use a similar process of letter-writing. However, instead of writing letters to herself, I suggested that she write a letter to her deceased husband to express her feelings. I further suggested that she respond back to her letter as if her husband was replying to it.

Grace has allowed me to share her letters with others so they might understand how the process worked for her. The content of those letters can be found on the next page.

## Here is Grace's "Adaptive Child" letter to Edward:

*Dear Edward,*

*It's three weeks that you're gone, and I'm having so much trouble believing it, and so much trouble dealing with the pain of everything that has happened in our lives. I can't find my centre.*

*I'm lost. I'm angry that our lives took such a turn for loss. I wanted us to be forever, taking care of each other and being each other's centre. How unrealistic is that?*

*We were given so much. We did so much and accomplished well. At our deepest parts, we did have something for so many moments in our lives. Then life took over, and we both felt out of control. We only knew to keep moving forward. It was part of our pattern. I'm glad I got to take good care of you in the last two years. It's what I do best. I wish you were here to do that for me right now, because I feel so incapable.*

*Other people want to help me, but they can't and you can't. I have to find my centre, and I have to put one foot in front of the other, and find new ways to connect in the world.*

*My style is to want to know how all that will pan out. Who will print out my paintings? Who will make love to me? Who will listen to me the way that you did?*

*How do I really say goodbye to you? How do I let go of you? The only picture of you I want to conjure up is when you were sick. You were so handsome to me, so gentle, so caring, so real. You took me into your heart and soul. On that last day, I felt you in the deepest part of me.*

*How did you manage to be so brave to live in the moment? What a silly question. It's what you always did! Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn't. Can you help me now? Can you direct this production from where you are and keep me safe?*

*I need your protection.*

*I'm going to remember "Be yourself and if anyone hurts you, it will hurt me." I'm going to remember us dancing and making love, holding each other after. I'm going to remember you asked for that as well. You saved us, protected us from having horrible memories of you. You taught us well at the end.*

## Here is Grace's Response Letter from Edward Written as Her Functional Adult

*Dear Grace,*

*I know you are sad tonight. Remember I love you, and you promised to carry me in your heart. Don't let sadness take over. I want you to experience joy, and it's okay to move on. You'll be alright. Nothing can take away from what we had. You'll experience new life, new experiences, new love. Don't be afraid. I'm watching you. I'm guiding you, and I'm always loving you. Life is an adventure. While you're on earth, you are meant to experience as much as possible. As long as I was alive, there were only certain possibilities. Now the world is your oyster. Remember, what you want on your tombstone: "She did it all." Now you have the opportunity.*

*I want to see you live life to the fullest. You deserve it. You know things will work out. You're capable and strong, and you have to much love to give. You have so much life left in you. I want you to do all the things you want. I want you to be happy!*

*I love you, I love you, I love you!*

I was pleased for Grace that she found this exercise enormously comforting, empowering and motivating. It truly helped her to move forward. Now five years later, Grace reports that those letters were instrumental in helping her take charge of her life, helping her to become more centered and in control of her life in a healthy way.

For anyone undergoing loss or grief, I highly recommend this process.