**Sample Chapter**

**An Autumn’s Journey – Deep Growth in the Grief and Loss of Life’s Seasons**

**Chapter 5**

**Kisses in Death**

**Processing Grief by Escorting Our Losses to the Next Place**

“[Don't walk behind me, I may not lead. Don't walk in front of me, I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.](http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/29605.html)”

 - Unknown

We would wait until the last deep frost; giving the garden and the greenhouse the fullest breadth of the season. Spring, it seemed was only moments ago; the sweet scent of warm soils still thick and commanding. When you’re a kid, it’s not the planting that’s fun because you can see and manage all of that. It’s the growing that’s mysterious as seeds transform in the cloaked secrecy of the soil, emerging as something far different than what they were when they were planted.

But by fall they had grown, produced both fruit and flower in abundance and had succumb to both the hard work of a long summer and now the biting hands of fall’s frost. Their work done and their energies spent, they would all now be uprooted either as withering plants or hardened stalks. For a kid, there was a finality to it all; not exactly morbid but something of grief and loss.

There’s unexpected loss where we’re shocked into grief; a seismic abruptness where the unanticipated onset of grief is exponentially complicated by the massive disorientation that besets us. Then there’s the expected loss, much like the garden and greenhouse where you can see loss coming from a long ways off; where you see it as natural and inevitable. Expected or unexpected, we are equally set at grief’s door to do grief’s work. The method of arrival might be different, but the process of grieving is largely the same.

Clearing the garden and the greenhouse was an acknowledgement that this season was irrefutably over and that the plants that found refuge in it were dying without remedy or recourse. We had planted with a cycle fully in mind, knowing that we would have to plant again next spring. It was an acknowledgement of birth, life and death; a cyclical process whose sidelines afforded us ample space to watch, but no room to intercede in order to alter or suspend the cycle. It was the stuff of partnership but nothing of the stuff of control. I was a kid watching the fullness of life play out splendidly in the greenhouse and then the garden, but having no idea of the both the grandeur and pain of it all.

"[Mediocrity knows nothing higher than itself, but talent instantly recognizes genius](http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/24944.html)," wrote Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The cycle of planting, growing and harvesting seemed all the stuff of incomprehensible genius to me. As a kid, I didn't know what mediocrity was because I naturally assumed that you always lived with a generous sense of abandon. I didn't know that there was anything else. It seemed that I was appropriately naive. Life had not yet tainted me with so many of the unnecessary cautions that eventually weave their variant threads into the choking fabric of mediocrity. And so, as a kid I saw genius.

I suppose that the bareness of it all was the hardest to take; the end where life had been exhausted and the productivity had passed in some final, satisfied gasp. The spent remains of that marvelous productivity as displayed in dried stocked, limp vines and shriveled stems was all that remained. It was the absence of life that left the garden a naked plot of now frigid dirt and the greenhouse desolate and abandoned; one a cemetery and the other a mausoleum it seemed. You know life will come again, but its absolute absence where it had once flourished created a clash between the sense that nothing could ever grow here again, yet knowing with the fullest assurance that it will and it would.

It seemed that there should be some sort of formality to all of this; a bidding farewell that somehow closes this season with a reverence. There always seemed some sort of joint camaraderie that demanded that the party left at the end of it all would bid the other a passionate, yet respectful goodbye. It was not just about saying goodbye to the other, but it was acknowledging the journey itself.

Celebration of the camaraderie of the journey was sweet and tender, thanking both the garden and greenhouse for a journey well done and wonderful. It was recalling the myriad fruit and flower that had been a product of plants now exhausted and spent in the production. The focus was not on the remnants that remained, but celebrating the glories of what they had accomplished and what they had graced my life with over those sweet and lingering months of spring and summer.

Whether it was the greenhouse or the garden, we planted seeds in the bosoms of both and we tended them through the months. But it was the greenhouse and the garden that nurtured them and did with those seeds what we could not. We prepared a place for the magic of germination and growth, but we didn’t perform it. That was the wonder and genius of the greenhouse and the garden. It was a marvelous partnership. This whole wondrous partnership and the fruit that it yielded brought celebration squarely into the heart of grief.

So in the fall, when fall’s frost had closed the final chapter to the season, I would stand in the garden, run clumps of dirt through grieving fingers and bid the garden goodbye. Tucked in with a thick, downy blanket of mulch ground from the mounds of fallen leaves shed by adjacent trees the garden seemed to smile, roll over and nod off to a winter’s slumber.

In the greenhouse we would turn off the water, store the pots and planters, sweep the counters clean of any stray potting soil, lock the windows tight against winters pending cold and bid a second farewell. The greenhouse seemed more vigilant, holding its stores safe in its cinderblock and glass bosom until spring would prompt it to release it all in a celebration of seeds and sweet soil. It was almost an expression of affection at the end of a wonderful journey, escorting the garden and the greenhouse to the next season. It came every fall.

**An Affection Goodbye in Adulthood**

When the end comes, what do you do? How do you go about that final goodbye that’s not about “goodbye until next time,” but that’s about “goodbye until the next life?” How do say goodbye in a way that closes out your relationship in this life for the rest of this life?

We rarely extend a goodbye with that type of irreversible finality. The concept of goodbye has been woven heavy with a sense that a “hello” will follow in some short order. So a “goodbye” that has no such threads woven through it; whose tapestry is sewn with nothing but the threads of loss is unknown and unwanted.

But is our role simply that of extending a goodbye and centering down to grieve the loss that we’ve sustained? When we speak that devastatingly final goodbye, is our role simply to deal with all the searing emotional shrapnel and rush to stop the rampant hemorrhaging that oozes our life blood out of places that we didn’t even know existed? Or when it comes to loss do we have a greater, more profound role?

Darkness had fallen coal black and thick; swirling around the hospice as a dank fog drifting in from the shoals of nighttime. The colors of fall and the transition of the fiery season were hidden under a blanket of nighttime black that muted the colors and rendered them entirely cold. It was as if every drop of the lifeblood of fall had been mercilessly drawn out, rending fall the anemic pallor of blacks, dirty whites and thin grays. Night had sucked the blood out of whatever bit of life the previous day had left. So stark was the absence of life that its presence was hard to visualize even though I had lived it and embraced it innumerable times. The turn of the day had hidden the turn of the season.

Nature moves on, adding and subtracting as it goes. It seems to welcome that which is born into it as readily as it releases that which dies. Nature turns in response to a far greater axis that spins the planet and sets both the solar system and the cosmos on clockwork journeys. The hand of the Creator sets creation itself to a cadence ultimately destined for destruction in this life so that all that is good might be gathered up and saved for eternity. All of that same grandness, wonder and eventual loss was played out in the greenhouse and garden every year as a kid. It was about to played out in ways I could not have imagined.

On this night, nature seemed to stop in the transition, catching its breath so as not to miss the grand turn of seasons set on a course of rest and reprieve. The pond was kissed by a wafer thin layer of ice that reflected the galaxies spinning light years above it. Geese and various waterfowl had settled on quiet banks, heads tucked under downy wings. An owl, the lone harbinger of the night called deep into sullen woods, its haunting and nearly cottony voice weaving through thick stands of hardwoods as if providing some element of warmth and life to it all. The moon had settled as a slice of pasty white in a dark sky riddled by stars; itself transitioning from a round orb through phases headed once again to fullness.

The lights of the hospice shone golden against the chill outside. It seemed to wrap the dying in a place both safe and rubbed warm so that the dying might embrace their passing in the greatest calm and security. All in its bosom seemed held in a protected embrace as the world looked on both sad and sadly expectant. It was much more than simply a place to die. It was a place that lovingly enveloped the dying, escorting them from one life to another with a mix of chivalry, honor and respect. Dying was not a relinquishment, but a passing which involved a partnership.

The call had come in the night. Mom was passing. Her heartbeat had softened and her breathing drifted ever shallower. The final goodbye was racing toward us, framed and counted not in days or even hours, but in mere minutes. Minutes remain the same length whether they are held against the span of years or minutes themselves. Yet, when minutes are held against themselves, they seem so terribly brief. Minutes were all that was left.

The assemblage of minutes would not be sufficient for us to arrive in time. She would pass minutes before we stepped in the door. However, Dad had spent the night, recognizing this to likely be the last of over fifty years of nights with his wife.

**Kisses in the Escorting**

His own humility would preclude his ever disclosing his actions during those final minutes as they slipped by draped in sullen shadows both in the room and in his heart. The picture of Mom’s passing was painted by a nurse who found something special in this moment. She had witnessed the passing of thousands, yet this turn of life unexpectedly pulled her heart tender and moved her to tears. In her own emotion, she drew us aside and etched with deep words those last moments, handing us in those few seconds a picture most remarkable.

Peering into the room during those last minutes, she saw Dad’s hand laid on Mom’s chest; wanting desperately to feel the last few beats, hoping to carry away with him something of the last of her life to add to the bounty of what had been lived with her. There was desperation borne of a heartfelt passion to grab even the slightest final thread to add one more facet to the massive tapestry woven over their fifty years together. The nurse said that his eyes never left her . . . not for the briefest moment. He gently kissed her on the forehead, over and over, loving her out of this life and into the next; sending with her the unmistakable message of his love and undying devotion. Trembling hands pressed upon hers, he loved her and prayed her into the Kingdom.

He did nothing out of greed or loss. There was no anger; no attention to the angst that ground his heart to parched powder. Inside he was dying right along with her while being left alive in his own emotional death to face life without her. There was no focus on any of these things. Neither did he pay attention to the horrendous loss that was raining into his life as an emotional downpour of torrential proportions. There was only the love of a simple man who escorted his wife into eternity in the finest, most unselfish manner that one can conceive; obediently handing her off to a God who was calling her home while temporarily leaving Dad here.

It was all beautifully selfless. In the soft shadows, a husband released his wife with all the costs of doing so suffocating and simultaneously rocking a gentle heart. Dad let it be so. His total focus was on escorting a beloved wife to the edge of this life and allowing her to step over, leaving him on this side terribly alone.

He was graceful, selfless and undying in his commitment to her. And in this grandest of all moments, I saw in my father the majesty of something eternal wrapped in the wonder of all that the human spirit is capable of. In him I saw what the combination of a man surrendered to God could be and could do. I watched him raise himself immeasurably above himself, take his wife by the hand and selflessly escort her out of this life into the next one. Awe swept over me, humbling me and stunning me all at once. Once she was fully escorted out of this life and his task was completed, he turned, bent over and cried.

**Grieving In Escorting Our Losses**

We grieve most effectively when we accept our loss and then boldly take the extra and terribly selfless step of escorting our losses out of our lives and into the next. Escorting our losses demands a letting go of whatever was lost and forgoing the implications of that loss in order to set ourselves aside momentarily in order to escort that loss home. When faced with the enormity of such a task, it all seems impossibly impossible. It would even appear to border on the ridiculous. But it frames the grieving process at the very outset in ways that lay a precious and vital foundation for effective grieving and profound healing.

The concept of escorting our losses to the next place embraces and wholly joins in the natural transitions of life, but it demands a selflessness that is unrelenting and entirely uncompromising in its complete exclusion of greed. Greed gives us permission to be the victim. Assuming the victim role provides us a vehicle or manner in which to process and proceed through our losses as we make their focus much more about us and the specific impact of the loss to us and on us. Such a posture brings loss close to home thereby putting it more fully in our control. It marginalizes loss, focusing it more specifically to us so that its scope is dramatically diminished and we can therefore contain it much more readily. It manages loss so that we can somehow survive it and walk away as unscathed as possible.

Conversely, escorting the losses out of our lives makes the process more about joining the natural, God-ordained transition of life and embracing the sovereignty of God. It is other focused in the sense of larger life and God’s overall plan. It means that I deal with my losses once I have escorted this person or this thing on to wherever it is they are naturally designed to go.

Grieving is more aggressively freed to happen when our posture is not one of focusing on our own losses or bemoaning the unfairness of life. It’s in this very place those most of us get stuck. It’s recognizing the turn of the seasons and releasing those things with a vigor that moves us to move them on.

There is in all of this a relinquishment that has a certain vigor to it. We join our God in His purposes by not only relinquishing the things that He is moving on, but assisting, even celebrating the moving. The partnership in God’s grand design becomes our focus rather than the loss of whatever it is that God is bringing to a close. This doesn’t necessarily take away our pain in the face of our losses. Not does it mean that we are freed of the grieving process. Rather, it assists us in embracing purpose in our pain as well as meaning in our loss.

**Seizing Our Role in Loss**

Where are we focusing in our losses? Typically, it’s in what we’ve lost and all of our responses extend outward from there. Loss becomes all about the loss; a consuming cycle that permits no movement beyond the loss. Because that’s usually the case, it’s all about things like unfairness, injustice; a life forever changed against our wills, questioning our choices, a misguided focus on recouping the loss and all those kinds of things. Those things are all a natural and normal part of loss. Yet, they afford no resolution in and of themselves.

It’s taking that extra step of ushering our losses to wherever they are destined to go. There’s a radical reorientation where we not only let go, but we participate in moving our losses out and away from us. We embrace life as a journey where we and everything around us are always in transition. Sometimes life appears stable with the evidence of any sort of transition as entirely absent. Such a perspective is little more than our desire to wish life as stable and constant. Other than God, the only constant is change itself.

Effective grief embraces change. It grieves loss and it works against our natural inclination by moving that which is lost onto whatever or wherever it is intended to go. Dad ushered Mom into a life where we all have yet to go. He sent her ahead of himself at great cost to himself. He embraced the two-fold trauma of letting go and simultaneously escorting her home. That’s the stuff of grief. It’s embracing two entirely contradictory facets of our humanity; wanting to desperately hold on, yet letting go all the same.

There is that natural, terrible internal clash in loss where the very thing we’re losing is the very thing we want to keep. Two opposing realities, each in their own right powerful enough to consume the sum total of our energies vie for the exact same ground in our hearts at the very same time. The titanic clash dissolves our energies, exhausts our stamina and suffocates hope with a horrifying totality.

The monumental struggle is bringing the passion to hold on in submission to the desire to let go. It seems the David and Goliath scenario, except we face it with no sling and no stones. It is won however, in loving the thing being lost with such an inflamed passion that we desire to escort it on and out of our lives. We hold a love for it strong and deep enough to absolutely forbid that it exit life alone. We realize that if we try to hold it, we will fail and it will leave without us holding its hand, stroking its face and kissing its forehead. We love the thing or the person enough to refuse to leave its last moments to both the hands of death and the terribly barren landscape of loneliness. When out of love we chose to be this selfless, we have the sling and the stones to do the impossible . . . to let go and escort our greatest loss with the greatest compassion.

[Dag Hammarskjold](http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Dag_Hammarskjold/) wrote these words, “[Pray that your loneliness may spur you into finding something to live for, great enough to die for.](http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/2679.html)” It would seem reasonable that escorting others out of this life creates a loneliness cutting enough but grand enough to give us something to live for and great enough to die for.

It is the grand task and the grand sacrifice. It may end in loneliness, but a loneliness manifest of great sacrifice and something of infinite love. Such loneliness may be bitter, but it is borne of the raw manna of life. Remarkably, the loneliness of escort gives us something to live for and something great enough to die for. It give loss room to bequeath a crowning touch on that which is lost and that which will pass into the night. In the wincingly sacrificial role of escort, the eyes of both heart and soul focus not on loss, but on everything the loss was and is yet to be when held perfect and fast in God's eternity. It makes space for something to come to a pinnacle so that we might celebrate it all the way to a marvelous closure.