Platitudes: Uncomfortable for the Griever and the Supporter

**Perhaps our eyes need to be washed by our tears once in a while so that we can see life with a clearer view again. Tom Bodett**

The fact is, when in grief we all hear the overused and trite **platitudes**. (You know the: *“She’s in a better place”, “God never gives us more than we can handle,” “It must have been his time,” “Be grateful you had him for nineteen years,” “You’ll be seeing him soon enough” “Its God’s will,”*…)

Considering the other person’s point of view, the reasons for using these **platitudes** are many:

* The majority of us do not know what to say that may “help” those in grief
* Many of us do not know how to handle other people’s pain
* Many well intentioned people use platitudes because they just don’t know what to say
* Many people use platitudes due to their own fears (death, illness or the current trauma)
* Platitudes help distance the speaker from the griever’s situation (they acknowledge the condition but cannot face placing themselves in the other’s current situation)
* The speaker has no way of understanding the pain due to a lack in their own world view
* Perhaps those words are the best empathy a person can express in an uncomfortable time

Regardless, these words can (and usually are) interpreted by the bereaved as hurtful, condescending and maddening because of their pain, their internal turmoil and their altered functioning. Their searing pain does not allow the griever to understand from the other’s position and thus, may react angrily when these comments are offered. But, as time progresses and the griever has moved a little further in their grief journey and is no longer affected by the extreme pain and trauma of their grief, (acknowledging that the grief never “goes away” but becomes “softer”) they may be able to view this situation through different lenses.

Sometimes we have preconceived notions about situations, sometimes we have expectations about how people might respond in certain circumstances and sometimes we are either hurting, overwhelmed or too engulfed in our own concerns to recognize and appreciate others’ responses. Grief clouds our reactions, interpretations and understanding of circumstances outside of our personal world. Platitudes become a subject on which grievers can target their anger in their grief process.

It is great soul medicine to feel heard, to be listened to and understood and to feel as if someone cares and empathizes with your loss. Unfortunately for some in early grief, this understanding cannot be reciprocated to the speaker which can cause additional anger. What may be spoken of and described as a platitude may be the supporter’s best attempt at empathy. When we assume that a supporter’s comment is a platitude, we could be judging their sincerity and intention when in reality even those people with great compassion can lose their ability to adequately articulate their feelings**.**

Although I have not been one to use platitudes in relation to death situations, I have:

* been in the uncomfortable situation in which I did not know what to say
* felt uncomfortable by not knowing how to “help” another’s pain
* wanted to distance myself from an encountered bereavement situation (due to my own inner conflict)
* had a lack in my own world view prior to my own son’s death

Because I can place myself in many of the above situations as reasons why people use platitudes, I can understand why someone might resort to their use. But, early in my grief, I may not have been able to do so. I too, roller- coastered through anger and it took my healing heart to allow my eyes to see beyond my own tears.

Grief changes us in ways that we would not expect and recognize until we live though it. We know we lose our heart but it may take a long time to realize the loss of our hearing and understanding. I’m grateful time changes all of them.

Platitudes exist, we all have difficulty facing uncomfortable situations and sometimes we fail to demonstrate our genuine compassion when we lack the appropriate words for a situation. I think saying “I’m so sorry. That sucks and I am here for you” is appropriate and will convey your empathy, caring and compassion. The next step is to be present and listen. I hope time, tears and opening your heart help your grief journey as well as your hearing and understanding …