

Hope in Grief by Joan Hummel

Delivered at the 2023 Butterfly Release and Memorial

Butterflies have long been associated with the idea of transformation. Many creatures in the natural world go through a major incubation, hibernation, or transmutation to become a different version of themselves, but none seem quite as adept at making a true transformation as a butterfly. They are oftentimes so beautiful, and we know their lives are short – the oldest of them can live up to 12 months, and most have lifespans of just a few weeks – but butterflies do so much in their short lives since they act as a major pollinator of plants while bringing us such joy when we encounter them.



That transformative aspect of butterflies is why many hospices and grief support programs worldwide use a butterfly as part of their logo or in their educational materials. When presented with the end of life and living on after someone dies, we want to embrace the notion that a life matters and has meaning, and we definitely know that our lives have been transformed when a life that matters becomes one of memory instead of presence. With its transformative life, the butterfly signals hope – hope that all the beauty and all that mattered in our lives because of the person who died is still within us even though they are not directly beside us. We recognize that our lives have been transformed by the people we are remembering and honoring today, and we hope we can do right by their memories as we live on with them in our hearts.



Hope is an ever-present part of grief for so many. We hope we have the strength to make it through hard days like anniversaries without falling apart. We hope we have the energy to do tasks that were once relatively easy like paying bills or remembering to put gas in the car or charge its battery. We hope we can get out of bed without feeling overwhelmed upon waking, when our conscious thoughts have us remembering that they are gone, and we hope when we go to bed that we can dream of them. We hope that as time goes on, our hearts will feel lighter, and our lives will get

easier. Anyone who has worked with grieving people recognizes that a central theme for survivors, even if they don't speak about it directly, is the hope that they will feel better. Hope becomes the necessary currency of grief as we long for a transformation that will bring us to a place of healing after loss.

T R U GRIEF SERVICES

We need to know that in the midst of our intense grief, hope is not forgotten. We have not lost the ability to be happy, although grief certainly makes us question that. There are such times of longing and so much intensity with the pain of living on without people who have been such a huge part of our lives. It's sometimes very challenging to feel like we will ever feel like our old selves again after the death of someone instrumental in our world. This is the especially hard work of grief for many – believing that we can be free of the sadness and hoping that we will move out of the very tight spots in which grief seems to place us.



Hope is not just a pipe dream for grievers. It is the way we move forward. It is a motivator for our own transformation in healing. Every story of people healing, whether in fairy tales, great literature, or true-life survival news includes a message of hope. Dragons are slain because someone had hope that they could do something unimaginable; protagonists overcome adversity because they have hope that they can make something happen; and survivors in real-world news speak of the hope that got them through what seemed impossible. Believe this, coming from a grief counselor of nearly 30 years: if hope were not an amazing part of the healing process in grief, no one would ever want to be a grief counselor, and our society would be one of walking basket cases. If people never started to feel better in their grief, no one would ever move forward in life, because everyone goes through grief at some point. Hope is present for grievers even when they are unaware of it...and it's almost always uncovered when the

magical moment arrives for nearly every griever the day they recognize they ARE feeling a bit better and that they went through an entire day or even an entire week feeling better when they never thought that would be possible, but they were hoping it would be.

I've learned there's no magic recipe to make hope in grief happen. I've learned that no two grievers are going to find their hope in quite the same way. But the one thing that does appear common in the hope that most grievers have is when they start to imagine that they can be happy again.

Imagining one can be happy again isn't just wishful thinking – it's part of being human. And the more chances for happy thoughts we give ourselves, even in small ways, the closer the access becomes to living those happy experiences.

Happy thoughts are transformational, especially if we give ourselves permission to have them.



Like many people, I have seemingly random things pop up when I open social media. The following very random piece was truly the first thing that popped up the day I started writing this piece about grief and hope – I ran across a very simple therapeutic exercise that seems all too appropriate for imagining ourselves happy as a part of hope in grief. The prompt was very simple – **“write a happy story in three words”** – and the responses that people gave seemed beyond fitting for finding hope in the midst of grief:

She slept peacefully.

I love gardening.

Balance is zero.

The great beyond.

It gets better.

Believe in yourself.

His strength inspired.

Love is everywhere.

You are loved.

She struck gold.

Life is beautiful.

It'll be okay.

The winning ticket.

My two boys.

I am light.

Help had come.

I am grateful.

You got this.

And she believed.

My cat's purring.

I am blessed.

The door opened.

Holiday has started.

Rescued a dog.

Diamonds were inside.

Bacon, sausage, egg.

Better than imagined.

I got paid.

I love Canada.

No longer lost.

Friday is coming.

Here's wishing you all well with finding your hope in grief – and wishing you the ability to think about writing several versions (possibly daily) of your happy story in three words – today's might be:

Released a butterfly.

Hope was present.

Sunny skies helped.

People were kind.

Memories were shared.

Transformation does happen.

Healing does occur.