

THE PRINCIPLES OF THE SECRET

Do they apply to grief?

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You've probably heard about it on Oprah: *The Secret*. It's a book, a DVD, an audio CD and it was big several years ago. What is *The Secret*? Well, the folks who produced it won't like my brief definition, but here it goes. The Secret states:

Whatever you think about most, the universe will bring to you.

You want a mate? A car? A new career? More money? Better health? Don't say, "I wish for these things."

Instead, see and feel yourself having them. Don't focus on lack. See abundance.

If this sounds familiar to those of you who remember the New Age thinking of the seventies, the author admits that this wisdom has been around for centuries.

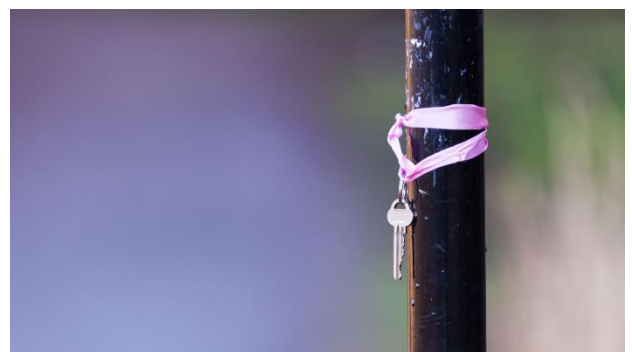
What's the difference? Nothing really.

It's just that successful people have always been using *The Secret*—many of them without realizing that many people haven't discovered it. The rest of us have been floundering around in our lives without understanding the simple elegance of its logic.

Don't get me wrong; I've seen this approach work in the lives of many successful people I've met over the years.

Returning to the title of this article, the question I have is: What about grief?

When a person we love is taken from us, is there anything that we can gain from applying *The Secret* to our grief? Let's look.



FIRST

First, what do we want when our loved one dies? Of course, we want him or her back. This is what we ache for on a moment-by-moment basis. Since this is unrealistic, visualizing this goal will not help.

But, if we can't have our loved one back with us, we are desperate to find ways to hold him or her close to us. You've heard many of the ways:

- ◆ A picture album of our loved one's life
- ◆ A video DVD of pictures and music
- ◆ Poetry inspired by our loved one's life
- ◆ A DVD of home videos
- ◆ Items that are connected to our loved one
- ◆ A book of written memories
- ◆ A quilt made of our loved one's clothes
- ◆ A pillow, bed sheets, or clothing that holds the smell of our loved one
- ◆ Telling and listening to stories of our loved one's life
- ◆ Listening to music
- ◆ Going to places that bring back reminders

So, the principles of *The Secret* do not apply to the ultimate cure for grief: the return of our loved one. But they can, in time, ease a little of our grief by gently moving us to a place where we can hold onto the precious memories.

But, wait: there's a problem here. Take a look at the list above. For those of you who have some distance on the death, you may remember that engaging in any of the behaviors on the list may at first have been associated with pain—often times gut-wrenching pain. But with time and with subsequent return to each item, the pain began to soften and the experience turned from negative to more positive.

Perhaps we can call this *The Secret of Shifting Grief*. That is, for many people, at first the reminders are

too painful—you just can't look at her pictures without crying. Smelling his pillow produces instant sobbing. Music brings sadness. Avoiding rather than visiting places is preferable.

If you are early in your grief, you may have a difficult time accepting *The Secret of Shifting Grief*. Your raw grief may prevent you from embracing reminders as positive. Instead they continue to be associated with pain.

SECOND

Second, what else do we want when our loved one dies? For some of us, the answer is easy: If we can't have back our loved one, we wish to join them. This we can call *The Secret of the Unmentionable* that we thought no one knew.

Because I'd heard it so many times from so many bereaved people in the depth of their pain, I grew to never be surprised when I heard the words that went something like this:

"Bob, I want to die. I've thought about taking my life. If a big semi were coming head on towards my car, I wouldn't move out of the way. I'd just let it happen. If I let myself die, I'll be with him."

My response has always been the same:

I hear that you are in so much pain that all you can think about is how to stop it. But if you let yourself die, think of all the hurt that you will be adding to your family members who are already in so much pain. So, wishing to die is understandable, but your death would devastate so many people already in grief.

THIRD

Third, in addition to Shifting and Unmentionable Grief, let's look at one more possible version of *The Secret*.

After a person dies, perhaps at some point in the future a wish for a happy life is the most logical goal that can be attained by using *The Secret*. Just look at all the well-meaning people around you who early on have been wishing to see you smile, laugh, and lighten up.

They want the old you back.
They want you to just be
happy again.

Of course you know that at first happiness is not a goal. I mean, what if you woke up tomorrow happy? What kind of person would you be if you allowed happiness into your life when your loved one is not here anymore?

In the workshop I give on guilt, I bring up a type of guilt called Moving on Guilt, in which the bereaved person catches him or herself laughing or, for a brief instant, forgetting that their loved one died. At that moment, the person often takes in a startled intake of air. Guilt floods the thinking and the person comes back to harsh reality with the self-reminder, "Don't ever do that again."

Sound familiar? This can be called *The Secret of Moving on*.



So, where does the wisdom of *The Secret* leave us bereaved people? I believe that the ultimate secret of dealing with grief lies in *faith*. Not necessarily spiritual or religious faith—however, such faith is of comfort to many who have experienced the intense pain of grief.

The faith I'm speaking of is that offered by those people who have grieved before us.

If you are a parent, it is the parents you've met whose child died years ago. When you first met this mom or dad, you may not have known of the death of their precious child. If you did, it may have crossed your mind that, "This mother isn't grieving much. She must not have loved her child as much as I do mine."

But, the more you got to know these moms and dads, not only did you realize they are just like you, but their love for their precious child is as strong as yours.

If you are a widowed person, look at the people in your life who have learned to live without their beloved husband or wife, not because they are strong, but because that *had* to live day after day without their lifelong partner.

If you are a bereaved sibling or child, look to those people who have been doing this for years and know that one of their secrets is that they had no choice but to wake up day after day without the ability to see, talk, and touch their brother, sister, mom, or dad.

Picture this person standing before you: brotherless, sisterless, parentless. You wonder how they did it. And you realize that these people felt they had no choice but to live another day—and another.

THE ULTIMATE SECRET

So, the ultimate secret for us is faith. Faith that you and I—like those who have gone before us into the depths of grief—will be forced to find ways to live without our loved one.

I know you may not agree as you read this: but someday you may be the person that others will look to. And they will say to you, “You have managed to live years without your loved one. I have no idea how you did it. There must be some secret to it. Perhaps someday I, too, will find it. But for now, if you have survived this long, maybe I can, too.”

And you will turn to this newly bereaved person and, with your *Secret* of Grief finally understood, you reply, “Yes, maybe you can, too.”

In summary, we began by looking at the principles of *The Secret*. But as we attempted to apply this concept to grief, what emerged were three secrets:

- ◆ Shifting Grief—the transformation of painful memories into comforting ones;
- ◆ Unmentionable Grief—the wish to join our loved one; and Moving On—the wish for a happy life.
- ◆ Faith that, if those who have grieved years before us can survive and find ways to cope and live, perhaps we can too.

The Secret of grief, then, can be summed up in the following way.

My loved one has died and for that I will always carry him or her in my heart.
But people who have grieved before me can provide the faith that, despite
my pain, someday I will find happiness again. And, after all, that is what our
loved one would want for us.

And that's no secret.