

Community Grief

By Nancy Green

If you have been reading this newspaper recently, you may have noticed how frequent the obituaries have become. I am not talking only about the recent deaths of well-known and loved Islanders (which has certainly taken an emotional toll), but just the sheer numbers. It could be said that this is to be expected with a community with such a large senior population. True, but such loss still evokes great sadness.

Much has been in the news recently about community grief. We have seen more mass shootings than we can possibly remember. We see the memorials and candlelight vigils, and they are important. These rituals are meaningful in bringing people together in their sadness—a metaphorical group hug. While they may not help the victim's relatives, they do help the community to move on with their lives.

Our Shelter Island losses come more like a slow drip—three this week, four the next. They come without the horror of violent death, but still bring considerable sorrow. It is important that we recognize the sorrow—even if not all of us knew those who have passed.

But among our senior community, the losses are being felt. These people were known to many of us. The Senior Center is exploring ways to honor these members. Whether it be planting a tree or having a collective service, the Center welcomes ideas from the community.

Much has been written about bereavement, and the most important thing to remember is that everyone grieves differently. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. However, one expert on the subject, J. William Worden, places the process in a comprehensible framework. He describes four major tasks that can generally help people return to normal living. Each task is varied and complex, but I will simplify them by just listing them: Task 1: To accept the reality of the loss. Task 2: To work through the pain of grief. Task 3: To adjust to an environment in which the deceased is missing. Task 4: To emotionally relocate the deceased and move on with life.

While these emotional tasks are real, the living must deal concurrently with the realities of life. Bills need to be paid and houses need to be maintained. These things are not trivial, and can feel overwhelming when compounded with the tasks of grieving.

Island grief specialist Bonnie Stockwell and I run in-person bereavement groups on Shelter Island every summer. We have found that the support and empathy of a group brings profound healing that is different from meeting with an individual counselor or talking to a friend. The grieving party need not be a spouse, but may be anyone who has been affected by a loss. We will be welcoming new groups this summer and ask interested people to contact Laurie Fanelli at the Senior Center.

In the meantime, it is helpful to pause and acknowledge these losses. Obituaries in The Reporter range from brief paragraphs to in-depth portrayals of long and often fascinating lives. I read them all, whether I have known the deceased or not. It feels important to honor them with my time, think about their families, and know that they were loved.

Nancy Green is a retired social worker and a member of the Shelter Island Health and Wellness Alliance.