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“An underdog who has been disadvantaged unfairly can appear significantly more physically attractive.”

Guy Winch, Ph.D.



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## Living One Life

Improving life through active appreciation.

by Kelly G. Wilson, Ph.D.

### Appreciating the Plain Fact of Human Sorrow

Finding richness, meaning, and purpose in sorrow.

Published on September 19, 2010 by Kelly G. Wilson, Ph.D. in Living One Life

We live in a culture that doesn't like sorrow much. The signs of it are everywhere. Commercials ask us if we feel anxious or sad and then sell us drugs if the answer is yes. The framers of the new fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders are ready to transform bereavement into a disease.

But there's another thing we can do. We can pause. We can take some time. We can appreciate the plain fact of human sorrow.

A few years ago, I was in a conversation about a client who had lost a child in an automobile accident. Carl Rogers in his landmark 1961 book *On Becoming a Person* said "What is most personal is most general." I take that admonition seriously. So, upon hearing of the loss of this child, it seemed right to look deeply into my own experience before responding. I haven't lost a child, but I have lost a brother. I thought about losing Randy and about the meaning of that loss in my own life.



Big brother Randy in the center, baby brother Dave, and me. Sometimes I think I can see the whole world in that old photo, 1957

Thoughts of Randy took me to the deep, dark evergreen forests of western Washington, where we grew up. There is a scent in the air in those woods-wet and rich. You can smell life and death in equal abundance. Sometimes a great evergreen would fall. It is sad when you see a big beautiful hemlock crashed to the earth after a hundred years of soaring. Those old trees would lie in the woods for years decomposing, and out of that a neat little row of eight or ten, new trees would grow all along that fallen trunk. Slowly, over decades, the trunk would be taken up into the new growth. These fallen trees are called nurse logs.

It turns out that it's very hard for a new tree to find a good spot to germinate and grow on the forest floor. The light is low and the ferns compete for every bit of space and light they can gather. Those fallen trees give the seeds a place above the ferns with a bit more light and moisture and nourishment. If you have an eye for those rows of trees you can spot them long after the old tree has sunk into the forest floor.

Sometimes in life new things grow from things that have fallen, not away from them. I find myself wondering, if something new could grow out of the tragedy of a lost child, what might grow there?

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And I find myself wondering about the people reading this right now. Do you know about things fallen? About things irrevocably lost? I wonder if you would be willing to stop a moment to acknowledge that loss, to know its face when you see it. If you could grow something new and beautiful from that loss, that could honor what has fallen, what might that be?

I feel that way about my older brother Randy, who we lost to suicide so many years ago. The small trees didn't start growing right away. But the minutes, hours, and days have filled years since then-to the brim. And nearly twenty-five years later, I can still see Randy's face, especially his lopsided grin. As I look at all I've nurtured in my life since then, people and projects that stand across the years like seedlings, all in a row, fed by that tragedy, I wonder if he would be proud of me. If he would feel honored by my memory of him.



Tending my garden with a little help from my friend Giovanni Meselli, Bressanone, Italy 2010

My own little row of trees can be found in my students, in clients, and in the people around the world who have joined with me in a conversation about meaning and purpose, about the sweet and the sad in life.

I think we owe it to our clients, to our friends,

family, and fellows, to do better than pathologizing or demonizing the sadness that will surely visit us all one day. Love and loss are poured from the same vessel. There is no way to

turn away from what we have lost without turning away from what we have loved.

I invite people, students, clients, you, to come to rest in my little garden where an appreciation of sorrow is not a disease. Let yourself settle in and breathe. Let yourself be saturated. Let a conversation grow up. Let yourself wonder what new things might grow from the rich loam of living.

John Erskine said it beautifully in his 1906 poem [Actæon](#)

One drought of Lethe for a world of pain  
 An easy bargain; yet I keep the thorn,  
 To keep the rose.

Randy? If you are listening? Please know that I remember you, fondly, still, and tend a little garden in your honor.

Namaste Y'all from Oxford, Mississippi,

Kelly

Co-author of [Things Might Go Terribly Horribly Wrong. 2010](#), [Mindfulness for Two. 2009](#), and [Acceptance and Commitment Therapy: An Experiential Approach to Behavior Change. 1999](#). Associate Professor of Psychology at the [University of Mississippi](#) and Founder of [Onelife Education and Training, LLC](#)

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