COMMUNITY MATTERS

EXPERIENCING LOSS IS NOT A LOST CAUSE

By Ilary Jane Fox MSW, LCSW

In the 1970s, Barb and Eric Sjoden followed their dream of being farmers and moved to Whitefish from New Jersey. Eric had retired early from a technical sales career and Barb decided to retire her teaching career to focus on their new 20-acre piece of land. From design to completion, it took 10 years, and another 34 acres, to build up their raw land with their own hands into the ranch they fantasized. “Those were the happiest 10 years of my life,” Barb said. “The dream was beautiful, and I sometimes want it to continue.”

But Barb is now 80 and Eric passed in 2006. Her two children and grandchildren aren’t interested in ranching and paying caretakers for her animals was financially straining. So she considered selling half her farm, which was the part she loved the most: Her llamas.

We all face losses every day. Some are so subtle that we don’t recognize them. Others are so significant they are traumatic events. Often times, experiencing a death of a loved one is what many consider when asked to describe the losses in their lives. But loss can be identified in more ways than most think. Barb has experienced many losses, some of which derive from arthritis in her hands. “Anything I had enjoyed doing has been taken away,” she said. “It almost feels like something is chopping me up bit by bit. Everything I loved doing was with my hands and my hands are gone.”

Barb was an artist. She took pleasure in journaling, designing clothes, and was her llamas’ caretaker. She designed their barn, brought in the electricity and water. She watched the babies grow. She sheared the adults’ soft wool and spun it to make hats, none of which she can do anymore.

“Now my beautiful barn for my llamas is just sitting there, rotting, because nobody wants it. It’s just a symbol of my loss,” she said.

Many of us will experience loss of identity and independence in our lifetime when we watch our children leave the nest, are transferred to nursing homes, or aren’t able to drive anymore. Loss of bodily function is another component of growing older in addition to declining health. As our vision and reaction time declines, loss of feeling safe becomes a greater issue because we feel more vulnerable. Losing sexual function is another life altering effect of growing older. Memory loss is another growing dilemma.

Coping with a loved one experiencing this issue can be quite difficult. When changing your role to a caregiver for a loved one, it is normal to have feelings of helplessness, anger and guilt. It’s important to reach out and grow your support system.

We have losses in every stage of life, but they are typically offset by gains so we don’t realize them. Experiencing loss, especially multiple, can send people into a depression. When we cannot accept our losses and move on, it’s evident that our hopes, plans and dreams of the future are stifled. It’s important to consider all of our significant losses as an opportunity to grieve. Remember the five universal stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance.

Getting into a treatment program suitable to your needs is also a positive step to getting well. If you are 55 and older experiencing emotional, behavioral or mental health disorders, North Valley Embrace Health is an option. Clinical staff provides individualized outpatient therapy for a variety of unique problems that senior adults and their caregivers face. Their goal is to restore optimum mental and physical health to allow for individuals to function as well as support the integrity of the family and maximize independence.

Along with relishing in her family and the additional help from an excellent agency caretaker who is “emotionally uplifting,” Barb participates in North Valley Embrace Health’s group therapy. She emphasized the freedom she has to talk openly and honestly about whatever is bothersome and knowing that people are listening and wanting the best results. She also is astonished by the courage of those who tell their stories. “I’ve seen people grow in a short time,” she said. “And hearing others has opened up another part of me. Going to the group has initiated me to face the stuff I threw under the rug. It’s giving me a chance to start again. I also am learning tools to use on my own to get well.”

Barb’s positive approach to life has been a driving force in how she’s able to cope with all these changes and losses in her life. She fondly looks back to when she was completing her doctorate in educational psychology in the mid-70s. She was one of many students and educators who participated in a new experiment called the “wishful settlement.” Everyone wrote about what they saw when they became old. Barb wrote that at 80 years old, she would be sitting somewhere that looked out over the trees. Smiling she said, “and, that’s just what I’m doing.”

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