

Grief and Aikido: Relaxing Under Pressure

“Heaven is right where you are standing, and that is the place to train.”

— **Morihei Ueshiba, founder of Aikido**

Grief is one of the deepest kinds of spiritual work we will ever do because it arises from the deepest parts of who we are. As we explore these depths, we discover one of the most fundamental human behaviors, which is the reflexive habit of turning away from pain. Everything in our mental, physical, and emotional DNA tells us to avoid discomfort at all costs. We are wired to seek pleasure and to avoid pain. But this habit to avoid turns us in the wrong direction, away from the door of healing.

At some point, however, through some unexpected loss, our reflex to escape pain is thwarted and we are pierced by the arrow of grief. Someone close to our hearts is taken and we are broken open. An earthquake of sorrow fills our chest. And dazed in the rubble, we find ourselves ill-prepared to respond to the scale and intensity of such internal disruption.

Depending on our inner capacity, such thresholds can produce either promise or peril. Doors can open or they can close. In these times, a spiritual practice can provide invaluable support.

Four years ago, the wisdom of Aikido – a Japanese martial art based on the principles of harmony and non-resistance – helped prepare me for an encounter with loss when my younger brother died from cancer.

Pete and I shared a rare bond of brotherhood for over sixty years, defined by boundless love, jaw-stretching humor, and a deep reverence for the gift of belonging we bestowed upon each other. The heartbreak of his passing remains a koan of sorrow that I will likely carry to the end of my days.

But fortunately, I'd spent thousands of hours training in this beautiful art which helped ground and illuminate my path through the dark wilderness of grief.

Specifically, the practices and principles of Aikido teach us the art of creating space within the constancy of life's tight spots – those endless constellations of friction, inside and out, which define our lives. Using the tools of breath, movement, and attention, we learn to develop more room around our experience.

For instance, we spend countless training hours practicing simple exercises with a partner – such as wrist grabs – to viscerally explore how we are wired to resist. Initially, it's both shocking and embarrassing how quickly your world shrinks when someone grabs your wrist.

In a nanosecond, you feel trapped and trespassed! But then you remember, “Oh, wait - I'm actually not being mugged in a dark alley, but learning how to harmoniously contact with another friendly human.”

You exhale, relax your shoulders, reset your posture, and allow yourself to feel into the resistance. Being present to such moments, over time, provides the opportunity to rewire some of this primal patterning – the same inner constrictions that clog our grief process.

“Body like the mountain, heart like the ocean, mind like the sky.”

- **Dogen**

For me, as I swam through my own currents of loss, Aikido practice helped me cultivate a still point inside which served as a reliable atoll in the ocean of grief. Sometimes, especially in the early days, I felt like I was swept off the beach and tossed into the roiling water. But eventually, and rarely on my timeline, I would pop up to the surface and find my way back to my small spit of sand. It became a trustable place to return to, an inner refuge from which I could wait for the storm to pass.

From one perspective, the grief process and Aikido training are both explorations into the nature of resistance. They each perfectly mirror who we become under duress. One of the guiding principles in Aikido that is intimately applicable to our relationship with grief is the notion of *relaxing under pressure*. Or, how *not* to

resist pressure. Untrained, our (nervous) systems generally do not operate this way. Whether we are grabbed by grief or by our partner on the mat, our default response is the same: we tighten and contract. We resist. But, as always, the training is to remember: breathe, relax, and invite a little more space to arise.

When Pete died, I was confronted by my own inner tempest of resistance which arose as shades and shards of shock, denial, numbness, rage, sadness, confusion, and all the rest.

However, over time, I built my little atoll one shovel of sand at a time. There were moments when the grief waves receded and something new arrived on the horizon of my attention. In addition to my conditioned impulse to push, pull, fight and flee from the pain of loss – *resisting what was present* – I began to ask: “What would non-resistance feel like here?”

At first, this inquiry began as a simple thought. Like a mind arrow that points itself toward a deeper exploration. My training had helped form new internal bridges between my psyche and my soma, so this inquiry slid naturally downward from my head to my heart, into the primal pond of grief.

As I watered this new movement with my attention, it began to open on its own. Every now and then it felt like the resistance pattern had been temporarily interrupted. A shift occurred in which “I” was no longer bobbing around in the great sea of grief, but the sea of grief was bobbing around inside a more spacious version of me. Paying attention had expanded a portion of my inner landscape.

As we each travel our unique inner landscapes, brailing our way from Here to a Deeper Here, sometimes the smallest tools can make the biggest difference. Our attention is that tool.

“Grief can be the garden of compassion. If you keep your heart open through everything, your pain can become your greatest ally in your life’s search for love and wisdom.”

Rumi