



# Connecting

Part 1 October, 2020

## I Am Overwhelmed

If only we had a penny for each person that expressed feeling “overwhelmed” this year..... That sense of being buried or crushed under a mountain of uncontrollable variables makes us want to scream out in distress and beg for somebody to come and dig us out of the rubble under which we are trying desperately to breath, or fight our way back up to the top so we might see some sunlight once again. We might be feeling the effects of many different setbacks in our lives, many are cumulative over time, while others are spontaneously thrown into our laps without any notice or consent on our part. Lives are disrupted because of the restrictive living guidelines of Covid 19, political unrest and uncertainty, financial market volatility, divorces, food insecurity, job loss, substance abuse in families, incarceration, illness, isolation from loved ones, debt, lack of socialization, travel restrictions & postponement of vacations or business plans, and even the freedom to attend church services, life events like marriages, funerals, graduations and the like. Family life is disrupted and our household budgets are set in turmoil when we try to assist family members who find themselves laid off or in need of a place to live. Furry members of the family are surrendered to the SPCA because many rental accommodations do not allow for pets; and families must decide between having a place to live and putting a beloved companion up for adoption. This is a shattering time for many, giving up so much simply to survive a difficult time. College

plans may be on hold until dad finds work again, and mom finds herself maneuvering three or four children through online studies, frustrated because she can no longer assist with Math past a grade three level. Children are house bound and angry that they are being home schooled when they just want to be at school playing with friends at recess. Everybody has to wear a mask, so we go sans makeup (au naturel) and wear only our oldest clothes (including B-zees shoes) so that everything can be pitched into the washer as soon as we enter the mud room. Fashion be damned....we are unconcerned about how we look, as long as our mask is on snugly and there are no asymptomatic kids in front of us in the grocery store lineup. All of this plays on our emotional health and sense of wellbeing. You will notice that I have not yet mentioned the words GRIEF, LOSS, BEREAVEMENT, or MOURNING up to this point.

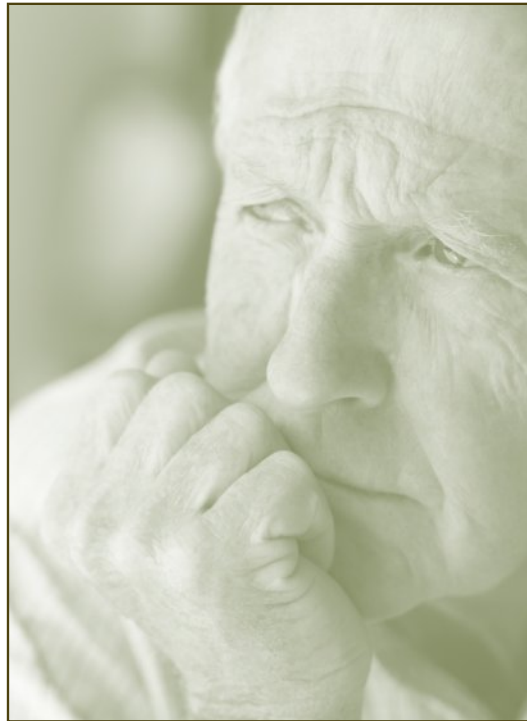
*When I started counting my blessings, my whole life turned around.*

--- Willie Nelson

Now, to envision adding the death of a loved one to a world that already seems to have spun right off its axis is totally unfathomable. We all need shoulders to lean on, gentle hands to wipe our tears, and smiles to brighten our world. As our bubbles shrink, these supports are less available to us right now. Sorrow is

indeed overwhelming after a loss, even at the best of times. But during these, the worst of times, one cannot even imagine how or when we will be able to remove the albatrosses from around our necks. It might help if we think back to other times in our lives when we felt similar feelings of being overwhelmed, and what we did to get us through. When you were not picked for that volleyball team you dreamed about, knowing it was your best chance of getting a university scholarship, what did you do to motivate yourself to gather the funds to pay for your tuition? Did you confide in a trusted confidante like a favourite uncle or Big Brother? When your child fell into a campfire pit and suffered severe burns, what role did your faith play in her recovery, and what did you learn about your own ability to function as a parent and caregiver? We may have to scour our memory to remember what things were helpful during those times of uncertainty, fear, instability and despair. When your dad was diagnosed with cancer just as you were about to graduate, do you remember feeling that monstrous load on your shoulders as the new “man of the house”? The coping skills we had then, the little homemade prayer you recited to help you not to stutter as you made your way to the front of the class to read your essay. That fear of public speaking would cripple even the most confidante young man. Yet, you survived so many things....and got stronger each and every time you had to rise above the black cloud that you saw as “an overwhelming lump of tar that would keep you stuck there forever”. Most people who state that they are overwhelmed really mean that they are feeling like they “lack control over a situation”. They acknowledge being overcome by a feeling of helplessness in their mind and/or emotions. We might describe how we feel as being sad, fearful, angry, depressed, irritated, helpless, perhaps over-reacting to insignificant events in our lives. Suddenly everything would be described as a 10, even though it might be something that we have done with ease for years....suddenly that task feels like it is too much for us to handle. We might experience physical symptoms like excessive sweating, chest pain, shortness of breath, tingling in parts of our body, sleeplessness, recurring infections, and others. It is like our stress meter

has long passed its “overload” setting and is like a volcano set to erupt at any time. We may feel completely exhausted, burnt out, or unable to function as we once were. It is hard to think, or make decisions, or concentrate, or plan things, or even do our routine activities around the house or workplace.



It might help to “call a friend”, slow down your pace...maybe taking a slow leisurely walk around your block, stopping to watch the rabbit nibble at some clover across the street, or let your dog take extra time identifying “those that came before” at every boulevard tree she passes. Breathe deeply taking in more oxygen and feel the breeze on your skin. Think of something you like to do that makes you calm down and put your energy into that one simple act like giving yourself a manicure with a bright new colour, or planting some new fall bulbs in anticipation of a spring surprise after a long winter. Talk to yourself...say positive affirming words that build you up and light that spark of self-confidence you need right now. Meditate, read, sing, get a new throw cushion, brighten your space. Change your hairdo or lipstick...enjoy the new you.

We can all relate to the beloved turtle. Grieving makes us so envious of that little creature retreating into his mobile home, whenever the world looks too threatening from his vantage point. Don't you wish you too, could duck back in, at will, no matter where you roamed and just isolate until you felt ready to greet the world again. That little turtle also is absolutely helpless when he is flipped over onto his shell, legs flailing in the air, trying desperately to rebalance himself.

Sometimes we rely on others to come to our aid after our world has been turned upside down and we are crying out for a

savior to come and rescue us. That person can be in the form of a friend, acquaintance, professional, or complete stranger, or even a little animal that lands on our doorstep in the middle of winter looking for a kind hand and warm place to call his own. Despite being overwhelmed, the little turtle does not give up trying to right himself.

It reminds me of a lovely message my dear friend, Bea, once shared with me in one of our conversations about life and all things illness and death related.....Her belief was that "it is always okay to give in.....but it is never okay to give up!" We all need somebody sometime, but there are indeed times in our lives, when pain and suffering is so intense that reaching out for help, or medication, or solace is always okay....the pain

must be manageable-- in order to be tolerable. And it has to be tolerable in order to withstand its fury until we recover. The important thing is that we always remain hopeful that "this too shall end" and things will get better with time! So it is with grief and sorrow, and loss.



I have learned that feeling overwhelmed might mean something different to each person. Some of us are overwhelmed by our feelings. Others, by time restraints or deadlines cast upon them. Still others by the fear of not doing things correctly. Others are troubled by events over which they have little or no control, yet seem to be left with

the consequences of actions that are not of their own making. Grandparents raise children that troubled parents are unable to care for themselves. Sometimes, the pressures we endure are self inflicted ones.

If we can be less demanding of ourselves, we might be able to lessen unrealistic expectations. Lower the bar (at least temporarily during your grief) and see if you feel more able to cope with the issues at hand. What if you don't realize you are feeling emotionally overwhelmed? A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself if the intensity of your feelings outmatches your ability to manage those feelings. For example, do you react disproportionately to the situation at hand when a lesser response would have been more acceptable? If you forgot to take out the fourth

garbage bag, for example, do you throw the entire can onto the road in anger? Are you always extremely tired, feeling as though you are never really rested and set to face the day? Does making the bed, or watering your houseplants seem like a monumental task and one that you keep putting off until next week? Do you remember what show you watched this morning on The View, or are you finding it harder to focus or remember simple things? Are you making excuses to isolate yourself or ignore phone calls, or resisting calling others because you don't like to divulge personal things about yourself or your circumstances? Do you think your sorrow or grief might still be keeping you from enjoying simple things, even many months or years after your loss? Can you even remember the last time that you felt truly joyous about something that happened?

I know that feeling overwhelmed after losing a loved one leaves you with so many loose ends--unfinished business with the deceased, dozens of forms to fill out reminding you over and over again that somebody you love has died, learning all those tasks that were "Roger's job", or "Sophie's thing". Suddenly, gardening or checking the oil in your vehicle becomes one of those "overwhelming" responsibilities that we wish we would have learned more about before somebody died. On top of everything else, death

makes us keenly aware that we just didn't know how much we don't know! That in itself is frightening and disconcerting for most of us. When we do tell our doctor that we are feeling "overwhelmed" it seems less innocuous than stating that we are "out of control". Each of us has periods in our lives when we will feel this way. I would quickly poke my hand into the air if a plane flew by with a trailing message, "are you overwhelmed today?" It is okay to react affirmatively and accept that the time is nigh to set boundaries for ourselves, determine what things over which we can effect some change, and defer those over which we have little or no control. Acknowledging our fears, concerns, and limitations might awaken an awareness or reflect accountability back to those most directly involved. Carrying your own heavy backpack on your grief journey is already a challenge, but gallantly offering to assume the added weight of others knapsacks as well may help to make somebody else's journey easier, but may limit your own progress. Pace yourself. Taking on too much sets you up for failure, disappointment, and over-extending yourself.

#### Next:

It is interesting that sometimes our biggest inspirations come from little people around us. . .

## Continued: Part 2

*This Thanksgiving Day, I bring blessings from our St. Albert Bereavement Board Members, as well as Faye, Preston, and myself—from our families to yours. We acknowledge your loss; sending love and healing energy to all whose loved ones died this past year, and those who still mourn after many years. Many have experienced relationship breakdowns during this Pandemic--dreams that will never be realized. We remember you who are also grieving. Thanksgiving gratitude will need to be resurrected from our memory banks, for special times we once shared, lessons we learned, and gifts we were left. Being thankful for those who help us is easy. Forgiving those who hurt us, or leave us, is so much harder. If you draw a blank trying to find something to be grateful for right now, just "Give THANKS for unknown blessings already on their way!" (Native American saying...)*