

## **Grief or Relief: Is it okay to feel both?** by George McLaughlin, Bereavement Coordinator

Several years ago, I officiated at a Celebration of Life Service for a fairly young man whom I had known for a relatively short while. The gentleman had battled Alzheimer's disease for many years and his spouse had been his primary caregiver. A few days after the service I stopped by to see how she was doing since most of the family from away were now gone. She shared with me the sense of guilt she was feeling due to family members and friends who had expressed to her their amazement at how well she seemed to be doing. She went on to explain that due to the progression of her husband's disease it seemed that she had lost him many years ago and so had already gone through the grieving process. With his passing her grief had turned to relief. This made her feel guilty, but she was reluctant to share this with others for fear they would not understand.

After having experienced the long slow death of a loved one or friend, a surprising sense of relief can sometimes wash over us and is often followed by a sense of guilt. Such emotions are natural, however, and we should not feel shame or guilt to admit that although we are grieving, we are also relieved. Relief is quite normal when the caregiving for a loved one has concluded. Few people would miss the anxiety of restless and sleepless nights, hurried trips for necessary errands, or worrying about the chance of our loved one falling or suffering any possible harm. Life as a caregiver is very focused and intense. Therefore, when this role is completed, the tension subsides. We then feel relief and begin to consider resuming many of the activities that had been set aside to fulfill the role of caregiver.

Experiencing relief does not mean regretting the time spent caring for a loved one. You can rejoice at being able to accomplish such an incredible goal. Take pride in fulfilling that role and the commitment it took to complete such a mission of love. It may have been tougher, longer, and more grueling than you anticipated, but you did it and that is to be admired.

Experiencing relief is certainly not forgetting a loved one. Be thankful for the time spent together as you provided care and cherish the memories made. But remember that their death does not define them, their life does. As you begin to get back to doing the things that you enjoy, honor their memory and consider what would please them. Celebrate their life as you live out your own.

While moving through the grieving process, we will experience a mixture of emotions, none necessarily right or wrong. Remember that it is okay to feel relief, you've earned it. And it can be an important step in your personal journey of knowing healing and wholeness again.

