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[www.elisabeth-lukas-archiv.de](http://www.elisabeth-lukas-archiv.de)

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Dr. Heidi Schönfeld  
Nürnberger Straße 103a  
D-96050 Bamberg  
[info@elisabeth-lukas-archiv.de](mailto:info@elisabeth-lukas-archiv.de)

This English edition was originally published in German as  
*In der Trauer lebt die Liebe weiter* Butzon & Bercker, 2021

Elisabeth Lukas, Love lives on in grief

***Translated from the German by:***  
Dr. David Nolland, Oxford

***Cover, typesetting, layout and image editing:***  
Bernhard Keller, Cologne

***Print and distribution:*** tredition, Hamburg  
ISBN: 978-3-384-21037-1

Elisabeth Lukas

# Love lives on in grief

LIVING LOGOTHERAPY

A publication series of the Elisabeth-Lukas-Archive



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## Grief is more than a feeling

Grief is by no means simply a feeling, even a feeling of misery. Feelings can be produced by artificial means, for example with the help of drugs or psychoactive substances or by electrically stimulating certain parts of the brain. Feelings can be dampened or even suppressed by means of desensitisation, routine, or manipulation, or by the cutting of neural pathways. Feelings are inner states that come and go, sometimes in step with external events, sometimes not. Experiments on animals show that a chicken in a cage can be made to feel angry, hungry, sleepy or sexually aroused within fifteen minutes by administering the right stimuli. Humans could be made to respond in a similar way.

Grief is different. It lies deep in the heart, at the spiritual centre of the person, and cannot be either summoned or driven off. It is much more than a feeling, it is an awareness of something valuable

having been lost. Nothing can erase this awareness. Even sedatives cannot prevent this awareness from being present in every waking moment. Likewise, nothing can undo the loss. Attempting to replace the person who has been lost with anything else only serves to emphasise their irreplaceability. Nothing can make the lost treasure less precious.

The pain of loss burns the value of what has been lost into the consciousness. The awareness of loss accompanies the bereaved person through life, like a whispering voice that may sometimes be louder, sometimes less loud, but which cannot be silenced, always speaking wistfully of what used to be so precious.

Yes, the griever is aware of much. But strangely this inescapable awareness of loss can be the key to coping with the resulting suffering. It opens a series of doorways to new dimensions of awareness. By passing through these doorways, the griever is changed, and so are his or her emotions. Grief is a journey towards a new, more clear-sighted mode of



human existence. In this book we will follow this pain-induced journey step by step.



## Grief is a reflection of wealth

The first gateway to be crossed, after the immediate awareness of loss, is the realisation that there has been something of great value present in one's life. This immediate insight in the face of tragedy already contains a grain of consolation. One's life has not been empty – one has not languished in solitude. One has lived in relationship with others, and the most interesting of these relationships have been ones of love. It is good to remind oneself of this and to reaffirm it.

Why is it good? Another important realisation: we humans have a problematic tendency to take wealth for granted – even inner wealth. As soon as someone precious enters into our life: a romantic partner, a friend, or a child, we get used to treating them as a possession to which we have an automatic right. Soon, we no longer even notice how much our existence is enriched and intensified by these people

to whom we are bound. We only remember their value and significance when they have departed. Grief puts a red pencil through all these absurd ideas of entitlement. Everything is on loan, everything is a gift – life itself is a gift up to the moment of death – this is what is written in the place of all our deleted fantasies of possession. But grief also tells us: Look! You were one of the lucky recipients. These gifts were bestowed upon you for years. Now this is the price you have to pay. The more intimate your love, the happier you were, the more bitterly you will weep over the loss of the joy you were granted.

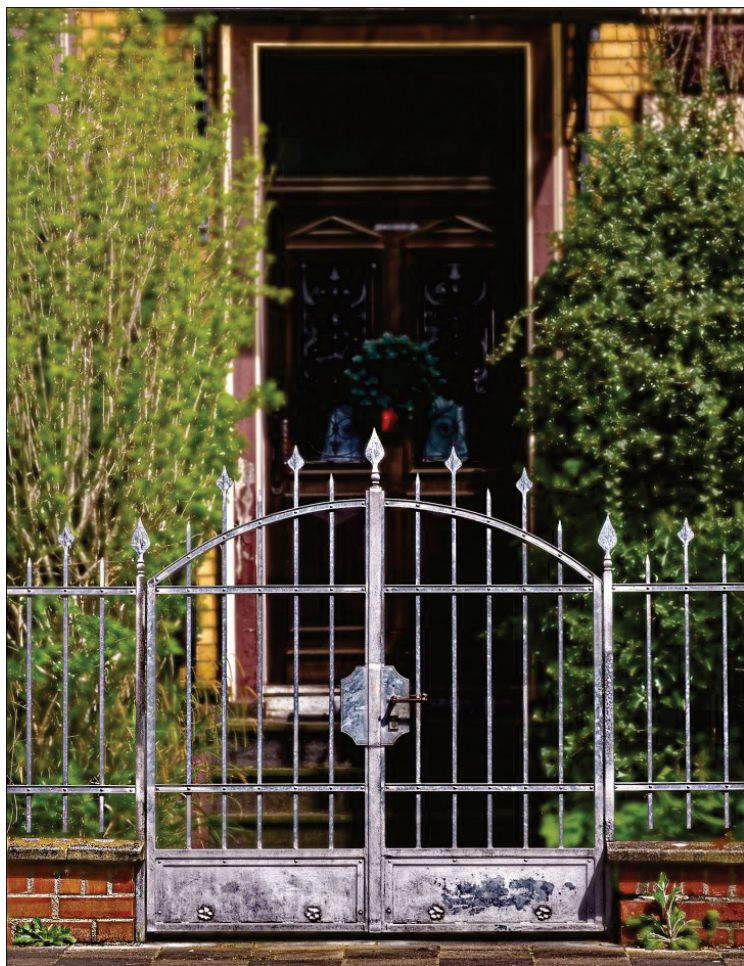
*Once, at a scientific conference in Dallas, I took part in a sightseeing tour for foreign speakers. The bus tour took us past some of the most magnificent gardens and the most expensive houses in America. The tour guide told us how many millions of dollars had been invested in each of them. When he enthused about a particularly impressive mansion with gutters made of pure gold, I made the succinct remark:*

*"But this is all just on loan." The tour guide looked at me with annoyance: "Are you trying to scare me?"*

*It was not at all my intention to scare him. But I felt sorry for him that he was so shaken by this comment. Life will eventually run its red pencil through his fantasies as well...*

Wealth does not consist of an overabundance of things that will have to be left behind. True wealth consists of a full life – a life of devotion to many wonderful treasures. The loss of these treasures will have to be grieved when they are taken away. Grief is a reflection of wealth.

Those who are truly poor are those who have nothing to grieve over. They have nothing to lose because there is nothing that quickens their heart. These are the poorest people of all.



## Can love die?

Like grief, love is not just a feeling. It is certainly not a feeling of dependence or blind subservience from the wastes of a sick soul. True love has nothing to do with low self-worth and a resultant desire to lean on someone more solid. The use or misuse of other people for selfish purposes is foreign to it. It does not seek a partner for protection or stimulation, it does not want a poster child for the curation of its own image, and it does not crave praise and tenderness for self-gratification. Love demands nothing at all; it is sovereign. The 'substance' from which it is made is a simple, unconditional yes to the beloved person – like a shooting star from the fireworks of creation. As Strauss put it in his operetta *The Gypsy Baron*, love is a “heavenly force”.

Thus, love can do whatever is necessary: leave the other person alone, let them go, release them if need be with moist eyes but an honest heart. Time moves

on, but love remains. Feelings may fade, but love endures. Death dissolves obligations, but love remains. How could an unconditional yes turn into a no just because of a change of circumstances? What if the other person changes course, falls ill, moves away, or dies? The part of a mutual relationship that was truly love survives even the end of the relationship.

But in what form does it survive? Well, that is not hard to work out. In a joyful resonance with the being and essence of the other person. In not forgetting them. In praying for them. And – in silent mourning for them. Grief says: “I am the price to be paid for your values. I am a reflection of your wealth. In me, your love is immortal.”

*Viennese psychiatrist Viktor E. Frankl expressed this poignantly in his book The Doctor and the Soul, p 108*

*“Consider, for instance, the affects of grief and repentance. From the utilitarian point of view, both must necessarily appear to be meaningless. To mourn for anything irrevocably lost must seem useless and*

*foolish from the point of view of "sound common sense"[...] But for the inner history of man, grief [...] does] have meaning. Grieving for a person whom we have loved and lost in a sense continues his life [...] The loved person whom we grieve for has been lost objectively, in empirical time, but he is preserved subjectively, in inner time." (Quotation shortened.)*





## Remembrance that leads to freedom

Many ways of looking back make one unfree. Psychotherapy knows a thing or two about this. In the exuberance of its youth (as a scientific discipline, psychotherapy has only been around for about 150 years), it has done much damage with its unqualified promotion of retrospection. Quite a few patients who only needed a bit of encouragement have become bogged down in the psychoanalytical process with the memorisation of negative childhood events and have never been able to break free from this. Throughout their lives, they have felt determined and influenced by past horrors.

Looking back with reproach makes one unfree. The reproach, whether towards oneself or others, hangs on one's chest in the form of a gnawing resentment, and is carried forward as historical "excess baggage". Closely related is looking back with despair. The patterns of thought: "if only ..." or "if only I had ..."

are stultifying companions, stumbling along behind the departed train of events. Looking back with dissatisfaction is also unconstructive. The question, 'What have I gotten out of my life?' is almost impossible to ask without a complaining or accusing tone. The answer, "not much...nothing at all," leads seamlessly to looking back with bitterness. Paradoxically, the opposite answer can also lead to paralysis. Looking back with rose-tinted glasses, dreaming of a romanticised past, nails the present firmly to what has long vanished.

Grief, aware of a precious – though limited – gift that it mourns, and in which love lives on (as it grieves for the beloved), can find more constructive perspectives. For example, it can look back with gratitude. This is an incomparable way to sooth wounds, alleviate pain, and bring peace! Or, it can look back as an artist. Every artist must step back from a work of art before finishing it, to view, judge, and perfect it from a distance. Whatever field they work in, they must, like a painter stepping back from their easel, obtain an overall impression of what they

have created. Only then can they see the tiny details that need improvement in the interest of the whole. In the same way, people should occasionally look back on their life from a spatial and temporal distance to recognise meaningful additions that are still to be made. In this sense, a time of grief can inspire the application of artistic “final touches”. For example, in the case of a death, we might take care of the deceased person’s effects, or modify our actions and attitudes in line with their wishes.

*In 1870, the Norwegian poet Henrik Ibsen wrote to Laura Kieler: "Spiritually, man is a farsighted creature – we see most clearly from a great distance... Summer is best described on a winter day." His words could also be expressed in this way: "The happiness we have experienced is best appreciated in grief."*

If this succeeds, it opens the way to the most liberating perspective of all: looking back with blessing. Here, we trust in "higher connections of meaning", approving of what has been; the beautiful