

Working Title: I'm Right Here Grandma!

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Abstract: Grieving the loss of a loved one, especially a young child, is seldom brief or easy. Sometimes a person can have a wonderful experience that helps this process, an experience that just may reach across the boundary between the living and the dead.

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As a routine part of my first session with a new psychotherapy client, I draw a family tree and get some basic information. Sometimes patterns emerge that prove to be important. Things progressed normally with "Millie" as I inquired about her siblings and parents. Next, I asked about her spouse and the couple's children. Given Millie's age, I asked if she had become a grandmother yet. With that, she teared up as she told me that her only grandchild, a little girl, had died the previous year from leukemia. Millie's grief was still fresh. Despite all the tears she had already cried, her continuing pain at this loss was very real.

As a psychologist, my work with people who are dealing with loss has led me on some amazing, indeed profound, journeys. My next question was the result of some of those experiences. "Have you heard from her since she died?" I asked. Millie's first facial reaction was one I typically see. It seemed to convey, "You'll think I'm crazy if I answer, 'Yes.'" Then her expression changed as she understood that if I could ask the question, I wouldn't be surprised at her answer. Somewhat tentatively, she told me she had. It had happened in a dream one night not long after the child had died. I nodded in acknowledgment and assured her I had heard many such stories. One of my sisters had such a visit from her brother-in-law the night after he died. The visit had helped provide a much needed sense of peace.

My next question was another surprise to Millie. "Would you like to hear from her again?" I gently queried. With a mixed look of disbelief and curiosity she nodded. I could easily have waited until her next session to pursue this, but the mood in the room felt so right, I opted to take advantage of the timing. I asked Millie to describe a favorite memory of a time she had spent with her granddaughter. She told me how the two of them had spent some wonderful days at the beach. The smile that spread over her face as she talked confirmed the joy these memories still held for her. "Let your eyes close and go back to the beach now," I invited. "The weather is just right for a wonderful day at the beach." After a brief silence, I asked her to describe the scene to help her anchor the experience more fully. She said she was alone on the beach. Blue skies and a warm sun provided a canopy over gentle waves that washed up on the sand. "Turn and look in the other direction and let me know what you see," I suggested. A few seconds later tears began quietly running down her cheeks. She told me she could see her granddaughter walking towards her along the beach. When they reached each other, the little girl reached up and took hold of her grandmother's hand. I sat quietly for a minute. Then, on a hunch, I told her, "It's okay to ask her the question." Without hesitation, Millie gave words to her pain, "Why did you leave?" Through her tears, with emotion that even now I can't define, she told me that the child looked up at her, and still holding her grandmother's hand had responded, "But Grandma, I didn't leave. I'm right here!"

Death remains one of the great mysteries. The intensity of our pain when we grieve such a loss is a measure of how much the relationship meant to us. Among the many ways that people find a measure of peace and consolation, colleagues like Dr. Raymond Moody and I find that Millie's experience is one that can be an important part of that process. We who are allowed to witness such moments are ourselves profoundly touched. Thank you Millie.