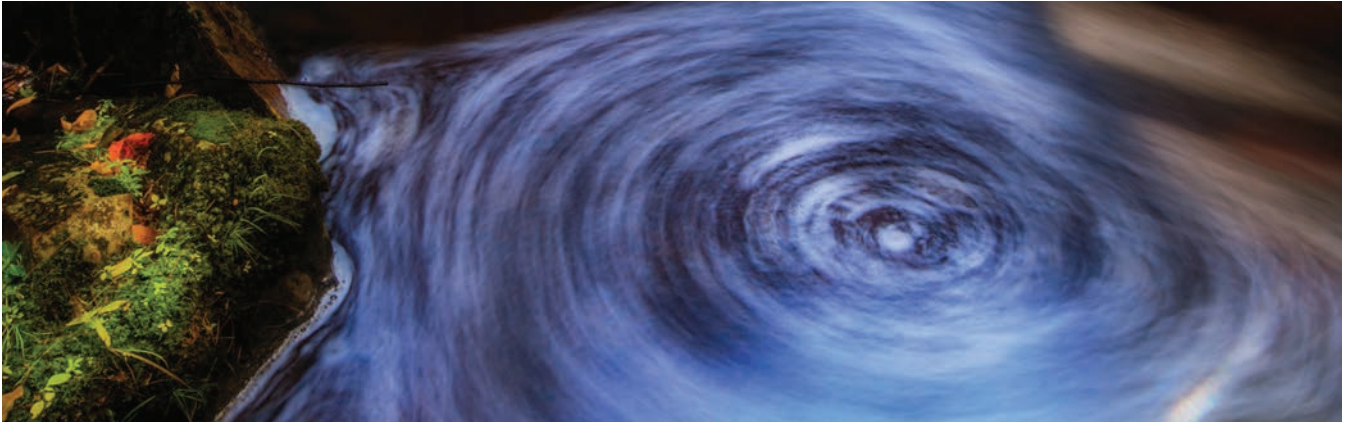


# THE WHIRLPOOL OF GRIEF, DR RICHARD WILSON



**ALEX JAMES** looks at one of the ways we can depict grieving and the journey of life

One of the modules we use in our bereavement training is *The Whirlpool of Grief* by Dr Richard Wilson. It is a useful, thought provoking illustration.

It shows a river running into a waterfall then into a whirlpool and then on to a stream. The theory in relation to grief is as follows; the river and the journey along it represent the everyday journey of life.

So the unsuspecting life traveller (sailor) is in the boat or raft sailing along unaware of the waterfall ahead which suddenly and unexpectedly plunges him into the whirlpool where his life is in chaos, turmoil and he is in shock, perhaps he is paralysed by the event for a time, drowning, trying to stay afloat amidst the confusion. After a while he manages to escape the whirlpool and move towards calmer waters. Maybe he might scramble to the side, take refuge along the banks before continuing his journey. Calmer waters allow him to recover. He may build another boat or raft but of course things are never quite the same.

Over many years in attempts to convey their experiences of grief many of my clients have used similar imagery to try to convey the feelings experienced, the following short passage taken from my book *Living With Bereavement* is how one of my clients described his experience of a sudden death.

‘Once I had a puzzle, a picture complete. I knew its pieces, how they fitted with each other, I knew its shape and colours and I planned its future and size. Suddenly it’s

as though someone has taken everything I knew and shaken it, thrown it up into the air and now I am left with the pieces – some of them are familiar but they no longer fit as they once did, parts are missing and it can never be the same.’ © Alex James *Living With Bereavement*

How hard we work at trying to find ways of expressing ourselves when the experience is so huge, how hard we work at trying to give others insight so that they might understand us. The truth is we really do work hard to communicate with each other. Amidst that isolation of grief we seek to be heard and those listening work hard to grasp the essence of it and to assist.

For the bereaved it often isn’t easy to find the words. It can be a huge relief to find a way of connecting experiences or telling our story.

Dr Richard Wilson’s *The Whirlpool of Grief* is easy to grasp and can be explored further. For instance someone might have a very sturdy boat with strong family support helping to guide it. It might have extra buoyancy aids or waterproof coverings that protect it as it hits the waterfall so that, although it is in chaos or turmoil in the whirlpool, its ability to recover with minimal damage is quite likely. What about the less sturdy raft? Its crew is less connected or perhaps there isn’t any crew, just one person negotiating that huge waterfall in a flimsy boat? It might be common to assume he might drown... Yes, he might, or he might have an inner resilience that drives him forward in spite of everything he may have to face.

Over time my thoughts have shifted. I can accept to a certain degree that how we manage any event in our lives may indeed be dependent on the support we have at the time, our circumstances, our past, our life expectations and goals, in fact everything

that makes us a unique human being. It follows through then that it also might depend on something inherent in us. Each of us is totally unique even within our families. Although we may share certain physical characteristics and capabilities how we manage our personal experience of life is unique to us. I believe our genetic makeup, our inherent traits, conduct how we manage our life events whether they are good bad or indifferent. Each of us has an individual capacity to get through life experiences. For some of us the death of our nearest and dearest, regardless of the circumstances, will be a totally devastating traumatic event. Whilst others, although bereft, will come through it. There are so many theories out there trying to capture the essence of grief, to enable people wishing to support those who are bereft to reach a greater understanding.

I am currently writing more about my thoughts and findings (watch this space) or, of course, you can contact me via the website [www.bereavement.co.uk](http://www.bereavement.co.uk). I am always keen to hear your thoughts and experiences. For now though perhaps the very best we can do is to recognise individuality, use our basic skills of communication ...listen – bear to hear, assume nothing, be non-judgemental, stop trying to find answers and simply allow the individual grief of the individual to unfold. After all who are the experts? They are!

Richard Wilson’s *Waterfall of Grief* can be found on the internet by simply typing Dr Richard Wilson’s *Waterfall of Grief*

Alex James MBACP is a professional bereavement counsellor/consultant, agony aunt and author who has worked with bereaved individuals and families for many years. Visit [www.bereavement.co.uk](http://www.bereavement.co.uk) to find out more.