The Switch Stays On

How we start out in life has consequences for the rest of our lives. The connections we make, or don’t make, to whoever parents us sets the stage for all of our future relationships. The more our parents are dependable, nurturing and sensitive to our needs, the more we are set up to be part of dependable, nurturing and sensitive relationships throughout life. If our parenting is erratic, lacking in nurture, or insensitive to our needs, our future relationships can be filled with anxiety, expecting or fearing to be let down again, or we may avoid closeness in relationships as we mistrust the dependability of others. While no one way of looking at people can explain everything about us, as each of us is complicated with a great variety of influences, it seems fair to say that how we attach, or don’t attach, in our early relationships can have ripple effects throughout our lives.

I recently heard a speaker, Dr. Guy Diamond, talk about this attachment way of looking at ourselves and our relationships. He talked about how we can be so attached, so wired, to our parents that even when we are living independently, grown and out of the home, we can feel a deep need to connect to them, especially in times of change or when we feel vulnerable. When we are sick, we want the tender care a sick child receives (or should receive). When we have important things happen, good or bad, we want to call and tell our parents. When we have big decisions to make, we feel the need to talk it over with mom or dad or both. The speaker said that “the switch stays on” and we feel the pull of attachment to our parents even if they have died and are no longer physically here with us. Even after death, the switch stays on.

How true this is and not just for children toward their parents. For parents whose children have died, the switch...
stays on. For lovers, spouses and partners who are now alone. For bereaved brothers, sisters, and best of friends. We get connected and make deep attachments. Our lives are wired together in ways that cannot be severed. Even when a part of us has been cut off, amputated, it still feels like it’s there, and we yearn for it.

Because the switch never turns off, longing has been found to be one of the most common feelings experienced by grieving people. We long for many things—the sound of a voice, the sight of a smile, the feel of a hand in ours or a body next to us. In the absence of these things and persons, we seek out substitutes in relationships to other people and things, yet the longing doesn’t ever completely go away, because…you know…the switch stays on.

There are some things in life that we don’t have to live with and accept because we can change them. It is in our nature to resist things which cause us pain and to fight to eliminate the source of the pain, and that’s a generally a good thing. We make human errors when we give up too soon, give in to fatalism and say, ‘well, what can you do’ when there are things we can do. We sometimes settle for too little in life when it could be better. This switch stuck in the “on” position, however, is not one of those things which we can change by will or strength of effort.

Because we are wired this way, our challenge is to learn to live with it instead of trying over and over to change it—to turn the switch off. Not going to happen, can’t be done. We are connected, and what a terrible loss it would be if the switch were actually turned off—if the feelings of connection and presence left behind were lost, too. It would be too much darkness. Unnecessary darkness as our grief is dark enough already, and we need the light provided by those stubborn “on” switches, important comfort like a night-light for a small child when all the other light has gone away.

Thank goodness the switch is always on to remind us that what we had and feels totally lost still exists in our memories and hearts. It assures us that we will always be connected by an attachment which is strong enough to survive even when it feels like all the power has gone out. Even then, the switch stays on.

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Sometimes when approaching the end of life, one writes a letter as legacy for family and friends. One need not wait, however, until the last days to write a "last letter." We could do it today.

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The Center for Good Mourning is supported by the generous support of the Arkansas Children's Hospital Auxiliary.

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