

## **ADVICE TO WAG MEMBERS ON COPING WITH THE GRIEF OF WHISTLEBLOWING**

by Teri Lambert

I talk to you as a person who has been through the mill, and who would like to share some of that experience to help you to understand the torturous nature of that journey, and so that you may be empowered to help yourselves.

When we lose something we grieve that loss, whether it be large or small. The word 'grieve' comes from the Latin 'gravere' - to burden. This burden is sorrow. Grief is a deep or violent sorrow, or keen regret.

My background is in nursing. I had a thirty year career terminated by people who forgot the basic medical ethical premise which is: above all, do no harm.

As a woman I was no different from men in that I identified myself with my career role. Separating myself from that role has been part of the difficulty and part of the sorrow that has followed me since my career has been ruined as a result of my whistleblowing.

From the beginning of my problems I knew that at no stage would I compromise my integrity, for that is an intrinsic part of me, and to lose my integrity meant that I would lose myself.

I believe that I functioned well in my career role, and my problems were in part caused by my peers perceiving that as a threat. My expectation was that my peers would treat work problems professionally. That expectation was naive and idealistic.

Although I have felt deep violent sorrow, I have no regrets about how I conducted myself, and I still believe that the principles I believed in (and still believe in) remain valid. However I do regret the heavy burden that I have carried on my stressful journey, and it is very difficult to rationalize this journey as a necessary learning experience.

This journey has taken me through enormous self doubt and insecurity, depression, thoughts of suicide, memory lapses, days I can't remember and days when I only functioned on routine. So that I would have to keep going I kept on studying. I kept on telling myself that "they" could not take that off me; the only person who could do that was myself, if I gave up.

Eventually I sought counselling as I came to a crisis point - days of uncontrollable crying. People who love me stepped in and rescued and organized me. I would strongly recommend that counselling be sought as early as possible. It is of enormous benefit to have an independent objective person listening.

I was lucky enough to be introduced to a book by Dr. William Wilkie called **UNDERSTANDING STRESS BREAKDOWN** (1985, Greenhouse Publications). Dr. Wilkie advocates that the person needing to be rescued have regular meals, plenty of sleep, and that problems need to be put to the side.

I cannot emphasise enough to you how much I needed loving family and friends who simply waited patiently and unconditionally while I worked my way through the maze, ensuring that the normal routines of everyday life were carried out. However, I realize that this is not an easy task.

Whistleblowing is very much a torturous journey for each individual, and very often there is no resolution to the problem. I will use the analogy of rape. I often described how I felt as though I had been intellectually raped, and then discarded like a used disposable item. I was never given the justice I was owed, and when no justice can be accessed or accorded, then no resolution is possible.

I was powerless to effect change as I was not in control or free to make choices about the situation I found myself in.

The hardest part of the journey was separating myself from the problem, and being able to look objectively at it, as if from the outside. The problem becomes all-consuming, and the thinking processes are constantly searching for ways to solve it.

Kubler Ross, in her research into the grieving process identifies three main aspects: denial, bargaining, and acceptance. The person who has lost their role through unjust circumstances goes through these three processes.

**Denial:** I know my idealism obscured my ability to assess the depth of the non-professional, subjective, destructive forces that were aligned against me and that I was having to deal with. I believed that the bureaucratic process would give me a fair go, but it did not.

**Bargaining:** I wrote many letters, but the main response from my colleagues was silence. I have bargained with government ministers, but three years down the track I still have no satisfactory result.

**Acceptance:** I am slowly coming to grips with accepting my situation. I need to put my problem to the side where it will remain unresolved, because it cannot be resolved without the goodwill of people who are not capable of goodwill. Resolution would require someone to say "I was wrong".

However, this acceptance is not giving up. I must accept the situation in order to survive and thrive as myself. My integrity is intact, and although I have sustained severe trauma, I still remain a whole person.

**Accepting that justice will not prevail is to regain control of my life and to make decisions for myself. It is to regain my autonomy as a person, responsible and accountable for myself.**

The journey has left me as idealistic as I started, but far more critical of what I see and hear, and far less trusting of a system that condones the destruction of individuals, in order to maintain its own power, control and the status quo.

I hope my sharing this experience with you will be useful, because it will have given some insight into my own journey with grief. Every person, because we are all individuals, will experience this journey differently, and tread the road at their own pace.