

You Don't Need the Other Person to Participate

Some relationships leave us waiting. For an apology. An explanation. Acknowledgment. The truth. A conversation. A response. For the other person to finally understand what happened. Perhaps you imagine that if they could just hear you properly, something would settle. If they would admit what they did. Answer the question. Tell you what happened. Say they loved you. Say they were sorry. Say you mattered.



Perhaps the relationship ended before that conversation could happen. Perhaps the person died. Perhaps they are alive but unavailable. Estranged. Unwilling. Unable to have the conversation you want. Or perhaps you have already tried. More than once. And nothing changed.

This can create a painful belief:

How can I ever complete something when the other person won't participate?

Perhaps because **emotional completion and mutual resolution are not the same thing**. You may have wanted both. But only one of them may still be yours to do.

Relationships Are Mutual. Your Completion Does Not Have to Be.

This can sound contradictory. A relationship involves two people. What happened between you belongs to a shared history. But you cannot complete the other person's emotional work. And they do not necessarily need to complete yours. You can acknowledge: What you wish had been different. What you appreciated. What hurt. What you regret. What you needed. What you never received. What you wish you had said. That work can happen even when the other person never enters the room.

Perhaps You Have Been Waiting for Permission to Complete

Sometimes another person's participation feels necessary because we are still waiting for them to confirm our version of reality.

Yes, that happened. Yes, I hurt you. Yes, you mattered. Yes, I understand.



Perhaps you would deeply value hearing those words. Their absence can be painful. But another person's refusal to acknowledge something does not automatically make your experience uncertain.

You do not need unanimous agreement in order to know what happened to you.

You May Want an Apology

Of course you may. Sometimes an apology matters enormously. A sincere apology can acknowledge harm. Restore dignity. Repair trust. Change a relationship. But an apology requires another person to recognize something. They may not. Perhaps they cannot tolerate what acknowledgment would require of them. Perhaps they remember events differently. Perhaps they believe their behavior was justified. Perhaps they are dead. You can continue wishing you had received the apology without making your entire completion dependent upon receiving it.

You May Want an Explanation

Why did you do that?

This question can remain active for years. Perhaps you have theories. Perhaps other people have theories. Perhaps the person gave you an explanation and it did not make sense. Maybe they gave you three explanations.

Perhaps they said:

I don't know.

Sometimes people do not fully understand their own behavior. And sometimes they understand perfectly well and still will not tell you. You may never receive an explanation that makes the relationship coherent.

An Explanation May Not Produce the Feeling You Expect

Perhaps you finally get one.

And think:

That's it?

The explanation may be disappointing. Self-serving. Incomplete. Entirely believable and still unsatisfying.

Because perhaps what you were really hoping the explanation would provide was something larger:

A way to make the outcome different. A way to make the hurt reasonable. A way to recover the relationship you thought you had. An explanation cannot always do that.

You May Want the Truth

This can be especially difficult after betrayal or concealment.

You want to know:

When did it start? What really happened? What else don't I know? Was that day real? Did you mean what you said?

Perhaps some facts genuinely matter. But complete access to another person's history, motives, thoughts, and choices may never be available. There can be grief in accepting that.

You may know enough to live without knowing everything.



You May Want Them to Understand the Consequences

Perhaps this is the imaginary conversation you return to. If they could only understand what their choice cost you. Financially. Emotionally. Relationally. The years. The family. Your trust. Perhaps you carefully construct the explanation. Surely if you say it exactly right, they will finally understand. Maybe they will. But perhaps you have already explained. And explained again. At some point, another person's failure to understand may no longer be a communication problem you are capable of solving.

You May Be Trying to Produce Empathy

This can be exhausting. You tell the story more clearly. Provide examples. Explain the context. Correct misunderstandings. Try a softer tone. A firmer tone. Different words. Perhaps the missing ingredient is not your communication skill. Perhaps the other person simply cannot or will not meet you there. You do not have to spend the rest of your life becoming increasingly articulate in hopes of producing someone else's empathy.

You May Want Them to Agree With You

Agreement can feel like validation. Especially after a relationship in which reality was frequently contested. But two people can leave the same relationship with different interpretations.

You may never get:

You're right.

Perhaps you do not need it in order to say:

This is what I experienced.

That is not the same as claiming perfect knowledge of everything that happened. It is simply refusing to require another person to authorize your experience.

You May Want Them to Know What They Lost

Perhaps you want them to regret losing you. This is understandable. Especially after rejection. Betrayal. Estrangement.

You imagine the moment when they finally recognize:

I made a terrible mistake.

Perhaps they will. Perhaps they won't. But there is a hidden cost to waiting for that realization. You remain oriented toward their evaluation. Your worth is still awaiting their verdict.

You do not need to become impressive enough to reverse someone else's rejection.

You May Want Reconciliation

Perhaps you genuinely want the relationship restored. That hope may remain. There is nothing inherently wrong with it. But reconciliation is mutual. It requires participation. Depending on the relationship, it may require honesty. Accountability. Changed behavior. Trust rebuilt over time. You cannot perform both sides.

You cannot reconcile alone.

That is not failure. It is a structural fact about relationships.



Completion Is Not Reconciliation

These words are sometimes treated as though they describe the same outcome. They don't. Reconciliation concerns the relationship between people. Completion concerns what remains emotionally unfinished for you. You may complete grief work around someone and reconcile. Complete it and remain estranged. Complete it after they die. Complete it and maintain a limited relationship. Complete it and decide you want no further contact. One does not dictate the other.

Completion Is Not Reunion Either

Perhaps someone left. You still love them. Working honestly with your grief does not create an obligation to restore the relationship. Nor is the purpose of the work to prepare you to win someone back. You can acknowledge love without turning love into a strategy.

Longing is not a decision.

You can miss someone without returning to them.

Completion Is Not Forgiveness

Perhaps forgiveness is important to you. Perhaps it is not. Perhaps your religious tradition gives the word particular meaning. Perhaps the word has been used against you. Your grief work does not need to wait until you reach a prescribed position on forgiveness. You can acknowledge what remains unfinished without being required to change your moral judgment about what happened.

Completion Is Not Forgetting

You may still remember. Tell the story. Say the person's name. Notice anniversaries. Think of them when a song plays. Remember what happened when something similar occurs. The objective is not amnesia. Something can become emotionally complete enough without disappearing from memory.

Completion Does Not Require You to Stop Loving Someone

The person may have died. Perhaps you expect to love them for the rest of your life. Good. Love does not need to be removed. Or perhaps the relationship ended and some love remains despite everything that happened. That may be uncomfortable. It is still allowed. You do not need to extinguish every feeling in order to complete what remains unfinished.

The Other Person May Never Know You Did This Work

And that can be completely appropriate. They may never read the letter. Know what you said. Know what you understood. Know that something changed for you. The work does not require an audience.

There is something profoundly different about saying:

I need you to hear this so I can be okay.

and:

This needs to be acknowledged because it belongs to my experience.



The Letter Is Not a Delivery System

This deserves particular emphasis in alumni work. The letter is part of your completion process. It is not a cleverly constructed communication tool. Not the final attempt. Not the definitive explanation. Not the document that will finally make the other person understand. The value of the letter does not depend on the recipient's response. That is precisely what makes the work possible when the other person cannot participate.

Sending Something Can Create New Unfinishedness

Sometimes we imagine contact will close the loop. Instead, another loop opens. You send the message. Now you wait. Did they read it? Will they respond? Why haven't they responded? What does that response mean? Why did they say *that*? Should you answer?

The original unfinishedness may become joined by a new set of questions. This does not mean contact is always wrong. It simply means **contact and completion are not interchangeable**.

Perhaps You Have Already Learned What Another Conversation Produces

This can be difficult to accept. You have tried. The conversation circles. They deny. Minimize. Change the subject. Become angry. Offer an explanation you have already heard. Promise something that does not change.

Perhaps you keep thinking:

Maybe this time I can explain it differently.

Maybe. But perhaps the repeated result is information too.

You Can Stop Presenting the Case

There may come a point when you know what happened well enough. Not perfectly. Not every motive. Not every missing fact. But enough. You do not need another hearing. Another witness. Another exhibit. Another closing argument.

Perhaps you can say:

I know what happened well enough to stop presenting the case.

That can be an enormous shift.

The Other Person Does Not Have to Become Coherent

Perhaps their behavior never makes complete sense. People contradict themselves. Act against their stated values. Want incompatible things. Make decisions you would never make. Sometimes we spend years trying to construct a psychologically elegant explanation for behavior that may simply remain confusing. You do not need to solve another human being before you can continue living.

What Belongs to Them Can Remain With Them

Their choices. Their explanation. Their remorse or lack of it. Their understanding. Their memories. Their willingness to repair. Their decision about contact. Their emotional work. Those things belong to them. You may be affected by them. But you cannot perform them.



What Belongs to You Can Receive Your Attention

Your grief. Your regret. Your appreciation. Your anger. Your hopes for the relationship. Your disappointment. Your words left unsaid. Your understanding of what happened. Your choices now. That is enough work for one person.

You May Still Wish They Would Participate

Completion does not require pretending you no longer care. Perhaps you would still welcome an apology. An honest explanation. A repaired relationship. You can want something without organizing your life around obtaining it.

Perhaps:

The door can remain open without requiring you to stand in the doorway.

Hope does not need to become permanent waiting.

You Don't Need the Other Person to Participate

Perhaps this is one of the most important things familiar grief recovery work can remind you. The relationship was mutual. The history involved both of you. The ending may have involved choices you could not control. And yet what remains emotionally unfinished within you can still receive attention.

You can acknowledge:

What happened. What mattered. What hurt. What you appreciated. What you regret. What you wanted. What you never received. What you wish you had said. You do not need the other person to agree. Apologize. Explain. Understand. Forgive. Return. Change. Or become the person you needed them to be. Perhaps they would participate if they could. Perhaps they absolutely would not.

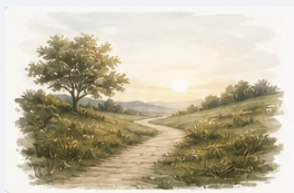
Either way, **your life does not have to remain suspended until another person completes their part of a conversation they may never have.**

You cannot create mutual resolution alone. You cannot reconcile alone. But you can give honest attention to what belongs to you. You can say what is yours to say. You can stop presenting the case. And perhaps, eventually, you can allow the other person to retain responsibility for their side of the relationship while you reclaim responsibility for something different:

your participation in the life that is still here.

CONTINUE THE SERIES

Next: What Belongs in the Letter This Time?



Returning to the letter as an alum may feel very different from writing one for the first time. You know the structure. You know where the process is going. And perhaps that familiarity creates its own expectations.

Next, we'll look at approaching the letter without trying to reproduce your first experience, manufacture a breakthrough, or write the "right" words - and at allowing this particular relationship to tell you what belongs there now.