Someone Remembers

My sister and her husband, both retired academicians, have been traveling since saying adieu to the university where they taught. They enjoy finding odd or weird gifts to send home to family and friends. One of their idiosyncrasies is gaining a sense of local attitudes by reading, thoroughly, the local newspapers from the towns and communities they visit.

Recently my sis sent me a clipping from one of those small town gazettes about fathers facing Father's Day after their child has died. It was a pretty good article. The reporter had interviewed several bereaved fathers and used quotes from them throughout the piece. There was nothing new, at least for me, to be gleaned from the article, but it did serve to remind me how it was (as if I could ever really forget) in those early months and years after our son, Brad, died.

What gave this clipping so much meaning had little to do with its content. The fact that after almost a dozen years my sister still thinks about her nephew and remembers that her brother will, forever, carry a slice of sadness means more to me than any exotic gift she might have sent. So few people make any effort to mention Brad's name. My other siblings cannot seem to bridge that gap of silence. Even my other children find it difficult to cross. So I read my sister’s offering and the tears that fell were not tears of grief (those dried up years ago), but rather, tears of thankfulness for remembering.

Thanks, Sis.

Editor

My friend Larry Tye in *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero* quotes Christopher Reeve (who played Superman in 4 of the movies). “You may recall that Reeve broke his spine when thrown from a horse. Prediction was that he would not have any functions. But while he was confined to a wheelchair, through extensive rehab work he did regain some sensation and function. He went on to direct an HBO film that was nominated for 5 Emmys. He played the lead in a remake of Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. He lobbied for federal funding of stem cell research and became the leading advocate for people with spinal cord injuries.

“What is a hero?” he wrote. “I remember how easily I'd talk about it, the glib response I repeated so many times. My answer was that a hero is someone who commits a courageous act without considering the consequences. Now my definition is completely different. I think a hero is an ordinary individual who finds the strength to persevere and endure in spite of overwhelming obstacles.”

By that definition, we might consider bereaved parents heroes too. Kind of along the lines of what Ann Kaiser Stearns talks about in her *Triumphant Survivors*. Among the triumphant survivors Ann interviewed she found “humor emerged repeatedly as a weapon of survival. In mourning someone, we frequently laugh at the things they once did or said. We are comforted by the laughter that rolls into tears.” It is not unusual at our Bereaved Parents meeting for a parent to have us all laughing at some foible or silly faux pas their son or daughter may have committed. A stranger wandering into the hall where we meet would hardly believe the purpose of our organization.

If Christopher Reeve is right then we are all heroes. We get up every day, perform the tasks required of us, and work hard to rebuild a life for ourselves and those around us while dealing with the deepest grief and emotional stress. Look in the mirror. You’ll find a real hero.

Richard A. Berman

R&D

BP/USA Maryland
The Gathering: A Perspective

Today I am full of inspiration and hope, even though it is my son, Anthony’s 30th birthday. You see Anthony is not here in our presence to celebrate with us. However, my heart is full because I have just come home from attending a weekend of hope at the Bereaved Parents National Gathering in St. Louis. What an amazing weekend!

I must say, I had a few doubts about attending this year, but those were quickly faded when I first arrived. The minute I walked into the room, familiar faces and friends, came to me, smiled and put their arms around me. Boy, did I need those hugs and smiles. That told me right from the start, I was where I needed to be. Now, I am sure most people would think this would be a sad, depressing weekend. Yes, we did shed tears, but we also shared laughter and joy. The first night, with the help of Bart Sumner, there were 100 or more bereaved parents standing up, laughing, doing silly actions, and having such a fun time. I am sure to anyone walking by, they could have easily thought, "What a fun time that group is having, wish I could join them."

The next morning we were introduced to the "Love in Motion" signing choir from California. What an awesome, spiritual experience. Their movements with their music and signing touched all of our hearts with humbleness and gratitude. I was blessed just to be in their presence. As Friday workshops began, I chose workshops that spoke to my heart. I got to hear the experience. I heard when I stumble, it's okay; pick myself up, even if I have to crawl. I learned we must, each of us, find our path and work to make that path better because our child lived!

Now, I must tell you. We ate a lot! We had three full meals daily with a room full of snacks in between. How awesome is that? After each meal, we had the opportunity to listen to different speakers who encouraged us and showed us that we too, can still live. We can laugh, cry, get angry, and choose to be a better person. Once again: all because our child lived. Each speaker was unique with their message and lifted my spirit to continue to grow and change.

I know these words are not adequate enough to describe my weekend. But, I must tell you I also received inspiration by meeting and talking to so many newly bereaved parents, or my new friends. I found inspiration by listening. Listening, I learned, is so very hard to do. But I found out that is what we need to do in order to help someone else new to this journey. We need to be still and listen to their stories and have someone listen to our stories. That is what inspired me this weekend. Each person that I shared with was willing to listen and then in return willing to share with me. I don't know about you, but I don't receive enough of this as I go about my daily life. So, to experience this for a weekend is an inspiration to me.

I must say thank you to the four ladies that I rode to St. Louis with. If anyone thinks riding in a car with five bereaved parents isn't a hoot; they are wrong! Yes, we talked about our kids. We discussed death and dying, which I know makes other people uncomfortable. But not us, we've been there, done that. However, we laughed, actually we giggled, but most importantly, we supported and loved each other. Once again, we gave each other hope!

Thank you to the Board of Directors of Bereaved Parents of the USA for hosting this Gathering. I know a lot of hard work and dedication went on behind the scenes to make this event successful. What an honor just to be able to attend, to listen, and to learn. Today my heart is full. Full of love for all the friends I have been with this weekend. Full of hope, that I can make a small change in me to honor my son. Once again, I must say, thank you for the hard work, as I have much gratitude and love from attending this weekend's Gathering. There is always HOPE.

Wishing you peace,

Doris Jackson
Frankfort, IN
Montgomery County Chapter
July 28, 2014

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14 - 15 Board of Directors for Bereaved Parents of the USA

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The death of a loved one can be devastating

Bereavement counsellor Sarah Smith describes some of the feelings that can arise from losing someone.

Bereavement affects people in different ways. There’s no right or wrong way to feel. “You might feel a lot of emotions at once, or feel you’re having a good day, then you wake up and feel worse again,” says Sarah, who works at Trinity Hospice in London. She says powerful feelings can come unexpectedly. “It’s like waves on a beach. You can be standing in water up to your knees and feel you can cope, then suddenly a big wave comes and knocks you off your feet.”

Experts generally accept that there are four stages of bereavement:

- accepting that your loss is real
- experiencing the pain of grief
- adjusting to life without the person who has died
- putting less emotional energy into grieving and putting it into something new (in other words, moving on)

You’ll probably go through all these stages, but you won’t necessarily move smoothly from one to the next. Your grief might feel chaotic and out of control, but these feelings will eventually become less intense. Give yourself time, as they will pass. You might feel:

- shock and numbness (this is usually the first reaction to the death, and people often speak of being in a daze)
- overwhelming sadness, with lots of crying
- tiredness or exhaustion
- anger, for example towards the person who died, their illness or God
- guilt, for example guilt about feeling angry, about something you said or didn’t say, or about not being able to stop your loved one dying

“These feelings are all perfectly normal,” says Sarah. “The negative feelings don’t make you a bad person. Lots of people feel guilty about their anger, but it’s OK to be angry and to question why.”

She adds that some people become forgetful and less able to concentrate. You might lose things, such as your keys. This is because your mind is distracted by bereavement and grief, says Sarah. You’re not losing your sanity.

We all need to grieve. In many ways I will always remain sad. For me there will be no closure, but there is hope. You can live your own life well and support those you love and who also ache with the loss of your fallen loved one. Going forward with life in positive ways may be the best way to honor him or her. Remember, our children would not want us to fail to live the kind of life they would have wanted for themselves. Destiny changed their plans. Now it must also change ours.

Donn Weaver, First Lieutenant Todd Weaver’s Dad
Bill Fletcher Jr. on the Invisible Underground of Child Loss

Although you get used to the loss, you never quite get over the death of a child.

My wife and I belong to an underground. More than likely, you do not know that this underground even exists. My hope is that you never join it.

It is an underground without a name. There are informal codes, but nothing that you would recognize. A sentence here; a reference to an event; a pause when discussing family history. Sometimes a tear at a strange or unusual moment.

We, in the underground, recognize all of these signs and once they are evident we have permission to speak with another member of the underground.

I knew nothing about this underground prior to March 21, 1986. It was on that day that my first born, after only three days of life, died peacefully in a hospital in Boston.

There are some strange things that occur when one loses a child. For the first two weeks there is an outpouring of sympathy and support, at least from most people that you know. There are those, however, who simply do not know how to respond to such a catastrophe and they, as a result, disengage, sometimes permanently. I lost one of my best friends in the aftermath of the death of my first born.

After two weeks, however, something very odd and confusing unfolds. Silence. As a man, the message that is communicated to me is that it is now time to get over the tragedy and get back to normality. Snap out of it, so to speak. And, by the way, make sure to take care of your wife since, in the words of a former friend, "...no matter how bad I felt I had to remember that she felt even worse..." whatever that meant.

The sympathy for my wife lasted longer. She was given more time to mourn but even then in increasing isolation. You see, most people do not know how to handle death and especially the death of a child.

Within a few weeks you start to understand that discussion of your misery and anguish is no longer acceptable. You see the discomfort in the faces of many people when the subject arises and, as a result, you turn inward, frequently thinking that there is something wrong with you for continuing to hold onto the deep, intense sadness that is almost indescribable.

The mourning is unpredictable and, as a result, many couples cannot survive it. A former co-worker of mine — another member of the underground — told me that she left her husband because he was crying all the time in the aftermath of the death of their child. He had one way of mourning and she had a very different way. The two of them were unable to reconcile their feelings and find support in one another.

At some point, however, you come across a member of the underground. It may result from a conversation with a virtual unknown, or it might be someone you have known for years. A word is offered or a sentence exchanged and you suddenly realize that they, too, lost a child. There is an exchange of glances where you and they attempt to ascertain whether it is really "safe" to discuss this horror. It is at that point that the ice is broken and you realize that you have met a member of the underground and that, indeed, you have joined it as well.

In our society we are generally not prepared for death but we are especially unprepared for the death of a child. We do not have the words for it. Thus, people — including many well-meaning people — say the most inappropriate things trying desperately to be supportive and encouraging, but generally making you feel sadder and more miserable. You have to remember, it is not their fault. Like most people, in fact, like you before this tragedy, we are trained to hide such horrors in a closet and then to lock the closet and put a couch in front of it. The tragedy is not to be discussed or acknowledged. Except, the tragedy eats at you, sometimes bringing you to the verge of screaming, leading you to seek someone with whom you can share the experience and emotions.

Over time you become used to the loss. You never quite get over it. The way that I have frequently described it is that if you extend your arms out, to your right and left, as far as they go, the space between your hands is the total happiness that you had prior to the loss of the child. Subsequent to the loss, that space shrinks. It does not disappear and you can absolutely find happiness again. But there is a piece of you that will not return and you have to learn to accept that and, indeed, to keep moving.

Every March 18 I remember my baby girl, Bianca Fletcher. I remember seeing her waving her arms and making squeaky sounds, because she was born prematurely. And every March 21 I again remember her. I remember the day that my wife and I were informed that she would not live a normal life and, indeed, would be unable to live at all without life support. And every year I cry with the loss but have been able to keep moving because of my wife, my second born, and of course, because of the underground.

"Bill Fletcher Jr. is a racial, labor and global justice activist and writer.

My child died. I don't need advice. All I need is for you to gently close your mouth, open your heart and walk with me until I can see in color again.

— Angela Miller
Sukey Forbes finds answers in the spiritual world after her young daughter dies from a high fever caused by a rare disorder. She asks, “Where is Charlotte now?” A prominent medium seems to make that connection and brings Ms. Forbes some peace, believing Charlotte is still with her, only in a different form.

Ms. Forbes is ripe for this belief as a result of her personal history growing up on a private island near Cape Cod with apparitions, mysticism and ancestors (including Ralph Waldo Emerson) who embraced natural spirits. A large portion of this book is spent on that personal history which the reader needs to understand our author’s path to finding inner peace. Ms. Forbes expresses perfectly the choices facing a bereaved parent:

The choices seemed basic and slim: Die. Exist. Live. I wanted to die, but with two young children to care for and a husband, that wasn’t an option. Exist. I could do that. I was doing that now. But how flat and lifeless. How dreary and endless the long march would be until I met Charlotte again. The only option that resonated with me was to live. But how? How to get there from here? To feel the fullness of life again seemed a Sisyphean task and yet I knew that somehow I had to get there. I would do whatever it took. And when I got there, I would reflect on it and hopefully help others behind me on the path. I wanted to live. That was the best I could do in that moment. I decided step one would be to fake it until I could make it.

Sukey Forbes chose life and chose to keep her daughter’s spirit close. If you are asking ‘where is my child now’ The Angel In My Pocket may help.

Healing A Parent’s Grieving Heart /100 Practical Ideas After Your Child Dies
Alan D. Wolfelt, PhD
Companion Press, 2002

This book is true to its word: It offers one hundred ideas for dealing with the weeks and months following your child’s death. Dr. Wolfelt’s advice will be of significant help to the most newly bereaved as well as those further along the grief journey. He does not judge. Rather he seeks to provide direction to channel the many emotions we feel. Some of the chapter titles are: Know That You Will Survive; Allow For Numbness; Understand the Six Needs of Mourning, Keep A Journal; and Listen to Music. This effort is valuable to read and to keep for future reference.

Did You Know They Were Bereaved Parents?

In addition to his fifty-year tenure at Sports Illustrated, Frank Deford appears weekly on National Public radio and as Senior Correspondent for Real Sports with Bryan Gumbel on HBO. He has written eighteen books, nine of them novels. A member of the National Association of Sportscasters and Sportswriters Hall of Fame, Deford was six times voted Sportswriter of the Year by the members of that organization, and was twice voted Magazine Writer of the Year by the Washington Journalism Review.

All of this came, however, in the aftermath of his eight year old daughter, Alexandra’s, death from Cystic Fibrosis. Deford chronicled her life and fight against the disease in Alex: The Life of a Child. Frank Deford found the courage to not only continue to provide the excellent reporting, writing and commentary he has become known for, but became instrumental in the Cystic Fibrosis Foundation, serving as its chairman, and continuing as chairman emeritus.

Frank Deford found the way out of oppressive grief was to stay busy with his work and working for a worthy cause. We are fortunate he did.

Dare To Dream
Sometimes it helps to envision ourselves as making it to the top of the mountain after our long struggle through the valley of sadness. As we climb each stepping stone of grief, we get closer to our dream of having a meaningful life again. We put shock, anger, guilt, denial and bargaining behind us and reach for the moon. We want to be social again, to be able to celebrate happy occasions, to get back in the swing of things, whether playing golf, cooking up a storm, planning a vacation, seeing a Broadway show, singing in the choir [or shower], or just enjoying shopping again. Don’t be afraid to dream of better days. They are ahead.
Gone from my sight — Henry Van Dyke

I am standing upon the seashore.
A ship, at my side spreads her white sails to the moving breeze and starts for the blue ocean.
She is an object of beauty and strength.
I stand and watch her until, at length, she hangs like a speck of white cloud just where the sea and sky come to mingle with each other.
Then, someone at my side says, “There, she is gone”
Gone where?
Gone from my sight. That is all.
She is just as large in mast, hull and spar as she was when she left my side.
And, she is just as able to bear her load of living freight to her destined port.
Her diminished size is in me — not in her.
And, just at the moment when someone says, “There, she is gone,” there are other eyes watching her coming, and other voices ready to take up the glad shout, “Here she comes!”

The acceptance of mortality in one’s life is no easy matter. But anyone who says he has accepted the premature mortality of his child is lying. There is an enormous difference between living with a child’s death and accepting it. The former takes a type of courage that few people understand.

James Lee Burke
From: Creole Belle

And If I Go While You’re Still Here —
Emily Dickinson

And if I go, while you’re still here...
Know that I live on,
Vibrating to a different measure
Behind a thin veil you cannot see through.
You will not see me,
So you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again,
Both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to the fullest
And when you need me,
Just whisper my name in your heart,
...I will be there.

A man’s reach should exceed his grasp, or what’s heaven for?
Robert Browning

Nor I, nor anyone else can travel that road for you.
You must travel it by yourself.
It is not far. It is within reach.
Walt Whitman

It may take years before green shoots of hope begin to appear in your life. Be patient and keep looking for them. They will reappear after your long winter of grief.
Dennis L. Apple

I’m sitting here on this old crate back behind the furnace.
The light’s gone from the dirty pane and it’s almost time for supper.
He smiles at me from the tattered print. I’ve pulled it out so often.
Dead so many years and still I miss him, man, I miss him.
My body shakes, the pressure builds, my chest is almost bursting.
God, let me cry — relieve the pain, but the tears just will not come.
I think of him so often still, how he looked and how he laughed,
to me he is no older now. If only I could touch him.
When I remember special times, how he looked, his words, his play,

Something in my chest swells up. It aches with no relief — just pain.
Women cry so easily, and I have cried just once.
I long to feel the sweet release of tears that just won’t come.
So I’ll sit on this old crate back behind the furnace.
I’ll remember how it used to be, and — maybe — tears will come.

From:
Andy’s Mountain -
Father’s Grieve Too, a Journey through Grief
by Dwight L. Patton
Allow Yourself to Mourn
Your child has died. You are now faced with the difficult, but important, need to mourn. Mourning is the open expression of your thoughts and feelings regarding the death of your child. It is an essential part of healing.

With the death of your child, your hopes, dreams and plans for the future are turned upside down. You are beginning a journey that is often frightening, painful, and overwhelming. The death of a child results in the most profound bereavement. In fact, sometimes your feelings of grief may be so intense that you do not understand what is happening. This article provides practical suggestions to help you move toward healing in your personal grief experience.

Realize Your Grief is Unique
Your grief is unique. No one will grieve in exactly the same way. Your experience will be influenced by a variety of factors: the relationship you had with the person who died; the circumstances surrounding the death; your emotional support system; and your cultural and religious background.

As a result of these factors, you will grieve in your own special way. Don’t try to compare your experience with that of other people or to adopt assumptions about just how long your grief should last. Consider taking a “one-day-at-a-time” approach that allows you to grieve at your own pace.

Allow Yourself to Feel Numb
Feeling dazed or numb when your child dies may well be a part of your early grief experience. You may feel as if the world has suddenly come to a halt. This numbness serves a valuable purpose: it gives your emotions time to catch up with what your mind has told you.

You may feel you are in a dream-like state and that you will wake up and none of this will be true. These feelings of numbness and disbelief help insulate you from the reality of the death until you are more able to tolerate what you don’t want to believe.

This Death is “Out of Order”
Because the more natural order is for parents to precede their children in death, you must readapt to a new and seemingly illogical reality. This shocking reality says that even though you are older and have been the protector and provider, you have survived while your child has not. This can be so difficult to comprehend.

Not only has the death of your child violated nature’s way, where the young grow up and replace the old, but your personal identity was tied to your child. You may feel impotent and wonder why you couldn’t have protected your child. These feelings of loss and sadness will probably leave you fatigued. Your ability to think clearly and make decisions may be impaired. And your low-energy level may naturally slow you down.

Respect what your body and mind are telling you. Nurture yourself. Get daily rest. Eat balanced meals. Lighten your schedule as much as possible. Caring for yourself doesn’t mean feeling sorry for yourself it means you are using survival skills.

Talk About Your Grief
Express your grief openly. When you share your grief outside yourself, healing occurs. Ignoring your grief won’t make it go away; talking about it often makes you feel better. Allow yourself to speak from your heart, not just your head. Doing so doesn’t mean you are losing control or going “crazy.” It is a normal part of your grief journey.

Watch Out for Clichés
Clichés—trite comments some people make in attempts to diminish your loss—can be extremely painful for you to hear. Comments like, “You are holding up so well,” “Time heals all wounds,” “Think of what you have to be thankful for,” or “You have to be strong for others” are not constructive. While these comments may be well-intended, you do not have to accept them. You have every right to express your grief. No one has the right to take it away.

Develop a Support System
Reaching out to others and accepting support is often difficult, particularly when you hurt so much. But the most compassionate self-action you can do at this difficult time is to find a support system of caring friends and relatives who will provide the understanding you need. Seek out those people who encourage you to be yourself and acknowledge your feelings—both happy and sad.

A support group may be one of the best ways to help yourself. In a group, you can connect with other parents who have experienced the death of a child. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about your child as much, and as often, as you like.

Sharing the pain won’t make it disappear, but it can ease any thoughts that what you are experiencing is crazy, or somehow bad. Support comes in different forms for different people. Support groups, counseling, friends, faith—find out what combination works best for you and try to make use of them.

Embrace Your Treasure of Memories
Memories are one of the best legacies that exist after the death of a child. You will always remember. Instead of ignoring these memories, share them with your family and friends.

Keep in mind that memories can be tinged with both happiness and sadness. If your memories bring laughter, smile. If your memories bring sadness, then it’s all right to cry. Memories that were made in love—no one can take them away from you.

Gather Important Keepsakes
You may want to collect some important keepsakes that help you treasure your memories. You may want to create a memory book, which is a collection of photos that represent your child’s life. Some people create memory boxes to keep special keepsakes in. Then, whenever you want, you can open your memory box and embrace those special memories. The reality that your child has died does not diminish your need to have these objects. They are a tangible, lasting part of the special relationship you had with your child.

Embrace Your Spirituality
If faith is part of your life, express it in ways that seem appropriate to you. Allow yourself to be around people who understand and support your religious beliefs. If you are angry at God because of the death of your child, realize this feeling as a normal part of your grief work. Find someone to talk with who won’t be critical of whatever thoughts and feelings you need to explore.

You may hear someone say, “With faith, you don’t need to grieve.” Don’t believe it. Having your personal faith does not insulate you from needing to talk out and explore your thoughts and feelings. To deny your grief is to invite problems to build up inside you. Express your faith, but express your grief as well.

Move toward Your Grief and Heal
To restore your capacity to love you must grieve when your child dies. You can’t heal unless you openly express your grief. Denying your grief will only make it become more confusing and overwhelming. Embrace your grief and heal.

Reconciling your grief will not happen quickly. Remember, grief is a process, not an event. Be patient and tolerant with yourself. Never forget that the death of your child changes your life forever. It’s not that you won’t be happy again, it’s simply that you will never be exactly the same as you were before the child died.

The experience of grief is powerful. So, too, is your ability to help yourself heal. In doing the work of grieving, you are moving toward a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in your life.
We are the parents whose children have died. We are the grandparents who have buried grandchildren. We are the siblings whose brothers and sisters no longer walk with us through life. We come together as Bereaved Parents of the USA to provide a haven where all bereaved families can meet and share our long and arduous grief journeys. We attend monthly gatherings whenever we can and for as long as we believe necessary. We share our fears, confusion, anger, guilt, frustrations, emptiness and feelings of hopelessness so that hope can be found anew. As we accept, support, comfort and encourage each other, we demonstrate to each other that survival is possible. Together we celebrate the lives of our children, share the joys and triumphs as well as the love that will never fade. Together we learn how little it matters where we live, what our color or our affluence is or what faith we uphold as we confront the tragedies of our children’s deaths. Together, strengthened by the bonds we forge at our gatherings, we offer what we have learned to each other and to every more recently bereaved family. We are the Bereaved Parents of the USA. We welcome you.