The Thing Is

to love life, to love it even when you have no stomach for it and everything you’ve held dear crumbles like burnt paper in your hands, your throat filled with the silt of it. When grief sits with you, its tropical heat thickening the air, heavy as water more fit for gills than lungs; when grief weights you like your own flesh only more of it, an obesity of grief, you think, How can a body withstand this? Then you hold life like a face between your palms, a plain face, no charming smile, no violet eyes, and you say, yes, I will take you I will love you, again.

Ellen Bass

For Years After

Brad died I felt I was dishonoring him by my failure to do “something” to memorialize his life. Other bereaved parents amazed me by setting up charities, writing books, building memorial gardens, or raising money for scholarship programs. I had no strength for such endeavors. Grief had exhausted me.

Although I was reluctant to take on editorship of A Journey Together it became a godsend. The amount of reading (both hard copy and online) and searching for the appropriate material to include in each issue gave me an understanding far beyond that achieved in group or experienced on my own journey. Further, I found writing cathartic and included some of those pieces from time to time.

I hope AJT has been useful and helpful to bereaved families. If so, then something good has been accomplished and my duty to my son’s memory secure. Now it is time for me to move on to other projects, but I will be eternally grateful for this opportunity that helped me find inner peace.

Thanks to all who encouraged me early on and to those who have shared their messages of hope which filled these pages. Please continue to read AJT as it moves into a new era and help the next editor, Kathy Corrigan, as you have supported me.

Richard Berman, Editor
THE ETERNAL LANDSCAPE

When poets look at life, fall is the perfect season to reflect middle age and approaching death. After 40 years of teaching English, the four season metaphor is pretty hard wired into my subconscious; but after 12 years as a bereaved parent fall reflects a different view.

To the newly bereaved death is a horror, bringing pain and loss into every daily activity. The loss of a child causes logic to explode, shatters dreams and hopes, crushes plans, destroys security. The world no longer makes sense. We cry for relief, wanting yesterday back, needing that child-like faith in life, ourselves, the universe. With time we realize that all who are born must also die. Death is the price we pay for this life. Our debt to death cannot be avoided but we can move beyond pain and fear.

Whether our children lived a heart beat or 100 years they were loved. Because they were loved they changed the world, making life better, richer, fuller. Instead of loss, fall leaves, gently falling to the ground, remind me that life is beautiful. Everything is as it should be. Death does not win. Life and love continue to flourish. Matt and I walk hand in hand, part of the eternal landscape.

Keith Swett
Seymour, WI

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DID YOU KNOW THEY WERE BEREAVED PARENTS?

On Mary Tyler Moore’s way to becoming a household name tragedy struck, threatening her rise to stardom.

Born and raised in fairly ordinary circumstances in New York, she got the entertaining bug early and at age seventeen appeared as a dancer in TV commercials. Her acting flair was recognized by producers (including Danny Thomas) and began receiving various roles on television programs. Eventually she was cast as Laura Petrie on The Dick Van Dyke Show. With that success under her belt she and her second husband formed MTM Productions and sold The Mary Tyler Moore Show, with its emphases on the single working woman’s life, to CBS. This vanguard success led to several spin-offs, including Lou Grant.

When Hollywood came calling Ms. Moore was ready. She starred in Thoroughly Modern Millie and prophetically, Ordinary People, where she portrays the mother in a family racked by the death of a child. The film’s release coincided with the accidental shooting death of Richard, Moore’s only child. “It could not be true,” she wrote in a later memoir. “Could he be here for twenty-four years and then irreversibly cease to exist? My sobs were those of panic.”

Somehow she found the inner strength to continue working both on screen and on Broadway. She also took up charitable causes. Notably animal rights where she is involved in advancing compassionate treatment of farm animals and is co-founder of Broadway Barks which discourages euthanasia, and instead, encourages adopting pets from shelters. Also Ms. Moore has championed diabetes awareness through Forever Moore, a research and development arm of JDRF (Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation) and its Clinical Development Program.

Did the death of her son bring out her compassionate side; prompting her to work, tirelessly, for these worthwhile causes? Whatever the answer it is clear Mary Tyler Moore is no ordinary person.

Chinese medicine considers autumn to be the season of grief and sorrow, making it especially important to nurture one’s health and emotional wellness during this time of year.

Check this out!

The Montgomery County Chapter, Crawfordsville, Indiana group had the privilege of participating in a recorded video on behalf of the Bereaved Parents of the USA. We worked hard to present a video with purpose and meaning and most importantly, speaking from our hearts, giving others an insight into what Bereaved Parents of the USA has meant to us.

Bereaved Parents of the USA, is an organization that helps others cope with the death of their child. This organization provides support, love, encouragement and the gift of hope, to parents on their grief journey.

Our hope is to show how Bereaved Parents of the USA, was our life line of hope and how this organization provides hope and the newly bereaved, taking it one day at a time, will survive, too.

Thank you for giving us this opportunity to participate in this project of hope. The Montgomery County Chapter, Crawfordsville, Indiana Group

Video can be viewed at: https://youtu.be/90Zv2VhTjxs
I was privileged and honored to be a part of the Planning Committee for this year’s Gathering, SEASONS OF HEALING, held in Hartford, CT. and I was excited to have this event in my “own backyard” so that many of the members of my Chapter could easily attend and experience all that our Gatherings have to offer. It’s hard to explain in words what might be gained from surrounding yourself with 200 fellow-bereaved parents for an entire weekend. I wanted them to experience all of it for themselves.

It was gratifying to witness so much hope and healing happening for them as the weekend unfolded. Yes, the speakers were inspirational and uplifting and the workshops were informative and encouraging. The Candle Lighting was moving and heart-warming and the closing drum circle was powerful and acknowledged the profound and healing work we had done over the weekend. But the truly magical part of the weekend was being part of the immediate and amazing connections made among all of the attendees. Some were rekindled connections from past Gatherings but many were new connections made simply because we understand one another’s journey. Such deep and meaningful bonds; such empowerment knowing we are not alone in our grief.

I asked my Chapter members who attended to write just a few sentences about their first-time Gathering experience. Here are several of their enlightening responses:

“This was my first gathering since my son Sean died 5 years ago. I can’t even begin to explain the feeling of being in a place that had so many people who “got you”. From the opening night to the closing ceremony, you could feel the love and warmth from all the other people who had come to the conference. The workshops and speakers were wonderful. I am not sure what I expected from the conference but I know I went away with many new friends”. ~ Fran Alger

“I enjoyed the conference, and although emotionally draining, the courage and power of the speakers was touching. I hope that next year they include a workshop on substance abuse, as I know there are many unspoken losses from this epidemic”. ~ Pat Roza

“The GATHERING...I have attended conferences for bereaved parents before, but this was my first one with the Bereaved Parents of the USA. This weekend allowed me to see that I have been successful in my grief journey. I am in a better place in my walk and was able to help others in the beginning of their journey and also some that are mid-way…..

I attended with some of the steering group from my chapter…yet when we met new people it was as if we all knew each other for a long time. The common denominator was that we all have experienced the death of a child. In this union we are all able to finish each other sentences, which made me feel connected to these new friends. It was so good to talk about our children and share Brian’s story and no one was going to run away. These new friends and old friends knew exactly how I felt. These people were not uncomfortable to talk about the death of their child or even listen to me share Brian’s story…what an honor to share our children and know that people are really interested in talking about grief and death.

My family and other friends from back home said to me, “Why would you go to such a place where you will become depressed and cry?” Yes, we did share tears but yet we laughed and did silly things at some of the workshops. I realized and told these family members that this (my grief) is part of my life and it is good to go and get hugs and smiles and comfort from people who REALLY understand…

I realized that I have honored my son and will continue to do this as long as I am alive and until I meet him one day. I still have bad days, but most of mine are pretty good days. I learned that even if I take two steps forward and one step back that I am still ahead in my journey.

I loved the Candle Lighting ceremony with the song from Alan Pedersen and I loved how we honored our children by lighting and holding our candles up…I bought the CD “the Best of Alan Pedersen and attending his workshop was awesome. I loved the “Love in Motion” Signing choir. They were such a blessing to the conference. I was able to attend the Annual Chapter Leader Training Day and that itself was such a learning experience.

When it was time to leave on Sunday…I felt sad because I would be missing my new friends, yet glad I had my friends from our chapter with me. It made me sad to leave but I knew that I would see these new friends again along the way…. and we will all greet each other with a hug, smile and all that we need….” ~ Joanne Arena

“I am so happy I made the decision to go to the BPUSA conference in Hartford in July. It was well attended and organized and there were many workshops I found helpful. I came upon one workshop by accident, Moving through Grief with Music, and went in. It was led by Dr. Doug and BJ Jensen, together with some members of LOVE IN MOTION Singing Choir who travel internationally, inspiring audiences with presentations of music in American Sign Language, drama, and movement. It was beautiful and healing to be part of this workshop.

I also was eager to see Kay Bevington and her husband who started Alive Alone after losing their only daughter. It was for those of us who have lost our only child/children. We all feel the same when we lose our children, but when you have lost your only child – there
is no future! I’m looking forward to attending the Alive Alone Conference in Virginia in April 2016.

The ending celebration, a drumming circle, was great. It seems very cathartic to bang on a drum. I looked around at those in the circle and saw many smiling faces gratified to know that in our grief we can still SMILE”. ~ Anne Harris

“As this was my first gathering, I was apprehensive about the experience I would have. I was completely surprised at how comforting it was to me. Just sharing with everyone and being with so many people who are walking in my shoes gave me a peaceful feeling.

I enjoyed the workshops I attended, and my favorite was Weepyseeds with Becky Russell. She was a great speaker, very positive, uplifting and funny. I very much appreciated the Candle Lighting Ceremony. The slide show was so emotional and beautiful. The music was perfect and having all our candles held up to our children was powerful.”
Practical Advice

by Paula Stephens

What I Wish More People Understood About Losing A Child

Four and half years after the death of my oldest son, I finally went to a grief support group for parents who have lost children. I went to support a friend who recently lost her son. I'm not sure I would've gone except that when I was in her shoes, four years ago, I wish I would've had a friend to go with me. Losing a child is the loneliest, most desolate journey a person can take and the only people who can come close to appreciating it are those who share the experience.

The meeting was a local support group chapter, an organization solely dedicated to providing support for those who have lost children, grandchildren or siblings. The facilitator was a tall gentleman who had lost his 17 year old son eight years ago. He opened the meeting by saying that dues to belong to the club are more than anyone would ever want to pay. Well, he couldn't be more correct: no one wants to belong to this group.

The group of incredible survivors included parents whose children had been killed by drunk drivers, murdered, accidental overdose, alcoholism, suicide and freak accidents. The children's ages ranged from 6-38 years old. When hearing the stories, I had a visceral reaction to being part of this "club," but was also humbled by the greatness of these mothers and fathers.

Most of what I share in this article came from this meeting, but also from my own experience of having lost a child and being four years into that lifelong journey of healing from deep grief. The following five tips can be your compass to help you navigate how to give support to grieving parents on a sacred journey they never wanted to take.

1. Remember our children.

The loss of children is a pain all bereaved parents share, and it is a degree of suffering that is impossible to grasp without experiencing it first hand. Often, when we know someone else is experiencing grief, our discomfort keeps us from approaching it head on. But we want the world to remember our child or children, no matter how young or old our child was.

If you see something that reminds you of my child, tell me. If you are reminded at the holidays or on his birthday that I am missing my son, please tell me you remember him. And when I speak his name or relive memories relive them with me, don't shrink away. If you never met my son, don't be afraid to ask about him. One of my greatest joys is talking about Brandon.

2. Accept that you can't "fix" us.

An out-of-order death such as child loss breaks a person (especially a parent) in a way that is not fixable or solvable — ever! We will learn to pick up the pieces and move forward, but our lives will never be the same.

Every grieving parent must find a way to continue to live with loss, and it's a solitary journey. We appreciate your support and hope you can be patient with us as we find our way.

Please: don't tell us it's time to get back to life, that's it's been long enough, or that time heals all wounds. We welcome your support and love, and we know sometimes it hard to watch, but our sense of brokenness isn't going to go away. It is something to observe, recognize, accept.

3. Know that there are at least two days a year we need a time out.

We still count birthdays and fantasize what our child would be like if he/she were still living. Birthdays are especially hard for us. Our hearts ache to celebrate our child's arrival into this world, but we are left becoming intensely aware of the hole in our hearts instead.

Some parents create rituals or have parties while others prefer solitude. Either way, we are likely going to need time to process the marking of another year without our child.

Then there's the anniversary of the date our child became an angel. This is a remarkable process similar to a parent of a newborn, first counting the days, then months then the one year anniversary, marking the time on the other side of that crevasse in our lives.

No matter how many years go by, the anniversary date of when our child died brings back deeply emotional memories and painful feelings (particularly if there is trauma associated with the child's death). The days leading up to that day can feel like impending doom or like it's hard to breathe. We may or may not share with you what's happening.

This is where the process of remembrance will help. If you have heard me speak of my child or supported me in remembering him/her, you will be able to put the pieces together and know when these tough days are approaching.

4. Realize that we struggle every day with happiness.

It's an ongoing battle to balance the pain and guilt of outliving your child with the desire to live in a way that honors them and their time on this earth.

I remember going on a family cruise eighteen months after Brandon died. On the first day, I stood at the back of the ship and bawled that I wasn't sharing this experience with him. Then I had to steady myself, and recognize that I was also creating memories with my surviving sons, and enjoying the time with them in the present moment.

As bereaved parents, we are constantly balancing holding grief in one hand and a happy life after loss in the other. You might observe this when you are with us at a wedding, graduation or other milestone celebration. Don't walk away — witness it with us and be part of our process.
5. Accept the fact that our loss might make you uncomfortable. Our loss is unnatural, out-of-order; it challenges your sense of safety. You may not know what to say or do, and you're afraid you might make us lose it. We've learned all of this as part of what we're learning about grief. We will never forget our child. And in fact, our loss is always right under the surface of other emotions, even happiness. We would rather lose it because you spoke his/her name and remembered our child, than try and shield ourselves from the pain and live in denial.

Grief is the pendulum swing of love. The stronger and deeper the love the more grief will be created on the other side. Consider it a sacred opportunity to stand shoulder to shoulder with someone who has endured one of life's most frightening events. Rise up with us.

Greetings to all Bereaved Families,

The Board of Directors have been so busy since the National Gathering in Hartford, Connecticut in July. The Gathering was a success! Many of you were given hope and strength through the many workshops, the wonderful Speakers, and the fellowship as we dined together. As I looked through the speaker and workshop presenter evaluations, I was encouraged that we struck GOLD with the people who gave of their time and talents to help each and every one of you mourn well that you might live well. We look forward now as we begin to plan “Crossroads of Your Heart” in Indianapolis, Indiana June 30-July 3, 2016.

Throughout A Journey Together, you will learn of the changes and new names of people who have stepped up to the plate to relieve seasoned volunteers who have worked tirelessly behind the scenes. I want to give huge shout-outs to Richard Berman, Donna Corrigan, and Theresa Valentine. Richard, thank you, for the years you’ve faithfully edited A Journey Together. Donna Corrigan for your work as Chapter Development Coordinator; you are the “first impression” of this organization as people contact you to start their Chapters. Theresa Valentine, Thank you! All of our Chapters rely heavily on your work with the Generic Newsletter. I think I’ve enjoyed your encouragement to us all in your “notes” each time you send the newsletter to each Chapter. May those who are your successors, hold your belief that we can all do this together.

I’m especially pleased to announce that Sarah Kravitz, bereaved sibling of Frank T. Lyman, Ill, has been appointed by the Board as our Sibling Coordinator. It is our hope that bereaved families will find a solid bereaved sibling program at the 2016 National Gathering. Sarah’s contact information is on the website. Please feel free to email her and let her know how we can help your children, adolescents and young adults whose sibling(s) have died. Thank you Sarah for coming forward and agreeing to serve siblings throughout our nation.

The Board is meeting October 2-4 for our Fall Board Meeting at the Wyndhm Indianapolis West, the location of our 2016 National Gathering. Please remember that you are all welcome to join any of our meetings. We welcome your emails, letters and input anytime. Our contact information is on the website.

We recognize that Chapter Leaders, Chapters and all the volunteers are the heart and soul of this organization. The Board supports you all and are here to listen. I hope you are enjoying your Fall, kids returning to school and the last hoorah of Labor Day weekend!

Warmest regards,
Delain Johnson
BP USA Board President

BOOK REVIEW

Special Dream
Luellen Hoffmam
The Crossroads Publishing Company
New York, 2009

Not a grief book and certainly not one for the newly bereaved, but still a useful work for anyone who has experienced a dream involving a deceased relative or close friend. Ms. Hoffman does not interpret the one hundred or so dreams she has collected from a variety of people; rather she presents each one in the individual’s own words. The author has developed a classification for these dreams with only the most vivid being considered Special. Unfortunately Ms. Hoffman has included only a few dreams of bereaved parents, but if you have had a nighttime ‘visit’ you may wish to compare notes with the dreamers in this thin volume.
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.