IF GRIEF COULD SPEAK, HERE ARE FIVE THINGS IT WOULD SAY

By Monique Minahan

If grief could speak it would say, I’m sorry.
I’m sorry it’s me that arrived at your doorstep instead of love. But I am made of love too. In fact, it’s because I love so much that I hurt so much when I lose the people I love.

If grief could speak it would say, You can survive.
I know you may not want to. I know life may not be worth living without them. I know the earth collapsed beneath your feet. I know a part of you died with them. And I know you can survive, one breath at a time, one moment at a time, one day at a time.

If grief could speak it would say, Please don’t hide me away.
I know when people see you with me they get uncomfortable. I know your friends don’t know what to say to me. I know it’s easier to hide me away when you have company over for dinner.

But I’d like a seat at the table. Will you let me speak? Will you listen to me? I can’t promise I’ll be polite or calm. I may raise my voice because I’m angry or I may collapse in a pile of tears, but if I can let it out then I don’t have to hold it in here, in you. I’d like to create some more space inside you for all of us to coexist. You, me, love, anger, laughter, peace, hope, joy... there’s enough room for all of us in your heart.

If grief could speak it would say, I love you.
You may not love me, but I love you. I love how you love so big… I love how you keep taking care of that space your loved one took up even though they’re gone. How you leave their favorite book in the same place, how you leave their clothes folded, how you let them live a little longer in the things left behind. I love how you don’t let the world forget they were here, that they mattered, that they were a part of you. I love you.

If grief could speak it would say, Find your own way.
There seem to be a lot of “experts” out there about me. They say I work in stages and they make it sound like I’m something to get over, like the flu. What I can tell you is there is nothing wrong with me and there is nothing wrong with you. I am not a sickness, I am grief. I am a valid experience and emotion and there is no right way to hold me. There is just your way. No two people receive me the same way. Let's find our own way to dance together, to cry together, to break together, to heal together.

Let’s find our own way through this brief and beautiful life.
WHAT GOES UP…
By Kelly Kittel

(Editor's note: This article makes a case for NOT releasing balloons in memory of our loved ones and offers alternative ways to honor them. KC)

If you Google the phrase, “What goes up, must come down” you’ll learn that it’s attributed to Isaac Newton. You’ll also find the following explanation for it: “Things that are launched into the air will return back down to the ground. Why? Because of gravity, that's why.” As a resident of the Ocean State, I can be found on the beach almost every day, sometimes humming the tune to Spinning Wheel, the song by Blood, Sweat and Tears that begins with Newton’s quotation. Why? Because almost every single time I walk the beach I see the crumpled remains of balloons along the tideline. That’s why. One sunny spring weekend, my son and I picked up over a hundred balloons in the one-mile-stretch of our favorite beach.

Balloons litter our shorelines. It comes as no surprise to learn that the balloon debris found in beach cleanups has tripled over the past ten years. Colorful ribbons once clenched by sweaty toddler fists unfurl across the sand like desiccated tentacles. And this is one of the biggest problems with balloons—they look just like jellyfish to the critters gulping them down by mistake. Whales, dolphins, sea turtles, and birds have all been found on the beach with ingested balloons blocking their digestive systems, slowly starving them to death. Which isn’t the festive image we typically associate with a party balloon tied to someone’s mailbox. Or released en masse to mark a special occasion or memorialize a loved one.

As a bereaved parent, I have been cringing for years as folks gather in graveyards and on goal lines to release bundles of balloons. It’s a nice symbol and we all crane our necks to watch the colorful orbs float up to the heavens where we picture our loved ones waiting, hands outstretched, to receive them. Especially our dearly departed children, who will never, ever delight in that iconic symbol of earthly birthday celebrations again. But none of us truly believe that heaven is just a balloon ride away. Or that our beloveds will actually be the happy recipients of anything we launch into space. If it were true, we’d all tie a bunch of balloons to a lawn chair and take a trip, ourselves, to visit them. Remember Newton? Instead, other creatures will be on the receiving end. But not in the way we’ve intended.

Balloons are usually made of natural latex, which is biodegradable, but the decomposition takes many months, the ribbons even longer. Others are made of Mylar, a kind of foil, and can float for hundreds of miles before descending. A whale calf recently washed ashore in California, dead from choking on a Mylar balloon. Killing sea creatures in the name of our loved ones is not the sort of myth we should be perpetrating. Dead sea birds entangled in pink and blue grosgrain ribbon is not how we’d intentionally choose to celebrate life. Or honor our babies. After we’ve watched them float away and moved on, the beautiful balloons we’ve released will ultimately either burst or slowly deflate. Gravity ensures their return to earth and that goes for Chinese Lanterns as well. Once their flames burn out, the metal and bamboo frames can entangle birds and choke livestock.

A handful of cities and states have enacted laws banning the mass release of balloons and lanterns, along with the White House, National Park Service, and even Disney World. I think it’s high time we voluntarily join them. The Balloon Council spends millions of lobbying dollars to keep balloon releases legal. Who knew such a council even existed? They do. And their objective? Well, essentially it’s to encourage us to litter with their products. At the very least, balloon releases should be included in existing litter laws because, after all, that’s what they are.

If you want to memorialize your loved ones or mark a special occasion with something lofty, there are better alternatives. For streams of color high in the air, why not fly kites? How about a mass bubble release? Or monarch butterflies? Homing pigeons? Or my personal favorite—plant a tree. You can watch it grow and it will provide years of habitat for animals and birds instead of killing them. I love to lay under the sweet gum trees we planted in the cemetery for our sons, my memories framed by green leaves against blue sky. I imagine their roots, reaching into the minerals of my sons’ ashes to transform death into life. The growth of their trees tangibly measures the years since I last held my sons. But as their branches reach towards the sky, they also promise the time yet to come, bringing me closer to my sons than any balloon ever will.

May your holidays be filled with reasons to be thankful. Having loved and having been loved is perhaps the most wondrous reason of all.
Grieving Dad: Surviving and Healing the Loss of Your Child by Mark Seidman

In Grieving Dad, Mark Seidman provides encouragement and hope to any dad who has had the misfortune of losing a child. He speaks from experience – His 26 year old son died suddenly in an accident. In an instant, Mark’s life was shattered. Mark recounts his journey of the first year after losing his son and shares what he learned that helped him find his way forward. The wisdom he acquired during that time will help any dad who has lost a child. With candor and compassion, Mark explains how he went from being hysterical and immobilized, to getting back on his feet and working to rebuild a good life for himself and his family. He spells out 40 specific lessons he learned that helped him move forward to live a full and rewarding life in the aftermath of his devastating loss. No dad should ever have to deal with the loss of a child, but Mark’s insights make the long, hard road just a bit easier.

Disaster Falls: A Family Story by Stephane Gerson

A haunting chronicle of what endures when the world we know is swept away.

On a day like any other, on a rafting trip down Utah’s Green River, Stéphane Gerson’s eight-year-old son, Owen, drowned in a spot known as Disaster Falls. That night, as darkness fell, Stéphane huddled in a tent with his wife, Alison, and their older son, Julian, trying to understand what seemed inconceivable. “It’s just the three of us now,” Alison said over the sounds of a light rain and, nearby, the rushing river. “We cannot do it alone. We have to stick together.”

*Disaster Falls* chronicles the aftermath of that day and their shared determination to stay true to Alison’s resolution. At the heart of the book is an unflinching portrait of a marriage tested. Husband and wife grieve in radically different ways that threaten to isolate each of them in their post-Owen worlds. (“He feels so far,” Stéphane says when Alison shows him a selfie Owen had taken. “He feels so close,” she says.) With beautiful specificity, Stéphane shows how they resist that isolation and reconfigure their marriage from within.

As Stéphane navigates his grief, the memoir expands to explore how society reacts to the death of a child. He depicts the “good death” of his father, which reveals an altogether different perspective on mortality. He excavates the history of the Green River—rife with hazards not mentioned in the rafting company’s brochures. He explores how stories can both memorialize and obscure a person’s life—and how they can rescue us.

*Disaster Falls* is a powerful account of a life cleaved in two—raw, truthful, and unexpectedly consoling.

Kadian Journal by Thomas Harding

In July 2012 Thomas Harding's fourteen-year-old son Kadian was killed in a bicycle accident. Shortly afterwards Thomas began to write. This book is the result.

Beginning on the day of Kadian’s death, and continuing to the year anniversary, and beyond, *Kadian Journal* is a record of grief in its rawest form, and of a mind in shock and questioning a strange new reality. Interspersed within the journal are fragments of memory: jewel-bright everyday moments that slowly combine to form a biography of a lost son, and a lost life.

It is an extraordinary document, and several things at once: a lucid, raw, and startlingly brave book: a powerful and moving account of a father’s grief, and a beautiful tribute to an exceptional son.
The Redbird Sings the Song of Hope by Kandy Noles Stevens

Not your typical book about grief, the redbird sings the song of hope is the perfect telling of what grieving people wish others knew. Kandy Noles Stevens unapologetically explains what isn't always helpful to the bereaved, but does so with grace and wit. Through her personal stories, she provides practical ideas of how to bring comfort to those who are hurting. In an engaging Southern style, Kandy writes about real people (including some pretty colorful ones) who have loved her family in their darkest days. Infused in every page are hope-filled words of God's faithfulness, including the sending of one redbird when her family needed it the most.

Breathe: A Memoir of Motherhood, Grief, and Family Conflict by Kelly Kittel

Kelly Kittel never questioned her Mayflower Society mantra—“Family is the most important thing”—until the day her fifteen-month-old son was run over by her sixteen-year-old niece. Nine months later, Kittel’s doctor made a terrible mistake during her subsequent pregnancy and she found herself burying yet another baby. Caught up in the maelstrom of a malpractice lawsuit, Kittel and her husband battle not only the medical system, but their own relatives, in the courtroom. As their family tree begins to topple, the Kittels struggle to nourish the roots of their young family and find healing. Achingly raw and beautifully narrated, Breathe is a story of motherhood, death, and family in the face of unspeakable tragedy and, ultimately, how she learns to breathe again.

Surviving the Unthinkable: The Loss of a Child by Dr. Janice Bell Meisenhelder

Few people understand the grief that comes with losing a child unless they have weathered that situation themselves.

Dr. Janice Bell Meisenhelder has suffered through the loss of a child and knows the almost unbearable sorrow a bereaved mother feels. She has created this gentle guide to help mothers deal with their emotions and begin to heal.

Her guide starts by describing the initial reactions to loss. She shows you the rhythms of grief and the basic emotions you will feel right after the event. She then moves on to handling anger, guilt, envy, and anxiety. As time passes, Meisenhelder warns about triggers and shows mothers how to handle holidays, birthdays, and family events. She offers advice on how to heal spiritually as well as emotionally.

Meisenhelder also prepares you for “tsunami days,” when the loss suddenly hits you all over again. She guides you through these days and on to the second and third year without your child. She encourages you to find ways to honor your child.

In addition to guidance for mothers, Surviving the Unthinkable also contains information for those immediate family and friends who want to understand and support their loved ones during this difficult time.

If I Could Mend Your Heart by Mary I. Farr

Years ago, when I was training to become a hospital chaplain, my supervisor offered a startling observation: “You will learn that chaplaincy and the art of caring for another during times of grief have little to do with a job description and everything to do with the interruptions.”

If I Could Mend Your Heart, is all about life’s interruptions – the losses, the endings, the upheavals. It’s a little book with a big message about healing and how we show up and support one another in our troubles. Readers will find themselves on a small quiet walk filled with authentic words of inspiration, and loving kindness.

The images speak of hospitality of the heart. It’s a perfect gift when no words can completely express our care and concern. A gift for a friend or one to keep on the nightstand, If I Could Mend Your Heart promises that sunrise truly does follow midnight.

We read to know we are not alone...
DON'T TELL ME TIME HEALS ALL WOUNDS
Emily Long

My daughter, Grace, was stillborn.

One day she was growing and healthy and beautifully alive inside my womb, then without warning she was simply gone.

Her heart beat until it didn’t.

I always wonder what I was doing the moment that her heart stopped and the sweet spirit that was hers left her body – and mine. Was I in the grocery store? Was I sitting in class? Was I sleeping or working or reading? Was I thinking of her dad and missing him?

Shouldn’t I have known the moment that her life faded away and her heart stopped? Shouldn’t my heart have stopped in that precise moment too? I didn’t know. And my heart didn’t stop.

But I broke when I heard those words, “I’m sorry. We can’t find a heartbeat. She is gone.” I broke with those words.

People like to say that grief is healed by time. The assumption is that somehow the passing of time will put all that death and loss and trauma breaks back together again.

It would be nice if time was some kind of magical potion to heal the wounds of grief and loss. I would love to have time be the savior that fixes the devastation and destruction of the death of my daughter.

But time is not magic and it isn’t a savior. Time is simply time.

Healing from the death of a child takes more than time. It is a fight for life – a fight to live and breathe and exist without the precious being whose heart once beat beneath your heart.
In the 14 years since my daughter’s heart stopped beating, I have fought to live. I have fought hard to pick up those broken pieces of myself and create a life full of meaning and joy and beauty and love. I fought a bloody battle with depression and suicide. I waged war with the dark abyss of grief and clawed my way back to the light.

**Every good and beautiful thing in my life now exists because I fought like hell and never gave up.**

I cried the oceans of tears. I raged against the dark and the broken and the utter senselessness of the death of babies. I crawled out of bed and opened the blinds to the sun when depression grabbed at my feet to drag me into the numbing gray.

I chanted her name, Grace, over and over again like a lifeline when the waves of unbearable grief swallowed me whole. I wrote and wrote and wrote all the words I needed to say but couldn’t bring myself to speak. I battled against the guilt and the unanswerable questions that loss leaves behind. I sat in the ruins of the life I expected to have and searched until my hands were bloodied and bruised for meaning and purpose to make life worthwhile again.

I fought like hell to be a mother she would have been proud of. I fought with fierce determination to be a woman she could have aspired to be.

**I fought like a warrior to live and become that woman and mother I am today.**

I am not the only one. Every mother and every father I know who has survived death of their child is a warrior. They have fought the bloody battle against brokenness and grief and loss. They have fought like hell for life and beauty and joy and love. The battle of grief is a fight for love.

**Times doesn’t heal all wounds.**

To belittle the courage and bravery of grieving mothers and fathers by distilling it down to the mere passing of time is insulting.

We fought like warriors to turn those wounds into battle scars – battle scars worn as symbols of a fierce and persistent love for our children and determination to honor life even beyond death.

**Don’t tell me time heals all wounds. Time merely passes. Life is fought for and cherished.**

We fight for life as we fought for and continue to cherish our children – no matter how much time has passed.

Because love is timeless. And it is always worth fighting for.

> "The reality is that we don’t forget, move on, and have closure, but rather we honor, we remember, and incorporate our deceased children and siblings into our lives in a new way. In fact, keeping memories of your loved one alive in your mind and heart is an important part of your healing journey."
> — Harriet Schiff, author of The Bereaved Parent
Love you to the Moon and back

It is the hard days—the days that challenge you to your very core—that will determine who you are. You will be defined not just by what you achieve, but by how you survive.

— SHERYL SANDBERG

save the date!

whispers of hope

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