WHAT BEREAVED PARENTS AND THOSE WHO CARE FOR THEM NEED TO KNOW

By Janet Boxx

“It gets worse before it gets better.” Those were the words the pastor offered to a newly bereaved couple whose daughter had died unexpectedly.

And you should know that he is right. Bereaved parents are stunned when four months, six month, nine months down the road they find their grief remains overwhelmingly raw.

The shock has worn off. Their hearts have been flayed open and the wound is still bleeding.

It doesn’t help that those outside the loss community expect healing to be happening when the magnitude of the loss is still seeping into the soul.

The depth of loss has not been fully realized when the funeral is over. No, in the weeks and months and years ahead bereaved parents are confronted with the realization that they didn’t just lose their child but that they lost the hope, dreams and expectations they held for that child as well. They lost their child’s future, but they also lost their own future expectations (marriages and grand babies, to name a few) and they grieve for both what their child will never experience and what they themselves will miss out on.

Frequently bereaved parents squelch their grief as they try to remain strong for their surviving children. They can’t fall apart because they are so desperately needed by those too young to understand or to express their grief in healthy ways. That’s one reason why the average length of time it takes for parents to work through the grief process averages five years or more – the longest bereavement period of any loss known to man.

My daughter’s grief counselor told her that many teens don’t grieve over lost siblings for four or five years. They experience delayed grief which I think results from trying to be strong for their parents. The entire home is in upheaval. The sense of security that was taken for granted has been exposed for the fallacy that it is. Gone is the naïveté that we can protect those we love from harm. It’s a frightening experience.

It’s truly terrifying.

And parents and siblings are often left dealing with problems that arise in the wake of the death. Financial pressure, legal issues, spiritual, emotional and health problems assault the family. Marriages and family relationships quake in the aftermath.

While the outside world expects healing to begin, bereaved families are often sorting through compounding problems. They are reeling from the fallout and haven’t really begun the healing process.

Bereaved parents and the outside world need to know and understand that grieving the loss of a son or daughter – regardless of their age – is the most devastating and destructive loss experience. Both the bereaved and those who care for them need to anticipate and make accommodations for a long and drawn out grieving process, because it definitely gets exponentially worse before it gets better.
For those who care about the bereaved, grieve with those who grieve. Let go of the expected length of bereavement. Don’t reduce grief to a simple bid for sympathy or pity. And be ever aware that for the grief-stricken feeling bad feels bad, but feeling better feels bad too. It’s a psychological hurdle grieving families frequently face. There is a battle raging within the hearts and minds of loss parents. What they know to be true doesn’t “feel” true and they struggle to reconcile the conflicting messages received from the heart and mind. The solution is not as simple as mind over matter.

People often ask me what to say or do for someone who is grieving. So many times I’ve heard others advice – “just be present and listen.” Both those things are helpful but not necessarily healing. In my experience validating feelings is the single most healing thing you can provide the bereaved.

Grief, for a bereaved parent can be likened to a pressure sore, more commonly known as a bedsore. Pressure sores develop when an individual stays in one position for too long. Unlike other wounds, a pressure sore grows deeper instead of spreading wider as other wounds do. They can be deceptively dangerous because they rapidly eat through layers of flesh below the affected skin to the tendons and the bones beneath if not treated promptly. Treatment involves the painful scraping away of the dead tissue to reach the healthy tissue below. Ointments is applied, the wound is packed and covered and daily cleaning is required to prevent the wound from getting deeper.

Likewise, grief gets worse and deeper when exposed to the pressure of society to project a positive outlook or to work through their grief in the timeframe others deem appropriate. Shaming and silencing the bereaved for failing to heal, wallowing in grief, or throwing a pity party deepens the wound by invalidating the worth of the loved one lost. Venting the negative feelings helps to clear away the infection but refusing to validate those feelings is tantamount to leaving the wound exposed to the dirt and debris floating in the air. The wound gets worse and healing takes longer as the grief-stricken seek the understanding of others.

Validation is the antibiotic ointment applied to promote healing. The presence of “safe friends” (those who don’t criticize or try to fix the broken) is the packing and covering which provides a barrier between the open wound and the influences of the outside world. Frequent validation and affirmation keep the emotional wound clean providing an environment that encourages healing. The bad must be flushed out before the good can replace it. Unfinished grief occurs when we slap a band aid on without cleaning and disinfecting the wound. The wound may no longer be visible to the outside world but is quietly festering beneath the band aid that it covers.

For the bereaved, be gentle and patient with yourself. You’ve been deeply wounded and deep wounds heal slowly. As the old song says, “The road is long with many a winding curve.” Grief isn’t supposed to feel good.

It gets worse before it gets better; but it can and does get better.

PRINCE HARRY... A CASE IN POINT
By Richard Berman, Baltimore BPUSA

Prince Harry’s recent revelation about his private battle with unresolved grief following the death of his mother, Princess Diana, twenty years ago when he was twelve may have taken the world by surprise, but bereaved parents, although dealing with a different type of loss, understand his struggle. Great loss, no matter the form, becomes all encompassing. Our every thought centers on the loss in the early days, weeks and months, after a child or a young parent or anyone else we are close to dies. It is hard to take a breath without focusing on what we’ve lost and what the future will be without them. Shock, depression, anger, guilt and a feeling of wandering about with no aim or direction become our constant unwanted, un-asked for, companions. But help is available if we seek it.

That is the purpose of BEREAVED PARENTS of the USA. Anyone suffering with the unrelenting sadness following their child’s death will find comfort and support at meetings where other bereaved parents share their stories, fears,
hopes, successes and setbacks as they travel the grief highway. We know it works. And although it takes time, I can’t imagine ever reaching a point of inner peace, after our son died, without the ongoing care and interest of the local and national members of this organization.

Unfortunately the British mantra, “keep a stiff upper lip” may sound good in an old WWII movie, but a grieving twelve year old needed help. Now, at last, he’s getting it. Prince Harry understands that unresolved grief does not go away on its own, but festers, often manifesting itself in socially unacceptable fashion. The Prince’s “coming out,” as it were, has taught the world a great lesson: after a loss grieving is not only OK it’s expected. Finding help is imperative. I consider myself lucky that BPUSA was there for me. It is unfortunate that something similar had not been made available to Prince Harry.

HONORING MOTHER NATURE: GREEN THERAPY By Dr. Lynn Migdal
From her book Eternal Love Connections: A mother’s resilient grief journey through sudden multiple loss. (Lynn will be a workshop presenter at our National Gathering Conference in DC)

Recently, I found myself standing over a sea-turtle nest, about thirty feet from the ocean. An expert excavated the sand away from egg fragments containing tiny, fragile loggerhead sea turtles. Each rescue involved lifting a baby turtle or egg out of its deep trench, assessing its needs, and preparing it for a safe journey to the distant Sargasso Sea. I picked up a turtle egg, and it hatched in my hand. I couldn’t explain why I was there. I just knew it was part of my healing process.

Mother Earth took my family. Whenever I am outside being healed by her, I remember to feel, breathe, move, and honor the divine love of my family. Although Mother Nature caused my grief, she is also responsible for my healing and my return to gratitude. I am reminded by her daily that I have a mission of helping her to heal the rest of her children.

As a parent who lost two daughters to a natural disaster, I have often been able to soften my grief by going outside and by being grateful to Mother Nature. Whenever I want a fast and healthy break from grieving my loss, I go outside and instantaneously feel like a lucky winner. At first I thought I was going nuts. “How can my mood and heart feel so much better outside?” I often asked myself. I was always shocked at how fast my mood changed after stepping out of my house!

Is it just me, or do all grievers who have endured loss from natural disasters feel this way? As an expert on trauma and natural healing, I knew that researchers had noted positive change in veterans with PTSD who were encouraged to spend time outside and who were paired with animals, including wolves and horses.

There were no animals in my house, as my dog had passed away three weeks after the mudslide. But when I went outside, I felt relieved of my trauma and stress; I was preventing myself from developing PTSD. The natural colors of Mother Nature calmed and soothed me. Her winds and light breezes cleansed my negativity and always shifted me back to gratitude. Was it her way of saying she was sorry?

Can all traumatized humans benefit from going outside?

For me personally, it is magic for my grief journey. Going outside is a survival technique that works for me, and I hope you will consider it. Mother Nature is there to heal us. We just have to make the decision to go outside, open our eyes, ears, and other senses, and be open to receiving her. If you are lucky enough to add a loving animal to the mix, that is an extra bonus. Trust me; it is not just because of the mudslide that
she has helped me to survive. She is available for all of us. All we have to do is go outside and allow the
healing to take place.

I am so thankful when I am outside. I never judge the weather or temperature in a negative way. One day
when I was trying to figure my life out, I realized that my divine daughters had been taken back by their
real mother. They were and are creative divine beings, just like Mother Nature. Being with her and their
love fills me with the healing emotion of gratitude. Whenever I am choosing gratitude, it is hard for me to
feel sadness. For me, the choice of gratitude soothes the suffering of grief.

LESSONS FROM CHINA

By Richard Berman. BPUSA Baltimore

Some months ago BPUSA was contacted by Dr. Lihong Shi, a professor of
anthropology at Case Western Reserve. She wanted permission to translate some
articles from A Journey Together and forward them to a group of bereaved
parents in Shanghai, China. She came across this group as part of her research
into the cultural effects of the one-child policy. We, of course, were happy to share
our efforts with bereaved parents wherever they live, even the opposite side of the
world, and gave our permission. But that was just the beginning. (To read a letter from the Shanghai Bereaved Parents, see AJT 2017 Winter issue)

Through Professor Shi I started a dialogue with members of the Shanghai group in letters, mostly between
myself and Mr. Wang, the group’s apparent leader. They had many questions about how meetings are
conducted, what topics are discussed and other queries concerning form and substance of a grief support
group. I provided answers that seemed to be helpful, but one question confused me: “We meet, have
outings, even go on trips together, but what do we do now,” he wanted to know? I couldn’t figure out why
he was asking that question. Wasn’t the support within the group helping the members’ progress along the
grief trail, I wondered? And if not, why not? The answer was forthcoming, but in a way I never could have
predicted.

As it happened, my wife, Susan, and I had an opportunity to travel to China so we made arrangements to
meet Mr. and Mrs. Wang and the other members of his group in Shanghai. It is not my intention to turn this
article into a travel log, but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention that seeing China (The Great Wall, The
Forbidden City) was nothing short of amazing and the Chinese people are some of the nicest, most helpful
people we’ve encountered in all our travels.

We arrived at the appointed restaurant with Yan, our interpreter, and met the Wangs and 15 other ‘shidu’
(the Chinese word for loss of one’s only child) parents. There was an incredibly warm reception, shaking
hands, hugs, exchange of gifts and pictures taken with everyone. Our letters had made us friends and this
greeting was old friends re-connecting. We sat at a large round table with a big lazy-susan where bowls
of food (nothing like anything I’d ever seen at my local Wing-Wa carry out) went around and everyone
served themselves (with chopsticks) family style. Mr. Wang began the meeting with a few introductory
welcoming remarks. It was my turn to speak. Drawing on the many group meetings I’ve attended I asked
everyone to introduce themselves, tell me their child’s name and one or two things about their beloved son
or daughter.

I started. “My name is Richard Berman. My son Brad died fourteen years ago. We miss him every day.”
That was all I was expecting from everyone else. I was worried they would find it difficult to limit themselves
to just a few words. I was worried about the wrong thing. We couldn’t get around the circle. These bereaved
parents were unable to even speak their child’s name without bursting into tears. One after another couldn’t do it. Many were so overcome with emotion they waved off their turn. Susan poked me in the ribs and exclaimed, “You made them cry!” I felt terrible. Here I was the ‘great expert’ in parental grief come half way around the world and all I could do is bring misery. It only took a moment, however, until it all became clear and I knew why I had come to Shanghai.

I quickly realized that although these Chinese bereaved parents had been getting together, meeting, traveling and doing activities they hadn’t been talking about their respective loss. They hadn’t been sharing memories of their child or the anguish of how they died. The hadn’t been talking about the guilt, anger, overriding sadness, lack of compassion from family or any of the other emotional pitfalls we encounter on this journey. In short, they hadn’t been doing their grief work. And because of that, even those five or eight years out, had made no progress and were wallowing as if they were still in the early years. I learned that Chinese culture frowns on any mention of the dead. This is especially true if the dead person was young. This taboo, unfortunately, was respected in group, which pretty much nullified any benefit that might have been gained. Now I knew what to do.

I explained that unless they were willing to open up, to talk about their individual loss they could never expect to achieve inner peace. “In group,” I said, “is the only place where it is safe to discuss your feelings, talk about your child and share all the emotional baggage that our child’s death brings. The purpose of the support group is to allow you to give voice to all of this without the disdain of the outside world.” I’m pretty sure they heard me.

In communications since with Mr. Wang, he told me that not everyone is able to shake off the cultural taboo, but enough of the group is willing to try and hopefully they can bring the rest along on the journey. I will continue to correspond with him (Susan writes to Mrs. Wang) and assist or advise as best as I can. We feel confident our purpose in going to China was accomplished. We think Brad would be proud of us.
WHEN SOMEONE ASKED ME QUESTIONS AS A ‘NOT-NEWLY BEREAVED’ PARENT
By Jude Gibbs

Earlier this evening, a gal asked some questions for a group discussion she will be taking part of this week. It stopped me in my tracks momentarily, because quite honestly, I’ve never been asked such questions. Those of us who have traveled this journey for some years seem to be “expected” to have “gotten over it” by now.

Nope. It’s plain and simple grief, and I believe all grief is complicated.

We do move forward on this time, as most things do. outside of grief groups asks me time they learn I have a son who Once I inform them that it was “move on” in the conversation, well if it was that long ago it’s not

Nope. It’s still important to me.

The same gal asked, “What do help/support the not-newly completely blank. I was taken don’t recall ever being asked manner. What do I need in the didn’t know how to respond.

When my brain began to slowly kick back into gear, I said, “I’ve been on this road 18 plus years, longer if you include my four pregnancy losses, the first 48 years ago. I want folks to know I still hurt! I still miss my babies — all of them — who they may have been, could have been. I’m older, getting closer to seeing them soon. But I have noticed something new taking place. The ‘missing’ of them is being replaced with an intense ‘longing’ for them the closer I get to seeing them again. The feeling is similar, but different. I don’t know that one is worse than the other, but different.”

She then proceeded to ask three more questions, “If you were to have the chance to ‘teach’ someone how to support you, what would you say? Would you want them to ask you occasionally how you’re doing in regards to missing your loved ones? Or would you want them to notice when you are mentioning them, and be intentional to ask questions and let you talk/share about them?” Hmmmm, lots to answer here. One — I would want them to validate my grief, not minimize, not ‘diss,’ not making me feel as if I ‘should’ be feeling differently than I do. Simply accept what is, and be a friend. Two — Yes, I would love for someone to ask. I want to know they care, to know they acknowledge the existence of my children. Three — Yes, I want to talk about my child.”

Those of us who are “not-newly bereaved” get lost in the weeds. We have lived with the heartache daily for so long that we become “accustomed” to it in variant degrees. However, we never forget. Not a day goes by when I don’t think of my son. I still have pictures of him hanging on the wall as I do of all my children. He is still my son. He still exists. His time in this world still matters. His life still affects every member of my immediate family. He’s still my other children’s brother. His legacy lives on. I still can picture him smiling in a multitude of settings. I have no desire to have those memories gone. I neither want nor seek a “cure” to my grief. I love my son. Often, with great love comes great sorrow. I embrace the pain.

I will add what I have often told others who are newly-bereaved and fear they will never be able to come up for air. The moments of excruciating pain occur less often over time — the duration of those moments shortens — however, the intensity of the pain can remain constant. So, overall, it does get easier. We eventually do laugh again, though we can feel some unfounded guilt when we first do. We do move forward with our lives and learn to “function” again and be productive. We go on to build new relationships even though we may have to establish some boundaries in which we “pull the weeds to make room for the beautiful flowers.” We don’t leave our deceased children behind — we carry them forward with us.
My heart, and I believe the hearts of most who are not newly bereaved, often break for those who are just beginning this journey. We have traveled the many twists and turns, peeling through the multiple layers of the onion skin, and do know some of the pitfalls. There are days I simply cannot read the great sorrow of the newly bereaved. It opens up Pandora’s Box for me and there are simply times I lack the strength to go there. It’s not that I don’t care, quite the contrary. I care too much. I know there’s no “fixes,” All I have to offer is the hope and comfort I have been given and what has brought me peace. I can help you carry your burden momentarily, but I can’t carry it for you. I believe no one can but God; the only One who truly understands grief and has the strength to carry it.

So, for us “not newly bereaved,” we simply request acknowledgement. We still fight battles, perhaps lost a few along the way, but we have won the war. We’re still here; we have survived.
And you shall, too.

“Sometimes we need to lose the small battles in order to win the war.” ~ Author unknown.

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A TIME AND PLACE FOR BEREAVED SIBLINGS
By Sarah Lyman Kravits

Recently I had a conversation with a group of people I had just met. We were taking a break from our volunteer work for a DCI drum corps on tour this summer, sitting underneath a tent for a few minutes before it was time to serve the next meal from the food truck. Several volunteers planned to attend a future show in this same location, but I told them I could not make it because I’d be out of town. As a matter of fact, I said, I was going to be in Herndon, Virginia that week, serving as the sibling coordinator for the Bereaved Parents of the USA (BPUSA) at their annual gathering conference. After taking a deep breath, I confessed, “I am a bereaved sibling. My brother was killed by a drunk driver. Supporting other bereaved siblings in their grief helps me cope.”

A man sitting next to me looked at me for a moment, and he said, “My brother was killed in a car crash too.” We began to talk further. As with me and my brother, he and his brother were the only two children in the family. If I remember from the conversation, his brother
was 21 when he died, and this man was probably in his 50s, so it had been many years. “I miss him,” he said, “every day.”

When we stood up to get back to work, he turned to me and asked, “Can I give you a hug?” In that moment nothing could have been more welcome. We hugged as though we had known each other for a long time. “Hang in there,” I said. I didn’t see him again that day, but our time together reminded me that I am not alone. I hope it did the same for him.

The loss suffered by bereaved siblings is challenging. Observers may believe it is less painful than other types of loss (this misconception often worsens the pain for devastated siblings and can deprive them of much-needed support). Sibling loss tends to be less visible than other losses, perhaps because bereaved siblings often take on the task of caring for other grieving people around them – their parents, in-laws, and other family members. We bereaved siblings tend to curl up around our grief and keep it close.

Despite these challenges, I am slowly discovering other bereaved siblings in my world. In the months after my brother died, friends and acquaintances came out of the woodwork one by one to let me know of their losses – a brother died of cardiac arrest, a sister fell out of a high chair, a brother was murdered, a sister died of cancer. As siblings revealed their pain and grief to me, I began to feel less alone. I gathered my tribe, or rather my tribe gathered itself, person by person, day by day, and it grows still. I began to keep a list of the bereaved siblings I know, a list with a beginning but no end, a list I know I will continue to add to as long as I live.

What can we bereaved siblings do for one another? How can we let other bereaved siblings know that we are present and ready to listen, that we will set judgment aside? How can we provide hope that they can express emotions honestly and find support and deep understanding? We need a time and place to make these things happen – and next month, that time and place will arrive. On August 4, 5, and 6 at the Hilton Washington Dulles Airport in Herndon, VA, the Bereaved Parents of the USA are holding their annual gathering conference. This year BPUSA is expanding sibling programming in the hopes of offering greater support for bereaved siblings ranging from ages 8 through adult. On workshop days, among the several workshops taking place in each time slot, one will be geared toward the needs and situations of bereaved siblings (in addition to a variety of other workshops on subject matter that serves bereaved siblings in addition to bereaved parents). We will have a sibling hospitality area where siblings can spend their down time and connect informally with other bereaved siblings. We will have sibling sharing sessions on Friday and Saturday nights, and a showing of a film made by a bereaved sibling about the intentional journey she and her parents took to work through their grief over the loss of her sister.

This is a place for you, bereaved sibling, and a time. Will you join us?

Click [this link](#) for the conference home page.

Click [this link](#) to go to registration information. If you are far afield you can stay at the hotel, and if you are local, you can come every day for the programs.

Click [this link](#) for more details about the sibling offerings.

Bereaved siblings, and of course bereaved parents, we welcome you. This time and place is for all of us, separately and together. We all come together in support of one another. We each walk a unique grief path, but we can reach out to one another as we travel, and offer a hand. We hope to see you in Herndon in August.
Thank you for the donation of the wristbands given to all attendees of the Gathering Conference.

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