



A JOURNEY TOGETHER

NATIONAL NEWSLETTER OF THE BEREAVED PARENTS OF THE USA



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We, as bereaved parents, help grieving parents and families rebuild their lives following the death of a child.

Jamie's Tree



It's impossible to know, with any certainty, what experiences we will encounter when we start out on a new journey. This is true whether we are beginning a trek of many miles or launching a mission of discovery into the depths of our souls. When we, unfortunately, find ourselves suddenly forced onto the grief trail we often are unable to recognize all of the signs pointing to future peace and happiness.

Shortly after our son died, we received a call from a local nursery. Turns out a good friend had arranged to have a live tree delivered to us in Jamie's memory. A three foot blue spruce. What kind of a gift was this?! We knew our friend meant well and was trying to help us in our grief. But what a burden it imposed.

She intended that we should plant it at our home. Grieving, as you know, is an exhausting experience. Being asked to deal with that tree felt like an outrageous request. We had no room in our yard for the tree. But of course we could not just throw it away. Luckily we had a cabin on a little lake up north. A few months later we rented a trailer and, with great effort, unspoken grumbling and a few audible complaints to each other, we finally were able to get this tree to our cabin, dig a hole, and plant it.

But now, 14 years later, that blue spruce has grown from a sapling to over twenty feet tall. It is a beautiful tree! We love it. We refer to it as our Jamie tree. Today we are deeply grateful to our friend for her gift. It means so much to us and every time we see it we are reminded of our beautiful son – *and of her caring for us*. Jamie's tree has become a great comfort to us through all the seasons. Early in our grief we would never have believed that a mere tree could bring us so much comfort. But grief changes over time. The sadness softens and we learn to appreciate the beauty that surrounds us. If your grief is still new, try to hold onto any "trees" that come your way. There may come a day when you're glad you kept them.

R & D, Maryland
BP/USA

Halo

The week before Christmas my wife and I were out shopping and stopped for lunch at a local diner. I shoved two quarters into the juke box and selected "Chicken Fried," a tune by my favorite country artist, the Zac Brown Band. Something went wrong and instead what came on was Beyonce's "Halo." Even though Beyonce is a fabulous singer, I've never been a great fan. I was about to complain to the hostess when a couple at the next booth turned to us and said, "We love that song. Isn't she just the best?" We started talking and discovered we had mutual interests. Since then we've gotten together with them several times

and have become good friends. As the old adage says, we "turned lemons into lemonade."

We don't always get what we want, what we paid for or what we deserve. But when we don't that doesn't mean there's nothing left to live for or look forward to. We have to find meaning in the life we now live. Brad's death, ten years ago, left us broken and empty. Even if there was someone to complain to what good would it do.

Fellow travelers on this journey came to our rescue. They taught us the meaning of love and caring. First, they taught us how

to survive and then they helped us find our way back to living. Many of them have become good friends. Now we extend that friendship to others.

I wonder if that "Halo" was a gift from Brad.

Editor





Bereaved Parents of the USA

2013 National Gathering



Lions Gate Hotel & Conference Center
Sacramento, California
July 26-28, 2013

To register visit www.bereavedparentsusa.org/gathering

To reserve your lodging call 866-866-7100

For additional information visit www.sspcc.org

Email to The2013Gathering@gmail.com

or call 916-768-3891 or 916-367-7865

Bringing Golden Nuggets of Hope to families grieving the death of a child.

Join us Thursday evening for a California

Welcome & Bar-B-Q by the Pool

Experience a California-style meet and greet while enjoying a fabulous BBQ dinner and the piano stylings of talented local musician, Warren Davis.

* * * * *

Additional Venues & Activities

Bookstore featuring books by our featured speakers and workshop presenters.

Wings of Hope Boutique with a unique selection of gifts and memorial items.

California Café where you can enjoy a casual snack and an opportunity to visit with friends.

Silent Auction and Raffle with a wide variety of items you'll want to take home with you.

Meals prepared just for us by the Lions Gate Chef and enjoyed with new friends from across the nation.

* * * * *

A Mom Reflects on Attending Her First Bereaved Parent National Gathering

My first Bereaved Parents gathering changed my life! Being around others whose children had died felt completely comfortable. The stories of other parents validated my own feelings, and I began to believe that I was going to be OK again.

When I am feeling down, I remember the 200+ bereaved parents that were there, and I don't feel so alone. Knowing other bereaved parents has added joy to my life and helped me feel that life is worth living again! ~Liz Boenig, "Miles' Mom," College Station, TX

Featured Speakers & Events

Friday Morning Opening Session Featuring
Keynote Speaker Dr. Darcie Sims!

Friday Mid-Day Q&A with our Panel of Professionals:
Dr. Gloria Horsley, Dr. Heidi Horsley, Dr. Doug Jensen, Dr. Bob Baugher, & Dr. Darcie Sims.

Additional featured speakers include
Mitch Carmody, Susan Levy, Daryl Hutson, and Kris Munsch of The Birdhouse Project.

Candle Lighting Ceremony with
Music by Alan Pedersen

Inspirational & Heartwarming Music by the dynamic
Love in Motion Signing Choir

Teen Sibling Program

* * * * *

60+ workshops on these topics and many more

Guilt & Regrets • Anger • Suicide Loss • Sudden Death • Traumatic Loss • Faith & Grief • How to live with a broken heart, • Loss of an infant • How child loss affects family dynamics • Differences in grieving styles, • How a child's death affects grandparents • Issues that complicate our grieving process • Proactive grieving • Finding grief support on the Internet, • Identity crisis after a child's death • When your only child dies • Grief support burnout • Preserving our memories • The Birdhouse Project with Kris Munch • Plus many, many more topics that will interest you!



THE PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Wow, already February. Where did January go? For me I think January went so quick because I was trying so hard to get away from the holidays.

During group in January, the consensus was, "Whew, glad those are over," and then it was "What do we do now?" My answer is always "Breathe and take another step forward." Sounds easy enough, but it takes energy.

This step we each take every day, is different for everyone. We each have had a child die, and we are each walking through it differently. As for me, I think I am doing well. Saying that makes me twinge with a little bit of guilt, I think that is natural. Hearing others tell me that they admire what I am doing now and how well I am doing, makes me also feel that twinge but I am also humbled. I have consciously made a choice to feel better and move forward. I tell myself that my son Greg would want it that way.

Some things I do more easily now, like saying NO, helping others, accepting that the non-bereaved don't get it, but

now I can educate them, and well, I can also have too many irons in the fire on any given day.

Each of us has to make the decision to feel better, to want to feel better. Take that deep breath and step forward.

The winter is here now, but soon the green will come and just like the seasons, you will see the change in yourself. We each can make the choice to walk outside, close your eyes and put your face towards the sun on a frozen winter day and say "I want to feel better." Each day is a gift. There are a lot of gray days still this winter, but I also know there are hot and sunny days right around the corner. Move forward. Do what makes you feel better. Let the sun shine on your face.

Lee Ann Hutson, President BP/USA
Montgomery County, IN

Angel by sascha

Hope is the melancholy angel of grievers,
Elusive and beautiful.
Hope is the light from nowhere,
Telling us that we must reach
For the unknown promise
That waits to be filled,
In a future we do not yet understand.

Not until we are lost do we begin to find ourselves.

Henry David Thoreau

Your absence has gone through me
like thread through a needle. Every-
thing I do is stitched with its color.

W.S. Merwin



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BEREAVED PARENTS OF THE USA

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Being the Mother of a Child Who Died — On Mother's Day

Claire McCarthy, M.D., Pediatrician, Children's Hospital Boston, Harvard Medical School

I am the mother of a child who died. And that makes Mother's Day very hard.

Recently I was talking to a mother whose child had just died. "What about Mother's Day?" she asked, through tears. It was hard to know what to say, because it's a terrible day for those of us who have lost a child. Other days of the year you can maybe make it a few hours without thinking about your loss; other days of the year you can pretend that you are an ordinary person and that life is normal. But not on Mother's Day.

On Mother's Day it's in your face that your child is gone forever. On Mother's Day you can't pretend you are ordinary or that life is normal. All the hoopla, all the Hallmark hype, the handmade cards and flowers and family gatherings, make it almost excruciating.

Our town has a Mother's Day road race for which I am eternally grateful – especially because, in a demonstration of grace's existence, the start and finish are next to the cemetery where my son is buried. On my way I can visit his grave and say what I need to say and look yet again at the name we chose for him carved into stone. At the end of the race, they give all the mothers a flower; on my way home, I go back to the grave and lay my flower there. And then I move forward with the day.

See, that's the real challenge after losing a child: moving forward. It's almost impossible to envision in that moment of loss; how can life continue after something so horrible? But life does continue, whether we like it or not. There are chores to do and bills to pay; morning comes, again and again. So you pick yourself up and you live, but you are never the same. At first, we are different because of our raw sadness. But over time, the sadness moves from our skin into our bones. It becomes less visible, but no less who we are. It changes into a wisdom, one we'd give up in a heartbeat to have our child back. We who have lost children understand life's fragility and beauty. We who have lost children understand that so many things just aren't important. All that is important is those we love. All that is important is each other. Nothing else.

It can feel very lonely, being the parent of a child who died. Especially on Mother's Day or Father's Day. We feel so different from those around us, all those happy people with children the same age our child was, or would have been. But over the years, I've come to understand that I'm not alone at all.

There is a wonderful Buddhist story about a woman whose son gets sick and dies. She goes to the Buddha to ask him to bring her son back to life; I will, he says, if you bring me some mustard seed from the home of a family that has not known loss. She goes from house to house but can find no family that has not lost someone dear to them. She buries her son and goes to the Buddha and says: I understand now.

That is what I understand now. It doesn't make me miss my son any less, or Mother's Day any easier. But it helps me make sense of it; loss is part of life. There are no guarantees, ever. Our children, and all those we love, are gifts to us for however long we have them.

I understand now too that we are together in this, all of us, in joy and in loss. It's the connections we make with each other that matter – it's the connections we make that give life value and help us face each morning. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, "We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty." Years ago, I chose words to say each time I go to my son's grave. It makes it easier to have a ritual. And over the years, the words have come to mean more to me. They aren't just about grief anymore. They are about who I am, what I have learned, and what I can give.

"I will always love you," I say. "And I will always be your mother."



Dear Gym,

I hope you can forgive me for not coming by this week. You know I come to see you almost every day, but I just haven't been feeling myself lately. This happens every year. I start to get moody and irritable; perhaps a little listless and don't feel like doing much. It's funny: I don't need to look at a calendar to know what day is approaching.



I'd really rather be running on your tread mill or taking that pilates or yoga class that always relaxes me; or swimming laps in your pool in my eternal effort to give back those ten pounds Brad gave me when I carried him all those years ago, but I just can't find the energy this week. Next week I know I'll be better. This week, however, I need to let the wave of emotions run over me. I've learned it's better to just let it happen rather than try to fight or hide from its affects. It's been ten years since Brad died, but I can always tell when the anniversary of his death is approaching. (I suspect the people around me can too even if they don't know my story.)

So this week I'll hunker down and only do the basics, the absolute requirements. I'll take out the photo albums and remember my old life. My friend Adele will probably call and insist I go to lunch with her. That's her way of saying she hasn't forgotten. And on THE day I'll go to the cemetery where I will reminisce and cry. And then the week will have passed and I'll get back to living.

So, please forgive me, Gym. I'll be back in a few days along with a little guilt because I didn't do anything special to memorialize the tenth anniversary of his death. Finding enjoyment in living, however, may be the best way to honor my son's memory. I'm always happy after I visit you, Gym, and Brad, I'm sure, would approve. And that will have to be enough.

With love,
Susan Berman,
BP/USA Baltimore, MD

PRACTICAL ADVICE

Remember the Basics When Coping with Loss

When faced with a life challenge or a loss it is helpful to remember the basics. This short list provides healthy coping strategies that are recommended to keep you moving during the first few days/weeks/months.

1. Take it one hour at a time, one day at a time, if need be, one moment at a time.
2. Get enough sleep or at least enough rest.
3. Try and maintain some type of a normal routine.
4. Remember that regular exercise helps relieve stress and tension.
5. Eat a balanced diet. Limit high calorie and junk food. Drink plenty of water.
6. Avoid using alcohol, medications or other drugs in excess or to mask the pain.
7. Do those things and be with those people who comfort, sustain and recharge you.
8. Talk to others, especially those who have lived through and survived similar experiences.
9. Find creative ways – journal, paint, photograph, build, woodwork, quilt, knit, collage or draw – to express intense feelings.
10. Remember coping skills you have used to survive past losses. Draw upon these inner strengths again.



GATHERING THOUGHTS

I cried so, so hard last night. You all know these bittersweet tears we shed remembering what was and contemplating what is now. But I haven't cried like this in many years. I recalled so many losses in my own life including that of my sweet only child, Maria Elena. But I just returned from the Bereaved Parents of the USA Gathering in Tampa, so I also held the grief of many, many more on my heart...yours, too...all of ours. As you know all too well, these times of tears are thoroughly draining. We finally reach the point where we can no longer cry. What's the point? We cannot cry forever. But the experience is cleansing. It is cathartic. Taking part in one of these conferences for bereaved parents is similar. Given the nature of the event, of course it is thoroughly draining, but it is cleansing and cathartic, too.

I had the opportunity to attend the last three National Gatherings – here in Chicago, in Virginia and this past one in Florida. My daughter, Maria Elena, died at the age of fourteen already sixteen years ago. Prior to these gatherings, I hadn't attended but one or two others. I gained much from these gatherings earlier on in my grief and was curious to see what I might learn even after I had come to smile again and yes, even enjoy life again.

I was amazed at how much I was affected by these gatherings. You are surrounded by persons who know firsthand what you are going through. Some have experienced this sooner; some have had more time processing their children moving on. Each person KNOWS. There is no small talk; you cut to the chase and really TALK. You have the opportunity to speak about your child, to share the intimate details of their lives and their deaths. You have the opportunity to be HEARD.

I have come to call this time *spending quality time with our children*. This weekend is set aside expressly for them. The pressures of the job, the phone ringing, the TV blaring, the other children pulling at us are all set aside so we can devote some special time on our other child/children who are no longer physically with us. They deserve this time as we deserve the time with them in this exceptional way. Though you may not realize it, you need the interaction with others in your situation. This nurturing environment brings us a greater understanding and acceptance of where we are in this grief process and where we are going.

You have the opportunity to choose from a multitude of workshops with fine, caring speakers who are bereaved parents themselves. They have many insights to share with you. You may choose four workshops a day, one or none. No pressure. I know of no one who has attended one of these conferences who hasn't left changed in some way for the better. You and your child both deserve this quality time! Please promise yourself the gift of attending the National Gathering in California this year!

Marilyn Cocogliato, Maria Elena's mom
BP/USA Hinsdale, IL

Did You Know They Were Bereaved Parents?

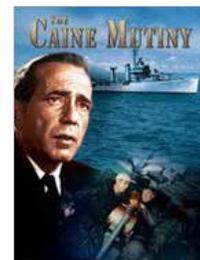


Herman Wouk, author of "The Caine Mutiny," "Marjorie Morning Star," and "Winds of War" is still writing at age 97. His first novel, "Aurora Dawn," was written long hand, between battles, while serving as a Naval officer on a destroyer, during WWII, seeing action in eight Pacific invasions. After the war he continued to write. He met Betty Sarah Brown who became his wife, lifelong partner and assistant until her death after 66 years together.

In 1951 the eldest of their three sons, Abraham (age 5), died in a swimming accident. Somehow Herman mustered the strength to finish "The Caine Mutiny," which he had been working on, reading each chapter out loud to Betty Sarah as he completed it. Perhaps this reading together was their way of taking a respite from the unrelenting grief. Mr. Wouk received the Pulitzer

Prize for this effort and, of course, Humphrey Bogart gave us his unforgettable performance as Captain Queeg. After that Herman returned to work writing many more books and plays.

His latest, "The Lawgiver" an insider's view of writing and producing a Hollywood epic was published last year and he, reportedly, is working on another novel. "Theirs," Wouk wrote of his characters in 'The Lawgiver,' "is a marriage like mine with BSW, decades of happiness 'ever after,' for all the deep grief that was a vein of our fate together." Herman and Betty Sarah Wouk found their way out of crushing grief. They are models for all of us.



A BEER WITH JESUS

Our support group, this month, dealt with whether or not we believe we will see our children again in the afterlife. I think almost all bereaved parents get some comfort out of "knowing" that we will be reunited with our offspring in the hereafter. Since there is not any closure to the grief of child loss to be had here on earth, a post life reunion must be it.

Those of you who read this newsletter regularly will know I have an affinity for country music because it has something to say about real life situations and does so without apology. This winter Thomas Rhett released his latest song "If I Could Have A Beer With Jesus" in which he imagines what he would say to Jesus if he came into the bar and sat with Mr. Rhett for "a couple tall ones." Among the questions he asks are these:

*What happens when life ends?
What's on the other side?
Is mom and daddy alright?*

And then Mr. Rhett, who assumes there is a hereafter, inquires (this, interestingly, is the only request he makes of Jesus):

And if it ain't no trouble tell them I said hi.

Of all the things he could have asked for, the most important was letting his parents know he was thinking about them, loves them. I wonder, if God, by whatever name we call him, were to appear before any of us, if we wouldn't ask for the same thing...to let our precious children know how much we love them, think about them, miss them.

But then, maybe they already know it.

Editor

When You Don't Know What To Say

Harold Ivan Smith
Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2002

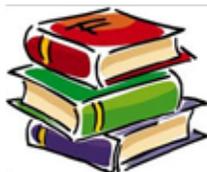
When You Don't Know What To Say is an interesting little book designed to help friends, family and acquaintances of people who have suffered a loss. Using biblical quotes and cultural references H.I. Smith explains the do's and don'ts of how to help the bereaved. He calls these helpers "grief sharers." He provides useful advice on listening and ways to really aid a grieving friend. Some of his quotes and vignettes are "old news" to veterans on this journey, but still ring true. Mr. Smith teaches friends of the bereaved what they need immediately after a loss and what they will need "down the road."

Living When A Loved One Has Died

Earl A. Grollman
Beacon Press, 1995

This is a particularly good and useful book for anyone dealing with the many aspects of grief such as anger, guilt or difficulty moving forward. Rabbi Grollman's words are not meant to be read through as one might with another book, but rather, after reading the sparse words on each page the reader should reflect on their meaning. This effort will help those on the grief journey take stock of where they are, where they're heading and how to get there.

BOOK REVIEWS



When Will I Stop Hurting?

June Cerza Kolf
Baker Books, 2001

Most general grief books written by someone who is not a bereaved parent fall short of helping those who are. That is why I was pleasantly surprised by the breath of coverage June Kolf included in When Will I Stop Hurting? She covers in a concise fashion all the areas we face such as anger, guilt, depression and shock using examples and quotes. She lays out the stages of grief in a more recognizable form than the often ill fitting Kubler-Ross model. Finally, Ms. Kolf offers advice we can use to help us progress through the first months. Insomnia, problems with appetite, facing the pain, taking care of yourself, making decisions, laughter and support are some of the areas she covers. This effort is a short, readable guide for anyone on the grief journey and will be especially helpful to those of us who are newly bereaved.



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BEREAVED PARENTS OF THE USA

CREDO

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.