

A Decade Is A Long Time

Written in Loving Memory of Cortney Michele

A decade. A measure of time that actually has a name...a name because 10 years is a lot of years; a name because it signifies the passage of a lot of time. Married couples mark the milestone with special celebrations and special gifts. Children celebrate with great energy their entry into double digits.

It makes me wonder -- what about bereaved parents? What are we to do with this milestone? How are we to mark the passing of 10 years since our beloved child died?

Because I haven't found any written guidelines on the subject, I've decided to just give in to the experience. I figure I'm going to cross the 10-year marker on my grief journey whether I like it or not, so I may as well just open my eyes and my heart and see and feel whatever there is to be seen and felt. Just like every other part of this journey, there's no way around the dips in the road – I just have to walk through them.

So, for one bereaved mom at the 10-year mark, here's what my experience with this special milestone is stirring in me.

- I find myself reflecting on the past 10 years...reflecting on those first minutes in the late afternoon of July 9, on the first hours, on the first days. Reflecting on all the painful firsts, all of the new realizations. All of the memories that I have struggled to suppress since that horrible day...all of the memories that are once again invading my mind and are transporting me to a place I don't want to be. I find that some of the memories are incredibly vivid and crisp and overwhelmingly painful; others are vague and shapeless and leave me numb again. I find myself reliving the grief experience year by year by year, and thinking about all of the lessons learned.
- This milestone, and the corresponding self-reflection it brings, has re-enforced for me the realization that I'm in a far different place 10 years later, that I have changed and grown, that I am not standing still, that I am not stuck in the mud of deep, incapacitating grief. Some would call this movement progress – I would concur begrudgingly, but I would prefer to call it movement in an uncertain direction. But, I do find comfort in having moved. No longer is my daughter's death front and center 24/7. It's now something less than that. In that, I find comfort.
- Thinking about the past 10 years has made me realize that I have finally acknowledged and succumbed to (I can't yet say "accepted") the fact that Cortney's death left a gaping hole in my heart and in my life that will never ever be filled in the way it was before July 9, 1996. I have integrated that fact into the fabric of my life and I have accommodated it. The edges around the hole aren't as raw and sensitive as they once were, and the hole has been filled in with new and joyful experiences, so it is not as large as it once was. But still, the hole remains, and I have acknowledged and succumbed to my new normal. I have learned to live with the hole, just as amputees learn to live without their limbs. Through the really good times and through the really bad times, and through everything in between, I know that the sense of loss is never very far away and that it will forever color the lens through which I look at life. Sometimes the lens is very dark; other times it is as clear as glass. But it is always there.

- I am so glad that after 10 years I have finally and gratefully realized that the love between my daughter and me could never die and will never even fade. The mother-daughter bond we shared is a forever bond. As Vincent Van Gogh said, “Love is something eternal; the aspect may change, but not the essence.” I know now that I love my daughter as I always have, and as I always will, and I know that’s a love Cortney and I share.
- I’m filling with a sense of dread as the “black anniversary” – particularly this special milestone – draws near. I am resisting making a plan. I just want to sleep deeply through the week before and the week after. I know I will survive it. I also know that I will hate it.
- I’m feeling sorry for my daughter and for me and for everyone who loved her. I’m feeling sorry for all that we have missed these past 10 years – and for all that we will miss in the next 10. I’m granting myself permission to wallow in these feelings for the time that I need, because that’s what I need (lesson learned on the grief journey – don’t be afraid or embarrassed to just surrender sometimes).
- I’m wanting to share this milestone with those who loved my daughter, because I know they feel her loss, too, but I lack the strength to reach out – the possible judgment by just one person is too much to risk, because no, I am NOT over “it” yet. But, I would like to shout from the roof tops – does anyone else remember that is has been 10 years since the day the music died at the Belt’s?

Now that I’ve reached and am about to go past the 10-year marker, what next? Here’s what I see between years 10 and 20. Time will tell.

- I expect that I will still miss my daughter beyond words. I know that I’ll still love my daughter, and that I’ll continue to ponder what would have been, if only there had never been a July 9, 1996. I’ll bring my daughter and my memories of her with me. I’ll find new ways to remember her, and I’ll smile more than I’ll cry at those memories. I’ll live in a way that would make my daughter proud.
- I’ll still be Cortney’s mom and she’ll still be my girl.
- I’ll continue to work on how to give and receive spiritual hugs, especially as I replay images of the physical hugs I was lucky enough to get from my daughter in the 80s and early 90s. I’ll see if I can replicate their warmth and love.
- I’ll search for and will find more “memory nuggets” like the one I have of my last embrace with my daughter. They sustain me.
- I’ll be more open to good times; perhaps I’ll even go looking for some – I can almost hear my daughter singing the line in the song: “Life may not be the party we hoped for...but while we are here, we might as well dance.” I know what she would want me to do. I will try to honor her wishes during the next decade without her.
- My belief will be strengthened in the concept articulated by many, including Emily Dickinson, when she wrote: “And if I go while you’re still here...know that I live on, vibrating to a different measure, behind a thin veil you cannot see through. You will not see me, so you must have faith. I wait for the time when we soar together again, both aware of each other. Until then, live your life to its fullest and, when you need me, just whisper my name in your heart. I will be there.”

I love my Cortney Michele. I wish this milestone were just a dream. A decade is a long time.

— Terre Belt
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