

Hope and Knowledge from the Gathering:

“From a Sibling’s Viewpoint for Parents”

This article is dedicated to Adam, Shawn, John, and Rebecca. They are Brandon and Sarah’s siblings. Our son, Brandon, and his girlfriend, Sarah, died in a car crash on December 28, 2002.

In July, I attended the Bereaved Parents of the USA National Gathering in Las Vegas, Nevada. This article is an attempt to share a small piece of the hope and knowledge gained from just one of the many sessions at the conference.

One session that was very helpful to me was entitled, “From a Sibling’s Viewpoint for Parents.” I have spent countless hours concerned about the impact of Brandon’s death on his brothers, who are now 22 and 16. In this session, Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn shared her personal experience as a bereft sibling and that of others whom she interviewed for her book, The Empty Room: Surviving the Loss of a Brother or Sister at Any Age.

Ms. DeVita-Raeburn was 14 when her older brother, Ted, died at the National Institute of Health in Bethesda, Maryland. He had aplastic anemia and had been in a bubble room for 8 years. She began the session by reading the first chapter of the book which describes the events surrounding the time of her brother’s death. Once I got home from the conference I couldn’t wait to read the book. I read it and recommend the book to parents and teenage or older siblings who are at least 1 or 2 years into their grief journey.

DeVita-Raeburn brings our attention to the fact that there has been very little research done on sibling loss. When she began interviewing for the book she put out a research notice hoping to find others who had done the research. To her surprise research was sparse and most respondents were bereft siblings who wanted to tell her their own story of loss.

Telling their story was one of the three themes that showed up when she interviewed bereft siblings. The comment she heard most frequently from the interviewees was that when their sibling died everyone kept telling them they had to be strong because it was going to be tough on their parents. They felt they were denied the right to grieve. Friends and family tend to forget that the loss happened to the siblings too. Siblings want to be able to tell their story. Once a surviving sibling is ready to work through their grief, they have to go through the act of claiming their story.

The second theme described in the session and in her book was the sibling’s need to redefine their identity. As part of the family structure, each child has their own role in the family. Their sibling was a reflection of them and now that person is gone and they have trouble seeing who they are supposed to be. They feel that they have lost a part of themselves when their sibling dies. It challenges them to redefine who they are.

The third theme she presented was that bereft sibling's feel they have lost a reference point. You see what your sibling does and then you do it too. Now they feel guilt about moving on without their sibling as a frame of reference. They share personal history with their deceased brother or sister and they feel that aspect is now gone. Bereft siblings need to acknowledge the sibling who has died as a part of their life. They are still a part of it just in a different way.

After giving us a peak into the viewpoint of bereft siblings, Elizabeth DeVita-Raeburn gave us some ideas to help parents when talking to their surviving children. She said to make the dead sibling "real". In other words, talk about who they REALLY were, don't make them "God-like". Tell stories about funny or crazy things that they did so that their siblings can listen and relate on a more realistic level. DeVita-Raeburn also points out that it often takes a really long time for siblings to address their grief. For her, she did not start addressing it for at least 10 years. She also warned us to be very careful to try to stay tuned in to our surviving children. Losing a brother or sister to death is a kind of lost innocence. The surviving sibling(s) could be more prone to taking risks, or, just the opposite, could be filled with fear that something could happen to them or other loved ones.

Attending this session and reading the book has helped me in a positive way to begin to understand the plight of my surviving children. It has given me keener awareness of the impact of Brandon's loss on his brothers. It has also given me the courage to have patience as they find the right time and path to work through the loss of their oldest brother.

Peace...
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