

My World Changed

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Prior to becoming a bereaved parent, I thought I had at least a glimpse of what parents whose children have died go through.

I was an emergency room nurse, and the saddest part of my job was to inform parents that their children had died. After delivering that most devastating news, I would sit and cry with them. When I went home at night, I would think about the parents, pray for them and thank God my two little boys were safe and that my family was intact.

Then, on September 11, 1997, I became a bereaved parent! The police informed me that my son, Andrew, had died in an auto accident. My life seemed to stop. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to breathe again without my son, let alone survive

his death. In the days that followed one thing was for sure; I hadn't had even a glimpse about what happens to a person when their child dies.

As I walk this journey of a bereaved parent, I notice that my whole world changed. My beliefs aren't the same. My priorities aren't the same and my future is changed forever. My whole life had been shattered, and I didn't know where to begin

to pick up the pieces or if I even had the will to pick up the pieces. Everyone around me, even though very attentive to me, continued functioning in their lives. I didn't know where I fit in any more. I was alone ... trying to figure out what happened in that split second when they told me Andrew was dead.

There were many things about my new world that I didn't like, and I knew that if I were to survive my son's death, then some things must be changed and it would be up to me to change them.

I noticed that the silence of people who did not mention Andrew's name or his life was deafening to me. There were no stories about him anymore. It felt like "out of sight out of mind." My son had lived; he had been a part of my life. I had dreams for him. He was my future. I was frightened that everyone would forget him, and I needed to hear other people say my Andrew's name. I needed to say his name and to tell stories about him. I could not stand the thought of going through the rest of my life not ever hearing or saying his name again. I knew then that part of my survival was going to involve keeping the memory of my son alive.

I noticed that people removed Andrew's picture and other remembrances of him from their homes, thinking that seeing them was going to upset me, but I needed to know that he was important to other people. Just because he died didn't mean

that memories of him couldn't still exist. As part of my healing, I gave framed pictures of Andrew to family and friends to display in their homes. This let them know I needed to have him around me.

I noticed that people would shy away from me, run down the other aisle of the grocery store rather than chance running into me. I needed more than ever for people to come up to me and give me a big hug. Depending on how I felt that day, I would hunt down those people and show them that talking with me was not going to be a painful experience for them and that being a bereaved parent was not contagious.

I noticed that I struggled with something so simple as not being able to sign a birthday or anniversary card from our family, because to do that, I would have to leave Andrew's name off the card. I had signed his name for twenty-three years and there was no way his name could be left off the cards now. I also knew I needed to continue to write his name or people might forget him. I now sign all cards, "With Love and Memories of Andrew." It's funny, I rarely sent Christmas Cards before Andrew died; now I make sure that I send everyone I know a Christmas card so I can write his name and keep his memory alive. I also notice that people send cards back to me with the same message. It's great!

I noticed that people were uncomfortable about what to say to me, so they would avoid mentioning Andrew's life or death for fear they would remind me of him. They thought they would feel badly if they made me cry, and then "what would they do with me?" It was easier for them not to say anything. What these people didn't know is that they didn't have to remind me of Andrew; I think about Andrew every minute of every day. I will never forget his life or his death. Mentioning Andrew's name only made me feel better. After experiencing a few of these encounters, I knew I had to make people understand that it was okay to talk about Andrew, and that if there were tears, that was okay too. I always thanked people for bringing up Andrew's name and remembering him. If tears came, I would explain that they had not made me cry, and I really appreciated them talking to me about Andrew.

I noticed that when I entered the room at my first bereaved parent meeting, I was surprised to find other parents in that room, some smiling, some laughing, and some making small talk. I thought I was really in the wrong place. It was inconceivable to me that I would ever smile or laugh again, and I assumed they must not have loved their child as much as I did. But once the meeting began, I learned that these parents did love their children as much as I loved Andrew and that maybe someday I would smile and laugh again, too. There was a glimmer of hope that I might survive, and they would lead the way.

I noticed that at those meetings, I learned a lot about my new world from parents who had walked the path before me. They brought to my attention the situations I might encounter, and offered suggestions as to how they had dealt with those

issues. They didn't theorize grief; they lived it everyday and shared their coping skills with the group. They gave me strength and confidence and validated that I was on the right path in keeping the memory of Andrew alive. They were patient with me. I knew I was in a safe place where people understood me. They wanted to help me get better. They knew something I didn't know at the time-that I was going to survive.

I noticed that some people thought that because my son was twenty-three-years old, somehow he wasn't a child anymore. Even though I was his parent, they assumed the grief would not be as intense as if he were a baby or younger child. I'll never forget a seventy-year-old man coming into the emergency room, dead on arrival, after a heart attack. I was told his mom was on her way to the ER. When his frail, ninety-year-old mom entered the room, she screamed out, "My baby, my baby." She sobbed; she hugged him; she held and rocked him. She kissed him all the while saying, "My baby, my baby." I learned that night that it doesn't matter how old your child was, because the parent-child relationship never ends. That night her baby died. The night Andrew died was the night my baby died. Our children are our children forever.

I noticed that I didn't know what to say when people asked me, "How many children do you have?" This causes me great anxiety when it comes up in a conversation. I answer that I have two boys, and most of the time that is sufficient. If the conversation requires more information, I tell them that my eldest son, Andrew, was a mechanical engineer and he died in an auto accident. My younger son, Elliott, is alive and well and is a graphic designer. I tell them about Andrew, not so they can feel sorry for me, but because I will always be his mom; he will always be my child, and I cannot deny he lived.

I noticed that people compared my loss to their own losses: father dying, grandmother dying and I even had one person compare my loss to their dog dying. I know these people didn't have any intention of hurting me. They were just trying to relate to the worst experience they ever had with death, but I needed to let them know that my father had died, my grandmother and grandfather died, some friends, my aunts & uncles and even my dogs have died. My Andrew's death was like no other experience I have had with death. My life didn't stop with all the other deaths as it did when Andrew died. Even though I grieved the other deaths, they didn't hit the core of my existence the way Andrew's death did. My heart didn't ache every minute of every day of every year, as it has since Andrew died. I would have given my life to let Andrew live, but I wasn't given that choice.

I noticed that the old family traditions at Christmastime, Andrew's birthday and other holidays needed to be changed to include something that kept Andrew's memory alive. We started new traditions. At Christmas I give everyone an ornament that reminds me of Andrew and his life. Friends and family give me Christmas ornaments to hang on our new "Andrew tree" that reminds them of

Andrew. We continue to gather on his birthday to celebrate his life. It's not about the ornament, the tree, or his birthday. It's about family and friends taking the time to remember Andrew, to say his name, to let me hear his name, to tell me a funny story they remember. It means so much to me and it has allowed me to continue to survive.

I noticed that even though it's been eight years, Andrew continues to live in the lives of others. What I love most is when my nieces say, "Aunt Sharon, I felt Andrew all around me today, or I heard his song and remembered when..., or when my nephew, comes into the house with a new friend and asks, "Where are the pictures of Andrew; I want to introduce him to my friend." When the little guys say, "I needed to get to first base last week and I asked Andrew to help me, and I made it." Or, when friends send me cards or mementos on his angel date or on his birthday. I will forever need to know that Andrew has not been forgotten. These little mentions of his name let me know that I will survive.

I noticed that after a year or two, people were expecting the "old" Sharon back. They wanted me to move on, to go on with my life, to be happy and to try to forget my son's death. I guess they read one of those psychology or medical books that give bereaved parents one year to recover. I know now, that the writers of those books never consulted a bereaved parent. Society doesn't understand or seem to want to give us the time it takes to get better. I let people know that I was working very hard on my recovery. I didn't want pity; I was not attention-seeking or a martyr. I wanted more than they did to feel like my old self again. I wanted the intense pain to stop. I hated where I was in my life and I hated feeling that bad.

I let them know that I had heard that as the years pass, the pain gets softer and the tears flow less, but I will never fully recover. I will always miss Andrew. I will always grieve his death. He will always be a part of my life and I will never forget him.

My wish for all parents and families whose children have died is that they will find peace and know that their child is with them and will never be forgotten.