

The Roller Coaster Ride — Nine Years and Counting

Nine years. It seems like a life time – it seems like yesterday. A life time since I held you in my arms. Yesterday, when I let the still intense pain of your death wash over me.

There are “grief triggers” everywhere this time of year. They’re impossible to avoid. The fireworks, the hot muggy days, the beach, the crabs, the picnics, the family gatherings. The black anniversary of your passing...the hopeful celebration of your birthday.

Nine years. One hundred eight months. Three thousand two hundred eighty five days. This never-ending grief journey has been quite the roller coaster ride!

In the beginning – and only the passage of a lot of time has allowed me to observe that there was a beginning that is far different than the present -- GRIEF had control of the ride; I was merely an unwilling passenger.

A passenger who felt totally out of control. The “grief triggers” then were frequent, unexpected, and debilitating. The constant, unwanted replaying of the most horrible day of my life and the days after made me question my very sanity. The incessant but necessary rediscovering of your death day after day literally brought me to my knees time and again. The forever unfulfilled need I had to care for you left me feeling mostly empty and guilty.

EVERYTHING was different. Most of life seemed like an out-of-body experience. No more shopping. No more make-up. No radio. Only sports on TV. No reading of novels. No hurrying anywhere. No thinking ahead, no more planning. No parties. No giggling. No idle chatter. Only new restaurants. Many fewer friends. Lots and lots of tears. Overwhelming feelings of guilt, isolation, and loneliness. All the “first’s” without you.

And then somewhere along one of the extended straight stretches of the roller coaster ride, I somehow summoned the strength to force GRIEF to give up the controls of the ride. And, while I will never be able to get off the ride, I more often than not have my hands on the controls these days. I’m actually learning how to incorporate your death into my life.

I don’t have to let go. I don’t have to move on. I don’t have to have closure. I just have to remain on the ride, stay in control as much as I can, and find meaning in the ride.

Grief books have helped. They have provided affirmation, reassurance, and hope. A local bereaved parents’ support group has served as an incredible force, drawing me through death to life again. My family has walked beside me, has held me up, and has allowed me to hold them up. My friends have given much and expected little.

I have learned that I have to walk through the pain and feel all of it, that I cannot walk around it. I am no longer embarrassed by my tears, and I have finally found the strength to do what I need to do to live. I am looking for and finding reasons to get up every morning.

Including you in a meaningful way in all that I can – from holiday gift giving to birthday celebrations to story telling -- has also helped me to cope. I was forced to say good-bye to your physical body, but I will never bury your memory or my love for you.

I’m also finding comfort in “seeing” you in everything beautiful. I take you everywhere...to the ocean to listen to the waves pounding on the shore and to the peaceful quiet of the deep woods. You are always with me, as I hold you in my heart. Sandy Goodman captured it well:

When the sun sits down on the mountains
And the clouds turn purple and pink
And golden rays send fingers out to touch me,
I stop breathing and inhale with my heart.
Because I know that along those glittering strands of light
Lies my connection to you.

So, birthday girl, you can see that it has been quite the ride these past nine years. I have come to accept that we will never share the life I dreamed of, but I also have come to know that you are very much alive to me and very much a part of me. Ours was an incredible bond to break, and I hope that you can still feel the depth of my never-ending love for you. Once your mother, always your mother.

Here’s hoping there are fireworks for your birthday. As always, please hug Traci. I love and miss her dearly, too. Happy 26th Cortney Michele. I’ll be looking skyward on your birthday.

— Terre Belt
Bereaved Mother
BPUSA/Anne Arundel County Chapter
Annapolis, Maryland
August 2005