

## **A Mother's Journey Through Grief**

My life was changed forever on October 6, 1983. I became the mother of a beautiful and healthy baby girl. The daughter I had always wanted was finally here ~ a real joy in my life. Then on July 21, 1985, my joy and my life were shattered by the sudden unexplained death of my 21-month-old daughter, Kristen. Thus, beginning my journey through grief as a bereaved mother.

Over the years I have read many books on grief in order to understand my feelings and thoughts and to discover what I needed to do in order to survive this tragedy. Even though there are many authors that I agree with as far as explaining the grief process and what is necessary to work through grief, I found two authors especially helpful ~ Dr. Alan Wolfelt and Dr. J. William Worden.

From all of my reading, I found that the grief process in many books was divided into anywhere from 3-12 phases or stages. At first I felt overwhelmed thinking that I would never get through 12 phases. Even though Wolfelt's 'Dimensions' combine many aspects of the 12 phases, having just three seemed to be more clear and manageable in my mind. Explaining grief in terms of dimensions seems to also allow for overlapping and regression of responses. Stages or phases, to me, implies more of a linear or ordered progression, which we all know is definitely not the case.

In this article, I would like to describe how the "Evasion, Encounter and Reconciliation Dimensions" (1) were (and are) a part of my own grief journey, as well as how Worden's "The Four Tasks of Mourning" (2) influenced my grief work. These writings helped clarify for me what the grief process was and wasn't and what was necessary for me to do in my own time and way in the hope of becoming a healthy survivor of child loss.

I have attempted to condense my thoughts as much as possible, as difficult as that is considering I am usually a 'lengthy' writer! What is described below is an abbreviated version of some of my journey so far and certainly not all-inclusive.

### **Evasion • • • Task I, To Accept the Reality of the Loss**

When the Doctor told us that Kristen had died, I intellectually knew that it was true, but my heart/mind connection wasn't so accepting and rational. My insides were in a knot and I kept telling myself "I can't believe this is happening!"

I made it through the wake and funeral knowing exactly who was there and what we did, but totally engulfed in numbing disbelief. On the outside, I appeared to be so much in control that people kept telling me that I was so strong, and my mother even asked me what sedative the Doctor gave me to keep me so calm. It wasn't a matter of being strong or being sedated (which I wasn't) ~ I was running on automatic ~ but my past coping strategy of 'keeping my cool' on the outside

was seriously being challenged by my feelings of shock and disbelief and PAIN on the inside.

I never really flatly denied that Kristen died, but I had overwhelming feelings of disbelief. I guess it was my way of allowing my body to slow down in order to give me time to take in all that was happening.

Looking back on the first few months and years, I can't pinpoint when I actually acknowledged/'accepted' the reality of Kristen's death. I think to some degree, many aspects of grief are not totally reconciled or resolved and this may be one of them. I firmly believe that for the rest of my life I'll be saying "I can't believe this really happened."

A child's death is so incomprehensible and UNACCEPTABLE, that expecting to totally 'accept' the loss is unrealistic in my eyes. People say it all the time, "You HAVE to accept this and get on with your life." Yes, there is a point of moving forward in one's grief and in one's life, but I don't believe that I will ever 'accept' my daughter's death. 'Accept' is a TOTALLY UNACCEPTABLE WORD for me! I acknowledge and understand that she is gone from this earth, but I don't 'accept' that it's okay she's gone!

### **Encounter • • • Task II, To Work Through to the Pain of Grief**

Even though I had experienced previous losses in my life (my dad died when I was three), there was nothing that could have prepared me for the intensity of emotions after Kristen's death. Tears well-up in my eyes as I recall the indescribable gut-wrenching pain. I couldn't eat or sleep for several days, just lots of crying. I was very restless, but I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was on a fast treadmill with no OFF switch, but I felt I was moving in slow motion. In other words, I was not myself and I felt I was 'going crazy.'

Three weeks after Kristen's death, my husband and I attended a Compassionate Friends (CF) meeting. We knew no one who had experienced this type of loss, so we wanted to meet others to reassure ourselves that we weren't really going crazy. Support groups may not be for everyone, but CF was a lifeline for us. We were allowed to 'tell our story' and express our feelings and thoughts freely. Family and friends acknowledged my right to grieve, but after awhile some of them started to assess what 'stage' I was in and became impatient with my 'long' mourning time (You've heard many say "It's been a year, get over it!"). Fortunately it was only 1-2 people that tried to pull me along to where I didn't want to be.

When you suffer a tragic loss, everything may seem totally out-of-control. I wasn't going to let someone control my grief. I was going to own it and do it my way. Once my feelings were known on this topic, those few people somewhat understood that I wouldn't be pulled to where I wasn't ready to go. My timeline

was not going to be rushed because of their uncomfortableness with the intense emotions of grief.

Some of the other emotions I felt included ~ searching/yearning, emptiness, sadness, despair, fear, confusion and anger. My yearning for Kristen was so intense that I would cry and scream out in anguish for her. My heart felt like it was ripped out whole and hot poker were thrusting through my entire body. It left me with such a sense of complete emptiness, utter sadness and despair. I thought I was going to spend the rest of my life in this agony. It was impossible for me to see past my immediate pain to a future with less pain. It just wasn't possible.

Even though it looked like I was in control of things, going about my usual tasks, my mind was in a state of fear and confusion. We didn't know for sure what Kristen died from until one year later. Until that time we were afraid that if we had another child, tragedy might strike again.

Being in this situation in the first place really made me angry. I didn't want to be a bereaved parent! My anger was manifested as constant irritability. For example, I couldn't stand waiting at a stoplight. I'd yell at the driver in front of me for no reason at all. Well, actually I had a reason, but it had nothing to do with the driver!

Tremendous loving support from my husband, family and friends helped me (and still do) become aware of and deal with my emotional roller coaster. I was experiencing emotions I never knew existed at such high intensity. Fortunately, I tried everyday to acknowledge, target and release those emotions instead of stuffing them, which can have some severe ramifications. It didn't always work, but I TRIED!

### **Reconciliation • • • Task III, To Adjust to an Environment in Which the Deceased is Missing and Task IV, To Emotionally Relocate the Deceased and Move on With Life**

This was and is the most difficult aspect of my journey. Hanging onto Kristen's image in my mind was imperative. I was not going to let that go. I wasn't going to settle for a memory. I wanted to touch her, smell her, kiss her and tell her I loved her one more time. Again, I can't pinpoint when my physical image of Kristen moved to my memory. It was a very gradual and reluctant process of running her life and death over and over in my mind.

Kristen was our only child, so when she died, I had difficulty adjusting to an empty home. I no longer had a child to care for 24 hours each day. Everywhere I looked I saw her, but I couldn't touch her. I even questioned whether I was a mother anymore, especially when I didn't receive Mother's Day cards that first year. My new identity as a bereaved mother was not one I wanted to own!

Because I was a full-time mom, some felt it might be best for me to return to teaching Physical Education in order to keep me busy. Dan and I thought long and hard and mutually agreed to continue our family despite still not knowing what Kristen died from. Some may have thought another child would be a replacement child, but in our hearts NO CHILD will ever take Kristen's place ~ each child that we would be blessed with in the future would be their OWN PERSON!

During this time I continued reading books on grief, exercising to release energy and anger and attending CF meetings. Over the course of time, I was slowly 'moving away' from Kristen, which then brought up some guilt. I guess I didn't want her to think I was giving up on her by relegating her to memory. This grief business was really getting to me!

Over the next 2-3 years, with the addition of our two boys, my journey had its ups and downs. Having Kevin and Brian was bittersweet ~ accentuating the reality that Kristen wasn't here. With Kevin's birth, there was a tremendous upsurge of grief when we discovered he had the same rare metabolic deficiency (MCAD) that went undetected in Kristen. She was positively diagnosed by testing saved liver tissue soon after Kevin was diagnosed. The "what if's" were flying everywhere. How different our lives would be "if only..." Until Kevin's birth, I thought I was moving along okay. The regression was unsettling and disheartening.

Dealing with Kevin's medical situation was stressful early on and involved grief work in its own way, but over the years I have learned to cope by using past strategies of reading, exercising, networking with other families in the same situation, and presently I am back in graduate school.

Soon after Kristen's death I began thinking about how I could help others during such a tragic time in their lives. My plans were put on hold while having Kevin and Brian and while making a major move to Greensboro from my/our home in Champaign, Illinois (another major loss for me). My anger about the move has since been channeled into pursuing a master's degree in counseling.

It was such a sense of release or inner peace once my decision was made. I freed myself to be open to new relationships, which I have been establishing at home, school and at hospice. At the same time, I felt a little more comfortable than before about physically 'letting go' (that's another word I take great exception to!) of Kristen. I know she'll be in my heart forever, and no one can take that away!

It may sound as if my grief journey is completed. In reality, however, my journey will be a lifelong one while Kristen 'grows up' in my mind. Birthdays and holidays are especially difficult. As I mentioned earlier, some aspects of my grief may

never be totally reconciled, but through my love for my daughter, I will not only survive ~ I will move beyond survival!

## **"Our Hearts Give Immortality To Those We Love In Memory"**

### **Suggestions for caregivers working with bereaved parents ~**

- Be with us and allow us to 'tell our story' no matter how many years go by
- Be there for us, listening and being non-judgemental, when others have heard enough
- Help us understand that grief is WORK ~ it won't go away by just thinking about it, we need to be proactive and not passive ~ move toward and into our grief instead of running away and hiding from it
- Help us, in our own time and way, explore our unique journey and encourage the expression of our thoughts and feelings, religious beliefs, search for meaning, etc.
- Normalize and validate our grief
- Allow us to be where we are instead of pulling us along to where you think we SHOULD be
- Be prepared for intense emotions ~ don't take them personally
- Encourage us to attend bereaved parent support groups and networking with others
- Offer hope for healing and survival ~ reconciliation doesn't mean we will never experience grief, again, but that we will move toward healing and moving on with our lives as changed persons
- Be aware of 'complicated' grief and refer to other professionals when necessary
- Take time for yourself ~ working with us takes lots of energy
- Be gentle with yourself, as far as expectations go ~ your role is not to take our pain away nor to fix us ~ BE WITH US!

Deb Lee Gould, July 1991

[This was the very first article I wrote after forming the MCAD Family Support Group in 1991 (along with my husband, Dan) and also returning to graduate school in Counseling. This article (revised) was written for a grief counseling newsletter and was printed in the Sept./Oct. and Nov./Dec. 1991, issues of the Transition Center's The Caregiver Newsletter, Greensboro, NC.]

### **References and Permissions to Reprint**

1) Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Clinical Psychologist and Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition in Fort Collins, CO. Author of a variety of books on grief such as ***Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy*** (Accelerated Development, Inc., 1988) and ***Helping Children Cope with Grief*** (Accelerated Development Inc., 1983). **"Dimensions of Grief"** in ***Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy***, Accelerated Development Inc., 1983, reproduced with the permission of, and written by Dr.

Alan Wolfelt, Director, Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Rd, Fort Collins, CO 80526, Companion Press (970) 226-6050.

2) Dr. J. William Worden, Clinical Psychologist and Co-Director of the Harvard Child Bereavement Study. Author of a variety of books on grief such as ***Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*** (Springer Publishing, 2nd Edition, 1991) and ***Children and Grief: When a Parent Dies*** (The Guilford Press, 1996). "***The Four Tasks of Mourning***" is "used by permission." ***Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy***, Dr. J. William Worden. Springer Publishing Company, Inc., New York 10012, 2nd Edition, Copyright ©1991, pp 10-18.