

Grief 'Reconciliation' ~ Releasing Ourselves from Self-limiting Identities

What does it mean to be bereaved? When I was unexpectedly thrust into the role of bereaved parent, I had no model from which to draw from. At first, and for a long time, **I thought and felt that I was destined to be forever sad, to have no more joy in my life, and to never be complete or whole again.** That 'mask of survivor' was upon me ~ looking 'okay' on the outside, yet experiencing unending turbulence on the inside. Swirling chaos was an accurate description of my feelings and experiences as a newly bereaved parent. (Note: That feeling is still applicable today in varying degrees, especially around birthdays, anniversaries, etc ~ what I call '**residual grief reality**').

My either/or thinking and overgeneralizations were two factors involved in the shaping of my bereaved parent 'identity.' I told myself "if I was sad now, I would always be sad. if I was strong now and outwardly positive, I would always have to be strong with a smile on my face. and if someone saw me when I wasn't strong, I not only failed myself, but I failed in the eyes of my family and friends."

I felt my choices for reacting/responding to my daughter's death were limited ~ not only limited, but inevitable. Life was going to be a horrendous chore and it was a matter of sheer survival. I was, in varying degrees, 'stuck' in my self-limiting identity for 4 long years. It wasn't until I reached bottom (for me, that meant constantly being angry at myself and others, which detrimentally affected my relationships) that **I realized I really did have the freedom to make other choices in how I would deal with Kristen's life and death.** I did not have to continue my masked and passively 'self-destructive' journey.

Without really realizing it, my initial coping responses were primarily grounded in my personal and religious beliefs/values, my past loss experiences, and societal expectations. At the time, I did not comprehend how all of those (and several other factors) influenced my identity. I also didn't understand the part they played in my getting 'stuck' and in the difficult task of learning to 'reinvest' in life. I wanted to hold onto the way life used to be even though my life, and my family's life, was changed forever. Despite outwardly appearing 'normal,' my energies were frozen in the past and I was unsure of how, when, and to what degree to unleash them and then to steer them positively toward the future.

When I came to the realization that **I really did have a choice in how I would cope, I made the conscious decision to 'move beyond mere survival.'** It was at that moment that I released myself from my strong, yet somewhat passive, survivor identity for one that was, and is, more proactive and creative. By expanding my narrowed vision of a future filled with sadness, my potential for living with joy again was reawakened and enhanced. That doesn't mean my pain has disappeared, however. Instead of always silently and inwardly experiencing

the pain, I am now outwardly channeling that pain into something positive and constructive. At the same time, **it allows me to continue to love my daughter in a different, yet still intimate, way.**

Kristen's death 7 years ago made me reprioritize what's important in my life. Yet, it wasn't until 3 years ago that I made the decision to activate those priorities. In other words, I finally chose to 'walk my talk' and I had a say in how I was going to do that.

I once read that life is not just a series of stimulus's and responses ~ it's how we use that space between the S & R that impacts our growth and happiness. While grieving a loved one's death, it is extremely difficult to believe that you have any choice in how to cope or that you could ever visualize a happy and healthy future without your loved one. Yet, in time and with **much** grief work, a mere fleck of light breaking through your darkened tunnel may give you the hope and the motivation to free and to mobilize your swirling energies. For me, **that light was the realization that I had the freedom and responsibility to keep my daughter's memory alive, as well as to keep myself alive. No one else was going to do that for me. Working through and with the pain of grief, I chose to create a new identity for myself ~ one that I could live with and be proud of, and one that is greatly influenced and fueled by my love for my daughter.**

Over the last several years, I have come to believe that when working through grief issues, we do have the freedom to make and to change individual choices. **When we give ourselves permission to do so, we are capable of utilizing our unique keys in unlocking our potential for living with joy again** and for sharing our reawakened lives with those willing to accept and nourish our new identity and with those we care for and love.

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