

I've Looked At Grief From Both Sides Now

In the summer of 2003, my husband of sixteen years, whom I had known since childhood, died in a sudden, tragic accident. In an instant, my life and those of my children were forever changed. I was not only dealing with the emotional devastation of my husband's death, but with the reality of being thrust into the role of a single mother of two young children. When I was most in need of support, I heard about the Bereavement Center of Westchester. Two months after my husband's death, my eight year old son and I became participants in the Tree House program. My daughter who was a baby at the time, began a few years later when she was five years old.

Not everyone is able to sit with a person in great pain and listen to him talk about death. I think the temptation many people have, especially when talking to children is to cheer them up, to make it all better, to change the subject. At the Tree House, nobody changes the subject. My children were able to express their feelings, and share memories of their father in a safe place. They met other children who had lost a parent and saw that they were not alone. The adult group gave me the opportunity to meet other grieving parents, and talk about how the person's death touched different aspects of our lives. In addition to grieving ourselves, we were parents of grieving children. With the help of our facilitators, we discussed how best to support our children through their grief, while we struggled with the daunting task of being single parents. Or more precisely "only parents".

After my husband died, I wondered if life would always be so agonizingly painful. I remember hearing that in time, you develop a "new normal", a changed life that becomes your new life. I understood the concept intellectually and found it intriguing at the time, yet I didn't know how I would ever get there. For my family, there have been many changes, including a move to a different community, new friends and new ways of looking at life. Birthdays, holidays and other milestones continue to be difficult. There are moments when out of nowhere, something triggers intense sadness, "grief-bursts" as they are called. But my day to day life has a new rhythm to it and there is joy in my life again. Time does change things. THIS is my new normal.

Five years after my husband died, I walk through the same doors I once walked, this time as a facilitator. It is a bit surreal being back in the same place in such a different role. I look out at the families as they gather in the cafeteria before the groups begin. There are families with children of all ages; some playing, others looking serious, stoic, or afraid. Some have tears in their eyes and great pain on their faces. The rawness of emotion in the room is palpable. I can feel and relate to their pain. I was there five years ago. At the same time, I realize I am in a very different place than I was. The words of Nelson Mandela come to mind: "There is nothing like returning to a place that remains unchanged, to find the ways in which you yourself have altered."

Having been on both sides of this process, I see how powerful and healing "just listening" can be. I am awed by the resilience shown in the face of a process that is both arduous and full of stops and starts. To me, the magic of grief work lies in the ability to empathize and be with a person in great pain, while still conveying a sense of hope for the future. This is a subtle and delicate dance. When I think back to where I was, and to the level of support and caring I received during the worst years of my life, tears of gratitude fill my eyes. The people at the Bereavement Center of Westchester were a lifeline, at a time when I needed them most. Now I am on this side of the Tree House, and hope to give back some of what I received to the families with whom I am working. I am humbled by the task... I know I can't fix it. Grief isn't something that can be gotten over, cured or fixed. Now that I am on this side of the Tree House, I work hard to be fully present to those with whom I am working. To meet them where they are as I walk beside them on their grief journeys.

By Monique Daniel