

Child Loss

By Linda Kornblau Arrick

I have been a volunteer facilitator in the Treehouse program at the BCW since 1999. I've worked primarily with groups of adults who have experienced the loss of a spouse/partner. But in the fall of 2008, I agreed to facilitate a Child Loss group.

When a child dies, parents are left with a pain so deep and so visceral that one can't imagine there will ever be a moment's relief, no less any measurable amount of healing. The death, and its resultant grief, leaves wide swaths of profound sadness, anger, anxiety, guilt, emptiness, and paralysis that cover the individuals and families left behind. Anyone who has had a friend or family member lose a child, understands how it is sometimes unbearable to watch these parents in their grief. Perhaps we are moved to continue to offer support because we are aware that their grief far outweighs what we, as witnesses, experience. And so it was for me as I sat in a room trying to walk beside these parents who had just lost the most precious piece of life.

I have been a Pediatric Nurse Practitioner for over 20 years. Part of what enables people in the medical profession to maintain their careers over decades is learning how to take in the awful things we see and hear about, allowing an empathic and appropriate response, and yet, somehow, protecting ourselves from the effects of those events or stories.

And so week after week during the Fall of 2008, I took in heart-wrenching stories of children who had died. I listened as mothers and fathers spoke about the ramifications of child loss: broken down relationships, disoriented days, sleepless nights, blame, guilt, worries for surviving children, questions of faith, concerns about depression and anxiety, coping with upcoming holidays and "anniversaries," visiting graves, toys that stayed on shelves, clothes that still smelled of sweetness. I teared up many times in our meetings. I went home each night with a sense of connection, I thought about these people

and their lives through my week. But I maintained a “therapeutic distance” to protect my heart from the pain and sadness.

Then Thanksgiving Day came and I went out for a walk by myself. I thought about past Thanksgivings and I remembered the one in 1981 that took place two weeks after the death of my daughter. I had buried her in Copenhagen Denmark and, when flying back to the States, imagined placing her spirit in my heart so that I could have her with me always. All my professional distance couldn't prevent the onslaught of grief, and memories as I walked through the woods. I had, with emotional strength and out of a need to move forward with my life, walled off access to the most difficult of feelings and memories. But the words and feelings of the men and women in the child loss group found their way down some narrow little conduit straight to my heart where my own visceral pain still lived as raw and real as the day it was born.

There was something wonderful in feeling that connection to my daughter again. Newly bereaved parents vacillate between a fear that the pain will never end and a fear that the pain will end. We can't imagine living in such grief but we can't imagine letting it go... because then where will our child be? We don't ever let go. We find ways to keep them close in the lives we go on to live.