

## Transforming Parental Grief Through Spiritual Connections

A few years after the sudden death of our daughter, Kristen, from an undiagnosed metabolic disorder, I was going about some tasks when I was once again reminded that when some feel uncomfortable about the topic of death, they say or do amazingly insensitive things. I happened to be writing a check at the store when the cashier noticed Kristen's picture in my wallet. She proceeded to ask how old she was and I stated that she would have been 5-years-old but she had died at 21 months. She quickly responded "Better at 21 months than 21 years."

I was astounded at such a cold matter-of-fact statement and her judging the significance and intensity of my loss based on my child's years of life. Instead of lashing out with a reciprocal rude comment, I composed myself and decided to make it a teachable moment. Looking straight into her eyes, I calmly said, **"There is no good age for a child to die,"** and proceeded to hand her my check and left.

She was stunned and had a "What did she just say" look on her face! I'll never know if she 'got it' but at least I can say I told her MY truth. If I wasn't so upset, I would have stayed to discuss more with her, but I was so appalled that she flippantly assessed my loss by the number of months Kristen lived. I felt the need to not only confront her ignorance but to stand up for my daughter – her life, death and spirit had immense meaning for ME, as well as my husband and family, no matter how brief her time on earth. And NO ONE was going to tell me that I possibly couldn't have had a relationship or deep connection with her that was worth grieving and mourning because she was JUST 21-months-old!

Only you as a parent can ever know the personal and spiritual bond you have with your child. Your enduring connection will help you work through your grief after a miscarriage, stillbirth, or any other child loss, despite no longer having the physical presence of your child. Yes, there are differences in texture of each parent's grief depending on various factors, but the fact remains...you are still a parent even when society may tell you otherwise.

Unfortunately, dismissing, quantifying, minimizing, or judging one loss is more difficult than another happens all the time with many types of loss. Our society directly and indirectly perpetuates much of this attitude so that even parents may not believe their unborn child is REALLY a child because he/she never took a breath outside the womb. I believe as more fully understand the loss and grief process and how it is unique and personal for everyone, that attitude will hopefully change over time. However, it's probably going to take many more assertive and proactive teachable moments for that to happen.

It has always been my belief that a loss is a loss is a loss...if it's significant to **YOU**, then it's an important and valid loss that will need to be acknowledged, grieved,

worked through from the inside out, and integrated into your life cognitively, emotionally, spiritually, behaviorally, and socially.

Even though these types of loss (i.e., miscarriage, stillbirth etc) are often called 'disenfranchised losses' (Doka, 2002), they have an impact on your life in the present and in the future, and even more so if your grief goes underground and is not grieved. Of course, if you don't believe there is a need to grieve a miscarriage etc., then as Oprah would say, "This article is not for you." However, my hope is that some of these comments will shine a new light on child loss for you and open your mind and heart to explore what the pregnancy, life and death of your child truly means/meant to you. No article or book on grief can tell you that...only you can discover what this all means to you.

Oftentimes, there is some variance between how each parent works toward 'holistically healing their fractured heart' (Gould, 1995). For instance, one may be more emotionally engaged and the other more cognitively focused when dealing with sadness, guilt, anger, etc (Doka and Martin, 2010). And through that coping filter, each will have their own perspective on the unborn child's life, death and their relationship to that child (i.e., mom physically carries and deliveries the baby, dad may or may not have been very involved in the pregnancy etc). Understanding that everyone grieves differently and along varying timelines is vital. Yet, the Processes of Mourning (Rando, 1993) and the Tasks of Mourning (Worden, 2008) will always be there...waiting for you to take action. Grief is definitely not a passive process or a one-time event. It will take a lot of work to move you toward a new kind of normal and a reconciliation with your loss. We all have the wisdom within us to heal...we just need to find our own way to access that wisdom and utilize it.

No matter when in the cycle of life you experience a child's death (i.e., miscarriage or in adulthood), it ultimately comes down to a choice: Do you lie down and give up or do you rise up embracing your own God-given light with your child's light to see you through the grief process and to draw strength from your spiritual connection to fuel you toward healing and becoming whom you were meant to be. Not dealing with your grief doesn't mean it will magically go away. It's a proactive choice to actualize and animate your process...one that you ultimately will be grateful you made.

If you're presently in the midst of your own grief, you may not see or feel that right now. But finding a non-judgmental family member, friend, clergy or someone else that will give you the space and time to give voice to your grief and explore ways you wish to maintain your spiritual connection to their child and celebrate their life will facilitate your process. However, you may feel that you don't even have enough memories to process, especially with a miscarriage or stillbirth...yet you can capture the memory of when you first learned you were to become parents, or when you felt the 1<sup>st</sup> stirrings or kick, or discussing names etc. There ARE memories for you to hang onto and cherish and it is those memories that will help you begin to rebuild your life. KNOW that your child is held in the arms of your other loved ones that

have died and weave that healing balm around and through your heart until it is your time to join your child in the future. Draw upon the lights and love of the past to be in the present and move forward with your life with greater meaning and purpose. It will be up to you to create that meaning and then animate it.

There is transformative power in embracing your individual grief process...and weaving your spiritual connection with your child within that will move you toward healing. Allow yourself to:

- Be open to the healing power of grace, divine synchronicity and 'love messages' (Gould, 1995) from your child.
- Be open to doing your own grief process despite how others THINK you should do it.
- Be open to finding family, friends, clergy, support groups or others that allow you to be YOU and to share your grief, even in the midst of their own uncomfortableness.
- Be open to being vulnerable and give yourself permission to not only grieve, but to 'heal' in your own time and your own way.
- Be open to finding YOUR way of celebrating your child's life and spirit symbolically or in other ways and bring that passion and compassion to your present and future relationships and connections.
- Be open to understanding that our idea of time on earth is not the same as divine and eternal time.
- Be open to rededicating your life and career by finding your passion or mission that that will help celebrate your child's spirit.
- Be open to a life of love, caring, mindfulness and peace - for yourself, your family, community and globally...all fueled by love for your child.

Helen Keller once said something to the effect of 'the most beautiful things in the world cannot be seen or touched but only felt by the heart.' Loss of an unborn child is very much like that. You may never have held your child in your arms or possibly for just a few short hours, but your heart has been touched and blessed forever...remember that special and unique connection and it will help move you beyond surviving your child's death to living again with faith, hope and love.

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## **References**

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