

# PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd



Dear Compassionate Friends:

A recent program on the Dr. Phil show featured a young couple who had suffered the unimaginable tragedy of losing three babies: a miscarriage, a stillbirth and a very young baby who had died from a heart defect. They were reeling from shock and unable to comfort each other in their grief. Each felt they had failed to protect their children, and the mother was very angry with her husband for “not grieving right”. The father was frozen in his grief; he was unable to share and express his grief and internalized all his feelings.

Although I didn’t agree with everything Dr. Phil counseled them to do, he did say several important things. No one ever teaches you to grieve and everyone grieves differently. It seems that many times you and your spouse are at different places in your grief and different levels of being able to function. In addition, society seems to encourage women to express their feelings and emotions, but discourages men from doing so. A father who has suffered the loss of his child will often be asked “how’s your wife doing? Never “how are you doing?”

My own poor husband felt he couldn’t express his grief and pain when Aaron died. He felt like he had to “be strong” for me and it was months before he finally shared how very much pain he was in. I felt like a terrible wife; I had let him down by not realizing how much he was hurting too. I told him that I was his friend as well as his wife and he needed me to be there for him as well.

In the past, men were considered the material providers for their families, and often not the nurturers and emotional caretakers. I’m really glad this is changing, because daddies are so important in the life of a child.

Sometimes it is not easy for men to share their feelings and emotions. Many men want to “fix” the problem. They perceive that talking about a problem that cannot be fixed is a waste of time and energy. Although my husband has always been very supportive of our Compassionate Friends support group and appreciated how much it helped me, he was unable to attend. He said the amount of the pain he could feel from the others in the group was just overwhelming. It was more helpful for him to talk to a close friend or a personal counselor, but he was unable to begin to heal until he could share that pain and forgive himself for being “unable to save” Aaron. He thought daddies are heroes and daddies can “fix anything” and they are! There are just some things in life you cannot control and that cannot be fixed. It doesn’t make you any less a hero.

One of the pieces of advice I disagreed with Dr. Phil on was that he counseled the parents to go on with their lives and not hold onto the babies that had died-that their little boy was looking down from Heaven and was sad they were not getting on with their lives. It had not been very long since they had lost their last baby, and I thought he was being unrealistic with the timetable of grief. Dr. Phil does not realize that when you lose your child you also grieve the loss of your future with your child, and all the memories that you would have shared in that future. The feeling from losing your future with three little ones is incomprehensible. Your broken heart will go on and will be mended with time, but it will never be the same. Your surviving children become even more precious, but your heart and arms still ache with the loss of the one no longer there.

I was very surprised and disappointed that Dr. Phil did not refer these parents to The Compassionate Friends or another support group for the loss of a child. Those of us who are further along the path of healing know that when you grieve the loss of a child you suffer at each milestone that child would have had: each birthday, when they would have gone to school, when they would have had their first date, and of course, the anniversary date of their death. We know that it helps so much to be able to share your feelings and memories with someone who has been there and understands because they have been there and survived! Our Friends understand the “shoulda, woulda, couldas”. They understand our feelings, no matter how bizarre we think they may be. Our Friends know you cannot “hurry” grief-each person has his or her own timetable. Our friends know that our feelings are our feelings-it doesn’t matter whether someone else thinks they are good or bad. We get to feel our feelings and our Friends don’t judge us. Our Friends don’t push us to “get back to normal” like sometimes well-meaning others try to do. Our Friends understand we have a new “normal” now and it may take a while to get there.

Be gentle with yourself and those who grieve with you. Be patient with yourself. Don’t try to stifle your grief or hurry it along. Acknowledge the emotions and feelings you have and give yourself permission to be angry OR happy. Be understanding with others who “don’t get it”. Most of the time they mean well and want to help-they care about you and want to help you heal.

Be aware of your family’s pain. They may not want to share their feelings or emotions-they may just need to know you know they are hurting, and you are there for a hug and support. It is very healing to cry together. It is so healing to know “we are in this together” and “I am there for you in good times and bad”.

I wish you comfort and healing in knowing you are not alone. You don’t have to travel this path of grief all by yourself. Reach out to those who care and share your pain. Sometimes there are no words, but a hug can transcend words.

In friendship,

*Nadine*