

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd



Dear Compassionate Friends:

Recently a close friend and I had a discussion regarding how to comfort a friend who is going through a rough period in her grieving. Her daughter would have graduated from high school this year and just a couple of weeks later celebrated her birthday. This close friend has always been exceptionally sensitive to the grief of parents who have lost children, as she has gone through our family's grief (her son and our Aaron were the same age), and we have had three other co-workers and Friends who have also lost children. Despite being so close to the grief of bereaved parents so many times, she said she still struggles with how to comfort these parents. She asked if you mentioned those children's birthdays, anniversary dates or loving memories to that Friend, and risk upsetting them and making them cry, or just not saying anything but letting them know you understand they are going through a tough time and be as supportive as possible.

I told her it is kind of a "no-win" situation, because it hurts either way. It hurts to remember those birthdays and anniversary dates, but for me, not saying anything about my child is infinitely more painful than mentioning him. I find because Aaron died so young (age 5) and it was so long ago, the people who do remember Aaron are especially precious to me. I still may get choked up and cry if you talk about him, but what a precious gift to share those memories! I still get Christmas cards and notes from doctors and nurses who worked with us at the hospital in Minneapolis, and that shows me they thought our Aaron was special also. Staying in touch after all these years is a thoughtfulness I truly appreciate.

My Friend going through a rough period right now handles it differently. She is a private person, and prefers the co-workers at her job not know what she is going through. I sent her a email letting her know I was thinking about her, and I wished her daughter a Happy Birthday up to Heaven. She wrote back that she is thankful to have such good friends who remember those dates.

Going back to the discussion with my caring friend, I guess the way to handle these situations is to approach the grieving person with caring, offer support and let them set the "tone" of how they want your support. Don't be afraid of tears. Tears are a release of emotional pain and can be healing tears. If the grieving person reacts with anger, back off, but don't take it personally. They may not be in a place where they can accept support, or they are angry they are in this situation to begin with.

Don't say "I know how you feel!" Even if you are a bereaved parent yourself and lost your child in the exact same circumstances and at the exact same age, you may have had a completely different relationship with your child and they may be at a different stage in their grief.

Don't say "they are in a better place!" Even if our heads know this is true, our hearts and arms ache with the loss of our child. It doesn't matter how old our child was, how they died or the circumstances of their death, the fact that they died before us means they died too soon, and our hearts are broken.

Don't say "You're so strong-I just couldn't live if my child died!" What are you saying-that you love your child more than I loved mine? It hurts like crazy to go on living with this pain, but my husband and other children needed me too. We are stronger than we think, but it is an ongoing struggle to stay strong.

Do say "I'm so sorry". Sometimes a hug or handshake and these kind words mean more than anything else. If you knew the child and have a story that indicates how special that child was to you, write it down and send it to the family on the child's birthday, anniversary date or just sometime in the future.

Do remember birthdays, anniversary dates and holidays. Bereaved parents' lives have forever changed, and sometimes it is hard when everyone else goes back to their "normal" lives after two weeks and expect that you will do the same.

Do realize that we are not the same person. We are grieving and forever changed. Please try to understand when we forget things, cry for no apparent reason, react with anger to a completely innocent remark or other odd behavior. I sometimes think that we should be given nametags and bumper stickers that say "Please be patient with me-I'm grieving".

Do understand our grief from losing our child is different than other loss. No parent should ever outlive their child. We are grieving not only the physical loss of our child, but the loss of future memories and the grief of feeling we let our child down by failing to protect him or keep him safe.

It is ironic that the task of educating others about our grief and how to comfort us falls to us. I remember several occasions when people asked how many children I had. I shared that I have three boys, but Aaron now lives in Heaven. They would get tears in their eyes and I ended up comforting them!

I also believe that God sometimes puts us in places to seek out and comfort other Friends. I can't tell you how many times I have struck up conversation with a stranger to find they were bereaved parents as well. It was very healing to share stories of our children. The Bible says "Blessed are those that mourn, for they shall be comforted". It was truly a blessing and brought great comfort to meet and share with those Friends.

I wish you the light of comfort and healing during those dark times of deep grief, and the strength to reach out to others to help heal yourself.

In friendship,

Nadine