

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd

Dear Compassionate Friends:

Have you ever heard a beautiful song or read a great book and thought “Wow! I could have written that!” or “how did she know what I was thinking?” because the songwriter’s lyrics express your feelings so well?

I often felt that, especially at first, on my journey of grief. Shania Twain co-wrote a song called “It Only Hurts When I Breathe” a few years ago, and I was struck how a bereaved parent could have written the lyrics. The singer is responding to someone asking her how she is doing and she answers she is doing just fine:

“Since you’ve been gone, I’m doing fine now, I’ve finally moved on. It’s not so bad, I’m not too sad. It only hurts when I’m breathing, my heart only breaks when it’s beating and my dreams only die when I’m sleeping”, so, she holds her breath and doesn’t sleep.

Sound familiar? I remember another Compassionate Friend sharing that her heart physically hurt so much when her daughter died she often caught herself looking down to see if her chest was still intact-surely her poor heart had been ripped right out of her chest.

So many of us have to put our “brave-I’m all right” face on to face the world within a very short time after our child or sibling dies. Our grief is so very different than grieving the loss of any other, even the death of a spouse. The acceptable society standard of grieving for two weeks or a month for those losses simply is not even close to grieving the loss of a child. I explain it to others as we lose the loss of our future memories with our children, as well as past memories. We strive to learn whether we still have our identity. The dynamics of your entire family change. Our family routines and schedules revolved completely around how Aaron was feeling that day. If we planned a family outing we had to be home by a certain time to start his dialysis and evening medications. He had to eat on a very rigid schedule so his blood sugar would remain stable. Aaron was unable physically to do a lot of activities, and we spent a lot of time reading, playing video games or just rocking and watching TV. After he died I felt lost and no longer knew who I was. “Am I still Aaron’s mom? Do I still have two children?”

Before we despair that we will never feel any better, please be comforted in knowing it DOES get a little better as time goes on. The pain becomes less intense, you will have “good” times more often than bad, and you can learn to live with the pain of a broken heart. I don’t recommend holding your breath so it doesn’t hurt, but it helps to remember to breathe. When we are stressed or upset we have a tendency to take short, shallow breaths (panting). This does not give us enough oxygen and creates more stress for your body. Instead, close your eyes and breathe deeply through your nose and release that breath through your mouth. This helps bring more oxygen to your blood and tissues and helps you focus and relax. Breathe in and out, take each moment as it comes and start over again each new day.

If you are not able to sleep, keep a journal or notebook beside your bed and write down your thoughts and feelings. It often helps to express those thoughts and feelings, even if those thoughts are directed only to you on paper. Go to a Compassionate Friends website and find a chat room. I guarantee you will have company! Some bereaved people have the opposite problem-they would like to pull the covers over their heads and sleep forever to blot out the pain, and hopefully to dream of their child. This is usually not a practical solution, because usually we have other members of our family who still need us. It can take a tremendous amount of energy to just get up, shower and face the day, but try to make the effort.

It comes down to taking care of you physically and just taking it one day at a time, even moment to moment. You will survive this. It hurts more than you can imagine, but you can get through it, with the help of those who love you and loved your child and the caring and support of your Compassionate Friends. Attend a Compassionate Friends meeting, or two or three. The topic for one meeting may not necessarily relate to you, but the next month might. It can be enormously healing just to be with others who are also on the path to healing and who understand your pain. I used to marvel that some of the Friends who had lost their children several years previously had survived and seemed to be able to function! I wanted to know how they did it, how they managed to navigate each day without falling apart or completely losing it. It was so comforting to share my feelings, no matter how crazy they seemed, with people who understood and listened (sometimes even nodding in agreement!) without turning away or becoming so uncomfortable with my pain.

Remember you are not alone on this journey to healing. Reach out to others for help. Accept offers of help from those who love you. Allow yourself to cry, to scream, to rage at the universe-this is not fair and you don’t have to “accept” it. Learn to live with the pain, learn to accept your feelings-good and bad; learn to honor your child’s life by living your own. I wish you comfort and healing, and the strength to begin that journey to healing.

In friendship,

Nadine