

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd

Dear Compassionate Friends:

The leaves are falling, the air is crisp and cold and the days are getting shorter. Autumn is here and the holidays are fast approaching. If your grief is making you want to go to bed and hide until January, you are not alone. There is a tremendous amount of emphasis put on family, happy get-togethers and giving thanks for our blessings and each other at this time of year; but this time of year can be very difficult for grieving people. We are struggling with the loss of our child or sibling and just are not feeling very thankful. We may be feeling isolated, lonely and that no one understands why we are just not up for a big family celebration.

Are you dreading your family's holiday traditions and feeling overwhelmed with your "to-do" list? Are you feeling resentful that others are joyfully looking forward to traveling out of town to family celebrations and eagerly anticipating their children coming home for college breaks and Thanksgiving vacation and Christmas vacation? You may be feeling you will never be thankful, never be joyful and never anticipate anything again. You may feel you certainly aren't very thankful for any blessings!

No matter where you are or where you travel there is still an empty chair where your child should be. No matter how many loving family members and friends gather around you there is an empty spot where your child belongs. For many years it hurt so much whenever someone would remark "I have to take a picture while we are all here", because not all of us were there. My child and a huge piece of my heart were missing. I loved seeing my nieces and nephews and my other children playing together and getting to know each other, but my other child should have been there. Now some of my pain consists of wondering what his wife would have been like and whether I would have had any grandchildren, as my siblings do. I wonder what kind of man he would be, whether he would have gone to college and what kind of career he would have chosen. The loss of these "future" memories is just as real as the memories we have of the short life he lived.

Aaron's birthday is November 9 and his anniversary date is November 10. The additional pain of having his birthday and anniversary date so near the holidays creates additional sadness and longing. It used to seem a constant heartache from Halloween, Aaron's birthday, anniversary, Thanksgiving and then Christmas-three very long months! I struggled to hold it together for my family, especially my other children. I wanted them to have happy holiday memories of their childhood, especially because Luke had been so young when Aaron died and Chase was not even born. So we have always gone trick or treating, always had a Christmas tree, always had family dinners, always participated in the church and school Christmas programs and always have celebrated Aaron's birthday with cake and balloons.

I got through the family celebrations and dinners with the trick we all know and do. You paste a smile on your face, pretend to participate and act happy to be there. You stay strong and detached so you don't cry, and everyone else pretends that you are not pretending. Somehow, you function on this "auto-pilot". This trick works well, at least while you are in the "shock" and "denial" phases of grief; not so well when you are in the "anger" phase. The anger phase requires different coping mechanisms.

If you are in the anger phase, now you may be angry that no one brings up your child's name or brings up memories of him. They very likely are completely unaware that this hurts far worse than speaking about your child and making you cry. Losing your child is the "elephant in the room"-the ultimate taboo. So how do you deal with it? Bring up your child's name, share a memory. Often this will break the ice and make others more comfortable with sharing precious memories of your child and even how much they miss him. If bringing up your child's name is too uncomfortable for you or the gathering you are attending, take home your feelings. Journal them, share them with your significant other or call a Compassionate Friend, spiritual advisor or counselor. You can cry, swear and rage all you want to your journal, to a Friend, counselor or an understanding spouse. There are no good or bad feelings-they are your feelings, and you get to feel however you wish. Working through all the phases of your feelings helps to begin healing your grief. There are many books and personal testimonies about grief, but in the end it is a personal journey. No one can grieve for you or tell you exactly how to grieve.

Now if hibernation for three months is an actual option for you and it works, do it. If it is not an actual option (for most of us), cope in the best way you know how (other than staying heavily medicated). That is not such a healthy option, and the grief will still be there waiting for you to deal with. In the next couple of months the newsletter, the Compassionate Friends chapter meetings and several special memorial services will help you cope with your grief at this time of year. I encourage you to participate in as many as you feel able. You are not alone, and you don't have to walk this path alone.

In friendship,

Nadine