

PONDERINGS ALONG THE PATH

By Nadine Boyd

Dear Compassionate Friends:

Grief has certain milestones, along with any other journey in our lives. The most obvious of those milestones are the first few anniversaries of your child or sibling's birthday or date of death, of course. We certainly expect that holidays like Christmas, Thanksgiving and Easter will also be tough to get through. You might be getting along and coping pretty well, thinking you made it through those big ones, and then something completely unexpected comes along, and you are right back to step one. Maybe this year your child would have gone to kindergarten, or lost his first tooth, or began talking or walking. Maybe this year your child would have gone to college or attended his first prom. Maybe this year your child or sibling would have gone through Driver's Ed, gotten his first job or bought his first car.

Grieving the loss of a child or sibling is so different than losing another loved one, say, a grandparent, because you also mourn the loss of future memories, not just past memories. In addition to the loss of the future memories mentioned above, my son Aaron died the day after his fifth birthday, and I was so fearful with my other children when they became five that something would happen to them also. Other Friends have shared that their other children often went through tough grieving times when those children reached a new stage of development, and almost had to "relive" and work through their grief before they could go higher developmentally. Even my youngest son, who was not even born when Aaron died, went through times when he asked a lot of questions about Aaron, and how much he wished he would have known him.

I guess the best way to get through grief is to be aware that there will be unexpected milestones. You may get through them with just a little twinge of the heartstrings, but there may be times you are "kicked in the gut". It takes time, but time really does help heal the pain. You can live with a hole in your heart. In time the really bad times will be less often, and there will be more time in between. Learning ways to cope and reaching out to others who have "been there, done that" helps a great deal.

I would also like to give credit and recognition this month to some other very special people in a child's life-grandparents. Grandparents serve a special and unique role in a child's life because they offer an unconditional love to their grandchild. Grandparents usually have more free time to spend with their grandchild and are not caught up in the discipline and rigid schedules their parents must maintain to keep the family structure going. Most grandparents I know are completely convinced their grandchild is the smartest, cutest and best child(ren) that ever lived. This unconditional love is such a gift to a child and contributes so much to their self-esteem and confidence. However, this unconditional love can be a double-edged sword with the loss of a child, because not only does the grandparent grieve the loss of their dear grandchild, but must see the suffering and pain of their own child and try to comfort their own child the best they can, in addition to dealing with their own grief and loss.

One way to cope with this love and grief within a family is to keep the memories of your child alive, either through stories (verbal or written) and pictures. Another is to remember special anniversary dates with cards and celebrations-perhaps with a birthday cake, balloons on that child's gravesite, special family dinner, or the like. A word of caution, however; not everyone grieves the same way or on the same timeline, so it is important to communicate with family members how you wish to honor your child's birthday or other special date so that if someone is not up to a celebration and chooses not to participate there are no feelings of being "left out" or not included.

Several friends and family members who lost a sibling when they were growing up have mentioned that pictures and other memories of their sibling were put away and the family never spoke of that child. They felt it was so important to allow the siblings to speak about that child and share pictures and memories to help the family heal. They expressed admiration at our decision to leave Aaron's pictures, Christmas stocking, etc. up. I told them even though Aaron lives in Heaven now he still is and always will be part of our family, and it felt wrong to take down his pictures or not put up his Christmas stocking. This year we will have another anniversary to remember, another empty chair and empty Christmas stocking. It will be a year October 16 that my husband and my children's dad passed away. He is still very much part of our lives and always will be, and we feel his absence greatly.

I wish you comfort and healing as the milestones come along. Remember you are not alone on this journey to healing. Remember to take the time to grieve and share memories with others who love your child or sibling. It hurts so much, especially at first, but can be so freeing and helps lessen the pain of your loneliness.

In friendship,

Nadine