



Journey to Healing

A Newsletter for Survivors of Suicide

First Quarter 2016

7 Things I've Learned Since the Loss of My Child

by Angela Miller

Child loss is a loss like no other. One often misunderstood by many. If you love a bereaved parent or know someone who does, remember that even his or her “good” days are harder than you could ever imagine. Compassion and love, not advice, are needed. If you'd like an inside look into why the loss of a child is a grief that lasts a lifetime, here is what I've learned in my seven years of trekking through the unimaginable.



1). Love never dies.

There will never come a day, hour, minute or second I stop loving or thinking about my son. Just as parents of living children unconditionally love their children always and forever, so do bereaved parents. I want to say and hear his name just the same as non-bereaved parents do. I want to speak about my deceased children as normally and naturally as you speak of your living ones. I love my child just as much as you love yours– the only difference is mine lives in heaven and talking about him is unfortunately quite taboo in our culture. I hope to change that. Our culture isn't so great about hearing about children gone too soon, but that doesn't stop me from saying my son's name and

sharing his love and light everywhere I go. Just because it might make you uncomfortable, doesn't make him matter any less. My son's life was cut irreversibly short, but his love lives on forever.

2). Bereaved parents share an unspeakable bond.

In my seven years navigating the world as a bereaved parent, I am continually struck by the power of the bond between bereaved parents. Strangers become kindred's in mere seconds– a look, a glance, a knowing of the heart connects us, even if we've never met before. No matter our circumstances, who we are, or how different we are, there is no greater bond than the connection between parents who understand the agony of enduring the death of a child. It's a pain we suffer for a lifetime, and unfortunately only those who have walked the path of child loss understand the depth and breadth of both the pain and the love we carry.

3). I will grieve for a lifetime.

Period. The end. There is no "moving on," or "[getting over it.](#)" There is no bow, no fix, and no solution to my heartache. There is no end to the ways I will grieve and for how long I will grieve. There is no glue for my broken heart, no elixir for my pain, no going back in time. For as long as I breathe, I will grieve and ache and love my son with all my heart and soul. There will never come a time where I won't think about who my son would be, what he would look like, and how he would be woven perfectly into the tapestry of my family. I wish people could understand that grief lasts forever because love lasts forever; that the loss of a child is not one finite event, it is a continuous loss that unfolds minute by minute over the course of a lifetime. Every missed birthday, holiday, milestone– should-be back-to-school school years and graduations; weddings that will never be; grandchildren that should have been but will never be born– an entire generation of people are irrevocably altered *forever*. This is why grief lasts forever. The ripple effect lasts forever. The bleeding never stops.

4). It's a club I can never leave, but is filled with the most shining souls I've ever known.

This crappy club called child loss is a club I never wanted to join, and one I can never leave, yet is filled with some of the best people I've ever known. And yet we all wish we could jump ship– that we could have met another way– *any* other way but *this*. Alas, these shining souls are the most beautiful, compassionate, grounded, loving, movers, shakers and healers I have ever had the honor of knowing. They are life-changers, game-changers, relentless survivors and thrivers. Warrior moms and dads who redefine the word brave.

Every day loss parents move mountains in honor of their children gone too soon. They start movements, change laws, and spearhead crusades of tireless activism. Why? In the hope that even just one parent could be spared from joining *the club*. If you've ever wondered who some of the greatest world changers are, hang out with a few bereaved parents and watch how they live, see what they do in a day, a week, a lifetime. Watch how they alchemize their grief into a force to be reckoned with, watch how they turn tragedy into transformation, loss into legacy.

Love is the most powerful force on earth, and the love between a bereaved parent and his/her child is a life-force to behold. Get to know a bereaved parent. You'll be thankful you did.

5). The empty chair/room/space never becomes less empty.

Empty chair, empty room, and empty space in every family picture. Empty, vacant, forever gone for this lifetime. Empty spaces that should be full, everywhere we go. There is and will always be a missing space in our lives, our families, and a forever-hole-in-our's-hearts. Time does not make the space less empty. Neither do platitudes, clichés or well-wishes for us to "move on," or "stop dwelling," from well-intentioned friends or family. Nothing does. No matter how you look at it, empty is still empty. Missing is still missing. Gone is still gone. The problem is nothing can fill it. Minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day, month after month, year after heartbreaking year the empty space remains.

The empty space of our missing child(ren) lasts a lifetime. And so we rightfully miss them forever. Help us by holding the space of that truth for us.

6). No matter how long it's been, holidays never become easier without my son.

Never, ever. Have you ever wondered why *every* holiday season is like torture for a bereaved parent? Even if it's been 5, 10, or 25 years later? It's because they really, truly are. Imagine if you had to live every holiday without one or more of your precious children. Imagine how that might feel for you. It would be easier to lose an arm, a leg or two— *anything*— than to live without your flesh and blood, without the beat of your heart. Almost anything would be easier than living without one of more of your precious children. That is why holidays are *always and forever* hard for bereaved parents. Don't wonder why or even try to understand. Know you don't have to understand in order to be a supportive presence. Consider supporting and loving some bereaved parents this holiday season. It will be the best gift you could ever give them.

7). *Because I know deep sorrow, I also know unspeakable joy.*

Though I will grieve the death of my son forever and then some, it does not mean my life is lacking happiness and joy. Quite the contrary, in fact, though it took awhile to get there. It is not either/or, it's both/and. My life is more rich now. I live from a deeper place. I love deeper still. Because I grieve I also know a joy like no other. The joy I experience now is far deeper and more intense than the joy I experienced before my loss. Such is the alchemy of grief.

Because I've clawed my way from the depth of unimaginable pain, suffering and sorrow, again and again— when the joy comes, however and whenever it does— it is a joy that reverberates through every pore of my skin and every bone in my body. I feel all of it, deeply: the love, the grief, the joy, the pain. I embrace and thank every morsel of it. My life now is more rich and vibrant and full, not despite my loss, but *because* of it. In grief there are gifts, sometimes many. These gifts don't in any way make it all "worth" it, but I am grateful beyond words for each and every gift that comes my way. I bow my head to each one and say *thank you, thank you, thank you*. Because there is nothing— and I mean absolutely *nothing*— I take for granted. Living life in this way gives me greater joy than I've ever known possible.

I have my son to thank for that. Being his mom is the best gift I've ever been given. Even death can't take that away.

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A Gentle Reminder:

Losing a loved one through suicide is an especially devastating loss. The loved ones left behind (survivors) have a difficult array of emotions to overcome on their journey of grief. There are many reasons for this.

First of all, the death is usually unexpected and sudden, even if the person had been talking about suicide in the past. The method is often violent and it is difficult for survivors to think about their loved one inflicting this violence on themselves. Unfortunately, suicide carries a stigma in our society; friends and family members are at a loss for knowing what to say.

For many people, losing a loved one to suicide causes a feeling of abandonment thinking, "My loved one chose to leave me!" All of these issues are difficult to deal with during the grieving process. Fortunately, the Greenville area has a self-help/support group called "Survivors of Suicide" for family members and friends of persons who have completed suicide. This free and confidential group is sponsored by Mental Health America of Greenville County.

Groups meet on the first and third Tuesday of each month at 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. If a family is too fragile to attend group, we will work with them to meet privately to gently guide them into the group. Additionally, CRISISline is available 24/7 at 864-271-8888 and a call-back can be returned by a survivor as close to the type of death you have experienced. **In the event of inclement weather, please always check mhagc.org for updates on our monthly meetings.**



Inspirational

As we begin a New Year survivors for the most part are glad that the holidays are over and all of the decorations can come down and people can settle into a new year. The Christmas carols are over for another nine or ten months and no more Christmas cards and no more feasting on the rich foods of the holidays. The New Year's resolution can be observed for a few more weeks and then people can settle into the year 2016. One of the thoughts that I have is: what is going to happen to me personally in this year and what is going to happen to our world as we venture forth into this new year. What exciting things will come my way and what challenges will I struggle through? There are a myriad of questions that people are confronted with as we move into a new year. That is what mystery is all about. As we venture forth in life we are confronted with the future as it unfolds. Survivors of a suicide never dreamed that they would become part of the LOSS family. As one survivor put it, "I have met some of the most wonderful people that I never wanted to meet". To me that is about the mystery of life and living.

The older we get the more mysterious life becomes. The recent tragic event that took place in Paris is but one of the mysteries of life. What behooves people to commit such a heinous act and cause such untold sorrow and mayhem? That is one of the great questions that plague us as we move on in life. Over the years that I have worked in LOSS I have learned to live with mystery and not having the answers. I think that survivors of a completed suicide are challenged to live with mystery as they try to figure out precisely why did their loved one die from suicide. In many instances survivors never know just why their loved one died. Notes never adequately answer that question. The question that survivors have is, "Why did my loved one die from suicide when there are other people in the world with the same challenges as my loved one and they are still living?" There is no answer to that question. That is part of the mystery.

I am generally turned off by people who seem to have all of the answers to some of the profound questions that we have about life. I prefer to relegate these questions to the mysteries of life. I am more comfortable admitting that there are situations in life that defy any rational explanation. I don't need to know the answers. It is not that I am comfortable with some of the issues that confront the world but I have stopped trying to find answers. I am more comfortable to put these issues in the realm of the mystery of life. I don't have to know the rationale of some of the vicissitudes of life. I have learned to live with mystery. It is an important part of the grief journey to try to learn the exact reason why a loved one found life so intolerable that suicide was the only way out. That is an important part of the early stages of the journey. I maintain that survivors are challenged to live with the mystery that they might never know precisely why their loved one decided that suicide was the only answer. That position is attained after a very long process in seeking why a loved one could not live any longer in this life. All suicides are tragic. Some suicides result after years of the torture of mental illness that was known to members of the family. Most suicides take people by surprise because while this loved one might have had some challenges and some disappointments in life suicide was never seen as an option or a possibility. Suicide was not part of the radar screen of survivors. Survivors are plagued with the question of trying to figure out why this loved one died from suicide. That is where the mystery comes in.

I recently read an article about a man who had spent the majority of his life in facilities that treat people with mental illness. He spent years on various medications and different forms of treatment some of which were putting this man in isolation as a way to treat him. His brother wrote a book about how his brother was treated with his mental illness. The book was made into a documentary of the life of this brother and the struggles that he had with his mental illness. One of the sentences that got my attention went like this: "My brother was a survivor of the horrors of mistreatment, a case history for those who point to the positive effects of kindness and talk therapy, and, perhaps most of all, the embodiment of the bottomless mystery of the human mind". I was intrigued by reading about the mystery of the human mind. We can't figure out the human mind. The mind is one of the wonders of creation. Our minds are so profound and complicated and mysterious that often they defy rationality. I have learned to conclude that people who complete suicide think differently than those of us who do not complete suicide. For those who complete suicide their actions made all the sense in the world. For survivors there is no rational explanation that will make sense. Suicide defies any rational explanation. That is one of the mysteries of life.

As we begin a new year I want to assure each and every member of the SOS family of my thoughts and prayers during my quiet time each day and I encourage all of you to do the same for each other – especially for those people who have recently joined our family. Keep the faith!

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Reflections by Becky

When a child begins life, its first developmental task is to attach to the caregiver. There is no “other” as it is cradled and fed, only the cries for connection when separation is experienced. And for the parent, the boundary between self and child seems mysteriously non-existent for a while. As the child matures and is compelled to explore the world, distancing is exciting, but also uncomfortable enough that the child looks backward often to balance the stimulation with a sense of security. The parent, too, is attentive, even vigilant, as the young child pushes toward gradual independence. Most caregivers will recall some anxiety as they observed this process in the small being that introduced them to the profound experience of bonding. Most of us learn to attach and to support our loved ones’ independence without a great sense of disruption. As we become more secure adults, we learn to give space for self-determination to those we care about. When we carry the attached relationships within us, the connections become flexible and don’t suffer whether our loved ones are close by or in another country. Even with distance, the attachments are not disrupted.

The universal human grief experience concerns a disruption of an attachment bond. When death takes someone close to us, a spouse, a parent, or especially a child, the disruption can be so profound that survivors may experience a sense of dismemberment. The sense of self and meaning of life as it was known may be greatly altered, or even destroyed. Many enact a process of “searching” and yearning for the person who died in an effort to restore the disrupted attachment. A surviving adult’s thoughts and behaviors are consumed by grief. This is the bridge, the alternative connector to the deceased. It is created with tireless energy after the crisis of loss.

For grieving children the attachment disruption is less within the cognitive spectrum, and more within a sensory range of felt absence. A teen who lost his mother when he was three years old remembers her fragrance and the silky feel of her blouse. Young children don’t understand permanency, and a vigilant part of them waits for the deceased person to return. To some extent, even adults struggle to integrate the numbing fact of death’s permanence, and while children and younger teens may flaunt use of the word, forever, they don’t really “get it” without further maturational experiences. The surviving family members, both adults and children, will find ways to stabilize themselves, individually and together, but each person’s grief process is in response to the attachment disruption. As grief begins, memory may be walled-off to defend against pain or complicated feelings, or amplified to maintain the sacred connection as the loss is gradually taken into our minds and bodies. Amplified memory is first aid for the wound created by the loss. It recreates every detail of the precious, deceased person’s words, mannerisms and behaviors. Adults and children use transitional objects for comfort, and to cope with the absence: a T shirt, a hat, a ring worn by the person who died. During the Victorian era, bereavement involved strict rules for mourning, and wearing mementoes of the person who died was fashionable; even woven bracelets of the beloved’s hair. Today we make small shrines and memory boxes. We wear precious photos of our loved person in locket. And children and teens incorporate the memory of the person in their world. They adopt the teams and sports icons of the deceased; begin to work

with symbols to demonstrate how they knew the one they loved, and may attempt to establish goals that they believe would have made their loved one proud. We cherish the grief connections we create, and elevate those parts of our lives in service to the bonds that keep us close to the deceased.

When the loss is a result of suicide, the adult's and adolescent's questioning processes alone can be exhausting, but this allows a sense of near dialogue with the deceased. We are trying to "know" and comprehend our loved one's final act and sense of the world. The created connection is almost larger than life when we are grieving in this way, even as we do this work in sorrow.

As a SOS facilitator, I am honored to observe the changes over time in grieving children, adolescents and parents. Questions seem to emerge when the grieving person heals into a phase where they are relieved of the relentless pain. What happens to the connection when the loss wounds have begun to heal over, and the triggers to remember the loved one are less charged and insistent? When the deceased person is no longer constantly on our mind, adults may have a vague sense that the connection is fading. I have been told that this is an insecure time. There is now a sense that the grieving person needs to do something that allows them to reconstruct a different kind of relationship with the loved one who died, and it usually isn't clear what this could be. They are ambivalent about the softening of pain. "If I welcome it, am I forgetting?" A surviving parent may watch her surviving children or teens and notice that they appear stable, even flourishing, but there might also be the sense that the deceased seems farther away. This is new, unfamiliar and uncomfortable. As the young grievers increase in resilience, the adult may feel uneasy and look for direction.

In response, I need to remind myself that the process that evolves out of grief is intimate and deep. The counselor cannot be on the inside. Intuitively, I sense that the grief process can be trusted, that it leads into healing and transcendence if you stay with it, and the imprint of the loved person's life will continue even after the survivor's life has finished. Just as death is a mystery, so is the unique pathway of individual grief. It would seem that when the scar has formed over the wound, this is meaningful, and a new time of unknown purpose is taking place. What is happening? Everything, including the survivor, is different now. Perhaps this healing period allows the survivor more energy to change and grow in a manner that bears the imprint of the person who died. I have asked if this phase could mean not "letting go," but "letting be," allowing the loved one to continue his or her process in the spiritual realm. It may be the time when survivors establish foundations or permanent memorials, or clean house. A friend used this time to make a CD from many old tapes of her deceased mother playing piano. Can the mystery support the grieving individual in exploration ... meditation practice, the development of a deeper spiritual life, going back to school, and commitment to something meaningful?

It appears that grieving children and adolescents are motivated to reengage in developmental tasks as soon as they can after a profound loss. Sometimes, this is concurrent with their grief process, and they manage this with unique defenses. They are creating their identities as they lean in to the future. Some children deliberately put aside their amplified memories. Is this life reaffirming itself? I do see this, and assure parents that the future allows their children many opportunities for reflecting, marking milestones and anniversaries, learning family history and giving birth to namesake babies.

For adults and the young, their profound attachment disruption informs everything that follows in intricate and sometimes subtle ways as the loss moves farther out. If there is a fallow period after a cataclysmic loss, is this an indication for the survivor that his or her transformation is being quietly generated on its own, and the imprint of the deceased is transcending time in a way that will touch the future? For anyone who faces this juncture in the moment, the "not knowing" can be frightening.

To stand where I am in years since the death of Bobby, I look at things so differently. We become a new normal and to some of our families, friends and associates, they re-learn who we have become and move with us. For those who can't, they may pull away, but it is my prayer that they will return to be a strong force with the journey you are beginning....whether it is in advocacy, training to facilitate or speak out on the dreadful mental health conditions our loved ones endured or saw and become a driving force to end all treatments at the Stage 4 of mental illness, as with all illnesses.

You remain in my heart....

Becky

If you are interested in having a part in the *Journey to Healing* Newsletter we welcome your poems, articles, newspaper clippings or readings that have been helpful to you. This newsletter should be not only an instrument of healing, encouragement and education but also a reflection of who we, the survivors are and who we have become. We need your help and input to make this meaningful for everyone and invite your feedback to tell us what additional information you would like to see addressed. Thanks!



*“There is no pain so great as the memory of
Joy in the present grief. ~*

Mental Health America of Greenville County
429 North Main Street, Suite 2
Greenville, SC 29601

Bringing wellness home.....



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Journey to Healing is a newsletter for survivors of suicide. Survivors are those of us whose lives have been changed by the completion of suicide by someone we knew. Journey to Healing is intended to let survivors know that you are not alone. If you would like to contribute an article or story for this newsletter, please send it to: Becky Kay, c/o Mental Health America of Greenville County 429 North Main Street, Suite 2, Greenville, SC 29601.

Survivors of Suicide Support Group – this group meets the 1st and 3rd Tuesdays of each month from 7:00 – 8:30 PM at St. Michael Lutheran Church, 2619 Augusta Street, Greenville, SC 29605. There is also a closed program for eight weeks designed to help adults, teens and children.

As we grow and recover, it is important to remember that the most powerful aid that SOS can provide new survivors is the companionship of others who have endured the same type of pain. For SOS to work at its best, we must continue going to meetings to help others after we no longer need to go to be helped.

SOS Support Team

This team of survivors who volunteer their time to reach out to survivors in need is available to anyone who feels the need to share with another survivor by phone or personal visit in between meetings. Please call CRISISline at 864 271-8888 to arrange a call or visit from a team member.