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Readings:

Living with loss: Bereaved swim against tide of grief

By Marcia Lattanzi-Licht

There was a time when my grief was so loud I could barely stand the noise.

A drunken driver killed my daughter, Ellen, when she was 17. I remember the physical blow of hearing she was dead. I couldn't catch my breath and I couldn't stop crying. It seemed as if someone had set off a bomb that destroyed the house of my life.

Everywhere I looked, there was loss.

The land of grief, with its sorrowful valleys and mountains that seem too high to climb, is a destination all humans eventually find. Its hallmarks are a sense of shock and numbness, a feeling of being alone, and a desolation that searches for meaning.

"It's like a nightmare, and I kept hoping to wake up," said Marlene Wilson of Boulder, Colo., whose husband died suddenly.

"I never really knew what forever meant until my dad died," said Daryl Kipke of Tempe, Ariz., whose father died of prostate cancer at 65. "I can't believe that I'll never see him again."

As 76 million baby boomers creep up the ladder of years, grief is there to meet them. More than 2.3 million people die in the United States each year. Almost a million people are widowed, and those who die usually leave behind adult children. As the U.S. population ages, more Americans are experiencing firsthand the pangs of grief, which knows no racial, financial or religious boundaries.

Yet, how a society handles grief is not just an individual challenge but a collective one. American emphasis on the quick fix creates impatience with grieving and a low tolerance for the slow journey through sorrow. The language of "closure" falsely suggests



that grief can be neatly wrapped up and put away. Families are often scattered across the country, making the reality of the loss remote for the individual's loved ones. Yet, grief is an experience that permanently changes us.

When my daughter died in 1985, my thinking was scattered, and I felt like an animal prowling, trying to protect what was left of my world. I wished I could trade my life for Ellen's, but I wasn't given that choice. I realized how limited and powerless I was. As much as I loved Ellen, I could not keep her alive. My faith was shaken. Suddenly my life was smaller and poorer, and I felt a crushing burden of sorrow weighing on me.

The only reason to keep on was that her brother, Steve, 16, needed me.

I also was angry. Ellen's death was the result of someone else's irresponsible behavior. I felt cheated out of a lifetime with her. And I was angry for Ellen's brother, who not only lost his best friend but also was now an only child.

Yet, I could see that it was painful for others to see the depth of my anger and sorrow. That led me to keep my grief quiet, except with the people I could trust to listen. Why? I realized that people judge how well someone is doing in mourning by the degree to which they do not show tears.

My experience was not unique.

Although Daryl Kipke was 37 years old when his father, Charles, died last year, the void left him stunned and bereft. He'd lost his mentor and friend.

"Who will be excited in the way dad was to hear about my next project, my successes, or help me sort through ideas? I thought we would have a lot more time together," Kipke said. He was especially heartbroken that his father would miss seeing a brand new granddaughter, Tessa Rose, grow up.

Kipke did some things that helped him cope and comprehend the reality of his loss. He went to Michigan to help make the decision with his family to end his dad's life support. Afterward, he found comfort in writing the obituary. He visited a ballpark his dad had helped design to gain inspiration for the eulogy.

But even though his five children and wife, Paula, supported and stood by him at the funeral, Kipke had a hard time talking much about his sorrow. He knew his wife was grieving in her own way, as women do, by expressing her emotions and seeking out relationships. There were times Kipke could not do that. Like many men, he dove into his work and kept his thoughts mostly to himself. He tried to be strong for his mother, although even that hurt.

"It was difficult for me to see my mother alone when she visited during the holidays. I was used to being with my parents as a couple. They should have been able to grow old together," he said.

"At 64, my Mom was too young to be a widow."

One of the most difficult parts of grief is this: It makes us feel so alone. When loved ones die, survivors may feel powerless, angry or shaken by a loss of innocence. The random and cruel reality of illnesses and accidents challenges us to feel safe in the world. Good and caring people die of heart attacks, cancer and Alzheimer's disease. Beautiful daughters die in automobile accidents.

The paradox of grief? Just when we need the most support, it can interfere with our ability to be close to others. We long for closeness, but yet being close to others reminds us that we can lose anyone and everyone we love. And grief leaves us feeling diminished.

Experts will tell you that grief is not an illness or a disease, but a process. It is isolating for people who experience the death of a loved one to have others dismiss the importance of mourning or urge them to "get over" their loss so they can return to "normal." In the land of

grief, mourning does not have a timetable. The only thing it requires of us is that we learn to absorb the loss, remember our loved ones and learn to live well with, and in spite of, our losses. Friends, family and a faith community can walk with us. If we still struggle, counselors, doctors and support groups can help. As others hold us up, time passes. Gradually, we realize that the compassion of others often comes from empathy. They have been there, too.

“It’s as though people who have lost someone precious speak a different language,” said a young mother in Boulder, Colo., whose daughter died of sudden infant death syndrome in 1994. “I don’t have to explain things. There is a clear understanding that is so comforting.”

Across time, the one thing that helped me to live without Ellen was the unwavering caring and support that surrounded me. It softened the sharpness of the tragedy of Ellen’s death by reminding me that there were many good and loving people in the world. The greatest learning I’ve had as I’ve lived with Ellen’s death is that no one makes it through a painful time alone. People acknowledged the importance of the loss in a number of ways: attending the funeral or memorial service, visiting, sending cards, flowers, notes, bringing food, and phone calls. The faces of friends and neighbors told me how difficult it was for them to take in the reality of Ellen’s death. In spite of their own sorrow, and the way the loss mirrored in their lives, they came.

The thing people offered that helped the most was the ability to listen in a non-judgmental way. And they were present, walking with me through the long journey of mourning. They helped me discover that I never had to like what happened to Ellen, but I needed to find ways to live with the experience. Most of all, they invited me to be a part of the world again.

My grief was most intense in the early weeks and months. Sixteen years later, I still have moments when I wish I could be with Ellen, to talk, laugh, disagree, shop, cook, or just be together. I miss the years we didn’t have together, her career, wedding, grandchildren, and most of all, the ordinary family times.

When I think about how I have learned to live with loss, I remember a phone conversation with my grandmother two days after Ellen’s death. She listened and cried with me. Then she spoke of her sister’s death in a tragic fire when they were children. She said to me, “Marcia, never make Steve feel bad that he’s still alive.” My grandmother was reminding me that my job was to love my son well, and the other people who were here to love. That does not mean that she was telling me to forget Ellen, and “put the past behind me.” Rather, she was telling me how the losses of her life had shaped her and influenced the woman she became.

Today, I enjoy my life, and am incredibly grateful for my many blessings. Ellen was one of the great gifts of my life. There continues to be an empty space in my life without her. And yet, all the other parts of my life remain sweet, and perhaps more so with time. Ellen’s death has shown me the great depth of caring and compassion that exists in others. The support and love of friends and family continues to be one of the richest parts of my life.

One thing is clear. Even though Ellen is gone, the love I feel for her hasn’t died. No amount of time can alter that. That love continues on inside me, like a song that plays on, quietly, in the background of my days.

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