

Living and Loving: Finding a Way Forward

My sister Marilyn, her husband Don, and their daughter Brie are my heroes when it comes to grieving. Marilyn and Don's son, Zaan, died when he was 8 years old after he had lived with a brain tumor that was first diagnosed when he was 18 months old. Zaan was an amazing person who somehow seemed to know his life on this earth was short and that he needed to seize each day and take from it everything it had to offer. He had no time for the petty trivialities that distract both children and adults alike from the richness life has to offer in this present moment.

In the following story my brother-in-law Don describes how he not only received his son Zaan's permission, but his admonition, to get on with his life when Zaan died.

It was several weeks after Zaan died and I was locked in an intense grief and almost physical pain wondering how I was ever going to survive. It was here that I asked myself two questions that both were entwined with the other.

The first question was: 'What would Zaan want me to do, how would he like me to live the rest of my life?' I had a mental picture of passing over, having stayed in the frame of mind I was currently in, and being greeted by a very angry son who was yelling at me, 'Dad! Why did you waste the rest of your life! You know life is for the living, I surely showed you that by my example.'

The second question was: 'If Zaan is right (and I had no doubt that he was right, because the mental picture was very vivid) how do I progress forward from this overwhelming grief and hurt?' I decided that the grief would always be there. No matter what I did it was never going to go away. Having accepted that, I then decided I would surround and envelop that grief in love. Love for Zaan, love for Brie, love for Marilyn, love for myself and most importantly Zaan's love for all of us. I would wrap it very carefully and allow myself to visit it whenever I felt like it and to whatever intensity I needed at the time.

Having done that I then decided that I would construct a new life around that love and grief with it being the center of my being, my strength, my integrity, my love for my family, my love for life. I would slowly build a new life in layers, a bit like laminating layers of plywood together. I would take my time and make it strong. I told Marilyn and Brie my thoughts and they adopted the same

*If you lose hope,
somehow you lose
the vitality that
keeps life moving,
you lose that
courage to be,
that quality that
helps you go on
in spite of it all.
And so today
I still have a dream.*

— Martin Luther King, Jr.

*You must not lose
faith in humanity.
Humanity is an ocean;
if a few drops
of the ocean are dirty,
the ocean does not
become dirty.*

— Mohandas K. Gandhi

*There are souls
in this world
which have the gift of
finding joy everywhere
and of leaving it
behind them
when they go.
— Frederick Faber*

*Death is a challenge.
It tells us not
to waste time ...
It tells us
to tell each other
right now
that we love each other.
— Leo F. Buscaglia*

pattern, even though I suspect Marilyn had already subconsciously been there before me. It enabled us all to function again. It was the beginning of the way forward.

We all still live from that beginning, each in our own way going back to visit that 'love/grief centre' whenever we need to. Nine years on, it is now mostly love in that center, and it still gives us our strength. It still feels like Zaan is part of our living family and we wouldn't want it any other way. It is probably a strange way of coming to terms with the death of a child, but for us it has worked. It has allowed us to survive and thrive and to honor, love, and cherish our son and brother."

Grieving and Resolving Grief is a Process

As Don's story shows, grief is resolved by what we do and not simply by what we understand about the nature of grief. The strategies of resolving grief I have presented are very different from many psycho-educational approaches where the intervention focuses most of its time teaching the person about grief to normalize feelings of loss, anger, or sadness. Educational processes may be somewhat helpful in reducing the self-alienation that follows their self-judgments about being angry or sad and not coping well, but they rarely help the person move from their sense of loss to a place of hope.

To truly help someone move from grief to hope we need to walk with them **through** the process, not teach them **about** the process. We would never teach or tell them that they are miserable because they can't imagine their future and that what they need to do to feel better is imagine a happy future. Rather, we invite them to share stories about what they miss and what they valued, and then help them to discover that these essential values are still accessible.

In the next section I will describe advanced strategies that can be used to speed the healing process and ensure that the hope-filled response is sustainable.