



The Importance Of Our Story

My name is Joyce Jensen, and I have been living here in Ottawa for almost 3 years now. I am a wife, a mother of two daughters and a grandmother of 3 grandsons, and it is a privilege for me to be talking to you tonight, as we all get together once again for a time of mutual support and help, and reaching out to one another as we try to **do** at these Support and Share evenings.

Now as I begin, I must tell you that I am not speaking to you tonight from any exalted position – I mean I am certainly **not** the guru of bereavement – far from it. I am here tonight because ... just like you, I have at some point in my life...become “acquainted with grief” to the point that it has *changed* me, and *altered* my life.

I’ll say that again...”I have become acquainted with grief to the point that it has changed me, and altered my life”

Now I’ve made a point of that – because I don’t think that grief **ALWAYS** does that to us....and I want to come back to that point a bit later on.

Now...I’m going to tell you something of my “Story” tonight...and that is not because I think **my** story is more worthy to be told than yours, or any different from yours. It’s because my story represents **all** of our stories, and I believe that it’s in the *telling* of them, that we gradually begin to be more comfortable in our grief..... more at peace, more confident with each other..... and more able to look at squarely at our own situations in relationship to other peoples’.

In other words, it is in the giving and receiving of our stories, the back and forth between us, that we begin to learn that we can feel *alive* again – that our spirit can begin to be *renewed* - and we can begin to move forward and experience some wholeness again.... And really.... that is the aim of our evenings together like this isn’t it??– and that is why there is time **intentionally set aside** a bit later on, which provides an environment for the recounting...the telling of our stories.

When I was 35 (which is some time ago now!) I had a brother who was 8 years younger than me. He was living in England, and I was living in Canada by then. He was my only sibling and at the age of 28 he was diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease.

Now I'm sure you all know... that Hodgkin's disease is one of those diseases where the Medical profession has made **huge** strides over the years, and the prognosis for people with that type of cancer *today*, has vastly improved...but 30 years ago, it was a different picture. My brother was already in the final stage of the disease when he was diagnosed...and despite *aggressive* medical intervention...and I mean aggressive, within 6 months of his diagnosis, his life was no more.

Much more recently, in the year 2000....6 years ago this year....both my mother **and** my father died, within 3 weeks of each other. They were elderly – my dad was 92 and my mother 82 ...both living in England...both still living in their home. They'd had a long and active and mostly healthy life...

They'd also had a long and faithful marriage...and you know, there was something *strangely comforting* about the fact that their deaths were so close together.... and that they were separated for such a short time. Since that time I have spoken to a surprising number of people who can tell very similar stories about elderly couples.... leaving this earth within a short time of each other, and there seems to be a "rightness" about that somehow.

Both these periods --- my brother's death, and the death of my parents, were sad and very unsettling times in my life....but you know, it was not until just over 3 years ago, when my *son died* unexpectedly while studying at the University of Toronto, that I **really** became acquainted with a tumultuous kind of grief that caused a chaotic and unfamiliar response in me.

And I know that even though your stories and mine are different, they overlap here, and that you know what I am talking about when I describe these things. ...And that's because we are all...as the saying goes...in the same boat, to a certain extent. Our stories are not the same, but they overlap, because we can all relate to what it's like to find ourselves on the threshold of a journey through bereavement and grief.

It was a grey November here in Canada in 2002, and my husband and I were on holiday, down in the Caribbean enjoying the warm ocean, the sun and the sand and the sights there. Our son had driven us to the airport just *5 days before*, so when we got "**THE CALL**" ...from one of our daughters....telling us that he had died of heart failure in his apartment, we were immediately thrust into a dream-like maze of disbelief and non-reality and shock....We tried to come to grips with this news...and we couldn't.

We had to make arrangements to get ourselves back to Canada, and to try and find some way of trying to **process**.... and **understand**... and **accept** what was awaiting us when we **did** get back...and we couldn't.

And I know that as I try and describe those awful moments, that the words will *resonate* with you,...because of the common elements of our journeys.

I mentioned before that I don't think that all grief affects us in ways that **significantly** change our lives. There seem to me, to be degrees of grief, but it is those cases that **significantly** affect us that cause us all to be here in this room tonight.

In my own case, it was not until the death of my son, that I really had to think about grief, and what it is...and what it does. I began to read books about it, and -in time, - to talk with other people about it, and to think about it's effect on me and people around me....And I **had** to do this as I struggled through those early days... to make some sense of a life that had suddenly become... *completely foreign and unrecognizable*.

Again, I know that our *stories*, although not the same...and our *grief* – although not the same... overlap, and that you can relate to what I am telling you.

After my son's death, 3 years and 4 months ago...I think that, *quite literally* I was **numb./frozen**...for about two years. Maybe longer. Life went on, all around me, *remarkably the same* actually, but I didn't feel as if I was taking part in it somehow. I seemed to be on the **back burner**, so to speak.. while everything kept going on at its usual pace all around me –

Life seemed to be going **past me like a movie**, while I was STUCK on the edge, watching it happen...and actually if the truth be known, there are times when I still feel like that!

My husband expressed similar experiences, over the first couple of years - -- and another thing that he describes **very vividly**, that I can relate to, is a *constant feeling* during those early days....of *waiting for something to happen*. We didn't know what, but it seemed as if we were living on the edge of some event that was about to take place, but it never did. This disturbing sensation stayed with us, day and night, for a long time, disrupting our sleep patterns and causing months of a low grade kind of anxiety - along with everything else that was going onthat we could not get out from under...By and large, that has gone now....The memory of it, though, is still strong.

As I have lived my life since that phone call to our hotel room in the Caribbean, I find that I am not the same person, within that life. I have felt smaller since my son died. Physically smaller. Now I am not a small person, but I feel that the room that I take up in this space, is less than it used to be. That feeling has not gone away, and it has nothing to do with losing or gaining weight. It has become a reality for me that I feel smaller than before. Beyond that, I can't explain it!

Another physical manifestation that occurs in my life now, is that every *November*, which is the month my son died, I get a cold... and I mean a **really nasty cold** that hangs on for weeks and **really drags me down**. *This is new for me*. I have never **ever** been one to be under the weather....in fact I have always been the one to **boast** about how *few sick days* I took over the years during my working life!!

This past November I was determined not to let it happen, but it did. Obviously without my even *knowing it*, my resistance begins to change... as the anniversary of his death approaches.

Although there has been some easing over the last 3 years, some things in my life today, remain acutely painful.

Memories, which so many people told me would be wonderful, I find are not. Any memory with him in it is painful because he is no longer here. Any more **recent** memory that he **should** be in but is absent from is **also** painful, because he is not there! My family and I discuss this often. My daughters are teaching me to let the memories **be** painful, and not to stop them coming to mind..., because **they** have discovered that there comes a point when the painful part diminishes, and the pleasantness of the memory becomes uppermost. I am glad that this is their experience, and I let them be my guide in this. My hope is that someday I will be able to fully enjoy **all** my memories again. In the meantime, I'll be patient.

One place that is **consistently** painful for **all** of us, are visits to his graveside – especially in the depths of winter. It seems such a bleak spot. Even in the Spring and Summer we feel the cold grip us when we visit that place – even though the surroundings are beautiful, and well cared for, and serene. ..There is always a chill ...always a little bit of dread in my heart....

Nevertheless, we *all visit, often* – even our little grandsons. They have a much more pragmatic view of these visits, and we *love* their input! It brings a *lightness* to the situation....that is really not light.

Despite the *heartache* that these graveside visits cause, we are *diligent* in visiting a lot. On everyone's birthday... at all major holidays, mother's day, father's day, etc. And you know, in retrospect, I can say that each visit - makes us all ever-so-slightly stronger!

They are a few practical things that we do as a family that are becoming traditions as the years go by, and are important in keeping my son's memory fresh some how.

We celebrate his birthday. It's actually coming up in a couple of weeks, on April 13th.. We always have a cake – which of course our grandsons think is just great ..and we get together... just for a short celebration..... just to remember.

We honour the anniversary of his death as a family. We put a memorial notice in the Ottawa Citizen....My daughters take the day off from work, and we *all go to his graveside*, and then we go out and have the **best** lunch that we can afford. My husband calls and makes a reservation at one of Ottawa's finest restaurants, and we spend the time remembering. It is a time of great joy... and great sadness for all of us each year.

Another thing that my family and I make a point of doing....is to talk about him in a *realistic* way whenever he comes into our conversations. By that I mean that we try not to make him into *something he wasn't* ... and he **wasn't** a perfect human being, any more than I am or you are. By talking about him and remembering him in a **real** way, we often find ourselves laughing at some of his not-so-perfect ways, and in doing that, we seem to find a solace and a unity that is quite special.

So how am I doing these days?? I never know *quite* how to answer that question when people ask, because I don't really have any reference points. How am I **supposed** to be doing 3 and a half years after my son's death. How are *you supposed* to be doing one month... six months after your spouse's death two years after your parent's

death. I don't know. Every grief journey is different...and we each react in our own way, and *that's because we have different personalities, we come from different cultures and backgrounds, we've been brought up differently, we've been through different life experiences, and we are at different stages in life.* So how am I doing?? I'm not sure – but I think overall, that I'm doing OK!

There is not *much* that we can do to speed up the process of becoming whole again, but there **are some things** that we can do to help it along, I have found.

All of us have places, or things that “sooth our souls” or “renew our spirits” or bring peace and serenity to us in some small way. For me, being in the natural world can help. Hiking, or canoeing, or just sitting by a lake, surrounded by the *exquisite* beauty of the hills, under a painfully blue sky can be poignant yes, and set up an ache and a longing in me, but at the same time, can bring a sense of serenity that is real.

My advice to you would be to find **whatever it is** that brings you even the **smallest** sense of peace, (maybe reading a book in a favourite spot, sitting by the fire, or listening to music, or looking at a star-filled sky, or at your church, or walking your dog in the snow) – **whatever it is, find it**, and make a point of spending time doing it. I believe we regain our wholeness little by little, and if we can find a place where our hearts can rest more comfortably....then we **should** spend time there... and help ourselves along the path to becoming whole again – no matter how slowly.

it was interesting to both my husband and I that during the summer months last year we were able to recognize *tiny little peaks of life, and pleasure* creeping back into our lives once again. Not often – and not lasting, but they were definitely making an appearance. And I think it fair to say that during the past several months, those small flashes of life have come upon us a bit more frequently, but I must qualify that by saying that life is definitely not like it used to be for us. We are living a different one these days.

The last thing that I want to say tonight, is about my dear husband... who is not here tonight....He is a good man. **He too**, is on a grief journey.....**He too**, has lost his son....but our ways of coping with that, have been very different... Although we are on a journey **together**,.... we are not **together** on the journey if you see what I mean....And I have to respect that – and I **do** respect that....There are times when we **ARE** together on the journey ,...but many times when he has to cope and deal with things, and live his life in his own way.... I have to let him....

I have discovered that things that help me along are not necessarily things that help him along!

These days we are comfortable with the fact that we are on different journeys – and I encourage you to respect the journeys of the other members of your family. Rejoice in the times when you are one on that journey...but try and respect the boundaries of their journeys at the times when you seem to be on totally different paths....those paths **will converge** at times....Just be ready to recognize them when they do.

-Finally, as an interesting little aside - I want to tell you that as I have done grief work surrounding my son, I have *also* revisited the deaths of my brother and my parents, and doing that has provided me with a *warm and comfortable acceptance of their passing too*. This has been a lovely and unexpected by-product....and again, I encourage any of you who have experienced multiple losses to consider maybe doing that ...You could be pleasantly surprised with the results.

That's it. Thank you for listening tonight. You have been a great group.

Joyce Jensen
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