

Bereaved Parents in the Time of COVID-19

The following article describing grief for her “distanced” surviving children was contributed by Carolyn Pogue of Calgary.

In 1978, I became a bereaved mother. In those days, the so-called wisdom was to just carry on. After all, Ruth Ann was “only five days old”. My mother flew to visit and told me the story of her loss. It helped.

Then the unimaginable happened. In the early 1990s, I experienced the loss of my son Michael, 20, and Kathryn, 13. It took years to climb up out of that pit.

I was grateful to find The Compassionate Friends. Writing, making art, reading books written by bereaved parents, being in nature and deepening my spiritual practice all helped. And strangely, perhaps, marking the Holocaust with interfaith friends, sitting with Indigenous, Inuit and Metis parents whose children had been taken away to residential school, and eventually travelling to slums, refugee camps and places of violence as part of peace-making and solidarity actions with people in the Middle East, Central America and India grounded me. I had become a citizen of a new, borderless country.

The stories I heard from these parent survivors stopped my breath over and over. But I was able to listen and share their tears because I knew something about how dark and deep the pit is. I knew something about how slippery the walls are, how hard it is to find the ladder to the light. We all had two things in common. We had lost a child, and we were still standing. And the third thing was that in their names, we were all seeking ways to make the world more peaceful for other parents and other children. This is how I understand courage: to keep going forward, in love.

Grief is never linear. We all learn that hard lesson. I remember thinking that if I could just be “good” and take steps 1, 2 and 3, then I would end up at step 4. And then 5 and 6 and bingo! I’d be *there*. I would be in the place where it didn’t hurt to take a deep breath or cook a Christmas turkey or see a child who looked like mine walking down the street. That didn’t happen, of course. Step 4 led back to step 2 and then leapt to 5 and circled back to step 1 again. Unlike the fox trot, the dance of grief makes up the steps as it goes along, never mind who its partner is.

I became accustomed to living without my children in the way, I suppose, that people become accustomed to living without their limbs after amputation. Like other members of TCF, I adjusted. I marked anniversaries of births, deaths and visited the cemetery when I could. Like other bereaved parents, I took time to listen to parents new to this pain because I had some strength and they had yet to find theirs. Life moved on. New challenges, new joys, new work, new travel, new members of the family. I rejoiced in the lives of our living children and grandchildren, nieces, nephews, children of our friends. My reinvented life was full and rich. And then the pandemic hit.

For the first six months or so, I was able to rise above the disappointment of our cancelled holiday visits from Calgary to see our children in Winnipeg, Yellowknife and Toronto. I was able to do what I’ve always done — make art, write, teach, work for peace. In fact, I began to think of the time as a creative retreat and taught myself to make videos. But the pandemic didn’t end.

It seemed I entered a time warp; I wasn't even sure if it was faster or slower than before March. In a TCF Facebook post, a mother in British Columbia described this well. "I believe that the pandemic has accentuated the isolation in dealing with our loss", she wrote. "It's like being in the Twilight Zone." Exactly.

I marked the births and deaths of my children, but was unable to travel to the cemetery this year. I made more art, taught more classes, created more videos, took longer walks. And then I began to feel a slight pressure at the base of my throat, a "lump in my throat". It seemed at once strange and familiar, but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. And then I could. It was grief.

After all the years of working through losses and recreating myself again and again and again, here was that old familiar dance partner. Why? I wondered. What has triggered this? And then I knew. I am grieving the separation from our living children and grandchildren.

This pandemic is hard on everyone. I needn't recreate the long list of losses such as employment, family gatherings, normal mourning rituals, freedom to travel. We all live with these. But it occurs to me that loss of connection can be uniquely hard on bereaved parents. Haven't we lost enough? Haven't our hearts been shattered already?

Although the answers to my own questions are "yes and yes", there is another question to ask. So now what?

The answer came slowly. Although I carry on the annual tradition of honouring my children in early December, I haven't been to a TCF meeting for years except to accompany a newly bereaved parent. And what I knew finally was, I need my people. I need to reconnect with the citizens of that borderless country who will understand what I'm talking about without having to explain.

Bereaved parents I have met at Sharing Circles, Remembrance Day and Holocaust services, in villages, parks, schools, slums, camps and homes around the world, taught me that our "club" has no borders, time limits, restrictions, criteria for nationality, race, religion, sexual orientation, financial status, age nor ability. Anyone can become a bereaved parent. Our membership knows no boundaries. But we have been where other parents have not.

Through the TCF Facebook page, I asked how other parents are coping during the pandemic. Generously, answers came.

Lorraine Etler of Bracebridge, Ontario wrote, "I lost my youngest son 21 months ago and haven't seen my eldest son since February 9 due to COVID. I feel like I have lost both my children." **Evelyn Beaudet of Castlegar, British Columbia** explained, "With COVID we can't travel as my husband and I are compromised. It makes the grief worse; my daughter and grandbabies are all I have left It's been unbearable at times and makes the grief for our son that much more intense. I'm finding it really hard especially with the holidays and my son's birthday coming up." Another parent stated, "I am finding the line between grief and depression has blurred. I can't tell if I'm more dysfunctional because of COVID isolation or because of two years of grief. It certainly makes life extremely difficult. My heart goes out to people who have lost their children during this pandemic."

A mother in Calgary, Alberta, suffered this loss in April: "I lost my son during COVID. Ryan had cancer, but his death was caused by COVID, by the closures and lack of treatment COVID had on cancer patients. It's particularly poignant because he was responding to treatment and had qualified for a potentially life-saving surgery. He was in hospital the night before his operation, when all surgeries were cancelled due to COVID. I have been unable to hold a funeral and have the closure or support of friends and family that funerals bring...everything is on Zoom. Our churches are closed. I have lost best friends, my husband, my younger son and extended family. Since Ryan's loss, I have not had the opportunity to hug, cry on a shoulder, or sit and talk face-to-face."

This "Twilight Zone" of pandemic grief and all its complications has deprived many of us, as Ryan's mother so searingly relates, of shared ritual and human touch. We are reduced to words, screens, phones; and words are often inadequate. One parent related that the pandemic has prevented her from scattering her child's ashes and visiting with her living children. She wisely practices self-care, including meditation, yoga and attending TCF meetings online.

One place I've found where my heart can settle is in a little nearby wild park near downtown Calgary. There are trees to listen to me, magpies, flickers and woodpeckers for company. Occasionally deer and coyotes pass through. I go there to pray, practice Qi gong, walk or sit. Finding it harder to get up and down these days, I placed a big old tree stump so that I can sit in comfort and lean back on a tall friendly poplar. It steadies me; it has become my pew.

My friend Karen Motyka of Calgary is no stranger to grief, nor to courage. One day she wrote a poem:

Grief and love.

Twins.

These twins seem closer during this very bizarre pandemic time. I need all the resources—spiritual, practical, physical and emotional—to help balance them, and to remind myself that bereaved parents are courageous, tenacious, creative, strong.

May we continue to reach out through the TCF sacred circle on Facebook, through newsletters and personal connections to find strength, resources, conversations and support as we adjust and reinvent ourselves, again. May we remember that we do not walk alone.