

HE TALKED ABOUT HIS SON and I didn't see a tear

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It's interesting how human behavior can fool us. We look at someone and think, "Okay, I've got her all figured out," and then she does something we would have never predicted.

When I was younger and would meet someone who mentioned the death of their loved one, it never dawned on me that this individual could still be experiencing some form of grief. What I saw in front of me was a person who appeared to matter-of-factly state that their loved one died and I took it at face value. I mean, you can't really blame me.

For example, when I was 19 years old, I had met a new neighbor who mentioned that his son had died the previous year. This man wasn't crying, no tremors in his voice, no hesitancy in saying "died" or "passed on." I thought, "Well, that was a while ago. I guess he's over it."

How wrong I was.

During the past 40 years I've met thousands of

people who've experienced a significant death and, in most public settings you would never see the depth of their despair, the guilt at "not having done enough," the anger at how the death took place. However, if you placed that person in an environment where they are able to connect with their memories of the dying process, the death, the funeral, the pain, the struggles, and most importantly, the life that was lived, you would see a significant shift in mood, posture, focus, and voice.

Every year for the past 25 years I attend the national conference of The Compassionate Friends—an amazing support group of individuals who are coping with the death of their child, grandchild or sibling. Saturday evening is a banquet with music and a guest speaker. My wife and I sit at a table typically with six other people. At the beginning of the meal the talk is amiable, often including laughter.

Once the meal is over, the next event is the candlelighting, with music, lights dimmed. The change is instantaneous. The banquet room of more than a thousand people is quiet.

As the music plays, candles are lit, and then held up in the darkness of the large room, instantly illuminating the room in a soft glow. Soon you can hear quiet sobs. Words of comfort come across the speakers throughout the room. The gentle ending finishes with words of hope, with candles extinguished, and lights raised.

I glance over at the people at my table as they hug, nod, comfort and are comforted by those around them. Every time this happens, I am struck by the fact that only a few minutes earlier these same individuals were happily chatting away. Now their faces are transformed into expressions of grief.

It always reminds me of a critical fact about the death of a loved one:
grief is always there, waiting for those moments to surface again.

Grief does not, will not, cannot go away. It can devastate you, take over your life, and with time gradually, slowly diminish; but it will never vanish. Why is this?

One answer is that grief is so many things.

It is much more than crying or feeling guilty or angry. It is being reminded of how that person died and suddenly being thrust back into that time period. It is their birthday or the exact day they died years before. It is missing that person. It is being at a celebration and suddenly hit with, "He should be here now." It is visiting a place where you and that person shared memories and wishing that you could go back to that wonderful moment. It is looking at a picture years later, seeing that face and wanting to touch, kiss, hug your loved one.

Another answer to why grief does not go away was shared with me more than 20 years ago by a bereaved mom, "Grief," she said, "is unfinished love."

So, as you meet the men and women who decide to share their story of grief with you, don't be fooled by the matter-of-fact way the information is shared. Understand that, at the right place and time, their grief will come bursting forth. And, if you happen to be at that location and at that moment, consider it an offering—painful as it will be to witness—as you permit that person to share their gift with you—a gift of love.