
WALLOWING THROUGH THE MUCK

Discovering joy and meaning after loss

DAVE ROBERTS, L.M.S.W. | bootsyandangel@gmail.com



FREE RESOURCES
FOR PROFESSIONALS
& COMMUNITY USE

Disorder in the house

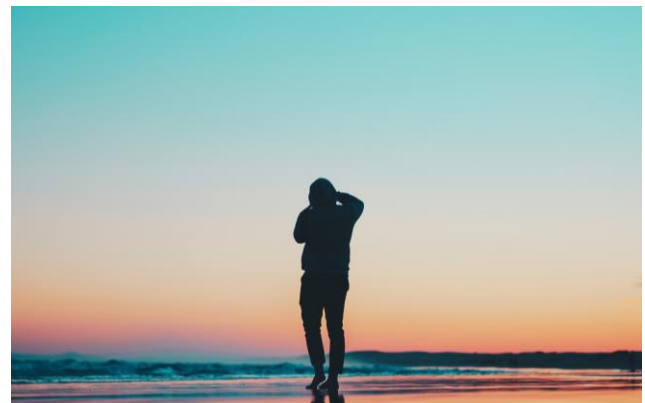
Life does not progress in an orderly or predictable fashion. All of us are confronted with a series of challenges, some more daunting than others. I believe that challenges present us with two options:

- To do nothing and stagnate emotionally, spiritually and psychologically
- To make a conscious decision to transform our way of thinking in order to find renewed joy and purpose.

My illusion of order and predictability was unceremoniously shattered after my daughter died at age 18, on March 1, 2003, due to a rare form of cancer. At the age of 47, there was disorder in my house, a house whose foundation consisted of values and rules that no longer applied to a world that was suddenly terrifying to me after Jeannine's death.

EMOTIONAL PAIN INTENSIFIED

During my early grief, which for me, lasted about two and a half years, the daily pain I experienced was identical to the pain that occurs when a scab gets violently and repeatedly ripped off. Trying to cognitively process why my Jeannine predeceased me further intensified my emotional pain. It is unnatural for any parent to bury their child.



I was told by a therapist that it is normal to take inventory of our lives in our 40s and determine how we wish to live the remainder of our years. At 47, it wasn't about me taking inventory, it was about rebuilding my life from scratch without the physical presence of my daughter.

LIVING WITH JOY, SADNESS AND PEACE

I am now in the eighteenth year of my journey as a parent who has experienced the death of a child. It is a path that I did not willingly embrace. I no longer live with the raw, debilitating pain of my daughter's death. The teachings that I have discovered as a result of the challenges I faced have allowed me to experience joy and a renewed sense of purpose. There are still moments of sadness, moments when I yearn for the physical presence of my daughter.

I've learned joy and sadness will be part of my experience for the remainder of my life. However, I have also found my peace in a forever-changed world; that has been empowering.

TEACHINGS DISCOVERED

To conclude this piece, I will share some of the teachings I have discovered since the death of my daughter:

- I had to wallow in the muck of grief before I could wallow through it. Wallowing in the muck for me meant honoring the pain, sadness and anger that I had experienced after Jeannine's death. Honoring these emotions was a catalyst for transforming my perspective on life and death.
- Every emotion that we experience, both positive and negative, is a crucial piece in the mosaic that comprises the path we walk after the death of our loved ones. We can learn from everything.
- Transformation of self after loss starts with simple intent.
- Surrendering to the need not to know. For a long period of time after Jeannine's death I asked a lot of "what if" and "why" questions. I never got an answer that satisfied me or changed the fact that my daughter died. Once I stopped asking the questions and embraced the quiet, I got the clarity that I needed; there is movement in stillness.
- Establishing continuing bonds with our deceased loved ones is a powerful tool to help us develop new relationships with our deceased children. It gives our loved ones and us permission to grow.
- That our present moments are influenced by the teachings of our past; past and present influence our futures.

- Nature and animals can help us expand our perspectives and in the process further facilitate the process of transformation after loss. Ted Andrews book 'Animal Speaks', and Jamie Sams' book Medicine Cards are two great resources in these areas.
- The importance of walking in awareness of the signs from our loved ones that communicate their eternal presence and more importantly, that we survive death.



Perhaps the most important teaching I have discovered since the death of my daughter is importance of being gentle with ourselves. The journey after the death of a child is a marathon and not a sprint. In the process, we must also honor the yin and the yang of who we are, because to deny that is to deny our authentic selves. We must embrace what we so often run away from....ourselves.

By embracing who we are, we redefine who we become.

David J. Roberts, LMSW, experienced the death of a child when his daughter Jeannine, 18, died of cancer in 2003. A retired addiction professional, he continues to teach psychology at Utica College in New York.