

7 IMPORTANT LESSONS I learned from bereaved parents

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I still remember Yola's words, "Dr. Bob, you had no idea what you were getting into."

She was right, of course. How could any non-bereaved parent ever begin to understand the world of a mom or dad who lost a child?

It was 1987 and I had been invited by the King County TCF group located south of Seattle to give a brief lecture on grief to 20 parents. The next day I got a phone call from Yola, the chapter leader, who said something like, "We'd like to invite you to lunch to discuss a few things."

Unbeknownst to me, the parents met after my presentation and decided to adopt me even though I wasn't a bereaved parent.

So, there I was, enjoying my hamburger and fries as the four parents explained what they had in mind for me. My official title was to be Professional Adviser. Innocently, I responded, "Sure, I'd be glad to help out."

Help out? For the next several years these 30-40 parents from the TCF chapter took me in to their world. I learned things from these folks I'd never read in books. Things, for example, as their fear of

divorce. Back then, they'd heard (incorrectly) that, when a child dies, the likelihood of divorce was near 90%. Whenever the topic came up, I saw their worried looks as they glanced at their spouses wondering, "Are we next?"

The good news is there were no divorces in the TCF group from the 1990s. Fortunately, a well-controlled study came out in the late 1990s that put the myth to rest, concluding that, when compared with similar nonbereaved parents, the bereaved parent group only had slightly higher divorce rates. I watched over the next few months as the group made a collective sigh of relief.

What else did I learn? A lot. Here are some of more important lessons. Perhaps you, too, have learned these lessons. However, I also imagine that the majority of the population hasn't a clue.

- ◆ **You never (ever, ever) get over the death of your child.** Ever. Twenty years ago, I conducted a study of the media and discovered that, in describing the plight of a bereaved person, journalists sometimes use terms such as: closure, healed, acceptance, recovered.

In all my years I never heard a parent say, “I now have closure.” Or “I’m now healed.” Or “I’ve now “Accepted (or recovered from) the death of my child.” In case you didn’t hear me, let me be clear:

A child dies. And while the grief of this child’s parents
may shift and change over the years, they will have
some degree of grief until they take their last breath.

- ◆ **They look just like you and me.** You have met many bereaved dads and moms. You likely just didn’t know it—because they simply didn’t tell you.

What I’m going to say next is no exaggeration: I’ve met thousands of bereaved parents. For the past 25 years I’ve been invited to the national conference of The Compassionate Friends. Many times, I’ve stood before workshop audiences of 100 or more parents. I’m going to tell you what you already know: They look just like anyone else, because—they are.

They are you and me and your next-door neighbor and your aunt and your uncle. At some of the workshops you hear laughter. And, for a few seconds, you might think, “Oh, it sounds like they’ve moved on with their grief, their sadness, their guilt, their anger.”

Then the speaker says something profoundly sad and instantly you see faces transformed to tears, looks of agony, and despondency. All of this in a matter of seconds. What does this tell us? It says that for many bereaved parents, grief sits at the precipice of their daily existence, waiting for something to bring it to the surface once again. And again. And again, even many years since that horrible day.

So, don’t be fooled when you see people walk past you. They may look okay, but if they’ve lost a child, their grief may only be seconds away.

- ◆ **You could have been the world’s best** mom or dad, but when your son or daughter dies, you will feel guilty. You will.

I’ve given several different workshops to parents over the past 30 years. But the number one requested topic is the “big G”—guilt.

When I open the workshop I say, “You came here today because you feel guilty. I am not going to tell you not to feel guilty. Now, turn to the person next to you and say firmly, “Stop feeling guilty. And, add, “Don’t you feel better?”

This always brings laughter because every person sitting there knows that you cannot talk someone (even themselves) out of guilt.

We are still waiting for the perfect parent: the flawless mom, the faultless dad. I tell them about all the different types of guilt and then offer suggestions from bereaved parents who, like them, were searching desperately for ways to cope with their guilt.

- ◆ **When a child dies, you enter a world you could never imagine.** The death of a child, whether it be sudden or due to a chronic illness, changes you forever. There is a term in psychology called “Our Assumptive World.” It is how we assume the world around us operates.

The moment your child dies, your assumptive world is shattered. You see everything in a different way because everything is different. Everything. Little things, big things. You don’t care so much anymore about life. You care less about what people think or say. Your priorities suddenly change.

You’ve lost a child, what else could be now be a big deal in your life? If you are a legislator and you come face-to-face with a parent who, in the name of their child, wants to change a law—watch out. If you think you really know someone prior to their child’s death, you may see behaviors and attitudes from that person that may surprise you.

- ◆ **Well-meaning, smart, caring people will say stupid things to you.**

Oh, yes, those unhelpful clichés mouthed by those who think they are somehow “helping.” When I ask my workshop participants to shout out the clichés, they come fast and furious:

- It was God’s will.
- Everything happens for a reason.
- You can have another child.
- I know just how you feel.
- Life goes on.
- At least he didn’t suffer.

Memorize these and similar others and relegate them to the junk pile of hurtful things not to ever, ever say.

- ◆ **You realize that the only people who really “get you” are parents who been through what you have.**

There is something magical when bereaved parents get together. It matters not about the background of another person. If they’ve lost a child, there is something that immediately connects you.

At the national conferences I’ve been asked to moderate evening sharing sessions. It is such a powerful moment when, for example, a dad says something and you look around to see all the other dads sitting there nodding their heads. At that moment it is clear to me that, if I had said the same thing, it would not have resonated in the same way. This a brother- and sisterhood that only a few can enter.

The often-repeated saying is, “I’m sorry for what brought you here. But I’m glad you’re here.”

◆ **Just because someone is a counselor/psychologist/psychiatrist doesn't mean they understand parental grief.**

Imagine you are a bereaved parent sitting in front of a counselor who asks, "So, how long has it been?" You closely watch the counselor's face; and when you say, "___years," you see the tell-tale sign that says something like, "...and you're still grieving?" At that instant, you want to bolt for the door because here is yet another professional who clearly doesn't get it. You want someone who, when you say "It's been 2 (or 22) years" to respond, "Welcome. Let's get to work."

Many people in the counseling and clinical field have no background in loss and grief, so choose wisely.

So, there they are: Seven big ones that I learned because of an invitation I accepted many years ago.

By sharing their stories with me, bereaved parents have given me a gift that I can share with others to help ease their grief, if only just a little.

Thank you, Yola (who still calls me once a month) and all the other parents who let me into their world.