

A Grief Shared - Phase II

Smile, though your heart is aching...

It has been 15 years. No - it is not possible - it couldn't be - it was yesterday or at the most a couple of years ago.

A few years after my daughter, Maria-Victoria died, I wrote an article entitled "A Grief Shared" in which I was trying to let professionals and others know what is helpful and what is not for those of us who have lost a child. Now at 15 years, I thought it might be time to revisit "A Grief Shared" from the perspective of someone further down the path.

It is harder to write this than the first one. I don't know why other than perhaps the accumulation of years of grief and "missingness" have eroded my stamina. But I still want to write it. Remember, it is just one person's perspective; maybe some things will resonate with others, maybe not.

Time - time goes by so quickly. Everything is in terms of before and after. The before is the refuge where smiles can come from. Those treasured little glimpses of the way we were. When I feel them I am truly happy. But most of life is lived in the after.

Smile, even though it's breaking...

The first few years in the after were survival boot camp. You don't really know if you can survive - you can't imagine it - you're not sure you want to. You make your decision - you plow through the after. It's not dark- but it's very cloudy - a thick fog - obscuring the future you don't want to see anyway. If you are lucky enough to have friends and support, you are able to travel a little steadier. In the early months of the after, you cannot imagine ever laughing again. You will find that after you are able to do so, you have reached a very important milepost.

When there are clouds in the sky, you'll get by...

"You'll get by" is a good phrase for those of us who have experienced this loss. For a long time that is about all you are hoping to do - "get by". I had - and still have - an overwhelming fear of literally being suffocated by my own grief and sad-shock; that it will utterly take everything out of me and leave me with nothingness. Sad-shock is the combination of the realization that this has really happened, followed by the overwhelming sadness that accompanies that realization. You learn these little tricks to keep this monster at bay. I will allow myself to sink into the abyss for only a very short period of time and then rapidly climb out - or I take a detour - consciously - if I'm getting too close to the edge.

What has helped me the most - and is a very personal thing that I seldom share with others - is the way I keep my daughter present with me every day (although I know she probably has better, more important things to do). Maria-Victoria's presence permeates my home. There are pictures everywhere. I can talk to her, tell her I love her and have framed notes from her telling me she loves me too. We refer to the guest bedroom in our house as Maria-Victoria's room, since when we moved about a year after the accident, we decorated it the way she had wanted in our old home. With every trip we take we are accompanied by Patrick, her stuffed dog, so that she always sees the sights with us. I wear an angel pin every day whenever I leave the house so she is with me. I have done this for 15 years.

Over the years I've had awesome, incredible spiritual experiences that have assured me and my soul that my daughter is still my daughter, that her spirit, her consciousness survives. It is so hard to try to explain this to people. It is incredibly important to me - such a part of who I am, that I can't bear to listen to the naysayers or worse those who outright chastise me for believing in such things as a scientist. Yes, I am a scientist and I have devoted a lot of time and research to the scientific study of survival of consciousness. Not to mention that I've experienced wondrous things. We who have reluctantly joined the group of bereaved parents, Compassionate Friends, probably know more about this than anyone on the planet.

If you smile through you fear and sorrow...

You do learn to laugh and smile again. You are a changed person - after all, you live in the after. With all this elapsed time how do I describe what it feels like. The one thing that stands out the most is that I have no fear of death. This has continued from the earlier - after years. I'm not in a hurry - I still want to enjoy life, try to have fun, do meaningful work, make a difference and treasure my family - but I'm not afraid to die. This is very freeing and has allowed me to chart my own path. As I said in my earlier article - death is the door to where my daughter is. I view it as a great adventure with the ultimate joy of reuniting with Maria-Victoria.

I am a more "take it or leave it" kind of person now. I guess those of us who have traveled this journey have a clearer vision of what's important and what is not. I don't need to convince anybody of anything. I've become more tolerant and less tolerant. More tolerant of different points of view but less tolerant of narrow-mindedness, silliness or arrogance.

Smile and maybe tomorrow...

I do fall into the chasm of "what might have been". Usually it's when I'm feeling sorry for myself and missing the love my daughter could be physically giving me at this time and the additional grandchildren that would be a part of my life. I miss the best friend I know she would have been. That hurts - so I don't stay there that long. I miss most her adorable face, her big eyes looking straight into mine, the feel

of her skin on my hands, her tenderness, our bond. Thinking of her and visualizing her -that helps.

If I was asked, what do you think is the biggest misconception of people who do not live in the after have about those who do, I would say this. They cannot understand how we live with this so present in our lives every day even after 15 years. As I said before, 15 years is impossible. You live every day with both the joy of having had your child with you for a time and the grief of not having your child. I truly believe that most people think we have "moved on" or something like that. Nope - that doesn't happen. Every day in the after we feel for our child. Fifteen years is 5,475 days. I can't put into words what 5,475 days has done to my body and mind. It has definitely caused erosion, a deep canyon. My soul, however, is enhanced, open and full.

You'll find that life is still worthwhile, if you just smile.

Our continuing journey is to make life worthwhile, without the physical presence of our child. Defining "worthwhile" is up to the individual person. I feel that if you have something to believe in, if hope is a big part of your life, if you are able to honor your child and find meaning in your contribution to this Earth, you have a worthwhile life. *So smile through your tears and sorrow, dare to laugh, dare to dream, and let your child's love embrace you.*

Written on the 15th anniversary of Maria-Victoria Boucugnani's angel date - September 13, 2011 by her mother Lynda Boucugnani-Whitehead.