

The Journey To Hope

Talk given to Compassionate Friends, Jonesboro Chapter, Christmas Candlelighting Service, December 4, 2000 by Lynda Boucugnani-Whitehead in honor of her daughter, Maria-Victoria Boucugnani and all of our children

On September 13, 1996 my daughter and I began a spiritual journey – together – though separated physically, very much united in spirit. It is a journey all of us in this room are taking at the same time. As Compassionate Friends we are on this soul journey together.

When we have “lost” someone we love so much, it is hard to come to terms with what this profound change means for our lives. We know in our hearts that the love we feel can’t just stop. This is as incomprehensible to us as the reality of death itself. I believe that this is the first lesson I learned on my journey. Love is not a physical thing – it is a purely spiritual presence. Although physically, my daughter, or your son or daughter or grandchild, is not here with us, the spirit, the essence of our children is always with us.

It is a strange and disconcerting feeling to feel intense love and intense grief at the same time. We, as Compassionate Friends, know better than most how intense personal grief is. Surely no one could feel the enormity of grief I feel, - I believe and say to myself. I believe no one could possibly understand this wrenching pain. Until I look at the faces of Susan, of Diane, of Charlotte, of Domingo, of Judy, of David, of all of us who have been united in this most extraordinary way.

My own spiritual growth has been profound since embarking on this excursion into spirit over 4 years ago. I have replaced the Why?, the Why me?, the What if? questions of fresh, raw grief with different questions that I will embrace as I travel up the spiritual highway. My questions now are more like:

“How do I give my love to you now, honey?”

“How do I keep our spiritual connection strong?”

“How have I grown as the result of this experience?”

This last question is of immense importance because the answer to it is the reason to continue to live. I don’t pretend to know the answer but I will continue to search for it. How have I grown as the result of this experience? There is a Chinese proverb which says, “the man who moved mountains began by carrying away small stones”. So it is with the mountain of grief.

Our spiritual journeys will all be different. We will be influenced by the various directions we take, the travelers we encounter, the ideas we embrace. There is no one map to follow, no travel agency that will guarantee a safe and hazard-free

journey. I would like to share some of my own landmarks in this personal journey in the hope that some common occurrences among us will assure us that we are never alone.

My Maria-Victoria, who was 13 when she returned to her first home, was everything a mother could wish for – beautiful, smart, silly, confident but most importantly, incredibly caring and concerned for others. I learned a lot from my daughter – about what is important in life, about the most exquisite love that can be known as children of God – here on earth.

After September 13th, my learning accelerated. I certainly would not have consciously chosen such a supersonic ride. We all know that first year is a blur; it is again a time of a paradox, of divergent feelings – intense pain coupled with profound numbness. Those two don't seem to go together do they? Let me share some writing from my journal at 2 ½ months after Maria-Victoria died.

Grief ache is an interesting thing. In the early weeks my grief ache was so physical, affecting my whole body and so easily identifiable. I would pray for some relief from the physical pain – some opiate to take “it” away for it hardly left my being. On those rare occasions when it subsided, it was usually due to a power greater than I. Like the time I simply gave over a major problem at work to God – saying “you handle it”. I could physically feel the pain subside when I did this and was so thankful for the relief. As the weeks have gone by the grief ache has changed in character but is always a companion. It is less full-body physical now and I don't have to constantly pray for relief. Now it takes different guises – characters in a play. There's the sick feeling I get when I realize for the thousandth time that you are really gone and I can never hold and kiss you again in this lifetime. It is the despair I feel at thinking of the years I may have to endure without you. It is the heart-grasping sob I feel at the loss of our life together – my best friend – the treasure chest, hope chest of our future memories. The loss of future memories is a profound loss. It can lead to slow tears silently running down my face or bouts of anguished crying coming from deep within. It came in waves from the very beginning. Huge, frequent storm waves at first. Now stormy seas with periods of relative calm, but ominous clouds ever present. We shall see how this grief ache evolves over time. There's a special morning character in this grief ache play, who comes on stage, never missing a performance. He comes every morning, just after the first awareness that I'm still here, to proclaim clear and loud, that my daughter is gone, yes gone. And don't you worry – I'm such a dependable chap that I'll never fail to deliver my message to you each morning.

This is early grief. I equate it to the beautiful songs written by Eric Clapton, after the death of his young son. Songs like Drowning in a River of Tears and Tears from Heaven.

As I continued on my journey, with my daughter at my spiritual side, the flavor of my thoughts and writings began to change. How did this happen? If I had to find one word that would capture it – it would be hope. In my case, hope came from changing my perspective about what life and death and life again is all about. In your case it may be a different way, but without hope, it is difficult to advance on this journey.

How do you find hope? Where is it hiding? How can you pull it within yourself?

Hope began at first for me with remembrance. In the months of the first year I would go to the cemetery and lay next to Maria-Victoria's "bit of earth"... (*I called it her bit of earth because the summer before she died in September, she had been in a community theatre production of The Secret Garden – which meant so much to her. Those of you familiar with The Secret Garden will remember that a major premise of it is the power of the spirit of the mother and wife who had died to instill hope and new life to the ones left behind. In this production, Maria-Victoria played a spirit.*) Anyway, I'd lay on our special blanket, reach out and rub the grass as if it was her hair and write remembrances. Before she died – when she was in the 6th grade, we had begun a mother – daughter book of the things we loved and made us happy, called "The Happy Book". We would alternate saying and writing. She wrote things like:

“ Waking up in my flowery room”.

“All the wrinkles on basset hounds.”

“Mommy's smile”

“Christmas time”

“Arguing with Tom” – friendly arguing

“Playing Uno and winning against David and the look of defeat on David's face”

“Sunshine coming through the window”

“Doing the Happy Book with Mommy”

After she died, I began a book with her about memories of things we did that was what our love was all about. Things like:

Snuggling under the yellow comforter and watching the X files.

Dressing you up as a bag of M and M's for Halloween.

Your messages on my answering machine at work in your little girl voice telling me how much you loved me.

As you see, and as I'm sure it was with you, it is the little everyday things that are so cherished. I began cherishing her wonderful sense of humor and dramatic talent. Through this remembrance, hope, began to enter my life. And I realized that the

value of one's life is not measured by extraordinary accomplishments, but by accomplishing things with extraordinary love.

As many of us in Compassionate Friends can attest to, I also had communications from my daughter, both direct and symbolic. They are too numerous to detail and so valuable to my soul, but let me choose two to illustrate how hope is helped through our loved ones, who are with us always.

Several months after my daughter died, I developed a roll of film that had been sitting in a camera. I didn't know what was on it and was so delighted when one of the pictures was of Maria-Victoria in her white sweater, holding me in an embrace. Several weeks later, my former husband and Maria-Victoria's father, also had unknown film developed from his home, that included a picture of Maria-Victoria embracing him in the same way, wearing the same white sweater. Nearly one year later, a friend of my son David sent me some pictures he had taken with David and Maria-Victoria up in Helen, Georgia the previous summer. In the pictures was one of Maria-Victoria embracing David, her brother, in the same way as in the other pictures – again wearing the same white sweater. All of these pictures came after she died. Is this a coincidence. No, I don't think so.

In those pictures from David's friend was also one of Maria-Victoria's hand holding a small butterfly. Remembering that picture, one day I took a picture of Maria-Victoria to the cemetery, thinking to myself as I was driving, "wouldn't it be something if a butterfly came as I was there", but not really expecting it. I laid the picture on our special blanket. Shortly thereafter, a beautiful butterfly came and landed right on the picture and stayed there for several minutes as I watched in awe. I have chosen to bring these pictures tonight, to share them with my Compassionate Friends, as a symbol of hope.

Through these and many other extraordinary experiences and my search to learn, I have come to know my daughter, and your children, are fine and that our love can never, ever go away. I have come to fully understand the saying from Corinthians:

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never dies.

Like some of you – not all of you of course – I talk to my daughter all the time. Recently I asked her:

“Do you have a message for me, honey?”

Immediately I had a vision in my mind of our last summer vacation up in Helen, Georgia where we went tubing down the Chattahoochee. The words that came to me were a direct mirror to that actual experience of tubing the river. I believe she said these words to me and I believe these words have meaning for you as well.

She said, “We are going down this journey together. We started together. There were rough spots and joy. We glided over the water and rocks. We held hands. We were separated for a time and missed each other. You needed to go over a scary waterfall on your own – you needed help and you got it. You were proud of taking the chance and facing the fear. Though we didn’t see each other for a while, you knew I was there and coming. Then we saw each other and were reunited. We got on the bus for the return journey side by side.”

This is my personal message of hope from my daughter.

Hope takes hold and allows us to finish our personal journeys toward spiritual growth.

As I return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this talk with you, let me share what I have learned so far. Remember, our ways of learning, of finding hope and peace, will all be different. There is no “best” itinerary, no favored airline, no universal travel plan. What I have learned – how I have grown from this experience is:

There is only a shared destination for us all – one of hope, peace and embracing the eternal love we share with our sons and daughters.

I have learned that there is no way out, only a way forward.

I have learned that where there is great love, there are always miracles.

I have learned that if you believe that life is worth living, your belief will help create the fact.

I have learned that our children are the greatest gift that can be given to us. That we have known, and will always know, the most exquisite love one can know as the children of God, the eternal love between parent and child.

I need to stop now and tell you a funny story. Several weeks ago I went to the mountains with a group of women friends – our book club – for a sleepover excursion. We, of course, went shopping and I found a wonderful “indoor” wind chime that is solar powered. It absorbs energy from light and every once in a while the mechanism will turn and make the chime go off. I brought it home and put it next to a sunny window – but I forgot to tell my husband Tom about the chime. The next day I got up before him and was down in the office when all of the sudden Tom came bounding down the stairs saying, “You’re not going to believe this – that chime is going off all by itself – it must be Maria-Victoria. I laughed and told him – “well it may be Maria-Victoria but it’s a solar powered chime and it’s the light that makes it go off.

Weeks later, I was down in my office writing this talk and finished it at about 11:00 at night. I went upstairs so I could read it to Tom and get his impression. It had been

dark for over five hours and that chime had not made a sound that entire time. Just at this place in my talk, that chime went off – all by itself. There was no visible light present. Both Tom and I were tremendously affected by this. Knowing Maria-Victoria's sense of humor, as well as her caring for others, I believe this last part is a special message for us all from our children.

So at this special time of Christmas remembrance, let us remember the love and smiles of our children, remember their delight in the wonders of the season and remember – joy.

I'd like to close with a few lyrics from "Bit of Earth" from the Secret Garden.

**A bit of earth
A drop of dew, a single stem
Begins to rise
That bit of earth
Is pushed away, the flowers bloom
Before our eyes**

**For in the earth
A charm's at work
The word is passed
The days are warm
Unfold and grow
The winter's past
We're free from harm**