

ONE

WILL IT ALWAYS HURT THIS MUCH?

4/15/95

A long day that should have been happy but instead is filled with sadness, depression, and tears. I don't know if I can continue to live this way. Not only have I lost a son, but I have lost a wife as well. She turns down all offers of suggestions for help and claims she is OK. Yet her face and actions tell another story. It is hard to stand by and watch a person deteriorate like this. She has no hope—no goals—nothing to live for, and the love is slowly leaving. It's funny how I give my life to help others and yet I cannot help my own wife, nor does she want help from me or any other person. I wonder how long we will continue like this.

My wife and I walked into the small, smoke-filled room where the support group was meeting. It had

been only two weeks since our son had suddenly died. We were in deep shock, going through each day as if we were zombies, hoping we would wake up from this nightmare.

After the meeting, I met with some of the men while Buelah visited with the women. All of us had one thing in common: we had lost a child by death. They asked us how long it had been, and we numbly told them it had been two weeks. Then one of the women spoke up and said to us, “Hang in there—the second year is often worse than the first!” I remember thinking, *If that’s true, then you might as well go ahead and kill us right now. There’s no way we’ll make it if it gets any worse than this.*

Looking back, I see that she was trying to prepare us. Much of our first year was spent in a daze as we trudged through each day like sad robots. It was a surreal experience, something like waking up after having a general anesthetic. On one level you know you’re awake, and you can hear what the nurse is saying to you. On another level you’re still in a fog and will need assistance for several hours. Parents who have lost a child are in this fog for years, not just hours or days.

Fresh grievors don’t want to hear this truth, but it’s best to be prepared for what’s to come and to also be reassured that good news will come later in this journey. The first year was indeed spent in mind-numbing shock.

We both thought we were living our worst nightmare and hoped we would soon wake up and find out it was caused by the pizza we ate the night before. When we faced the second year, the second round of painful reminders on the calendar, we knew we were in this for the long haul.

When a runner is preparing for a race, it's important for him or her to know the distance of the race. The distance determines the runner's mind-set, preparation, and the strategy for completing the race. In a short race, there's no need to stop for water—it will be over in a few seconds or minutes. A marathon, on the other hand, requires careful planning. The runner dares not pass those important water stops.

My journal entry of April 15, 1995, may have led you to believe that our son had died only a few weeks earlier. But it's a snapshot of the struggles we were having a full four years after Denny's death. In those days I was weary and running low on hope. I came very close to giving in to my despair. In my office at church, I listened as an increasing number of people came to me to share their own experiences of pain and loss. I listened to those who were grieving the loss of a child, spouse, parent, sibling, or grandparent. I stepped into stories of unemployment, loss of friendships, and even terminal illness as some were starting the process of grieving their own deaths.

People seemed to know instinctively that my deep loss had somehow brought me to the place at which I might understand and sympathize with their loss. I identified with Rabbi Harold Kushner, the author of *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. People told him he was a much better speaker, counselor, and writer after the death of his son. In those days, people often left my office with appreciative tears in their eyes, knowing someone had really listened to them. I was becoming aware that the brokenness of my heart somehow resonated with the broken people sitting in front of me.

My ministry was taking a different direction, and I knew that somehow God was taking my sorrow and using it to help others as they mourned their own losses. I was glad to be of comfort, but I wanted to move more quickly beyond my pain.

I longed to help my family so they, too, could move past the pain. Yet when I went home and tried to “fix” my wife, she resisted my pastoral counseling techniques. She continued with her determined depression, day after day, month after month, year after year.

At times it felt as though we were chained together on some sort of death march, much like the stories that came from the prisoners of war in World War II. They were often deprived of food and water and had to deal with frostbite and illness. Yet they were forced to

continue their long march until they either fell and died or reached their destination. Bereaved parents feel as though they're on a long, sad march but have no final destination. We feel as though this overwhelming sadness will be with us forever.

We're expected to move on, yet something within us resists these expectations to move on so quickly. A good analogy might be a high-priced professional athlete who's expected to play in an important game. He or she is hurt but is taped up and sometimes drugged to make it possible to continue participating, even though he or she really should not be competing. We fans know the athlete is hurt and can sometimes see blood seeping through the bandages, and we applaud the bravado of the fierce competitor who plays through injuries.

Bereaved parents are also learning how to play hurt, but the casual onlooker has no idea how badly they've been injured or how long it will take to recover.

Perhaps we should return to the days when bereaved persons wore black armbands or displayed symbols in their front windows that indicated a death in the family. On Ash Wednesday the priest or minister takes ashes and carefully makes the sign of the Cross on our foreheads. We want all to see—for a day—that we Christians are a people of the Cross, living between Good Friday and Easter Sunday.

For the newly bereaved parent, though, every day feels like Ash Wednesday, and we want everyone to see and understand the devastation of our loss.

Yes, bereaved parents learn how to play hurt.

Our injury is made even worse by people who try to fast-forward us through our grief. They suggest we should come to some sort of closure. In my attempt to ward off the shallow words from those who spoke about closure, I borrowed a phrase from another griever whom I heard say, “People close on houses, not the death of a child.”

I found a better word that more accurately described the task before me—to *reconcile* myself to my son’s death.

I suppose I first noticed this word, *reconcile*, just after I opened my first checking account as a young adult. After the first month, I received a statement from the bank with instructions about the importance of reconciling my checkbook to the bank statement. It was imperative that my checkbook reflect the same balance as the one on the bank’s statement.

In order to reconcile myself to Denny’s death, I had to go through the process of reconciling my heart—not my head—to the reality of his death. I had no idea of the amount of time this process would take for me and my family. Looking back over my “before Denny’s death”

years (BDD) as a pastor, I recall several times when I looked into the sad eyes of someone who had lost a child by death and wondered why he or she was having such a hard time recovering from the loss. I'm quite sure I said some things that sounded very pastoral but served only to hurt or cause the grieving parents to question their own sanity as they tried to come to terms with their painful loss.

By the way, I have already asked God to forgive me for the hurry-up-and-get-over-it words I spoke to countless grievers I encountered during the early years of my ministry. I wish I could take back those words. Perhaps this book will help educate and sensitize people to the length of time it takes for a parent to valiantly reclaim his or her life.

Few people whose children are all living understand the formidable task that bereaved parents face. Gradually, bereaved parents must face the realization that their lives, and the lives of their entire family, have been changed forever. The struggle before them is to find a new "normal."

One of the biggest lies a griever hears is that time heals all wounds. How I wish this were true! It isn't. Time is important, but time alone will not heal a broken heart. In my journey, it has taken time plus the company of others who acknowledged my pain and hopelessness.

During these past 16 years I have noticed some of the important factors that affect a griever's journey:

- Your relationship with the child
- The circumstances surrounding the child's death
- The age of the child
- The support of family and friends.

Your Relationship with the Child

I enjoyed a very close relationship with Denny. When he was born, I was fresh out of seminary and pastoring a small church in the south suburbs of Chicago that averaged about 50 worshipers on Sunday mornings. The church and parsonage were physically connected, so our living quarters, the place of worship, and my office were all under one roof. It was very convenient, especially in the winter time. In order to attend the worship services, we just walked downstairs, through the basement, and up to the sanctuary on the other side. My office was also near the sanctuary, so this arrangement allowed me to stay close to my wife and help out in those early days after Denny's birth.

When Buelah needed a break, I just left the office, walked a few feet down the hallway, and gave her a hand. I had a lot of experience helping raise my nine younger brothers and sisters, and I was comfortable with preparing the formula and feeding our son, changing diapers, and giving baths. All of this allowed me to bond with

Denny in a very special way. I imagine those early days together helped forge my strong relationship with him. Our family photo albums hold scores of pictures of us together, often with me down on all fours, giving him horsey rides and playing on the floor together. One picture shows the two of us holding a five-pound catfish we caught together. In that picture he is about four years old, and one can see the admiring look in his eyes as we shared that special moment with each other.

As he grew up, I made it a priority to attend every football, basketball, and baseball game, often as his coach but always as his biggest fan. Later, when he reached the early years of adolescence, a time when children tend to pull away from their parents, he often walked close to me, even in public places such as the shopping mall, holding my hand as we walked along together. I felt a bit uncomfortable holding the hand of my 13-year-old son in public and would often release his hand and reach up and rest my hand on his shoulder. Somehow that felt more manly than holding hands.

Across the years I've heard heartbreaking stories of parents who told me the very last conversation they had with their child was filled with words of anger and rage. They confessed they would give anything to have those moments back to do things differently. Their grief is complicated by the layer of regret that's added to their

already painful recovery. Sometimes an understanding friend or trained therapist can assist a griever as he or she works through those haunting memories. The Bible is wise on this point as we are encouraged in Eph. 4:26 not to let the sun go down while we're still angry.

In the years since Denny's death, I've had several grieving parents ask me how long they'll feel so devastated or how long it will be until they feel like living again. I tell them that I wish I could fast-forward them through their upcoming pain and suffering. I want to tell them it will be over with soon—but I'm reluctant to give anyone a specific time as a reference point for his or her grief. We're all different, and many factors affect the amount of time it takes.

In our case, it was nearly five years before we wanted to pick up the pieces and go on with our lives. As you look back over my journal entry, you can see the homesickness I had for Denny as you read the words from October 13, 1992:

I don't know why, but something triggered my thoughts about him. I just miss him and can feel his skin, his closeness, his hair, his scalp, I can almost sense his closeness tonight . . . and it is killing me. Oh, how I long to hold him again and tell him I love him and hear his words, "I love you too, Dad." Oh, how can

*I go on when my heart has been torn from me? Oh,
God—I'm still asking "Why?"*

These words were written more than 18 months after Denny's death, and I'm certain there were those who were close to me who would be shocked to know that this is what I was feeling at that time.

My wife and I each had a wonderful relationship with Denny. He often came home from school and, finding his mother in the kitchen, grabbed her and danced with her. I could hear them laughing as he dipped her back until her long hair swept across the floor. He had a very special relationship with her. When he was in elementary school, he took pride in the fact that his mom was the room mother. He loved having her on the field trips and always found a way to sit next to her on the bus.

Later, when he started driving, he often came to our bedroom when he returned home from a date or a night out with his buddies. Before going to his room, he would knock on our bedroom door and ask if he could come in. He would sit on the edge of the bed and spend several minutes with us, sharing the interesting things that had happened during his day. Before he left the room, he tucked the covers in around our chins and whispered, "You're the best parents in the whole world." He would kiss each of us on the forehead and then

quietly slip off to his room. He was a very affectionate young man who was comfortable with hugs and kisses.

Denny had obviously learned this bedtime ritual from us. When he was very young, we had established the nightly ritual of tucking him under the covers and whispering that he was a wonderful son and that we were very proud of him. As he was slipping off to sleep, we wanted him to hear our words of love and confidence in him. I wish we could have said our good-byes to him the night he died!

Circumstances Surrounding the Child's Death

Sometimes a child's death is preceded by months or years of chemotherapy, radiation, or other forms of therapy, as the parents watch the life of their precious child slowly ebb away. I've sat with anxious parents in hospital waiting rooms as they awaited the outcome of a long surgery on their child. My heart went out to them as I heard "Oh, my God!" screams as the surgeon grimly told them that their child had six months to a year to live. Their grief journey had begun. As they clung to hope and prayed for a cure, they also prepared themselves to say good-bye.

Sometimes it comes suddenly. While I served as a chaplain to state troopers, we knocked on the door and delivered the news no parent ever wants to hear: "Your

child is dead.” Watching a parent go into shock is one of the hardest things to witness.

Two days before I discovered Denny’s body, I had taken him to the doctor, and we had been told he had mononucleosis. Medications were prescribed, and he was advised to rest and let his body recover. We were planning to leave on a ski trip in two days, and the doctor said Denny could make the trip but probably wouldn’t feel much like skiing. The night he died, Denny wanted to sleep on the couch near the fireplace and television set. On February 6, just after taking our younger son to school, I found him. That memory is seared into my mind forever.

My journal entry of February 25, 1991, reveals what it was like for me.

I try to forget and even deny that he is gone, but the whole scene of finding him is firmly in my mind. To think I walked right past the couch and into the garage when I took Andy to school. It was very foggy, and Andy mentioned how hard Denny was breathing as he studied at the kitchen table the night before. I came back home, had a bowl of cereal, but could not hear Denny breathing on the couch as he lay there, about 12 feet away. I thought he must have turned the corner,

he must be better—he isn't breathing hard like he did last night. He will enjoy the ski trip more.

I went down to the family room, looked at his neck because I thought he was very still—I get closer—maybe I touched his arm—(this is too much to write about here). . . . I yell to Buelah, who is coming up the stairs from the laundry room, “He’s not breathing! Call 911!” I instinctively try CPR. I scream for Scott—he is an EMT. He comes quickly and tries to listen for a heartbeat. Buelah is crying and screaming into the phone. Scott throws up his hands and says, “Dennis, it’s too late. He’s gone!” I scream, “This isn’t supposed to happen to me, God! Where are you?” NIGHTMARE!

As I write these words, 16 years later, the hair still stands up on the back of my neck, and my heart rate increases as I allow myself to feel the horror of it all over again.

There are other factors that affect our grief journey. The child may have been murdered or chosen to take his or her own life. There may be unanswered questions and court hearings that add to the overwhelming pain a parent is already suffering.

Soon after my son died, a young teenage girl from our church was abducted as she spoke with her

boyfriend from a pay telephone. Her last words were screams for help as the line went silent. Now, after 16 years, she has never been heard from, and her parents have sadly reached the conclusion that she is dead. Her dad shared with me that he still hopes she has amnesia and that someday she'll walk through the door and back to her waiting family. Through the years he has struggled between hanging onto hope and grieving her death.

Age of the Child

I have served in what some would call a mega-church for more than 20 years and have stood with several parents who have suffered the death of a child. Some children died even before they were born, while others were well into their 40s or older, often leaving behind grandchildren for the grieving parents.

I have grieved with those whose children didn't live long enough for a parent-child relationship to develop. Their grief is a bit different as they mourn the death of dreams and a future that will never be. I recall the words of a loving grandmother as she tucked the soft blanket under the chin of her beautiful, stillborn granddaughter just before the casket was closed. Through her tears she said, "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

Obviously, this grandmother, along with the child's parents, will always grieve the child they never got to know and will always wonder what it might have been

like to watch her grow up, take her first step, start school, attend her first prom, get married, have children. They feel as though someone broke into their lives and robbed them of their most precious possession.

All these factors and others affect the length of time it takes a parent to struggle and reconcile to a child's death. This is one of the reasons it's not wise to say, "I know just how you feel, because I also lost a child." One never knows the heart of the relationship another has with his or her child.

Support of Family and Friends

I often counsel grieving parents who say that other members of their family feel they should be "over it by now." Grieving parents feel anger and resentment toward those who are trying to push them to a quick resolution of their grief. Often I have the task of trying to help the person in front of me and also educate the other family members, helping them understand the magnitude of this loss and the time it will take to recover.

Buelah, Andy, and I were very fortunate that our entire family was very supportive of us. I'm the oldest of 10 children, and they rushed to my side when they heard the news of Denny's death. They cried with me and, to this day, continue to share their memories of Denny with me. As I think of all the ways they supported us, I'll never forget that special prayer they had for us the day

after the funeral. Before they returned to their respective homes, we all stood together in our living room, and Bev led our family in asking God to give us “time-released” comfort over the next days and weeks to come. Later my sister Jeanette also lost her precious child, Megan, and once again the family moved quickly to her side, like EMTs rushing to a horrible accident. Buelah and I are blessed to have the unwavering support of our wonderful families.

Even with all of the support that’s available, there are times when a bereaved parent feels as though he or she has hit a wall. Marathon runners know about “hitting the wall.” This is the result of a build-up of lactic acid in the leg muscles, and it usually occurs around the 20th mile. The runner often feels as if an extra 50 pounds of concrete is strapped to his or her legs. Running through this pain requires almost superhuman effort. The water stops and cheers from the sidelines become especially important as sweat-soaked, weary runners try to find the courage to ignore their pain and press on to the finish line.

Bereaved parents need to know where their water stops are located. They need to know what messages to listen to from the sidelines. They need to know they can survive this grueling trip they never intended to take. In a word, they need to find hope that they can survive their

nightmare. My goal is that this book will help you face the journey toward your “new normal.” Be patient with yourself. This trip will take longer than you think!