When a Child Dies

Living With Loss
Healing With Hope

By Terra Trevor

Following my 15-year-old son’s death, my plans for our mother-son relationship sat like scenery on an empty stage: a last performance and the actors had departed the stage, but not by choice.

We had chosen to extend our family through adoption. Jay was my son borne from that choice, and adopted from Korea. In losing him, I lost my dreams as well as the reality of him.

I needed to come up with a new life for myself, outside adoption parenting and outside the reality of my son’s and my relationship each with the other. But how could I choose a destiny when I couldn’t even buy a new sweater without exchanging it twice before deciding on a color and the right fit. I was starting my life over from scratch, and I was terrified of making decisions, even little ones. I didn’t think I would ever care about anything ever again.

My mind felt glued shut, and my heart was beginning to feel like it was laminated, sealed in plastic to keep out further pain. Then I had a soul bleaching moment when I understood that I didn’t want to stay closed up and hollow feeling forever. There had to be a way to allow myself the space and years to grieve deep and fully and feel every ounce of the pain and yet continue to walk forward.

Jay, my son and my youngest child, the pole star of my life—had passed. I would never get over it. Nor would I ever be the same. I would not give up or give in to societies mistaken notion of getting over grief. I would find a way to learn to live with it and not allow it to hold me back.

The answer came as I stood before Mt. St. Helen’s. I stared at the way she looked years after her summit was removed by a volcano eruption. That day I watched the slate blue dusk blend into ragged peaks and lava domes. A friend once had a cabin perched on a bluff overlooking the lake, surrounded by gigantic pines. I pulled up the hood of my sweatshirt, my face strained into the wind. Fireweed and purple-red flowers dotted the level earthen floor, in a place where a forest and the cabin once stood. I walked, circling the crater, and saw wild violets blooming.

The mountain had been scattered and sundered into bits, and she survived. I swallowed a clotty grief deep inside my throat. A grief so wide it gave me laryngitis. Bold and enthusiastic thoughts of Jay filled me. I’m breathing proof he was once more than a photograph.

I shuffled out into the empty field of my mind to find enough words to make it through another winter of writing. Nothing quits. My life had changed into something I didn’t want, and I began gathering the pieces that were left of me, and coaxing them into growth. I was starting out
again, but like the mountain I’d lost all of my big trees. The horizon was still mine. I felt myself part of the mountain with hills catching the sunset through a furious wind, dust devils kicking up dirt. All my senses became alive, out on the edge. I imagined fireweed blooming on the burned over land in my heart, beginning purple petals.

*Terra Trevor is the author of “Pushing up the Sky, A Mother’s Story” from which a portion of this article is adapted. Copyright © 2007, Terra Trevor. All Rights Reserved. A version of this article was first published in the Dec/Jan 2006 issue of Adoption Today.

**When A Child Dies 10 Ways You Can Help**
When a child dies you may feel helpless and ill at ease. You can help, though. Here are ten practical ways to really help a grieving parent— from one who knows.

1. Don’t avoid us. Be the friend you’ve always been.

2. Listen if we want to talk about it.

3. Cry with us and don’t try to find magic words to ease our pain.

4. Don’t say, “Call me if you need anything.” Most bereaved parents won’t feel strong enough to pick up the telephone. Instead offer to do something specific.

5. Give special attention to and offer to take care of our other children. Siblings have not only lost a brother or sister to death, they have also lost their parents to grief.

6. Remember: Grief is exhausting. Grief feels like fear.

7. Marker events like our children’s adoption arrival day remind us our child is absent.

Pay careful attention to us on Holidays. Most bereaved parents dread holidays. Follow your heart and take a leap to reach out to us because we are deeply hurting. If we say no, ask us again year after year. Eventually we will feel strong enough to say, “Yes.”

8. Think twice before referring to your child’s arrival as “Gotcha Day.” Gotcha takes away from a birthmother’s loss, and only focuses on an adoptive parent’s gain. And it sticks in the throat of a mother (any mother) who has lost her child, whether to death or adoption. Adopting a child is a sacred event. Better to celebrate and hold the day in awe without feeling a need to name it. The English language does not carry words powerful enough to convey what loss and gain become when they are mixed. No child should carry the burden of the UNnomynmity of this mix. Parents, please claim but don’t name the day....

9. In the days and especially in years ahead share a fond memory and mention the name of the child who died in conversations as casually as you would any living friend or family member.

10. Acknowledging the date our child died by sending us a card or flowers is a wonderful way to remind us that you are remembering our child and we need not walk our grief journey alone.

*There is no timetable for grief. Be patient with us. We don’t recover from the death of a child, we learn to live with it, and over a process of years we begin to find a new normal.*