

Death of a Child

By Rich Edler

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“Grief is inevitable; misery is optional. It does no good to sit in a hole. It does no good for the loss of one life to lead to the loss of two.”

Reflections at Ten Years

Ten years? Sometimes it seems like yesterday. Sometimes it seems like it never happened. Most of the time it is somewhere in between. It has been 10 years today since Mark died.

When I wrote “Into the Valley and Out Again,” I chronicled first one day, then one week, then the first month and year. Now it is ten. Here are my thoughts.

The hurt never goes away. We never forget. We never get over it. We don’t want to. We hurt so much because we loved so much. But the focus on death and the event fades and the warmth of good memories replaces it. Oh, we can still go back there in an instant. Back to the night that will forever separate our life between “before” and “after.” But we now go back less and less. Time helps a lot.

I have fewer friends. Better friends, mind you, but fewer. I am out of the circle now. My Rolodex is cold. My networking, which used to be razor sharp, has atrophied. My power lunches have become tuna fish sandwiches. But the amazing thing is how much I don’t care. I miss some special people so I go out of my way to stay in touch, and that is enough.

I have new and different priorities. I move through life a little slower, a little more tuned to life around me, and to life gone too soon. I brake for sunsets. I hurt for the people who share this walk with me. Since Mark died, hundreds and then thousands of children have died. I feel for them and their families in a way I could never have understood before. I value people more than things, moments more than milestones, and I no longer equate *what I do* with *who I am*.

I am not having the life I expected to have. I recall an old saying, “Man plans . . . God laughs.” Dennis Prager, an author and Los Angeles radio talk-show host, said that unhappiness equals image minus reality. What he meant is that you are unhappy when your image of where you should be is dramatically different from where you really are.

When a child dies, the reality of the life we are going to have is altered forever. I am no longer going to be Mark’s dad. I am no longer going to join him at UCLA football games. I am no longer going to be a grandfather to the children he will never have. If that gap between image and reality is a recipe for unhappiness, well, then the reverse is

also true. If you “solve” the equation of happiness, then happiness equals image matched closely with reality. So I have had to change my image to match the new reality.

I like my new life better. This makes me feel guilty because I would trade my real life in an instant if I could have Mark back. But I really do like the person I have become since Mark died. I don't even know that person from 10 years ago. Back then my life purpose was to run a large advertising agency. Today, it is to give back gratitude for the joy of the life I have been given. I want to make Mark proud. I want to be a blessing to others. And I want to enjoy the journey, too. I still have a grief that goes unspoken. Who will listen at 10 years? Yes, I still miss Mark. But I miss him quietly and silently. I grieve for his loss, for the loss of the person he would have become if he wasn't forever 18, and also for the loss of the life I would be having if he were here.

I have an overwhelming sense of gratitude. I have been blessed beyond measure. I have a surviving son who has given me more joy than I could imagine any parent having, and now a beautiful daughter-in-law, and a granddaughter. Gratitude is one of the most helpful and healing things you can do on your grief journey. And with gratitude comes thanks. So in gratitude, Kitty and I made a list this week of the people who were there for us when we needed them most. These are the people who dropped everything in their lives on a moment's phone call and rushed to our side. These are the people with whom we are joined forever, and who no matter how far they drift, or what unimportant spats we might have, will always have a special place in our hearts. You make your own list. Then find those people, wherever they are, and say thank you.

I choose joy over sadness. If there is one overriding truth through these years it is simply this: Grief is inevitable; misery is optional. It does no good to sit in a hole. It does no good for the loss of one life to lead to the loss of two.

What does do good is doing good. To decide to lead the second part of your life differently and better than you would have before . . . in your child's name. When we do that, when we do one small act of kindness we never would have done before . . . when we reach out to other bereaved parents because we can and because we have been there . . . then the world is changed in a small way for the better, and then the actions we take become a living tribute to our child's life. And then the child is never entirely gone.

And that, my fellow compassionate friends, is how it looks for me.