## History Lesson in Relation to Grief and Death

## Praising what is lost makes the remembrance dear.   William Shakespeare

The United States has had a total of 43 presidents sworn into office since 1789 although we have actually had 44 presidents because Grover Cleveland is counted twice for serving two non-consecutive terms. Four of those presidents died of natural causes while in office: Harrison (1841), Taylor, (1849-50) Harding,(1921-23) and Roosevelt (1933-45) Four were assassinated: Abraham Lincoln (1865), James A. Garfield (1881), William McKinley (1897–1901) John F. Kennedy (1961-63).

At least 32 children of the presidents died before the age of five and dozens more before their 30th birthday. Rutherford B. Hays had seven children, three who died before their second birthday. John Tyler experienced three adult daughters’ deaths within a six year period. William McKinley and Franklin Pierce experienced the deaths of all of their children. John and John Quincy Adams each experienced the deaths of two of their children. Thomas Jefferson buried five of his six children and Abraham Lincoln buried two of his four children. All of the following buried young children: Franklin Roosevelt (infant), Dwight D. Eisenhower (son, 4 yrs. Scarlet fever) John Kennedy (premature son, 2 days) Ronald Reagan (daughter 9 hours after birth) George H.W. Bush (daughter 4, leukemia)

Six Presidents buried their children while in the White House: John Adams, 30 yr old son cirrhosis of the liver, Thomas Jefferson, adult daughter, (and 3 yr old son by Sally Hemmings) Franklin Pierce, son 12 killed in a train accident, Abraham Lincoln, son 12, Scarlett fever, Calvin Coolidge, son, 16 blood poisoning, John Kennedy, 2 day old infant son.

Interesting descriptions found about their grief experience include:

\*\* **John Adams** could not speak for years of his one-year old daughter.

\*\* **Thomas Jefferson** carried a lock of his daughter’s hair all of his life. (she died at 4 months)

\*\* **Grover Cleveland** found that the death of his twelve year old daughter “almost unbearable” (Baby Ruth for whom the candy bar was named after)

\*\* **John Kennedy** had to be pried away from his infant son’s coffin. (he also experienced the death of a stillborn daughter seven year earlier)

\*\* **Calvin Coolidge** was described as “a different person” after his sixteen year old son died of blood poisoning.

\*\* First Lady, **Jane Pierce** wore black for the rest of her life. (but she also experienced the death of all three of her children!)

\*\* First Lady **Mary Todd Lincoln’s** grief has been well documented including her “out of control grief” her “total withdrawal”

\*\* First Lady **Elizabeth Johnson** lived in seclusion on the second floor of the White House during the last year of her husband’s term after her 35 year old son’s suicide.

\*\* First Lady, **Grace Coolidge** died 50 years and one day after the death of her son. (although some reports say she died shortly before midnight and died on July 7th - the death anniversary of her son)

\*\* After Dowd Dwight (Icky) Eisenhower died (at 4 years of Scarlett fever) both **Dwight D. and Mamie** **Eisenhower** sent flowers and a note to each other on September 24th, the death anniversary of their child. (34 years later on the death anniversary President Eisenhower had his first heart attack and Mamie Eisenhower had her fatal stroke years later on September 23rd.)

\*\* First Lady, **Jane Pierce**, was so grief-stricken that did not attend her husband, Franklin Pierce’s inauguration after witnessing her only (of three) surviving son’s death two months before in a railroad accident. It is stated that she blamed his political ambitions for his death.

\*\* One writer stated that “**the Lincolns** were famously inconsolable” ( obviously not a bereaved parent!)

\*\* In his autobiography**, President Coolidge** wrote that “when young Calvin went, the power and glory of the Presidency went with him…I don’t know why such a price was exacted for occupying the White House.”

The following is the list of the Presidents who have grieved the deaths of their children.

George Washington 1789-1797 : step-son 1781

John Adams 1797-1801: daughter 2, 1770, daughter stillborn 1777, son, 30, cirrhosis of the liver 1800

Thomas Jefferson 1801-1809: daughter 2, 1770, daughter stillborn 1777, daughter 5 mo. 1781, Daughter 2 ½ yrs 1784, adult daughter 1804 (children with his slave Sally Hemmings: son, 2 wks, 1777, daughter 2, 1794, son 3, 1802,

James Monroe 1817-1825: son 2 yrs, 1801

John Quincy Adams 1825-1829: daughter 1, 1812, son, 28, 1829, son, 31, 1834

Andrew Jackson 1829-1837: adopted daughter 17, 1828

Martin Van Buren 1837-1841: stillborn 1814, adult son, 1866

William H. Harrison 1841: son 5, 1819 (he outlived 5 of his 10 kids – 4 young adult children)

John Tyler 1841-1845: infant daughter 1825 (of 15 children plus 2 with slave mother)

Zachary Taylor 1849-1850: daughter 5, 1820 daughter 1, 1820, daughter 21, 1835

Franklin Pierce 1853-1857: (all of his children died in early childhood) infant son, 1836, son 4, 1843, son 12 1853

Abraham Lincoln 1861-65: son 4, 1850, son 12, 1862

Andrew Johnson 1865-69: adult son 1869

Rutherford B. Hayes 1877-1881: three sons, 2, 1863, 3, 1866, 1, 1874

James Garfield 1881: daughter 3, 1963, son 2, 1876

Chester A. Arthur 1881-1885: son 3, 1863

Grover Cleveland 1885-1889: daughter 13, 1904

Benjamin Harrison 1889-1893: infant daughter, 1861

William McKinley 1897-1901: infant daughter 1873, daughter 4, 1875

Calvin Coolidge 1923-1929: son, 16, 1924

Franklin D. Roosevelt 1933-1945: infant son 1909

Dwight D. Eisenhower 1953-1961: son, 4, 1921

John F. Kennedy 1961-1963: infant daughter 1956, infant son 1963

Ronald Reagan 1981-1989: shortly after birth 1947

George H.W. Bush 1989-1993: daughter, 4 1953

I found this information fascinating. In light of the fact that I have supported and comforted, been supported by and comforted by so many bereaved parents that with this information and by viewing grief through a historical perspective, it creates the opportunity to look at bereavement through different eyes.

Yes, I have considered the fact that the numbers of child deaths may have been higher in the past two centuries due to the lack of using our current medical practices, immunizations and medical advances in treating diseases. Still, there is much to learn from this information… and if I ever take a history class again, I know will have already taken the preliminary steps for my research project!

I hope it has been useful, informational and perhaps given you an opportunity to view grief in a different light…