Grief Happens

Life and death give us lessons to learn everyday. If we’re aware, we notice the lessons in the media, on bumper stickers; in conversations and through our experiences, but what do we do with them? Do we heed them and heal ourselves by making different life choices? Or do we choose to stay stuck in our chosen state causing our own “death” in our grief? Often, we become so accustomed to life’s bombardment of information that we choose to view life from our surface level of involvement. We notice the signs, “Accidents Happen,” “Divorce Happens,” “S--- Happens,” “Change Happens,” but one of the invisible and most uncomfortable signs that many choose to ignore is “Grief Happens.” One problem with this sign is that we, who are in grief, do not have placards giving us directions as to the flow of the grief process. Further, people who don’t understand grief and loss and others who prefer to disregard it sometimes cannot support those who are grieving. Therefore, to survive a grief experience, those in grief hopefully learn that they are ultimately responsible for their own grief process (and changed life) and that “Things do not change, we do.” (Henry David Thoreau).

What many people who have not experienced grief or those who choose to ignore it, do not understand, is that grief is not an event that occurs for a certain length of time and then reaches a final ending. Reality is, grief is a life experience that one endures and one that lasts over a lifetime. The lack of this acknowledgement can lead to a tremendous amount of pain for the griever in terms of their reaction to others’ comments like “you should be over your grief by now,” “you need to move on,” “you’re crying too much” or an insinuation that you are mentally unstable because of your reaction to the grief.

One of the life lessons from bereavement is that “Grief Happens” too. It occurs at all times and any time whether it’s anticipated or totally unexpected. Because grief is a life-long process, we can be caught unprepared for our reaction at any time in our early grief process or beyond. While we are moving through our grief, we might think that we are progressing quite well but the pain of our grief can surface at the most inopportune, most surprising moments. Depending upon the means by which our loved one died, we can re-experience the trauma of the moment of death, the moment we found out about the death or our reaction at any time surrounding the death. This is common to relive those events during bereavement. But since grief cannot be scheduled, many find themselves overcome with the resurfacing of their pain during pleasant and/or normal activities of life. All of us can expect these assaults on our hearts without notice or forewarning because grief cannot be controlled. You may be listening to the radio, watching television or a movie, see a person, hear a comment, taste a food, smell a fragrance and grief can unexpectedly envelop you. An unforeseen reminder can surprise you at any time. One can expect these episodes because we surely can’t control when this might occur in our lives. With time, the frequency of these episodes may diminish but we need to know and accept that because grief is centered in the heart and because grief is a part of who you are now, the reminder of your pain may wash over you at any time.

I have survived many of these moments since my son Zac’s death on October 1, 2000 but I was totally taken aback when a song was sung in church recently that transported me back to my Grandmother’s funeral that occurred forty years ago. I had tears in my eyes and could not sing the song. It made me realize that yes, Grief Happens anytime, anywhere. And, I am a different person because of my grief and this is my world now. Further, I know I need to take responsibility for how I live my life differently and I must be aware of the lessons I have learned from the deaths I have grieved.

Yes, Grief Happens. Grief will be with us the rest of our lives and it will change who we are. But, we can also choose to be aware of and learn from the lessons that grief teaches us. Anais Nin’s comment about change supports what the bereaved learn through the life lessons of grief. “There came a time when the risk to remain tight in the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom.” I wish you the strength to blossom in your grief.