

Walking Through Grief – Camp Erin

by Merle Meyers



For young children, death is not integrated into their understanding nor perceived as permanent. This can be age-related or the result of their big people not sharing the realities of their own anxieties about illness and death. But death is still present in the media culture, and a child's perception of death gradually matures with age after the death of family members or those in the community.

During a recent summer bereavement camp for kids ages 6 to 18, we "Big Buddies" had seven of the under-10 boys in our cabin. One significant activity is called "The Grief Walk," an actual walk through the woods with the guidance of a trained juvenile counselor who discusses emotions of grieving. The Grief Walk makes campers' loss raw and real, and over time, enables them to process important grief information in bits and pieces. If this information isn't given to children in a reasonable and practical way, they will frequently blame themselves for losing their loved ones. Often at the end of the walk there are tears and sobbing.

As we walk on the path through the forest, the children, the counselor, and the Big Buddies come across a giant tree with a banner hanging from it. On the banner are the words **SHOCK** and **DISBELIEF**. In a slow and dramatic tone of voice, the counselor reads the words to the children, and then says:

- *After you received news of their death, you feel numb, like you're in a fog, in another world. You can't keep your thoughts straight; you can't remember things. You have trouble concentrating and completing even simple things. You feel bewildered. It's a*

nightmare and you are helpless. You ask yourself, "Is this how I'm going to spend the rest of my life?"

- *You don't understand how this could have happened. And you still sometimes even hear their voice. You just know they are sitting in their chair in the other room talking to you!*
- *These are normal human emotions that come with the news that your loved one has died. These natural emotions protect you. They help you process the death of your loved one properly, in due time. Shock and disbelief are normal and healthy.*

Then after a short period of silent reflection, we continue our walk along the path. Next, we encounter another banner hanging on a tall fir tree. The word on this banner is **FEAR**. The counselor pauses, reads the word, then turns to the children and says:

- *What do I do? Who will take care of me? How do I make it? Why is my world crashing down on me? It is the fear of what is unknown. I start to think about bad things that will happen to me at school, my dog dying, losing my mom next, things I normally wouldn't ever think about. Am I the new leader of the house? Why do people not want to talk with me about this?*
- *Grieving is a new territory we've never been to, and we don't know what to expect. Will this fear ever go away? Will all these things come true?*
- *But fear is a normal and healthy reaction to grieving a loss. And it's also normal and healthy to talk openly about your fears with someone you trust, like a loved one or a counselor. And since it is normal and healthy to talk openly about your fears, you don't need to feel guilt or shame. Guilt and shame just don't belong here.*

Then, after the pause and reflection, we continue to walk. As the path leads us up the hill, the counselor stops at a tree with another banner. After a deliberate pause, the counselor turns to the children and loudly recites the word **ANGER**.

- *When your emotions figure out you will be safe, and that you will survive this, then some of us get REALLY ANGRY! This is one of the many emotions we might feel when we grieve. Anger is a force inside us. And anger can be used for good or bad. What lies beneath your anger is your pain.*
- *Someone is responsible for the death of your loved one, and the world doesn't even notice. People all say, "I know how you feel." I know they don't. When they say, "I'm sorry for your loss," I look at their eyes to see if they mean it. Often, they don't.*
- *What if your loved one who died left you with a mess? Maybe you're angry with that person, or you're angry at God. But anger is normal, and when used in a nondestructive way, it can be a positive energy. Do you notice it is energy you haven't had before in your grief? Anger is the road out of the numbness and the fog. We are feeling emotion again. This emotion is like a ship charting its course outward. This is emotion moving outward toward healing. The more we express our anger in a positive way, the more we heal. Anger is the "Fight" in "Fight or Flight." Anger is your shield. Anger makes you feel tight.*

- *People may feel uncomfortable being around you with your anger, but that's not important. This is not their journey; this is YOUR journey.*
- *When we don't express our anger outward, our grief can become complicated. This is unhealthy. Bottled up emotions can make our tummy hurt and cause ulcers, lead to depression, or make us want to eat a lot more than we need.*
- *Unhealthy or destructive anger directed at things or others can get us in trouble, which can give us a new set of problems. You are already suffering enough, grieving the loss of your loved one. You know, the depth and width of your grief and anger is often at the same depth and width of your love for the one you lost.*

Then, after a short period of reflection, we continue up the path until we come upon a tall, tall tree with a banner that the counselor reads: **GUILT**.

- *"If only I would have been with her in the car, the accident wouldn't have happened." "Why didn't I notice how sick he was?" "Why wasn't I there when she died?"*
- *Sometimes we hold ourselves responsible for not controlling something we cannot control. When we talk to people we trust to have answers and tell us the truth, we find nothing we did or didn't do would have prevented the death of our loved one. You don't lock those guilt feelings up and put them away forever, but when the time is right for you, take those feelings out, talk with the ones you trust, or others going through a similar experience. Often when we are under the emotional stress of grieving, guilt can make you feel responsible. That doesn't mean you are responsible.*
- *It is ok to have regrets. "I wish I would have taken a little extra time to...." or, "If only I knew then what I know now." We all have regrets because we're all human. Regrets don't convict us of doing harm to our loved one who died, guilt does.*
- *In grief, guilt thoughts are normal and healthy when talked about and worked through with those you trust!*

Our journey continues farther down the path to the banner on the next tree. It says **SADNESS**. Again, the counselor pauses, then says:

- *Sadness is the heavy, dark gloom you feel on the inside. Everything you believe about who you are, why you're here, and what you're supposed to do in life seems under attack. It is a very dark and scary place toward which you turn inside. But why does this happen? Why do we have to go through this?*
- *This sadness comes from losing someone you love. This sadness makes us put the brakes on in life. It makes us re-think, and re-feel inside. You make a new space inside, and then in time, let the outside world, your friends and loved ones back in. Eventually there is no more room for your dark, painful sadness. The world, your friends, and loved ones replace your sadness.*

After a pause and reflection, we continue along the path through the forest. Most children are in complete silence, with a few crying or sobbing. The path is now meandering downward. Our journey is becoming less strenuous. You could even say, "The journey is

beginning to get easier." As we walk around a bend, we approach a large fir tree with another hanging banner. On this banner, the counselor slowly reads the word **REMEMBER**. The counselor says:

- *"Your loved one has died and will never be back; you don't want to let them go, and you shouldn't let them go. How you remember your loved one is unique to you."*
- *If somebody remembers your loved one differently, it doesn't matter. This is YOUR MEMORY. And your memory is your memorial to your loved one. This is how you carry your loved one with you for the rest of your life. Your memory includes the times and special things about your loved one you choose to stay with you for life.*
- *You must go backward and complete your memory of your loved one and events with them before you can move forward in your grief work. If we don't go backward and complete our memory we can get stuck in a boggy place where our grief is carried with us as we awkwardly try to move forward with our life. When your memory is complete, you are complete and ready to Move Forward. Your memory about what your loved one was like and why you loved them is what you will use to share with others. IT'S YOUR MEMORY!*

We reflect on our memory or our loved one, then continue down the path toward the meadow where our grief walk began. The counselor stops and looks at the seventh and final banner hanging from this tree and reads: **LIVING ON**.

- *This is not "moving on." People who don't understand will sometimes say, "Get over it," or "It's time to move on," meaning to leave your loved one behind and "get on with your life." Living On is to move forward with your loved one memorialized in your memory for the rest of your life!*
- *It's been said by a teen camper, "It's like letting go and holding on at the same time." Living On is moving forward with your loved one in your heart and memory.*

One camper struggled greatly through the Grief Walk. He cried a lot and insisted he just wanted to go home. The Big Buddy suggested he put that idea in a corral for now so he could finish playing with his friends, with the promise he could take it out of the corral later whenever he was ready. The little guy agreed.

The next morning around 2:00 AM, among the safety of the sleeping cabin mates, the boy began crying. I woke up and saw he was not awake, so I waited and listened. In his sleep he was pleading with his deceased father who had taken his life by suicide, *"PLEASE DADDY, DON'T GO...PLEASE DADDY!"* This went on for several minutes. I laid awake horrified, asking myself, *"What are we doing to these children? Do I go wake up a camp counselor to help him?"*

Then after about 15 minutes of silence I heard him again, still in his sleep, calmly say, *"Goodbye Dad."* This was a HANKY ALERT for me! I got to listen to him process his goodbye to his father in his sleep.

The next day, it was as if a huge weight had been lifted off the boy. He had a great day finishing camp, and he and his mother were the second-to-last family to leave the campground after the closing family barbeque with our 73 campers and their families.

One of the greatest privileges of my life was hearing this wonderful child in his sleep, processing his grief over losing his father. However you go through it, grieving is a process. We repeat our earlier request, please don't go through it alone.