

## ***SILENCE IS NOT AN ANSWER IN THE TIME OF GRIEF***

by Elizabeth Cross McDonald

This summer I survived the two most devastating realities I have experienced since my father's death in 1980. The first was anguishing in its inevitability: my 31 year old brother's death from the cancer that stalked him for seven years. The second was worsened by its utter uselessness and avoidability: the deliberate way virtually every friend and acquaintance, save my very closest, has avoided and ignored me during this time of grief.

I do not believe that those who knew about Al's death did not worry about me and my family. It is likely that many were concerned. But I know that most of my friends are young, and have not yet had a close family member die. Death is scary or un-real, and few can envision themselves in the position I have been in twice. In a word, they are ignorant about my feelings and how to react to them.

A few of the braver approached me with hearty, superficial greetings that suggested my absence but not its cause: "Well hello, nice to see you back" or "So schools about to start, are you ready?" This was, for all its well-meaning, very painful for me. I felt these people were using trivialities as a way of saying, "These things are more important than his death, and I'm more concerned about today's weather than how terrible you feel." With uneasy smiles on their faces, these people made me feel like a fool.

To a few, I said, "Perhaps you didn't know my brother died." The response was a muffled, "Oh, yes... I'm sorry." I stopped volunteering this information: it was awful to realize that these people, through all the banality, knew about Albert, and said nothing. Some people undoubtedly kept silent in the hopes that I would approach them to talk and they could then be duly supportive. This was a gross error of judgment. I needed to have friends voluntarily open their hearts in sympathy, as I was feeling vulnerable and afraid that those I turned to might turn me away. To me, the silence said, "Leave me alone, I don't care."

Still others made efforts to engage me in conversation, as long as I was able to be cheerful and not talk about Albert. To these people, my casual comment like, "Oh, I remember when Albert and I visited that person" was nervously ignored and met by an embarrassed silence. I needed to be able to remember my brother reflectively, without self-consciousness or shame. And even close friends could not understand that waves of grief, anger and depression affected me in ways I myself could not understand. How I needed their patience and support, their faith that I was angry at Death, and not at them.

My grief is now settling into the long depression that is a necessary step to healing. But every week, people on campus - maybe your friend or roommate - also face the unthinkable tragedy in a place where youth can lead people to feel immortal. These people need your support, and it's not hard to give it to them. If someone you know, whether closely or just vaguely, is bereaved, please don't be shy or afraid. Take the initiative, walk up, look into his or her eyes and say, "I am so sorry to hear about the death." Only one person did this to me. Though I was not particularly close to him, his generosity moved me to tears.

You need not give your philosophy on tragedy in life or your favorite remedy for depression. The bereaved person does not expect or want this. And if you consider yourself to be a close friend of the bereaved person, now is your chance to prove it. Listening - not avoiding the bereaved's sadness or being afraid to have the friend cry to you - is essential. If your friend

does cry, consider yourself lucky that he or she is comfortable enough to share these deep emotions with you.

And don't try to stop the tears - they are also a step to healing and must flow freely. If you feel anger or hostility directed at you, take comfort that anger and grief are interconnected. The friend is not angry at you, it is simply his desperate attempt to justify or focus the waves of anger and desolation that surge uncontrollably through him.

If the bereaved are surrounded by people who care, the grieving process is made less bitter and devastating. Yet caring and concern for your friend is meaningless unless you directly tell her that you do care. I understand that Dad and Albert had no intention of abandoning me that they left me through no power of their own. The intentions of my silent friends are much less clear. Remember this: Just say, "I heard, and I'm sorry."

Cendra (ken'dra) Lynn, Ph.D. Rivendell Resources [griefnet@rivendell.org](mailto:griefnet@rivendell.org)