

## HOW DO WE CELEBRATE OUR CHILDREN'S BIRTHDAYS?

In thinking about my son Eric's birthday, I begin to wonder exactly how I will "celebrate" – if that is the word. I know I need a plan for how I will spend that day without crying or staying in bed all day.

I remember watching the Disney adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. I recall a scene at the Mad Hatter's tea party where they were singing, "A very merry un-birthday to me." Is this how we feel about our child's birthday now? It really isn't an un-birthday, but would it be easier for me to celebrate an un-birthday?

Last year my son's birthday was only 9 months after he died, I knew it would be a difficult day for me. I spent the day with my daughter-in-law and grandson. We made a day of it at the Baltimore Aquarium. My grandson had such a wonderful time. While watching the dolphin show, the handler asked for a volunteer from the audience. To our surprise, the volunteer's name was Eric. I turned to my daughter-in-law, and said, "I think we know where we were supposed to be today." I then came home, talked about Eric, looked at his pictures, read the poem that I had written for him – and cried.

This year, I decided to buy cupcakes for three of the classes of students in the elementary school where do volunteer work. I also made an ophthalmologist appointment for my friend, Bob, who stays with us. Somehow, keeping busy during the day seemed to be a good thing to do.

We used to have birthday parties, dinners, cakes with candles. Now instead of those happy times, we have the pain of grief. We try to find a way to handle the loss of our child. On the day our child was born, we embraced him with hope, love, joy, without much thought of the future. We shared that wonderful gift of life with each one. Now that life is over, we relive every moment. For some of us there were years, for some others, months, days or even less. It isn't the length of the life that is important now. It is the fact that we had that life with us at all.

When we look at the calendar, as one more year has passed, the birth date is approaching. Our child isn't getting older; he or she has just been gone longer. For that, we now remember the date of his or her death. So, what are we supposed to do on the day that our child was born? As Eric's birthday approaches, I find myself at a great loss. Instead of celebrating his birthday, I am learning how to cope with a day that is filled with loss and grief.

So, here I am asking that question again. How do we "celebrate" the birthday of our child? I am sure each of us has tried different ways. There is no one best way. Each of us has to find what gives us comfort and honors our child's memory.

I choose to remember the day that Eric was born by recalling his birth, his first few days, weeks, months, years. I look at his baby pictures again. I look at pictures of him as an adolescent and then as a young man, finally, as a husband and a father. I try to fill my mind with comforting thoughts of the loving words we said to each other over the span of his short life of 36 and a half years. I try to remember his face and his voice.

The past year and a half since he died has been an extremely difficult one. But out of the sadness, I have found some joy. Without Eric, at first I had no idea what to do with myself. But somehow, since his death, I have been able to find an activity to fill the emptiness. A few months ago I began to volunteer at the local elementary school. I have found that gives me the opportunity to touch other children's lives as I touched Eric's. Even though I have a husband, step-son and grandson, all of whom I love, the pain of missing Eric is just so overwhelming.

The time I spend at school each day is a reprieve from the loneliness and sadness that fills my mind. As difficult as it is for each of us to live without our child, we find we must accept that this is the way it is. But we have a choice to make. We cannot change what was. We can only change the now. We can embrace life in any number of fulfilling ways, or we can try and hide from it. The choice is ours to make. I choose to live in the memory of Eric, reaching out to the children with love and kindness, just as I did to Eric.

Happy Birthday, Eric. In my heart, you will be 38. You will always be here with me. I am so thankful for all the love we shared. The wonderful gift of your birth. I will remember this today and always.