

## MID HUDSON NEW YORK CHAPTER

# Newsletter

together we remember... together we heal.

Kathy Corrigan Chapter Leader

www.mhbpusa.com





#### Please join us for our next meetings

Thursday, September 3<sup>rd</sup> -- Topic: The Roller Coaster of Grief Emotions
Thursday, October 1st – Topic: TBA
7:00 at The Children's Home of Poughkeepsie, 10 Children's Way, Poughkeepsie, NY
Call Kathy (845) 462-2825 for information

#### A WARM WELCOME TO NEWCOMERS

We understand how difficult it is to attend your first meeting. Feelings can be overwhelming; we have all experienced them and know how important it is to take that first step. Our stories may be different but we are alike in that we all hurt deeply. We cannot take your pain away but we can offer friendship and support. Bring a friend or relative to lean on if you wish.

#### ONE LESS SECOND GRADER

By Angela Miller

Signs of back to school are everywhere. For some parents it might be a relief. Summer is over, and the school schedule is a welcome change.

For bereaved parents, signs of torture are everywhere. Over-sized backpacks, school supplies, car drop off and pick up lines. It's a sucker punch to the gut. Everywhere you look there are painful reminders of what you're missing. Reminders of what could have, should have been. Reminders of what will *never* be.

It's too much sometimes. By sometimes I mean almost always. But it's especially much too much right now. It's hard to stay "positive" in the face of back to school. You grin and bear it, but people don't be fooled. Behind every smile there is a floodgate of tears threatening to tsunami you at any given moment.

Everything you wish would be is not. And the truth of that burns. It burns new holes in you. It burns holes in the old places that you thought you'd lovingly repaired. It aches in places you didn't know could ache. It screams a scream that reminds you of the wretched moment your life changed forever. Irreversibly.

This is the truth of being a bereaved parent. Milestones like this rip open your scabs all over and you *bleed*.

Today should be my son's first day of second grade. He would be *eight*. Instead he is dead

Instead, my Facebook feed is overflowing with the smiling, happy faces of my son's friends: another year older. Another *year*. His friends who look nothing like my baby still looks in my mind. Over-sized backpacks, toothy grins. Some with over-sized backpacks sans smiles.

And for us? Over-sized sadness and an ache that never leaves.

I try to imagine what it would be like to have just one picture of my son starting school. Just one picture. A toothy grin, or a scowl. Blurry or in focus – I'd take it. I long for just one school picture. One picture that I'll never get. Kindergarten, or preschool, one from first or second grade. Even if he never would've made it to second grade – I'd have taken that too. At least that would have given us six more blessed, sacred years with him. Six more years to watch him grow older.

Every time I see a new back-to-school picture I sob...sob...sob...My friends don't know this because they don't ask. Six years out few remember anymore. My son's name is a distant memory on most people's lips. A distant thought in their minds. He's been gone far too long to stay in the present. Especially in the frenzy of back to school. Life moves at warp speed. But for a bereaved parent time stands still.

We stand with one foot in the life we *had* and one foot in the life we *have*. With an aching heart often stuck in *what could have, should have been.* We straddle time and space.

It's hard to live like that.

(continued)

My son's name is the song of my heart. The sound of my heartbeat. He is my raison d'être.

It hurts that people forget that today one second grade classroom is missing one very special little boy. One less second grader. It hurts that an entire school day will happen today without anyone realizing someone was missing. It hurts that the world goes on without skipping a beat. Without calling. Or sending a card. Or saying his name.

Today might be just a tad bit more bearable if one person would take the time to remember. Just a simple, Hey Angela, I wanted to let you know I remember. I remember and my heart aches with yours. I'm sorry your baby isn't starting second grade today like he should be. I'm sorry you didn't get to walk your three sons to school today. I'm so sorry.

People forget... A mother *never* forgets...

First time back-to-school moms tell me of their sadness. And I get it. Sending your child off to school is emotional. How is it possible they are *already* another year older?! They grow up so fast.

I have two other children of my own. I get it. I really do. But I want to scream to these parents—YOU ARE SO LUCKY!!!!! YOU ARE SO BLESSED TO SEND YOUR CHILD OFF TO SCHOOL. YOU ARE SO BLESSED TO WATCH YOUR CHILD GROW ANOTHER YEAR OLDER!!!! You are so blessed to cry these sad back to school tears.

Some of us aren't so lucky. Or blessed. Or whatever you want to call it. In fact, *many* of us aren't. We feel the weight of it every day, and some days, like back-to-school day, it *crushes* us all over again.

Now please don't get me wrong. I'm not negating that the sadness of moms sending their kids to school is *real*. I know it's real. Many of these moms are my dear friends, my sisters from another mother. And I listen to them with compassion, and I feel every bit of their sadness with them. I just wish I could feel *that* kind of sadness too. I wish I didn't belong to the *other* moms' club. The one no one wants to join. The one no one can ever leave. I want to be sad in the same way the other moms are sad. I want to cry those moms' tears. *Not the forever-hole-in-my-heart-because-he'll-never-go-to-school kind of tears*.

Bereaved parents have been robbed of a lifetime of these precious milestones. Milestones that should be celebratory are instead like salt in an open wound. A wound that never fully heals. I would give both my arms and legs to get to experience the unique sadness of sending my son off to his first day of second grade. In fact, I would give my whole life to experience it for just one minute. Just one minute longer is always and forever the cry of a bereaved mama's heart.

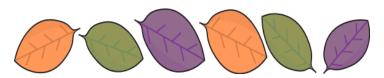
If only I could have walked him hand in hand to his teacher's classroom today. If only I could have been annoyed by the lengthy back-to-school shopping list. If only I could have written this Facebook post: Just dropped off my baby for his first day of second grade. Where did the time go?!! If only I could have read responses beneath his adorable picture: OMG, when did he get SO big?!! He is soooo adorable, Angela. If only I could have hugged him at the end of his first day. If only I could have tucked him in tonight and listened to the sweet song of him telling me all about his day.

If only I could have... If only I could... If only.

Note: If you have a bereaved mom in your life remember that she is most likely choking down sobs in the quiet of her house. The silence of where her child's voice should be is deafening. She likely sobs in the shower. In the car. Behind her computer screen. Behind her game face as she drops off her other child for his or her first day of school. Remember these back-to-school moms The too. bereaved kind. Remember the mother who has no living child to drop off at school at all. Please. Remember her. Show her you remember that her child should be starting school too. Show her in tangible ways that you care. Show her you love her. Show her you love her child. Show her you have not forgotten no matter how many years have passed.

And for the love of everyone, remember to say her child's name over and over again. All day, every day. It is music to her ears. A priceless gift to her aching heart. She will never grow tired of hearing her child's name.

Friends, remember that happy milestones are often filled with sorrow for many around you. Especially the milestones that people forget are hard for bereaved parents, like back to school. Look deeper and remember those who might need extra hugs, listening ears and a shoulder to cry on this time of year. You can be the difference between someone feeling utterly lost and alone, and someone feeling comforted and held.



Grieving is not a short-term process; it's not even a long-term process; it's a lifelong process. 'Having a future' now means that although your life will flow again, it will flow differently as a result of the loss. Your grief will become incorporated into your life history, become a part of your identity. And you will continue now, and forever, to redefine your relationship with your deceased loved one. Death doesn't end the relationship, it simply forges a new type of relationship - one based not on physical presence but on memory, spirit, and love.

# Please Join Us BONFIRE AND BARBECUE

A potluck picnic and a prayer/wish/intention burning ceremony in memory of our children

September 26th

6:00 pm
Pinky's Backyard

12 ½ Washington Avenue

Highland, NY 12528

#### TO THOSE THAT MOURN

Look on each day that comes as a challenge, as a test of courage. The pain will come in waves, some days worse than others, for no apparent reason. Accept the pain. Little by little, you will find new strength, new vision, born of the very pain and loneliness which seems, at first, impossible to master.

~ Daphne du Maurier

## THE SHIRT IN THE CLOTHES HAMPER

The shirt was at the bottom of the dirty clothes hamper when he died. I found it there when I got around to doing wash sometime after the funeral. Life must go on in spite of what happens to us, and the wash is part of ordinary day-to-day life. It was natural for the shirt to be there; I'd done his wash since he was born twenty-one years before. I stood and looked at it and decided to leave it there. Year after year, wash after wash, I left it there. This was a symbol of normal life. My life wasn't normal any more, and left it there to sort of hang on to the past // guess / It gave me comfort to see such an ordinary, normal thing as one of his shirts in the dirty clothes when my life was so extraordinary now. One by one such "hangings on" are done away with as we slowly re-enter life's mainstream again. We know the time is right for these habits to go, when we don't grieve for them when they happen. And they must happen, just as we must move on eventually. One day in a fit of neatness my daughter did the wash, and she washed the shirt. It must have been five years after her brother died. I felt a tiny surprise when I saw the shirt hanging clean in the closet, but I didn't feel the sorrow or even disappointment. The time seemed to be right for the shirt to leave the dirty clothes hamper. A simple thing, but this was a symbol of progress of sorts. I'm glad no one rushed me - I would have resented it. I was allowed this simple idiosyncrasy until it was natural to give it up. Left alone I probably never would have removed the shirt, just left it there, never really knowing why. But when this happened, I knew I was getting better. Finally, I was letting go, and that was okay. ~ Faye Harden

### SUMMER'S END

Always at summer's end there comes that moment when memory brings to me gifts from the past.

I see your face then, glistening in the sun.
I hear your laughter then, shared by the wind.
And in that glint of time I feel you near again, as you were, long ago, at summer's end.

~ Sascha

# WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO RESOLVE OUR GRIEF?

By Margaret Gerner

Grief is defined as the reaction to loss and to 'resolve' something means to change or transform it. Therefore, grief resolution means to change or transform our reaction to the loss of our child. This definition says nothing about forgetting the child, not missing her or not wishing she were still with us, many years after the death. It says we will think and feel differently about having lost him or her. It's been 20 years since my son, Arthur, was killed. I don't hurt anymore when I think of him. I am always aware that my family is incomplete and frequently I experience a feeling of regret for what might have been. But I no longer think of Arthur every day or feel the searing pain of loss that I felt for so long. I can remember what a beautiful child he was. I can remember cute things he did. I can remember the not-so-cute things he did, also. I remember many precious things about him, but remembering does not hurt anymore. Of course, not hurting does not mean that I don't care that Arthur is dead or that his six short years haven't affected my life - even today. It says I have changed how I react to his death. That's what resolving your grief means. It means that you can go through a day or week without intense pain and longing. It means that you can think of the years you had with your child and smile it means that you can enjoy yourself again without feeling guilty. It means that you can live and invest in new interests, even though they don't include your child, it means that you can think of him without hurting. It means that your reaction to your child's death is changed. As one mother put it, now I can think of his life more than his death. For me, that's resolution.

# SIBLING CORNER

### I'M STILL HERE

Laura Wexler, writer & assistant editor for "George" Magazine, was 17 when her sister Rachel, 18, was killed in a freak boating accident at a summer camp. Laura wrote "I'm Still Here" four years later.

At first "I'm still here" was the mantra I chanted inside my head, chiding myself for sadness, urging myself that, unlike Rachel, I was still living and must not be sad, must not miss a moment of time or anything else precious. Months later, unable to contain my grief, I said I'm still here as if I were the only one of my tribe to escape slaughter and wandering plains alone. I wanted to die. Not because I hate life, but because I wanted to see Rachel.

Many times my parents, washed in grief, looked at me through salt water, saying "You're still here. You're all we have left." Those words weighed heavily upon me, made me feel too loved, too lucky. And they made Rachel feel too gone. But, just as many times I wanted to shake my parents out of depression and back into life before Rachel's death, saying, "I'm still here. Don't you leave me, too."

For almost a year after Rachel died, I didn't say her name out loud. The sound of R and the A and the I felt foreign on my tongue. Later, when I joined a support group, the facilitator noted that I never said Rachel's name. It just hurt too much. And if I'd had my choice, I would have asked my parents not to say Rachel's name either. Any instance we now used her name was unhappy.

Talking about family or home or anything in my past was terrifying for me. Sometimes, as I told my story or recounted a memory, I said, "we" instead of "I." Pretty soon, though, I got the hang of checking over everything in my head before I opened my mouth. The thing is, though, if you tell a lie enough times, you start to forget the truth you're trying to cover up in the first place. I started to feel my memory blurring and that frightened me. Memory was my only link to Rachel.

I ask myself why I have such trouble talking about Rachel's death or even her life, and come up with a couple of things. I really believe no one understands my particular pain, the things I've lost, tangible and intangible, since Rachel's death. The only person that knows exactly how I feel is dead.

It's hard to worry about your own grief when your parents are not parental anymore. My mother, who probably told me when to take my first breath and how long it would last, abruptly withdrew from being an overbearing presence in my life. She never left me completely, but there were enough times when she'd look down at her feet and say quietly, "Laura, I just can't take this right now. I'm lucky if I can get up in the morning." Just as I wanted my old self, my old world back, I wanted a mother I could fight with.

My father sits at the head of the table, head bent to his chest, and pulls his glasses off to sob freely. This idea that you should be able to protect and comfort and be there for your parents even more than for yourself is particular to people on the brink of adulthood. Like me. In other words, if I were 12 or 13, few people would expect me to assume a parental role. But as I was 18, it was apparently okay for people to continually ask, "How are your parents doing? Are you helping them as much as you can?" I felt guilty enough being alive. And then to have people insinuate that my main function in life thereafter was to be a comfort to my parents made me feel worse. Because I honestly didn't see that my parents were remarkably comforted by me. They were sad when I was there and when I wasn't. And I couldn't do a thing about it.

# GETTING THROUGH THE ANNUAL REMINDERS OF YOUR LOSS

~ Carol Luebering

Memory writes on every page of the calendar, here a birthday, there a holiday, further on a wedding date. In the wake of death, those precious days bear a bittersweet tinge, a pang that the celebrations they mark will never be repeated with someone you have loved. Most of those dates are warmed by tender recollections; some are written darker than the rest. Whether this is your first turn around the calendar, or one of many, since your loss, these dates loom dark on the horizon. Tears that you thought were behind you swell again, and with them come a terrible loneliness.

Working Your Way Through. These days will not be wished away, even if your pull the covers over your head and wait for the sun to set; and perhaps nothing you can do will make them easy. You can meet these milestones head-on and make them into a bridge stretching toward a brighter tomorrow. Begin by planning a departure from your usual activities; take the dreaded day off work, if you can. No use in pretending that this day is like any other; it isn't. Don't let anyone, yourself included accuse you of "wallowing" in grief. Taking time to lean into your sorrow is facing reality.

**Reach Out.** Choose your company for the day; don't wait for someone to remember. Your grief easily slips

out of mind, even within the closet circle of family and friends. Start dropping reminders when the day's approach first begins to haunt you. Don't assume that the best company is those with whom you have always spent that day. You might be more comfortable with someone who has been in your shoes. Claim the offers of "anything I can do" which were so generously made when your loss occurred. Be specific; say that you want someone to drive you to the cemetery, that you want company for shopping or lunch, and that you want a shoulder you can cry on, or even that you want someone to help you think of some way to mark the day.

Look Back. Claim your memories, those bits of history which have made you who you are. Someone once observed that "memory is the power to gather roses in winter." Clip your bouquet; get out the scrapbook and the old birthday cards; line up the gifts and souvenirs you cherish. Call to mind all the joys and struggles which shaped this interrupted relationship. Write a new obituary, one which contains all the personal details you wouldn't have entrusted to the newspaper even had there been room. Include a physical description; the color of eyes and hair, the way their nose crinkled, the shape of their hands. Add the qualities which were important to you. Admit your regrets. If you are haunted by a bit of unfinished business, and unresolved quarrel cut short by death, words of love and appreciation left unspoken, say what you need to say in some formal way by writing a letter or by expressing your feelings to a valued friend. Mourn the dead dreams; the hope of seeing a child grown, celebrating a milestone. Claim your grief. Give yourself permission to cry as much as you need to. Relive once more the illness or accident which precipitated your loss. Recapture the feelings which swept over you at the time of death. Recall, too, the signs of care which surrounded you in those difficult first days. Reread the cards and notes, the visitors' book. Feel again the warm hugs; the gentle pressure of others hands in yours, the sight of friends gathered to grieve and to pray with you. Survey your journey through the calendar so far, with all its ups and downs. Take stock of how far you have come, of the unexpected strengths you have found within yourself. Congratulate yourself for coming as far as you have, for getting out of bed on the days when that seemed impossible, for learning to manage the everyday stuff of life without someone who once was part of life's daily structure.

**Look Forward** Close at least one small door on the past. Make a conscious act of forgiveness to someone; the love who abandoned you, the killer, the doctor who didn't diagnose soon enough, yourself. Clean a closet, even if all you can do is rearrange it. Create a new holiday ritual. Go out for Thanksgiving

dinner instead of fixing the turkey yourself. Replace the big tree with a small one trimmed with bows instead of getting out ornaments. Mark a birthday by giving just one thing which belonged to the person you mourn to someone who will cherish it. Celebrate today's joys. Count the blessings you have, especially the people who grace your life with love. Ask yourself which of those relationships need attention, to whom you need to express your affection while there is still time. Mark your calendar to make a friendly phone call or extend an invitation. Plan just one thing for the future. Think big, if you can; a change of job, a special vacation trip, redecorating the house. Or think small. Promise yourself lunch with a friend next week; get a book you have wanted to read from the library; rearrange the living room furniture. Dream of being whole and happy; imagine yourself facing life with confidence.

Take Heart. However unimaginable such wholeness may seem, it is the end toward which grief's journey leads. Time, they say, heals all wounds. There is some truth in that; leave a broken bone alone and it will mend. But only a fool hopes that time alone will make an unset bone straight and strong. In the same way, time alone heals grief without bringing wholeness. The turns through the calendar mark the passage of time; one year, two years, ten. But time works its magic only when it is used well. Face the truth of your sorrow and the truth of the healing which has already begun; and believe it; those of you who are now weeping will one day laugh again.

When I risk telling who I am, I give a gift to myself and to my friends...

