

A Different Kind of Grief

My oldest son Aaron died of a heroin overdose in May 2007. He was 33 years old and had battled addiction for almost 20 years. After he died, I was encouraged by friends and family members to attend a grief group specifically for parents whose children had died. But, I was not ready to attend a grief group immediately following his death. I needed to shelter my grief for a while. Sharing my grief with friends and my Befriender from church kept his death personal; close to me – I didn't have to publically *feel* and admit to the world my son had died. But after a couple of months had passed, this wasn't enough. The need to connect with other parents who were grieving the loss of their child became bigger need than my need to insulate myself.

The grief groups met in a neighborhood church nearby. The first 30 minutes of the group involved a volunteer speaker or expert on grief offering us some tidbit of their experience or knowledge for our support or pondering during our small groups which followed. Two of the most important things I got out of this group really had nothing to do with what was said during the lecture or shared in small group. Most important was that when I walked in I could feel my body breathe a sigh of relief. Here I didn't have to provide any pretense; my breathing became deeper, my shoulders relaxed. The most important thing in my life became focusing on me and my grief process. Second was that Bob, my husband, often joined me at these groups. Just knowing this meeting was as important for him as it was for me created an unspoken grief bond between us. I was always amazed when he would share something in the group that he had never shared with me personally; the group seemed to create an opening point between us that we could not always find by ourselves.

The other thing that became a draw to the group was a woman whose adult child died of alcohol withdrawal related complications in a hospital. We had an instant bonding and are still in contact today, five years later. Although I connected to the general loss of all these dear, sweet parents who like me had to live with that upside down mortality of outliving our children, I always felt an disconnect from them with exception of this one particular woman . I think this was based on two things. First, the children of many of these parents had achieved a successful life by most societal standards before they died. This had not been Aaron's experience. Second, although several died accidentally or unexpectedly as did Aaron, the addiction card had never been played in their life. Although some of the children had died of illnesses, the feeling that I got from some of the group members was that addiction is not really an illness but a pitiful character defect that eventually caught up with Aaron. In other words, his death was his own fault. I do want to make it clear that I do not believe this was done maliciously, but simply because of the ignorance that much of the general public shares about the disease of addiction.

Because I had been active in family recovery groups for some 30 years and was familiar with the thought process of addiction as disease, I found this response from some group members appalling and stigmatizing. And, I didn't feel like my own personal grief group was somewhere that I needed to advocate and educate. This feeling that I needed to justify Aaron's illness created a cavern between me and the group except for my connection with the woman who had also lost a child to an addiction related death. She also knew and understood the disease model of addiction; she understood all the loss of dreams that transpired before Aaron's death because she watched it happen to her child, too. While Aaron was still alive, I lost hope as I watched each of his dreams drop away; but I never lost *all hope* for new dreams. I believe in recovery; I knew it was possible for Aaron as it had been for many friends and family members. This is one of the

pillars of the family recovery group that I attend: one must never give up hope that the addict/alcoholic can change. And of course I prayed for his recovery and for new dreams and a new life. But when he died all of those losses kept at bay by the hope of his recovery were reignited on his funeral bier by the grief, despair, guilt, and stigma that only a parent or loved one of an addict/alcoholic understands.

I do understand that some of these feelings can also happen when any child has a terminal illness. But, usually there's not a stigma attached to the illness. When I would share in my grief group about all the loss of dreams that occurred when Aaron was in and out of recovery, I would often get a compassionless blank gaze back from many group members. Didn't they understand that addiction was a disease from which there is no cure, only recovery? Did they believe that Aaron got what he deserved: live by the sword, die by the sword? Whatever the reason, either their ignorance or judgment kept me from connecting and trusting the group. This left me feeling isolated and even more destitute in my grief. I decided to leave the group.

After that I also made more of an effort to share my grief with family members other than my husband. But this proved unsuccessful. They seemed unwilling or unable to talk about Aaron; either to reminisce about the good parts of his life or share how they felt about his death. It became clear his loss was different for each of them. Wherever each of them were in their own relationship with Aaron had an effect on how they dealt with his death. I believe his addiction-related death contributed to their mix of sadness, shame, guilt, remorse, anger or acceptance they previously experienced in their relationship with him as an addict. From my viewpoint, it kept us from being able to process our grief together and felt very isolating for me.

My loss and despair grew monumental. It was as if I had turned down a road of pain that had no ending or solace. As I prayed for consolation, God began to bring a different focus into my life. Instead of focusing on the “why” Aaron died, I began to focus on the “what” – the disease of addiction. I began to educate myself voraciously about addiction. I read everything I could get my hands on and went to as many educational seminars as possible. I received certification as a Recovery Coach from Minnesota Recovery Connection because I believed this service could have given Aaron a better chance at recovery. Even though it was too late for him to benefit from these services, I found it consoling to have the opportunity to help others. More and more light bulbs went on as to why Aaron was unable to recover. I learned how the years of using affected his brain. Addiction affected his brain’s ability to its ability to inhibit thoughts around drug use and also caused him to lose the capacity to remember all the consequences of using.

It was through all this research that I came to understand that just like a diabetic may wait too long to change their lifestyle and get on insulin so his life can be prolonged, addiction can progress to the point that one’s brain and soul cannot recover. I used to believe that Aaron died because he was incapable of being honest with himself. One of the books that I read and studied over and over again was *The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous*. I was obsessed with a passage in Chapter Five, “How It Works”. “Those who do not recovery are people who cannot or will not completely give themselves to this program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves.” Aaron had started lying at an early age; it was second nature to him even before addiction took hold of his life. I believed that his own dishonesty had caused his death. Today I believe it provided a false sense of closure that I needed at the time of his death in order to keep going on. ***But in reality this belief about his***

dishonesty, made me no better than all the others in my grief group who looked at addiction as character defect.

I blamed Aaron's death on his dishonesty until my continued recovery allowed me to absorb the rest of the words that followed the passage in "How It Works". **"There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault. They seem to have been born that way."** And, this rang true about Aaron. Suddenly I knew that Aaron's addiction and death had nothing to do with his dishonesty. Why and how he died from addiction became something I could now accept as between Aaron and his Maker; it was not my job to figure out, or a position I needed to justify. It just became a mystery that I finally acknowledged and accepted. It was the beginning my own freedom from Aaron's addiction and helped me turn another corner on my grief journey.

Over the last five years as I processed all this understanding it fueled my own passion to offer grief support to those who have lost a loved one to addiction. Aaron always felt like he led a very purposeless life. If I can alleviate some of the pain for those who lost a loved to addiction, or at least be able to look into their eyes with the understanding of how the stigma and disease of addiction has complicated this different kind of grief, then my son's life is not purposeless anymore.