



Family and Caregiver Education

BEREAVEMENT

Not Forgetting

It is hard for me to confess how I felt about parents who lost children before we lost Lee. I felt sorry for them, of course, and each time it happened, the earth seemed to shift under my feet a bit. I could not imagine how we would survive the loss of any of our three daughters. When we visited my brother-in-law's house, however, there was a picture on the mantel of Larry, the son they lost to polio during World War II, long before I knew my wife. I was sure it was a terrible loss, but it seemed that they had erected a shrine to his memory and that his young brothers, one born quite a while after Larry's death, had to compete with this sibling, who could do no wrong. They never seemed to get over Larry's death, although they lived more years after he was gone than they had before. I hope I never felt they should get over it, but I fear I did.

And now I had pictures of Lee in our living room. We hoped that we did not enshrine her memory and make it impossible for our other two daughters to compete with their sister, who could no longer make mistakes, fail, be mean or thoughtless or spiteful. I hope we did that, but we did not get over the loss of Lee.

I wondered if we could and if we should. No one told us to snap out of it, but I feared our grieving would become boring to our friends. Should we close that awful chapter and get on with life? When I mentioned our loss in a column, the mail would come in from others who shared this special grieving, and most of them wondered if they would ever get over it.

In responding to them, I imagined my memories of Lee fading. Her glasses, her face, the way her hair fell toward her shoulders, how she walked. Her smile. The intensity when she practiced the oboe. Her thoughtfulness, her temper, her tears. All gone. Erased. Forgotten.

Not remembered, Lee would not appear in my dreams, never come quietly into my office and sit while I wrote. I would never imagine I saw her walking across campus, noticed her driving by in a car we no longer owned, heard her practicing in the other room.

I would never feel the guilt at not staying by her bed in the hospital, never relive the blurred days after her death when I felt that I was walking in an ocean of molasses, never feel the always unexpected, always painful sense of emptiness at her passing so many years ago.

To those who wrote asking for help in getting over it, I gave this counsel: Imagine that you could forget. Think how terrible it would be not to dream, not to remember, not to miss, not to be sad, not to live with this lively shadow that no one else can see by your side, always alive in memory, laughing, teasing, worrying, suffering, sharing the life you go on living.

Remembering may be a celebration or it may be a dagger in the heart, but it is better, far better, than forgetting.

—Donald M. Murray, *The Lively Shadow: Living with the Death of a Child*, Ballantine Books, 2003

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