



## **Grief Is Like Your Shadow**

Back in June of 1995 is when grief and I locked horns. I remember it well. It came on me suddenly, with little warning and then draped over me like a black cloak on a man I no longer knew. Like my shadow, it followed me everywhere, and everywhere I turned, it was there staring back at me, almost tempting me to try and shake it off. But I learned from my experience that grief is like your shadow, it's always there it's just that certain conditions make it clear for you to see. You can't run from grief, you can't hide from it, and you can't shake it off of you like it was a bug, but with proper attention and determination you can learn to live with it, accepting it for what it is.

And so it was, in an instant, a split second, my life was forever changed. My wife of twelve years, Ann, was told she had advanced lung cancer. The doctors couldn't operate; they had to poison her with names of drugs as long as my arm. This they told us might slow down the onslaught but ultimately nothing would stop the insidious progress of the disease. Basically we were told to begin making plans back home; she had a year to live, maybe 18 months, anything more than that would be a miracle. Our sons were seven and nine back then and needed their mother as much as I needed my wife. But in the end, all of that was striped away like old paint off cracked wood.

Many people think somehow they can outrun grief. If they just keep moving, maybe the pace will knock it out. Eventually, maybe it will just whimper away and leave

them alone. But, I have learned the hard way that grief doesn't work that way. There is a circle to grief. Metaphorically speaking you can go around in this circle trying to find your way back to some place that no longer exists, dismissing your feelings along the way but marching forward nonetheless thinking you are making progress. Or, you can go through the circle, feeling the pain and letting it burn inside of you and one day when the fire goes out you find yourself in a new place, a better place because you allowed yourself to grieve.

For months I marched through those storms. Crying any chance I got, at work, at home, at church and my favorite place nestled in her arms. I firmly believe that by wearing my pain on me sleeve I was allowing myself a chance to morn, a chance to grieve and then over time, a chance to heal.

In my book, *THE GREATEST GIFT- A Return to Hope*, I try to teach the lessons I learned about grief. I learned the hard way that it doesn't always start with the death of a loved one, it's an emotional effect caused by a thought. In other words, I started grieving from the first time I heard those words "it's cancer." Maybe some of you have grieved over a divorce or a job loss, when someone dear to you is lost; there is the opportunity to grieve.

Don't avoid it!

The past can't be fixed but it can be learned from. Ann didn't die after 18 months; she died in 1998, 41 months after she was given her death sentence. 41 months of marching with her on a path littered with ice and glass, on hills to climb up and tumble down. I learned as I went, marking my steps with the hope that one day I would find my

way back to that place we had. But after she died, that place died too, and it was time for me to find a new place.

If you are grieving, here are some steps that might help you find your way back to living a productive life again.

**Feel the pain-** To often people tend to bury their pain. Maybe in alcohol or other drugs and they try to make busy from their grief, only to realize several years later it kept following them. Grief is not something you can avoid, you have to feel it, let it sink in and actually live with you for a while. The tears are your gift to teach you that you're vulnerable and sometimes life isn't any fun at all, but allow yourself to feel how you feel. One day you might feel sad, another day angry, another day overwhelmed but whatever the day is and whatever the feeling is, let it happen. Remember, the deeper the love, usually the deeper the grief but that means you are feeling the pain and you are one step closer to being well again.

I learned that crying felt good. If only for a moment or two but eventually those moments added up to an hour and then a day. The slow release of tears meant I was feeling the pain and not running from it. Crying is all a part of the natural progression of grief.

**Seek help-** Find the right people who can help you and it's not always family. If you're a spiritual person, ask God for His help through prayers. Whatever help you get, these people need to be patient with you and listen to your story until the cows come home. You will learn that some people run away from the fire, others run to it, some just admire the flames and do nothing at all. The people who run to you won't judge you and tell you how you should feel. They will just love you and will do anything for you even if

it's just hearing your voice. Don't be afraid to lean on these people as they were sent to you for a reason. Kindly distance yourself from the people who are not as capable or as willing to help you. They may one day return to you, but for now, they are not the people you need in your life.

You may also need professional help. In doing so do not consider this a sign of weakness, rather it's you surrendering to the fact that you can't do this alone. Grief Support workshops can be great ways of expressing your feelings and meeting people who have had similar experiences to you. When you reach out for help, you will find out soon enough that you are not alone in your grief.

**Deal with the pain-** The old adage "time heals all wounds" doesn't apply to grief. Only time plus hard work and help can heal the wound properly. Think of it like breaking your arm. At first you feel the pain, then you find someone to help you, then you begin to deal with it by seeking medical assistance. The doctor sets your arm in a cast where it begins to heal. In fact, it heals even stronger than before, but it wasn't time alone that healed the wound, it was time and attention to it. After you've cried a million tears and told people about your pain, begin doing something about it. Chip away at your grief each day. Attend grief workshops and make new friends. Begin writing a journal, take long walks, and take care of yourself and your loved ones all the while continuing to grieve. Give yourself permission to grieve and don't rush your grief and don't let anyone rush it for you. Even after a year or two you'll still have good days and bad and it may be worse at certain times of the year, but over time and with the hard work you can begin to merge back into traffic again with a slight breeze at your back pushing you forward and back into life.

**Make choices-** The ultimate choice is choosing to live again. It's the greatest gift you can give yourself. After Ann died I had spent almost four years grieving and I wanted to live again. I wanted to have fun again and to resume my life minus my wife and best friend. I couldn't change what happened and I had come to a place of acceptance. I could choose to stay stuck or I could choose to move on. I chose to move on but I never let her go. A part of her will always be with me. She more than anyone made me into who I am today and I'll always be thankful for the time I had with her, not for the time that was swept away. It took me years to come to this restful place and it came with pain and suffering, but I found it nonetheless.

**Moving on-** Moving is when you are able to take down the shrines in your house and emotionally relocate your loved one to a place in your heart where they'll always be. Studies have shown that about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of all people who go through grief are successful at taking their life to a new and meaningful level. These people have been called triumphant survivors and they actually transform themselves. They accept what happened and they chose to allow this experience to build their character. People who have successfully moved on replace their sense of anger and pity with more meaningful purpose driven feelings. They commit to giving back and marching forward, to serving others who might be going through all that they did. They conduct fund raisers to bring awareness and money to a cause. They write books about their experience so others will benefit. They wrap their arms around old friends and just listen.

Could this be you someday?

Adversity, big and small will affect all of us sooner or later but it will affect all of us differently. For some they let it consume them and they spend the rest of their days

wallowing in self pity eventually spilling onto a beach, washed up. Others work at their grief marching through it, making good choices along the way. Choices that will take their lives in a direction that they can feel good about. One day they look back and say, “I’m not happy with what happened, but I am happy with what happened to me.” None of us want to lose a loved one, but it happens for reasons beyond what we know.

First you grieve, and then you chose to live again. It may sound easy, it’s not, but it can be done. If you arrive at this place, you will know it not by a smile on your face, but by a sense of happiness in your heart and the joy in knowing you are a survivor. You came through the pain, perhaps the hardest struggle you’ll ever endure and you made it, you returned to a place of hope.

The shadow that followed you and haunted you and seemed much bigger and stronger than you is now nothing more than what it is. A shadow, we all have them. Remember this; it’s the elements of nature that make the tree stronger, the sun, the cold, the heat, the rain and the wind. A constant cycle of transformation, everyday its digs in fighting to survive.