

Moving Past Grief

Loss of a Child - My Journey Back to Joy



by Dhyanis Carniglia, Certified Grief Coach

*One person's story frees the secrets
held in the silently suffering heart of another.*
Lynn Jericho

PREFACE

Raised in the 1950's in a "do-it-yourself" family that did everything together, I expected the best out of life. I watched my kind and fair father help my mother with all her artistic projects. He helped her create her garden, casting a large concrete aggregate bowl for her bonsai tree on the patio (from directions out of Sunset Magazine). He hauled beautiful pieces of driftwood and stone from our camping trips at beaches and rivers. We all learned how to develop our own black and white negatives and photos in Dad's homemade darkroom. We three kids each had our own bow and individualized set of arrows from his workshop for the local archery range. We helped pick grapes for the home wine making venture. We all learned to sail 8-foot "El Toros" on Lake Merritt. We attended catechism class and piano lessons, and were expected to attend University.

So when I dropped out after 2 years of UC to marry a fellow I had known in high school, but who had been expelled and who was now AWOL from the Navy, I disappointed everyone. When I realized I had landed in an abusive situation I stayed on, hoping to cure his Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome (not ever discussed back then) with persistent love.

A year into it I gave birth to a miraculous baby girl, Serena Anne. That remains one of the highest moments of my life, holding this tiny new perfect person for the first time; feeling the unbreakable bond of motherhood.* I experienced the full joy of nursing her and getting to know her sparkling personality. Her Daddy loved her too, but he gradually buckled under the responsibility of a family. By Serena's first birthday it was apparent that she too was threatened by his mood swings and unpredictable violence. I called my father who helped us move out and sequestered us until it was safe.

It was now 1969 and the youth culture had burgeoned into a philosophy which aligned with my free spirit essence. So I entered this world as a single mom with a job at a San Francisco Ad Agency, weekend concerts in Golden Gate Park with the flower children – the works! When all this led to a move to Montreal, then a long journey "on the road" to a remote village in southern Mexico (with my artist gal friend from England), my daughter was my constant companion and teacher. Returning home to California, we settled near the family cabin, where she entered first grade, and I actually found a man my family liked. We joined forces in a carved wood sign business. All was well.

* My sister had hand-copied in her card congratulating me on the birth of our baby the verse "On Children" from Kahlil Gibran's The Prophet:

...Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you yet they belong not to you...

MOVING PAST GRIEF

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Remember, Tomorrow is promised to no one.
Walter Payton

I. THE NEWS

With my 8-1/2 year old daughter Serena safely at my parents' home for Easter Vacation, I was able to complete the set of painted plywood signs commissioned to ring the crash wall of newly built motorcycle race track. My partner and I loaded them onto the special rack he built for his Model A flatbed truck, maximum speed 35mph, and chugged the few hours south through Gold Country foothills to deliver. It was Good Friday 1976. Our carved wood and painted sign business was thriving. With both our artistic talents, his building expertise and my organizational abilities, our local reputation was spreading.

The friendly owner invited us to dine with his family, then watch the races and stay the night. His son was racing. The whole town had rallied to view this novel entertainment and spirits were high. The mood shifted to horror as one motor bike spun out, hit the rail, and left its rider sprawled inert on the track. It was our hosts' son. Rushing to the scene with his mother, I experienced with her the maternal panic, and the tragedy of suddenly losing a child. After some tense minutes of imagining the worst, the teenager revived and was led off bruised and limping, but alive. We were all relieved, but I'd had a vicarious emotional shake-up – a vivid reminder of how fragile is our humanity.

Next morning we went to the office to collect the balance due for the signs. Our plan was to head up to my parents' mountain cabin, where we would all meet for Easter weekend festivities. But we found a phone message with the cryptically ominous words "There's been an accident". I called the number and my friend's voice repeated these words then waited silently for me to ask "Yes, but what happened?" More silence, then "Well...it's hard." With that my mind raced through myriad possibilities, and settled on the thought "I hope no one is permanently maimed or paralyzed." I took a deep breath and asked "OK – who is missing?" "Your Dad.....and Serena" the news came with crushing certainty.

Something primal seemed to rise from the center of the earth, up through my feet and out through a long loud eerie cry of "NO-O-O-O-O-O-O....." Then a scrambling of denial "Maybe you don't have it right since you live on the opposite side of the river? Maybe they are just injured?"

"No...sorry...it's really true. Only your mother survived, and she is in the hospital." With that I could neither listen nor speak. I handed the phone over to my partner and stumbled outside, gasping for air, instinctively looking to nature – my usual source of solace.

*I have access to unlimited assistance. My strength comes
from my connection to my source of being.*
Wayne Dyer

II. WHAT NOW? A VISION

I emerged into the fresh and transparent spring air, into a disoriented altered state, surrendering in total shock. My mind seemed to seize up, unable to make sense of any number of churning thoughts, struggling to fill the cavernous “What now?” Time was rubber – I don’t know if I stood there for 20 seconds or 20 minutes, trying to process “The News” and how it instantly changed my entire life.

As my eyes focused on the glowing spring leaves against a pure blue stained-glass-like sky, wondering how it had all happened, I remembered how the previous evening that vicarious experience of what it might feel like to lose a child had been a strange sort of rehearsal. But now it was real.

Then came an unforgettable moment – perhaps a vision? I saw, sparkling through that brilliant blue, two side-by-side columns of light, one slightly higher than the other, flashing as if signaling to me. Then in “surround sound” I heard the distinct words, as if divinely delivered, “We’re OK. We’re OK. Go take care of Mom”.

I did not doubt the truth of the unusual message, and was utterly grateful to receive it. I now had an action plan in the midst of this emotional chaos. It was so reassuring to believe they were not suffering: and so comforting to discover that communication was even possible. It was as if they had been watching and waiting for me.

The vision faded and all attention turned to the reality of my mother’s plight. I did not know how badly she had been injured, and could not truly imagine what she might be feeling upon discovering her dual loss of both husband of 30 years and her only granddaughter. But I had to get to her as fast as possible.

Meanwhile our client had offered to loan us a spare vehicle, faster than the Model A truck, to take us the two hours up through the foothills. Before leaving I attempted to call my ex-mother-in-law, my daughter’s other grandmother, but the phone rang unanswered and we had to get on the road.

*The world is round and the place that may seem like the end
may also be only the beginning.*

Ivy Baker Priest

III. LOSS OF IDENTITY

I was a mother – now I am not. With that essential role stripped away – who am I now? Who will I become? Will I spin out of control?

As my partner drove us towards the small town hospital we had a most amazing conversation. He said “You know she set you free to dance around the world”. In retrospect, he knew me better than I knew myself. Four years later that was indeed my path; though at the time I was not even a professional dancer. He extrapolated this wisdom from seeing the passion I brought to my hobby of Bellydance classes in our small community.

But for the moment I had lost my bearings and my anchor in the world – my precious daughter. How would I tell her teachers and her many friends? How would I relate to them without her? What could ever fill this void?

As it happened, the borrowed vehicle was not in A-1 condition, and was blowing blue smoke out of the exhaust pipe. We were stopped by the Highway Patrol. When he heard we were family of the accident victims he gave us an escort to the hospital (before issuing the fix-it ticket!).

*Adversary is like a strong wind. It tears away from us
all but the things that cannot be torn,
so that we see ourselves as we really are.*
Arthur Golden

IV. GUILT AND FORGIVENESS

We were greeted by many of the family members who had planned to join us for the Easter weekend celebration. They hugged me somberly as I learned that Mom had received only a “bump on the head”. The more disturbing news was that she had been driving and that it had been a “single car accident”.

I found her lying in the dark room wishing that she too would just die. I gripped her by the shoulders in semi terror, exclaiming “Not you too Mom! You are still here for some reason!” “I killed them” she choked. “No, Mom, there was some other hand on that wheel beside your own!”

Later, recalling that moment, she told me that it was her first memory of “coming back to life.” And I have often wondered at the blessing of faith and trust embodied in my response. I felt not a hint of blame, but somehow a complete acceptance that what happened was ordained in the “bigger plan”. It seemed my job to banish any guilt that would add to my mother’s anguish.

In her case the potential for guilt was paramount. It had been a single car accident and she had no memory of how or why she lost control on a long curve. The 1972 Toyota Land Cruiser, laden with coffers of food for the coming feast, had rolled. The torque caused the plastic roof to pop off the metal frame (it was all explained to us later). Mom’s seat belt broke and she landed, unconscious but nearly unscathed, away from the car. Apparently my daughter had been sleeping on the back seat and was thrown to the pavement with such force that she died instantly. My father was trapped in his seat and was most likely mangled by the twisted roof. My mother awoke to plead with the firemen on the scene to help her husband and granddaughter who, she imagined, were “still in the car”.

For me, issues of guilt arose in the form of questions. “What did I do to deserve or even create this?” “Did Serena perhaps prefer death to living with me?” “Maybe I was not a good enough mother?” “What were my last words to her? Did I say ‘I love you’ when I sent her to Grandma’s house for that Easter week?” Over the years I have dealt more compassionately with myself, but at the time these questions loomed large.

*We must be willing to let go of the life we have planned
so as to accept the life that is waiting for us.*
Joseph Campbell

V. CLOSURE?

Once Mom had been released from the hospital and settled into a nearby motel, surrounded by the family, I asked where the bodies were and could we go talk to someone about the particulars of their deaths. At the local coroners/mortuary the man was clearly not expecting us (my sister and brother accompanied me). He said “I have not prepared them for viewing – and you don’t want to see your Dad until after the make-up.” Something inside me would not be satisfied until I saw my daughter, so I said we’d wait.

It was also a surprise that our uncle had already made arrangements contrary to what I knew my parents’ agreement to be. This was not to include make-up or viewing, as our family’s burial of choice was cremation. Apparently it was too late to change, so we had to let them carry out transporting the bodies to a facility in the Bay Area (near home) where we could then renegotiate. That actually meant paying for the two separate plans. Unbelievable, but I had heard this type of expensive mistake happens when people are uninformed, vulnerable and completely bereft.

When she was wheeled out on the gurney, hair freshly washed and splayed out around her head, Serena looked like an angel. (I have some of that hair among my mementos). I bent to kiss her for the last time, some of my tears dropping on to her cheek; “Cold as the clay.” All I could say was that she had lived a full life for her 8-1/2 years.

I needed that closure of physically seeing her in death, as I had physically given birth. I have always been glad for that opportunity, and wonder what it must be like for mothers who are not able to have it.

Losing my father at the same time left another void. As it happened, he had been diagnosed with a return of melanoma several months prior. In a way his sudden and speedy death, avoiding a potentially painful and slow demise, could be considered a blessing in disguise.

We must materialize spirit and spiritualize matter.

Rudolph Steiner

VI. MEMORIAL

The weeks following “The Accident” blurred by, with people offering condolences and asking questions. We all made sure not to leave Mom alone and there were so many arrangements to be made; as well as some surprising revelations.

I really could not bring myself to go through my daughter’s belongings in our rented farmhouse, so I simply closed the door to her room. My partner and I packed up our portable sign tools and temporarily moved down to the Bay Area to be with Mom.

My family had become very adept sailors, and maintained a beautiful teak-decked 41 foot yawl rigged sailboat, docked on the canal behind the San Rafael house. They had christened it “Serena” after my daughter, who had loved the trips on San Francisco Bay with her grandpa at the helm.

Through her mostly constant tears Mom revealed that she and Dad had discussed taking that boat out into the ocean together, whenever my Dad’s illness approached its end stages. They had planned to sink it, going down together. They had been partners in all things and she could not envision a life without him. In fact she mentioned being jealous that Serena had been the one to go with him instead of her, but she knew they had shared a special bond. This was a tear-jerking, romantic and shocking scenario that none of us had suspected.

For the general friends and family we held the dual memorial outdoors atop nearby Mt. Tamalpais, with its breathtaking views of the surrounding bay and sea. This was a nostalgic location as Mom and Dad had spent much of their early courtship taking hikes and picnics here. I stood on the hillside watching a butterfly flit through the mourners, and read aloud the short poem I had written for my daughter.

“Now let us share some energy with Serena, eternal child of the universe...

You danced briefly through our lives
In and out your rainbow tunnel
A vibrant dance to a spectral song.
We may in time interpret that dance
Gratefully, holding the mosaic of your memory.

But you can finally be serene,
The musical angel you longed to be.
For, as it is written in The Prophet:

*‘Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.
And when you have reached the mountain top, then you shall begin to climb.
And when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.’”*

(“On Death” from The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran)

A few days later the immediate family climbed aboard two sailboats, the “Serena” and “Gigi” belonging to a close neighbor, with the two urns of ashes. We sailed out through the Golden Gate, and let the ashes float away on the currents, mixing with the wind churned whitecaps. Just at that moment a pair of pure white gulls swooped between the two boats, as if two souls were flying free.

*Strange isn't it? Each man's life affects so many other lives.
When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole doesn't he?
Clarence the Angel, It's a Wonderful Life*

VII. THE CHASM

Then came a confusing time, trying to establish what would become our “new normal”. My partner and I stayed to support my inconsolable Mom. She sometimes slept on the boat, where she had a dream visitation from Serena saying “It’s alright Grandma”. We solicited sign work with a small winery and worked from the garage. My relationship to the world, divested of all motherly duties and joys, made no sense.

Gone were the daily routines of breakfast, dressing, walking to the bus stop. Gone were the carefree picnics to the river, games with friends and neighbors, birthday parties and family gatherings. Gone were the multitude of questions about life, and the prolific drawings strewn everywhere. No more dancing around the house to her favorite songs.

Mostly I felt an intense physical pain in my heart. It was as if a bomb had gone off in my chest and left this huge aching chasm. After several weeks I went to a doctor, asking if this was a heart attack. His grim answer was “No, your heart is healthy. This is just grief”. I am grateful that he did not prescribe any emotion-suppressing medication, which I believe distorts and prolongs the natural grieving process.

To describe the raw emotion of this desolate place, the complete disorientation of grief, cannot truly be done with any words I can find. Maybe it’s like Alice Down the Rabbit Hole – just free-falling into darkness – no props, no net, no predictable outcome, and very little hope of resolution. Even though I had early experienced a complete spiritual and mental acceptance of the events, I still had to go through this very human maternal earthly hell, without a compass or a guide. What meaning could I find in this sorrow and suffering?

*I wish I could show you, when you are lonely or in darkness,
the astonishing light of your own being.*

Hafiz

VIII. THE JOURNEY THROUGH

We attended a few parties, and my pattern became to over-do it with the alcohol (ha – socially acceptable “self-medication”), then dance, almost violently. I felt isolated among the groups of happy people, who either “didn’t know” or were assuming I would just return to a “normal” life. I did not want to keep talking about how I felt, so I expressed through cathartic dance. And I was anxious to get back to my belly dancing, so I found a couple of teachers and took private lessons. This decision to pursue dance proved the most constructive focus for my distracted energy.

It might be counter-intuitive to consider dancing as a mode of getting through some tough days of grieving. Many people associate dancing with joy or upbeat emotions. But both my determination to master the art, plus the sheer physicality of the “original women’s work-out”, gradually seemed to help ease the unrelenting pain. (I have since learned how movement of the body can work to literally help us acknowledge and move the energy through, accelerating the grief process. I have developed a system to achieve this goal. I call it “Moving Past Grief” and offer it as an adjunct to my regular phone support coaching sessions).

When my mother regained enough equilibrium to be left to the kindness of neighbors (the wonderful widow next door had begun to include Mom in her yoga and Buddhist practice), we headed once again for the hills. It was time to deal with Serena’s belongings, giving away some and selecting a precious few keepsakes. Through the flood of tears I reviewed the indelible memories of her young life, handling each article of clothing, her dolls and toys. Mom asked for the ballet slippers, which she had dipped in copper, and gave one back to me.

I know this process of clearing out possessions of loved ones is a sensitive issue for all grieving parents, and also a very personal one. Some find it easier to have someone else dispose of everything for them. Some will keep everything in place for extended periods. Some cannot bear to remain in the space where they lived with their child and hurry to move out. When other children are involved more complications may arise. They may want to keep or continue to use certain items (if it helps them cope with the loss of a sibling, it’s probably a good thing, even if painful for a parent). The smallest thing can and will remind us of our beloved child, and send us into fits of rending sobs. This is the unpredictable and surreal “Wonderland” into which Alice descends.

A creek ran through the property, and some sleepless nights I would follow the trail downstream to a tiny meadow and just let the sobs evolve into wails of mourning. I let out the pent-up heart pain by howling at the moon. I recommend it, or any other ways, of vocalizing those feelings. Some cultures hire professional wailers to aid and encourage the grieving family to vocalize their feelings. We have no such customs or venue for such healthy and authentic expression, but would be better off for it. For me this primeval wailing offered some much needed release and relief.

Once back in our community I did rejoin the women at the dance studio. We formed an amateur performing group and worked on dances to present at fairs and parades. The circle of women, some of them mothers of my daughter's friends, emerged as the greatest support of all. The dance became my lifeline, my way through to rebuilding a new identity. I could smile through the tears, find joy in small moments of tenderness, and share a sense of accomplishment and camaraderie. Soon our teacher asked me to take over her beginning classes, and I was putting my artistic talents to work making costumes, organizing rehearsals. Bless them all who gave me these opportunities and made me feel needed again.

The next year we moved our sign business to Hawaii (near Kona). The islands are innately spiritual and can foster a clean and healthy lifestyle. After an impromptu performance many women asked if I would teach them. I did not at first reveal my loss to them, but when they found out they were also ready and willing to pray for me and help me heal. We played together and created Middle Eastern Dinner Shows, everyone pitching in with skits, exotic recipes and decorations. We even had our own live band.

My travelling friend (Barbara from England) brought her 4-yr-old son to live with us. She later said she saw me "come back" in Hawaii, transformed again into "the butterfly" she had known.

*When the Japanese mend broken objects,
they aggrandize the damage by filling the cracks with gold.
They believe that when something's suffered damage and has a history
it becomes more beautiful.*
Barbara Bloom

*If we touch reality in the present moment
we touch eternity.*
Thich Nhat Hanh

IX. RITUAL & CELEBRATION

When, after 5 years, my partner and I took separate paths, something urged me to follow my dream of travel, especially to the places of origin of this ancient dance. So I decided to dance my way to Egypt, Morocco, Greece and Turkey – anywhere the dance was part of the indigenous culture. With a very small nest egg to get started, I was led from jobs, to agents and artist visas, to lifelong friendships. This journey of self-discovery would fill another book. However I will say here that throughout these travels I made it a habit to light candles for my daughter and father in churches everywhere. I found solace in the beauty and meditative atmosphere, and the practice helped me keep their spirits alive in my heart.

Later, back in California, I settled and married (and helped raise a step son who has cerebral palsy – another heart-warming story). Each year our Christmas tree is adorned with commemorative ornaments, and every October we create a Day of the Dead altar. It includes symbols and artifacts for my departed loved ones, including one copper ballet slipper. My mother and my stepson's mother have since joined them.

There are so many wonderful, creative ways to honor those we have cherished in life. My dear grandmother donated funds to Serena's school for a new natural log playground construction in her name. One of my clients made quilts out of her deceased husband's clothing and gave them to each of their four children as keepsakes. My close friend has established a foundation in her son's name which funds arts programs for the handicapped and for underprivileged children. Its motto is "Seeing the Positive in Others."

*Every single thing that has ever happened in your life
is preparing you for a moment that is yet to come.*

Marc

X. COACHING

Many of my friends and relatives have subsequently lost a child and I have been there for them as a beacon of hope. But I felt inadequate to truly help them through that desolate time and always wanted to be more formally trained. A serendipitous meeting introduced me to the outstanding certification program at Aurora Winter's Grief Coach Academy.

Now I am confidently qualified to meet bereaved parents and provide a caring, personalized, and effective recipe for rebuilding a new relationship to life. Though the experience of losing a loved one is never forgotten, coaching can make all the difference in successfully living with the memories. It is not time that heals, but by asking the right questions and taking the right actions, we can together once again access the joy and purpose meant for us all. Coaching can help us embrace grief as an ultimately healing, liberating and empowering process.

Dhyanis Carniglia is a long-time Bellydance teacher and performer, leading women on journeys of self-discovery. She has also studied Dance Therapy with Anna Halprin and Bodytales with Olivia Corson. She has presented movement workshops for cancer survivors and recovering addicts, as well as The Holistic Nurses Association, and various courses on women's sensuality and spirituality (e.g. Medicine Dancing, and Sacred Courtesan School). As a member of both Poetic Dance Theater Co. and the masked dance theater company "Tuju Taksu", Dhyanis has studied Balinese dance and embodiment of mythological archetypes. For 13 years she produced and directed "The Living Goddess Dance/Theater Project" in Marin County, CA.

Also an award-winning theatrical costume designer in the San Francisco Bay Area, Dhyanis has two decades of theater experience, including costuming, scenic art and show production. She has her own line of custom dance wear and luxurious casual clothing which she sells online and at trade shows and events, using her artistic talents to help women feel more beautiful.

In addition to phone session packages, she is currently offering a "Moving Past Grief" workshop for the bereaved and is available for booking as guest presenter at Grief Retreats across the country. Contact her at goddess@dhyanis.com or visit her website at www.movingpastgrief.com, or www.dhyanis.com. Born on Valentine's Day, Dhyanis leads with her heart!

*Dance communicates man's deepest, highest and most truly spiritual
thoughts and emotions far better than words.*

Unknown