

THE CRUEL TRICK of grief

DR. BOB BAUGHER

We Need Not Walk Alone, Fall 2012

On May 12, 2000, Adam Petty, grandson of famous racecar driver, Richard Petty was killed instantly when the throttle of his racecar stuck and sent him head-on into a wall. He was 19.

A few days later, while being interviewed about the tragedy, Adam's father, Kyle, stated, "I hope I never get over it. I pray every night that it hurts as bad tomorrow as it hurts today, because that way then I know I'm as close to him as I always have been."

I have a question for you: What if tomorrow you awoke to find that all (and I mean all) of the pain you've been feeling from the death of your loved one was instantly gone? How would you feel? Relieved? Comforted? Calm? Perhaps at first. However, as the days and weeks wore on, many people might begin to experience a strange

feeling that something was wrong. Why is this? Let's examine what may be going on here.

During the time your loved one was alive you had thousands upon thousands of experiences of places you went, talks you had, and things you did together. Because our reaction to death causes intense pain, which in turn causes grief, these become integrated into the brain cells of these previously pleasant memories of our loved one.

Later, whenever we even think about our loved one, these previously comforting thoughts may now bring pain and grief.

Therefore, every memory which before had produced positive emotions, now is coupled with pain and grief.

Here is a sketch of the process:

Death → pain → grief → memories → pain → grief

Furthermore, for many bereaved people, as the pain and grief begin to slowly subside, so do memories of their loved one slip further into the distance.

If this happens to us, it can create panic, a feeling of losing our grasp of our loved one. To combat this, we seek ways to hold tight to our loved one, which—because our memories are now tied to pain—includes holding tight to one’s grief.

In light of this, the comment from bereaved dad, Kyle, makes perfect sense. Why give up the pain if it means further losing your son?

However, what we all know about grief is the following fact: with time, the pain subsides.

For many of us, the pain and grief may never totally disappear. A wise bereaved mom, whose son had died 20 years prior, once said to me, “You know, Bob, grief is just a sign of unfinished love.”

We also know that, contrary to what was preached by so-called experts a few decades ago, the majority of bereaved people do find ways to create some type of continuing bond with their deceased loved one, whether it be by visiting a special place, wearing jewelry or clothing, carrying a favorite picture, or keeping a cherished item.

The challenge for us all is this: We need to find a way in our grief journey to gradually let the pain subside without dreading that, by letting this happen, we are somehow “losing” our loved one.

As you know, there are multiple ways to keep our loved one close to us. When my sister Lori’s husband, Jeff, suddenly died from leukemia at age 52, my son Shawn, Lori and I spent hours and hours in the days leading up to the memorial service creating a DVD of his life with pictures, videos, and music. Now, in her grief, whenever

she wants, Lori puts it in her DVD player, gets her box of tissue ready and watches it. Some would say that she is torturing herself. But those of us who know her realize that this is one of her ways of staying connected to a man whose love she still feels after 27 years of marriage.

Grief is complex stuff. It can impose a cruel trick on us all. It begins when death barges into our life and takes our loved ones from our physical grasp. It then leaves us in pain, which in turn causes a multiple array of grief reactions. Finally, because our memories are all we have, the recollections easily become blended with our pain and grief.

Do you remember the first time you laughed? The first time you forgot to do something that acknowledged your loved one? The times when your pain was not the white-hot, gut-wrenching ache of grief? Did you also feel the memories slipping?

In contrast to the wish of Kyle Petty, your job is to slowly yet deliberately understand that letting go of some of the pain does not mean you are losing the precious memories of your loved one.

You can overcome this cruel trick by doing all you can to compile and retain lasting memories of this wonderful, amazing person whose love will never die.

You’ve likely heard the many ways you can still keep your loved one with you. As you gradually experience the diminishing pain while strengthen the memories, you will find that, despite this sad loss, you are getting a little better—which is exactly what your loved one would want.