

Widening the Circle

By Barbara Allen

The grandfather sat fidgeting in his chair seeming to struggle with being where he was. "A newcomer," I thought watching him from across the TCF circle. After 2 ½ years, I was making new transitions from early bereavement to moving outside my own grief in support of others. Jim's death at age 35 in March, 2003 from the disease of addiction was a doozy of a challenge for Tom and me.

Month after month and now year by year every story moved me deeply as newly bereaved came to their first Compassionate Friends meeting. No longer was I holding back any part of my heart – each death had become significant to me. Every story and family mattered in ways I could never have anticipated. The pain of others in this intense loss was something not just bearable but important to witness.

That evening I sat my heart already breaking for whatever story this man would soon share within this circle of reluctant heroes. Walking across the threshold into a TCF meeting takes great courage, in my experience. Repeatedly returning to share and to listen to others are acts of heroism to me. It may not be a front page news item but the quiet strength of men and women rarely gets this kind of attention.

As the meeting began, the grandfather was looking more agitated as he listened to the opening comments and norms of our format. Then the stories began to fill the circle. His face told many stories of its own – shock, dismay, and confusion seem to pass like clouds on a windy day. Soon he began to share about the recent death of his beloved 7-year old granddaughter in a house fire. Rage, grief, disbelief – so many emotions and thoughts came rolling out almost breathlessly like heavy boulders crashing down hill. At one point he cried, "why did God take my granddaughter and let the drug addicts live?!"

Several heads in the circle quickly swiveled in my direction. I kept my heart focused on this broken grandfather. I had heard this kind of comment before – as if there is bargaining to be done that might change what has come to be. As if there is some Universal logic that trades "good" for "bad".... We know there is no good death – no good way to lose a beloved child of any age.

The discussion moved on around the circle eventually coming to me. I shared my beloved son's story and my struggle on that particular night. Earlier I felt neither judgment nor resentment towards the grandfather. What I felt was his deep and real pain. I sensed that part of him believed that if some "bad" person had died, perhaps his beloved granddaughter would still be alive. Those of us who have been in TCF circles for some time know this is not how life works out.

After the meeting the grandfather cautiously approached me, apologizing if he had hurt my feelings. "No," I explained; "I feel your horrific pain. And, I'm so sorry for it. I wish that none of us need be here but we are. I know there is no good way to lose a beloved child." We hugged, cried and parted. He came to a few more meetings sharing a deepening pain upon learning that a family member had intentionally set the house fire. He had even bigger issues to deal with, it seemed.

This grandfather isn't alone in his feelings that there are "better" and "worse" deaths than others. I hear too often from parents and siblings of those who die from the disease of addiction, HIV or suicide that they don't feel welcome or safe in their TCF meetings. Depending on location or size

of meeting, too many say they lie about the cause of death for their son or daughter. This isn't unique within TCF; many report being fearful or ashamed of telling their family and friends the true cause of death.

In TCF we say, "We need not walk alone". Yet unknowingly... perhaps unwittingly... bereaved parents are walking outside our circles. There are many ways our unconscious or conscious biases show up. Yet we have a policy of inclusion within TCF.

In Oklahoma City and again this year in Nashville, I did a session entitled "When Substance Abuse is a Factor in the Death of a Child." Each time I asked if there were folks who had not shared the whole truth of their children's death to their TCF group. Many hands went up. We ended up having an ad hoc sharing session on shame one evening. I would like to see a session on this topic in Portland next year.

After Nashville, I got numerous e-mails from a Grief Net support group. At the conference, I had given out wristbands that say: "**No Shame or Blame ~ Just Love**". One of their members was in my session and passed the word on the wristbands. I learned that many of these parents had never attended a TCF meeting for fear of being rejected due to the cause of death of their children. This is their perception and not necessarily based on anything more specific than a general societal stigma.



This social stigma varies widely across the country and from chapter to chapter, of course. Tragically the disease of addiction is taking more and more of our beloved children – in small towns and in large cities. Equally tragic is the general stigma about death from AIDS or suicide or other causes that may have an element of shame attached to them. Since Nashville, I've given out hundreds of wristbands to those living with any of these diseases (addiction, HIV, etc.) as well as those now asking about them for their chapter or organization.

Is our TCF circle wide enough? Do we do all we can as members of this amazing organization to widen the circle? As we look into our hearts, let us remember that every bereaved parent, sibling and grandparent wanted the same for their beloved child – a long, fruitful and peaceful life. We all know that discrimination of any kind has no place within the circle of The Compassionate Friends.

Every child matters. It is my personal intention that our children who die from this disease not be swept under the rug of public scorn and judgment. It is also my personal intention that we - their loving parents, siblings and grandparents - are not swept along with them. Let's hold the circle wide – we are The Compassionate Friends who need not walk alone. **Namaste**

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