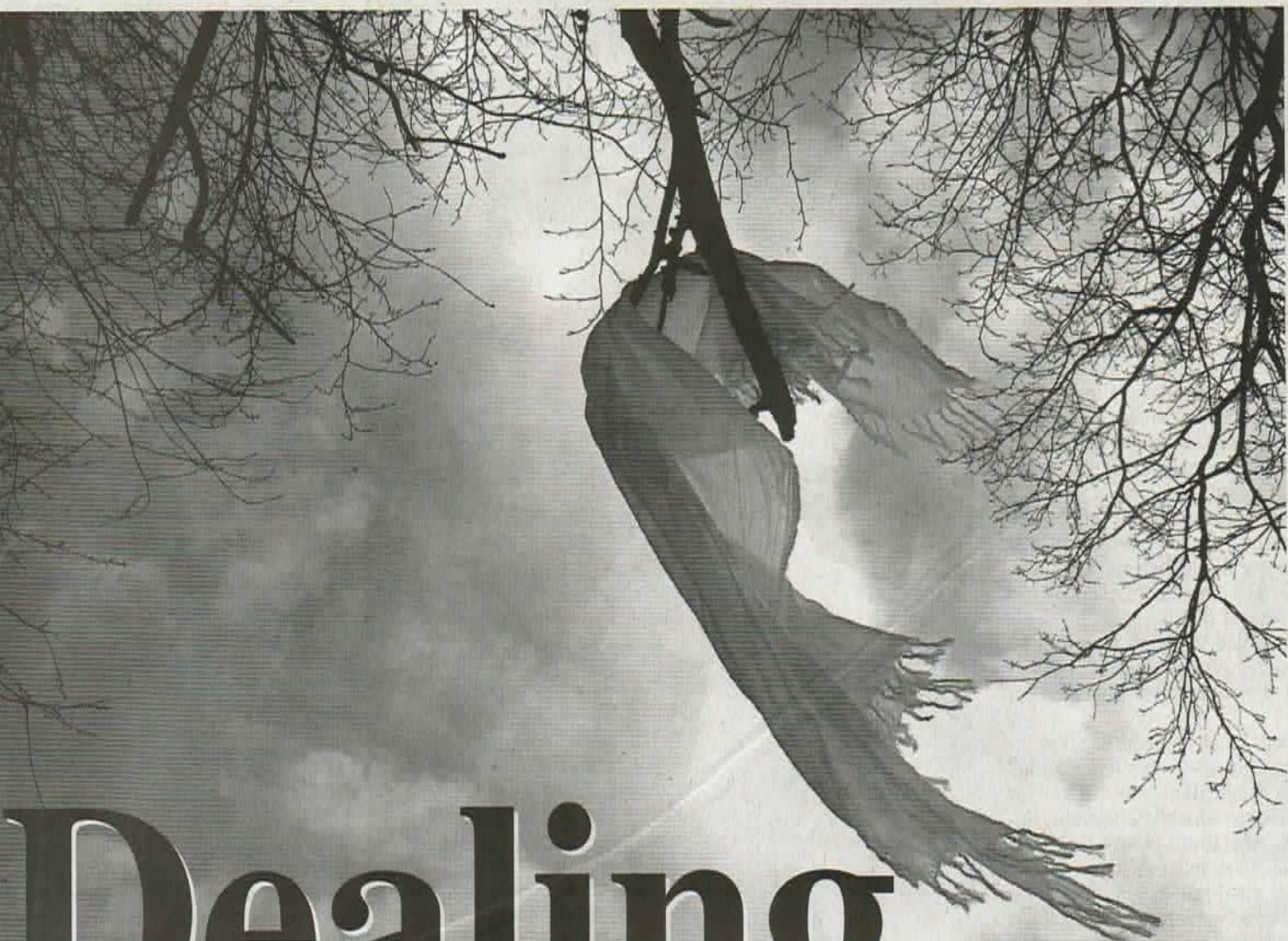


# OPINION

The Okanagan Sunday, May 16, 2010



# Dealing with grief

Unfortunately, grief and grieving are part of life, whether one is anticipating a typical child and ends up having one with a challenge, goes through divorce or loses a loved one.

I imagine people who lose a limb, sight or the ability to walk feel grief as well as loss. Unfortunately, we have experienced two of these – most recently, the passing of the children's father, mother-in-law's son, my parent's son-in-law, a great friend to many and the love of my life.

We were fortunate to come across the five stages of grief early on after my husband died.

Although our family had already gone through the process when our child with a developmental disability was born, we were not familiar with what we were going through at the time.

In that case, we literally grieved the perfect, typical child we anticipated, to enable us to accept the one who had been chosen to grace our doorstep.

The process can be painful, emotional for sure, and as you go up and down the ladder of the stages, it comes and goes, hopefully ending with understanding and acceptance.

Here are those five stages:

**Denial** – "This is not really happening to me." Thinking the spouse is going to come through the door or setting a dinner place for him, expecting to see him when you come home.

There is little or no crying here, as we have not accepted our loss yet or even acknowledged it. In my/our case, we were numb and did not feel anything, going on as normal in our lives for the most part. We tried to sleep without help, we exercised, went to the bank, shopped for food, took the dogs for walks and tried to be as "normal" as possible.

This stage did not last as long as we thought. Some say six months until one realizes that their mate is not going to walk through the door, but it came and went as we stayed in our frozen state to protect us from feeling.

**Anger/feeling victimized** – "Why me/us? . . . Why did he have to be taken away so early in his life? . . . He was such a good person, why do only the good die young? . . . and then, Why did you leave me to deal with all your stuff? . . . Why do I have to deal with this, it is so unfair?"

I don't want to deal with this; I want to run away from it. It can also manifest itself as fighting within the family, as we experienced. Are we taking our anger out on each other?

**Bargaining** – This can happen before death or divorce. "If I make this change, will you stay? . . . If I take my medication, can you save my leg?" You can beg or try to make a deal with God, wishing that you can change things. For us, this stage happened in full force as we tried to save my husband after his heart attack and again when the paramedics came. After they arrived, I kept



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### *Whose Challenge Is It Anyway?*

asking when we would be going to the hospital, realizing that if we did get in the ambulance, it was likely that he would live.

I asked him not to leave us and pleaded with God to let us keep him. I also got the incredible experience of feeling his spirit leave his body, saying goodbye and telling him how much we loved and would miss him.

The children all helped in doing CPR, calling 911 and being with him as well as in saying goodbye.

For the first time, I understood why some faiths believe in keeping the body at home for a time after the loved one has died. It was somehow comforting for me to go and speak to him when all the emergency people had gone home. Even when I knew he was not in his earthly shell, I equally knew he could hear me and was comforted on his journey by what I said to him.

**Depression** – Frustration, bitterness, self pity, feelings of hopelessness, mourning the hopes, dreams and plans for the future. Desperation set in.

Continuing one's life so others can say, "My you are doing well," when, actually, it is quite the opposite.

Being a very positive person, I don't feel depressed, but sure felt bitter and sure felt the sting of all the firsts we now have to go through. The first mother's and father's days without him, first wedding with no father to walk our daughter down the aisle, first trip without him, first Sunday night dinner without him.

This stage hurts so much that we decided to change things up. We stopped having huge family gatherings on Sundays or invited more people. We initially ignored someone sitting or not sitting in "Papa's chair" and sat at a different table. We went out for dinner on Sunday.

We still have the balance of the year to go through and least look forward to Christmas, as we lost him on Christmas Eve.

**Acceptance** – It may be realized that the marriage breakdown was both party's responsibility, the medical attention to detail was second to none, but we still lost the limb. We did all we could, and he still died.

In our case, we all know he is not walking in the door, but I am not sure if we are actually at this stage for good – or if all of us are, anyway.

I asked him daily if he wanted to walk with me and the dogs, play tennis in warm months or go to the gym. We cannot make people do things they don't want to. We understand that and accept it.

Getting counselling together as a family and independently has helped.

A good friend also shared a piece of grieving from their faith. This has really helped, as I am a goal oriented, positive person and needed to have some sort of time period to move forward.

As I understand it, Shiva means seven in Hebrew, therefore the initial process is a week long. Most typical activity is altered as the family goes through the initial shock and stays together at home. Guests, friends and relatives come to visit and pay their respects.

Although Shiva is a part of the traditional "sitting" ritual, this happened naturally as the community found out about our child many years ago and at Christmas this past year with Jack.

There are many traditions that go along with this, but the one that made the most sense to us was not being in public.

Although people want to share your loss, it is hard for us who are grieving to be able to be hugged and to absorb the pain of others.

I did not know or expect that.

I did learn that one can easily put restrictions on accepting well-intentioned visitors, such as one beverage or a half hour. I learned that you can answer the door, but that you don't have to let that kind person in; they just want to know you are OK.

I also understood why some faiths wear a black arm band or drape their homes in black.

For us, it meant that although there was a lot of love and kind wishes out there, some people may not want to talk to anyone as they go through their initial grief.

This gift of knowledge is helping us get through our first year.

Some other things that have helped are wearing sunglasses or keeping your head down when in a crowd. Arriving at social functions at the last minute and leaving early means you don't have to talk at length to anyone if you don't want to.

Going to my bootcamp daily and having the love of my coaches and co-campers helps me heal. They are there when I need them and give huge support by making me feel like a person, not just a widow.

Realizing that everyone takes on situations differently also helps.

My friend also shared that the length of grieving in his faith is a year.

I like to think of that as my goal, my children's and extended family's goal, and pray that I am strong enough to go on in our new world after next Christmas.

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