

THE ROAD TO HEALING

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We gather because our children have died. We assemble because something of ourselves died as well. But, also in those dreadful moments of their passing, something new was born within each of us – a pain, an anguish, an agony that not only endures, but which consumes the quality and tempo of our living for months and even years. As compassionate friends we gather to confront that pain, to address the absence of our children, to support one another, to find the road to healing, to seek ways to live once more.

We seek healing, understanding that healing is not forgetting. We reach for wellness, knowing that wellness does not imply that our deceased child is dismissed from our thoughts, for such is not the case. We seek to heal, knowing that we will never forget, in either our hearts or our thoughts. We know further that the touch of our children on our beings, or ours on theirs, will never be wholly entrusted to yesterday.

But, each and every one of us seeks release from the bondage of our child's death. We desire repose, stillness and calm, that the beauty of our child's love might enfold us yet again. We thirst for awakenings free of pain, for minutes and hours free from unremitting torment. In our child's name, and for ourselves, we hunger for genuine and lasting emancipation from an overwhelming bereavement that consumes our living and threatens the continued vitality of our spirits.

My belief is that all these things are possible for us as long as we understand that our lives will never return to what we remember as normal before our child died.

The experiences of countless bereaved parents assure us that we can learn to bear the unbearable, to overcome that which crushes our spirit, to move from darkness to light. To find our own lives and renew them on a road toward healing. We can learn to live once more.

Many undoubtedly wonder if this can possibly be true and all of us who have endured well beyond the earlier stages of this long, dark journey certainly understand that feeling.

Let me share a portion of my own loss with you. Olin was our only child. When he died at the age of seventeen, the happiness he wove into the pattern of my living seemed to become lost in a vast consuming darkness. The lamp of life at the core of my soul was extinguished. I felt lost in a lonely, cold, netherworld of the spirit.

His death isolated my being. I drifted, removed from life and thus the value of existence itself became diminished within me. Olin had been the catalyst of laughter, the touchstone of joy. Now, both laughter and joy had become but ill-defined memories.

As I struggled ever downward, I started to realize that I was paying scant honor to Olin's life and its influence on mine. I had loved him beyond all measure, and I loved him still, with fierceness and tenacity. But, my emotional state was such that I was labeling, unintentionally, his life's touch on mine as destruction, allowing no chance or opportunity for life or love to shine through.

I reached out for help, acknowledging my obligation to keep faith with Olin. I sought recovery and life as a part of my debt, my duty to him. It was months before I saw it also as an obligation to my wife, my family or to myself. I have observed that this is fairly typical. We often recognize our bond with the deceased before that which we share with the living.

In the months and years to follow, I was fortunate to find a pathway toward healing. In looking back with the keen sight of retrospection, three areas seem worthwhile to examine as essential elements of a successful healing journey.

- To seek healing for more than just our deceased child, to extend that obligation to our families and to ourselves.
- Forgiveness, of both ourselves and others.
- To consciously make future decisions and commitments, to set realistic goals and actively pursue them.

Looking back, I see a moment with my father, two months after Olin died, as the first inkling that I might

have an obligation to more than just Olin. He said to me, "Don, you've got to get over this. You've lost your zest, your energy, your interest in life. You've got to overcome this."

Most of us view moments such as this with anger. How could another person possibly understand? But, he did. He also is a bereaved parent, having lost my sister only a year and a half before the death of Olin.

I cannot tell you that I paid heed to these concerns right away. I did not, I could not. But, I have never forgotten. When I recall the love and concern in his voice and eyes, I always reflect on these words of Gibran from *The Prophet*, "You are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth."

My only living arrow had fallen, and for a long while I was awash in darkness. But, through that darkness, my father, who had himself cast four arrows to the future, who had already felt the fall of one, reached out to steady the flight of one who had faltered.

I have come at last to understand what he already knew – that, I, too, am a living arrow, sent with love from my parent's bow into the future. And so are all the rest of us.

All of us have an obligation to complete the trajectory of our own flight, or own lives. We owe it to those who sent us forth and to those who share our journey now. And we owe it to ourselves, for if our flight, or life is to be true, we must find and give flower to love and caring in our own souls.

The second area to address in healing is perhaps the most difficult, forgiveness.

We must forgive our children for abandoning us, for dying. We must forgive ourselves for letting them die, even if there was nothing we could have done to prevent it.

We believe parents preserve and protect and many of us initially regard ourselves as having failed in that regard. And even if we did fail them in many ways, we still must forgive ourselves their deaths for we did not kill our children. Indeed, each of us would have saved our child, or even taken their place, had only such a chance presented itself. We deserve to forgive ourselves.

Forgiveness is acceptance of our own and other's faults, wrongs and "humanness." It is also

our victory over hate, bitterness and despair. It is as strong as an act of love as we can make. Just as grief is the crying forth of love at parting, forgiveness is the balancing of love's power to both hurt and heal.

I am certain that forgiveness, in its many expressions and with its many demands, is a necessary forerunner to embracing the future.

And that brings us to our final area, to consciously make future decisions and commitments, to set realistic goals and actively pursue them. No matter how much it may hurt, the future awaits us all. Indeed, the future is the healing zone, that place where all efforts merge to produce a recovery that enables us to live once more. In our early bereavement this is really impossible to contemplate, for it is about all we can manage to confront the moment, the hour, the day. For a very long time, the future is just not a part of our consciousness.

Yet there comes a time on the healing road where decisions and commitments to the future are possible, frequently even necessary.

Perhaps you paint, coach soccer, are active in a bridge club, work with Girl Scouts, help newly bereaved families or work hard at raising your own family. There is more than ample room in these or in numberless other areas where future commitments can be made. Anything of value to ourselves will suffice.

It is setting and achieving goals that count, goals sensible and possible within the context of our own lives.

The road to healing is not easy, but few worthwhile things in our lives are easy. Yet healing really is not nearly as difficult as the task we have already met...the hour of our child's death and the weeks immediately following.

Our children danced joy in our lives and the memory of that joy is a song that continues in our hearts. So it will ever be, but more that is good remains to be said. The horror in our lives will pass away and the pain will ultimately perish. But, our love for our children and their love for us shall not perish, nor pass away or ever die. For love is immortal. It knows no season, nor comings or goings. It is and shall remain.