

No Room for Grief

This letter is written by a parent who lost their child, and well describes the pain of grieving around people who don't understand what it is like. Check out MitchellsJourney.org

WHEN THERE'S NO ROOM FOR GRIEF

About a year ago I was cleaning my inbox and stumbled into a letter I wrote my family the night Mitch passed away. I wasn't expecting to see it, so when my eyes saw the headline, "Mitchell Passed Away", I was immediately swept up by a tidal wave of tears. After I gained my composure, I began a journey through time, reading emails that were sent the weeks following our son's passing.



One person especially close to me, just a few weeks after Mitch passed wrote, "Now that the worst is over ..." I was mortified by her words and sad to see how out of touch that person was with reality. I thought to myself, "I guess she's lucky she doesn't understand." What she and many others didn't realize was the worst of everything was just beginning. In matters of grief, especially the loss of a child, hell happens in the aftermath of death. Let me say that again: hell happens in the aftermath of death.

What followed in the weeks, months and years was a new kind of journey for me – a journey where we had to learn to heal in a world where there seemed to be no room for grief.

Two years after my son passed, I was on my way to Southern California to take my oldest son surfing. I remember exactly where I was when I received a call from a friend and colleague from an earlier part of my career. She wanted to give me candid feedback. She was convinced I was stuck in grief and that I needed to move on – yet there I was, with my oldest son, very much moving on with life. No effort was extended to understand my mind and heart; instead, after reading a few stories, she felt that my writings were self-focused and something resembling a sermonette. I appreciate truth and candid feedback, however much it might bruise my ego, yet in her almost flippant assessment of things, I couldn't help but think of Anis Nin's observation: "We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are." What she didn't understand was that my writing found here on Mitchell's Journey was a private journal that I chose to make public – not to solicit sympathy, but to help others who might be struggling with various aspects of grief. Writing was my therapy – yet, according to her, there seemed to be no room for grief.

Another year would pass, and a well-meaning colleague (who has such a good heart) would put his hand on my shoulder and summarily tell me that the time for grief was over. With a slap on the back he told me the time had come to become like a caterpillar and transform into something new. Again, according to my friend, there was no room for grief. He was ready, and therefore I should have been ready.

Those who read Mitchell's Journey know I am a man of faith. I not only believe in God, I love Him. I am not angry at Him over the loss of my child. I am hurt, but I'm not angry. In fact, I have come to

recognize the many tender mercies He has provided our family; blessings that eased our burdens and offered light to an otherwise darkened path.

Even still, I've observed a certain isolation that comes from people of faith, especially those who haven't lost a child. Often, when sharing words of hope, people can inadvertently dismiss or diminish the pain of the sufferer. We'll hear things like, "In the eternal scheme of things, this life is but a blink." To them I say, "Life is the longest thing I know. Now that I've lost my child, this life is an eternity." Others say things like, "Don't be sad, you'll see your child again." To them, my heart cries out, "But my heart pains to see my son today. I miss him so and I don't [yet] know how to live without him. I'm trying my hardest to find a way." I've seen others, even those who have lost a child say things like, "I've had a spiritual experience and I'm okay – therefore, because I'm okay, you should also be okay."



There is an endless, almost nauseating list of platitudes and poems that would seem to leave no room for grief. One poem reads, "Death is nothing at all. It doesn't count." To that, I say death, aside from being born, is the biggest thing that will ever happen to you or me. It counts a great deal. Poems like these would try to convince us that nothing has

happened, that everything remains as it was, our loved one slipped into the next room - just around the corner ... when in truth, after the death of a loved one, everything is different and nothing (at least in this life) will ever be the same. That room of which they speak may as well be on the other side of the universe. Poems and platitudes sometimes dismiss the hard realities of grief and mortality. They leave no room for grief. And when there is no room for grief, there is no room for healing.

It took almost 4 years for the worst to pass. What's more, I'm not stuck in grief – but it is a heavy burden to carry and to others, I may appear to walk slowly. I'm not a caterpillar anymore, and what I am becoming is only just emerging – in my time and in my own way.

I've had the burden and blessing to speak to thousands of people over the last few years about perspectives on grief. I am a young student of the subject and have much to learn. What I know so far is, sorrow is sacred. There must be room for grief.

If you know someone who suffered the loss of a child or has a terminally ill child, you can serve them by giving them room for grief. When I say room, I don't mean space away from them. What I'm saying is you can give them a safe space to talk about their loved one. Giving room for grief can be as simple as saying, "I'm here for you. I care, and I want to listen to your heart." Your friend may not trust you at first because the world has taught them, over time, there is no room for grief. Everyone is different, but

if you're patient, they'll eventually feel that you're safe and will open up to you.

You may be tempted to avoid such subjects with your friend because it is awkward or sad. Sometimes, if we're to serve our friends, we must set aside our uncomfortable feelings of empathy and give space for the sufferer's hard reality. You may worry that talking about "it" will touch an already tender wound or that your friend might suddenly remember the realities of loss – as if by avoiding the subject, they might forget the worst thing that could ever happen to them. By avoiding conversation, we leave no room for grief. It is helpful to remember that your friend is already sad and that talking is therapeutic. What's more, talking about it doesn't remind them of their loss – they think about it every single day – only in isolation and compounded sorrow.

In many ways, I feel like I've come a million miles since I've lost my son. Yet, I still have a billion miles to go. I know sacred truths about the immortal soul. I also know that our loved ones are sometimes near. I have experienced moments of peace that surpass my mortal understanding. These things I know of myself and no one can take them away from me. Yet, moments of peace and pain come and go like the ocean tide – that is just part of being human.

Even after 6 years, I still need room for grief.



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