

## ‘Creative Building Blocks ~ Holistic Healing of a Fractured Heart’

[\*originally written in 1995, but rewritten for FOD website & US copyright submission in 2001, and revised in 2010]

On July 21, 1985, my heart was literally shattered when my 21-month-old daughter, Kristen, died suddenly for no apparent reason. Having never experienced such intense raw pain, I was grasping at anything just to survive this assault on my entire being. Since that life-altering experience, the process of trying to mend the many jagged fractures in my heart has been a monumental task ~ a challenge I was not willing to give up on.

Without even realizing it at the time, I was often on automatic pilot and utilizing some very positive strategies (as well as a few not so positive ones) to help me cope and to try to make sense out of this incomprehensible loss. Some of those strategies that I used when Kristen died must have been ingrained in me from my earliest loss, the death of my father when I was 3-years-old, and from various other stresses I've had to cope with throughout my life. When I was stressed 'to the max' after Kristen's death, I relied heavily on them to get me through one day, one hour, one moment at a time. I would like to share with you several of those 'pathways to healing' that I have used, and still use, on my journey.

Over time, those pathways have enabled me to move beyond sheer survival to living and loving again. They also have opened my eyes to a **new and different way of experiencing the grief process** ~ in that there is grief work to be done in all aspects of life ~ and that it is not some outside separate entity that must be done only when a loss or transition occurs, but **as an ongoing lifelong internal/external 'working through' and 'reconciled integration' of not only losses, but past and present personal 'sins' and family-of-origin issues within the larger context of my present family, community, and world connections.** This is more of a comprehensive and intensive process and not a one-time working through of a loss. It led me to integrate losses etc within my own life in order to holistically grow into a more 'whole' person ~ emotionally, cognitively, Spiritually, physically, and socially.

Holistically mending my heart has not been an easy one-shot-deal. It has been a long and arduous process, and in many ways it will be a lifelong process. So far, this process has entailed exploring all aspects or dimensions of my life and being. Over the years I had come to understand that if I hoped to feel 'whole' again and to reconnect those shattered pieces of my heart, it would be necessary for me to **continually examine those dimensions or aspects of my life in relation to my past, present, and future.**

*(refer to my 'Healing of a Fractured Heart' Model and 'Interpretation' at the end of this article)*

It was and is a process I took head-on right from the beginning, but not without obstacles. No matter how much pain I was going to have to endure, I was determined to do this thing called grief work and I was going to do whatever it took to work through it. Unfortunately, for part of my journey and because of specific circumstances, I did find myself not working through some emotional aspects of my grief. Those reasons will be discussed, as well as what I did to get myself 'unstuck' and moving forward again in a constructive way. Please keep in mind though, when I speak of 'I' it is within a much greater context than just me ~ and that context will become more clear as you read on.

Being the visual person that I am, **I used to visualize all the dimensions of my life as flowing in unity within my heart. However, when Kristen died, deep fissures split my heart open** ~ exposing me to indescribable and unbearable pain. It felt like a hot poker had just pierced through my heart a million times over, ripping it apart with no end in sight. **I 'lost my self' that day ~ July 21, 1985,** and it has taken me many years to really 'come home to myself.'

Through a lot of hard work, faith, hope, and love, my 'being,' which was split apart by those deep fissures, has now been reconnected. The pieces of my being are not without scars, however, and may not look the same as they did before Kristen died, but I now feel more whole than I have been in the last several years. It's not that I had not 'healed' to a certain point over the years, but it felt as if I reached a 'plateau' and I wasn't moving to that next level of healing (even though no one really knows what that will look like or feel like!) ~ there was this lingering feeling of still being incomplete or 'unfinished.'

Despite that feeling of incompleteness on the inside, I was able to find a way to at least feel that my body was not falling apart as my 'insides' had. Having always been very physically active, **sport and exercise have been a lifesaver for me in regard to stress reduction and relaxation for almost 35 years.** Of course, it has been helpful for weight control, in conjunction with a low fat diet, but I have mostly used physical activity for the psychological and inspirational benefits than for the weight control. Grief work is exhausting and I have found that after exercising or even doing yard work, I have more energy to face the daily tasks of living, as well as for the tasks of grieving.

Because heart disease runs in my family, I am very aware of the importance of exercise and monitoring my stress level, as well as having a medical check-up every now and then. That's an area I need more work on, however! Nevertheless, if I follow through on those things, I plan on being around for a while.

When I do my daily biking or walking, I get into such a 'flow' state through 'meditation' and visualization that my logical mind stops working overtime so I can relax and allow my creative side to come forth and see things in a different light.

Additionally, many of my writings have been conceived while riding and listening to my favorite music. It's such a relaxing state to be in that sometimes I wish I could stay on the bike all day!

**Music has been another integral coping strategy over the years.** I have used it in varying ways ~ for facilitating expression of intense feelings (i.e., anger, sorrow), for inspiration, motivation, and for relaxation and 'meditation.' It's amazing how biking to a fast song not only helps my heart/body, but also my mind and spirit. Getting the blood flowing throughout my body rejuvenates me. The faster and harder I ride, the more I breathe in life, learnings, and insights, and at the same time I exhale many of my stresses.

As I work up a sweat, I feel as if **my body is cleansing itself from the inside out ~ ridding itself of toxicities that can, if not properly dealt with, build up and 'kill' me physically, emotionally, and spiritually.** Despite having felt psychologically overwhelmed at times, my exercise has helped me keep my head above the water ~ enough to see even the slightest bit of light and hope. I get a **similar sense of cleansing and renewed strength when I allow myself to cry.** I've had some of my best cries while riding the bike!

Along with exercise and music, I also try to **give myself time to rest and/or play.** Sometimes that's hard for me to do because I am such a work-oriented person. However, every morning I make it a priority to give myself at least 2½ hours of 'my time' before my boys get up for the day. If I didn't do that, I'd be even more stressed than usual. Of course, some people think it's crazy to get up so early, but it's what I need to do in order to stay sane. I have found that if it works for me, then I'm going to keep right on doing it!

Another area that I've had to really work on is **learning to access my 'childlike' qualities ~ in my own way.** Being an adult all the time can be quite exhausting! Allowing myself to occasionally 'play' is a struggle at times, especially while going through grief, but I have found that **having a sense of humor, wonder, and lightness can lessen some of the heavy load** I carry in my grief. My 2 boys constantly remind me to "lighten up, Mom!" They are great role models for spontaneity and fun. **Children are wonderful teachers, aren't they?**

In addition to physically taking care of myself, **consistently reaching out of myself for support has been a vital link in my 'healing.'** Three weeks after Kristen died, my husband, Dan, and I attended our first **Compassionate Friends support group** meeting in Champaign, Illinois ~ our home. It was a lifesaver for us to be with other parents who had experienced the death of a child. We felt safe to express our feelings, even the 'socially unacceptable' or unspeakable ones, such as anger at our child for dying and leaving us in this pain.

Throughout the years, I have continued my 'connection' with several bereaved mothers from that group. We would call each other for support, as well as meet for dinner once a month. It felt great to be able to laugh again, as well as cry together if we felt the need. Even though I now live across the country from them, I know I can pick up the phone anytime and they would be there to support me. They don't judge me and tell me that I'm not grieving the way I 'should' be grieving. **We're all on our own individual journey, yet we're connected in a very special way.**

Bereaved parents often get the societal message that after a certain amount of time, we should be 'over it.' Well, let me tell you something ~ **you NEVER get over it!** However, by utilizing constructive coping strategies such as support groups, you can survive and learn to enjoy life again. Unfortunately, there are many bereaved individuals that do not have the social support that is necessary for healthy healing. **One of the lessons I have learned** over the years is that **if I didn't find support in one place, then I had to take it upon myself to search elsewhere to get what I needed.**

If you feel like you're all alone and you don't have support from your family, friends, and/or church, then seeking qualified professional help may satisfy your need to be heard and to be supported. Calling your local Hospice, mental health agency, or asking a trusted clergy person about professionals who work with loss and grief issues, specifically child loss, may be helpful. Of course, **it's your choice who you seek support from, but it's imperative that you have some kind of ongoing and perceived support.** 'People need people,' and I, for one, could not have survived without support from a variety of sources over the years.

Along with **being a very visual person, I try to work things through in my mind, cognitively.** I feel more comfortable and less helpless when I 'get a handle on things.' When Kristen died, I wanted to **learn as much as possible** about the grief process and what to expect. I also spent a great deal of time in the medical library trying to understand Reye's Syndrome, which was the initial cause given for Kristen's death (one year later we learned it was really a treatable rare genetic metabolic deficiency called MCAD when our second child was born and diagnosed with it). Reading helped me understand that I wasn't going crazy and that my journey was going to be a long slow process and not a one-time event.

Learning about the grief process (*see references at end of this article*) **also helped me somewhat with my own self-talk.** If I felt 'crazy,' I would tell myself that what I was experiencing was a normal reaction to having Kristen ripped from my heart. Of course, there have been times that I haven't been too positive or that I couldn't find a way to reframe the situation or thought. Having grown up with a lot of 'negative' thinking at times, it has taken me a very long time to turn that way of thinking around. Yet if I can do that, then anything is possible! Working on my cognitive style has been a tough task for me. My not so positive thinking (possibly formed out of fear of being abandoned again, especially after my dad died when I was so young, leaving my mom with 6 kids under age 9 to raise alone!) has been in place for so long that I have come to realize that it is something that will take persistence and patience to turn around on a daily basis. I know I can do it though. I have to if I am going to really live.

After Kristen died, I thought that I would never be 'happy' again, at least in this lifetime ~ until I was reunited with her in heaven. That kind of polarized thinking has often held me back from fully living. I really feel it's also a matter of choice ~ **you can choose to be 'happy' or choose to be bitter for the rest of your life. And what you tell yourself and what you think has a lot to do with that.** I do not expect other people or material things to make me happy and never have ~ it's my responsibility to seek ways of being content and satisfied for myself. I have found that by doing my grief work, seeking support from others, and finding a meaningful way to keep Kristen's memory alive are a few of the positive things I have done for myself to open the pathway to a renewed sense of happiness. Whether you believe it or not, your thoughts, beliefs, and expectations play a huge part in how you feel and how you go about living on this earth.

Confronting my 'cognitive distortions,' (and I mean some major distortions!) has also helped with decreasing some of my fears. When I heard my second child's diagnosis, I immediately thought and felt that he was going to die. But by reading and talking with professionals about his genetic metabolic disorder over the years, I have come to a place where I feel comfortable and I no longer think that he is going to automatically die. I found that **knowledge was power. Not having that knowledge and uncertainty fueled a lot of my fears.** Now that I know what needs to be done with his condition, I feel I have more control over the situation than when I first heard his diagnosis. I don't feel as powerless. Being active in his care and not passive has helped me take control and has also helped with problem solving and decision-making. As with anything, however, I have learned what I can and cannot control. As much as you wish you could control everything, it's just not realistic. Sometimes you just have to go with the flow and hope for the best.

In doing my grief work, **one of the most painful things for me to do was connecting what my head was saying to what my heart was feeling.** Initially, to protect myself from the onslaught of intense emotions, **I built up an intellectual shell around myself.** I may not have been able to control Kristen's death, but I was definitely going to control how I dealt with it. Unfortunately however, over the past few years, there have been several outside factors out of my control that interfered with the natural unfolding of my personal process and how I originally planned to go about working through that process. As difficult as grief was and is I was determined to do it my way no matter what or who was blocking the way!

My 'shell' was very functional for me for a while. However, I realized early on that I was going to have to 'face the music' at some point in time. So I **cracked the shell enough to make a 'window' to my heart and soul.** That way I wasn't completely closed off from others and myself and I could open the emotional window as much or as little as I was comfortable with. Yet, for the longest time, I felt more comfortable being 'alone inside myself' than with being with others, especially after making a major move from Illinois to North Carolina. Being taken away from my home, family, friends, and Kristen (she is buried in Champaign) was almost too much to bear. I felt shell-shocked for the longest time and it really threw me back to the beginning of my process ~ a major loss on top of a monumental loss!

Despite feeling safe to express my pain privately or with my husband and a few other bereaved parents, I pretty much resisted opening up to other people. I tried talking to people who had not experienced a child's death and I often felt 'unheard' or that they could not deal with the intensity of my emotions. I soon discovered that I was going to have to do this work on my own and privately. After my experiences with trying to explain my pain to 'outsiders,' I guess I closed my window completely on many of them before they could close it on me. I must have feared either being rejected by them for being a failure as a parent or getting too close to them and then getting hurt all over again. And I didn't want to hurt anymore!

Although I have experienced the entire gamut of human emotions over the course of my grief journey, **the two emotions that I experienced the strongest and longest were my anger and guilt.** Due to my early life experience with loss, even though I didn't look or outwardly act like it, I was in varying degrees somewhat of an 'angry child.' I had a 'good' life growing up, but in some way I felt cheated out of the family and life I was supposed to have. I also felt that, in some strange but unrealistic way, I was partially responsible for my loved ones leaving me and for the loss of my 'dream' family. Those kinds of thoughts and feelings triggered a lot of guilt, even if it was 'false' guilt.

In reflecting on my life over the years, **I realized that my anger was not only my reaction to my father's and Kristen's death, but it was also my connection to them.** In some strange way, my anger has been **my fuel for living.** I felt that if I let go of it, I'd have to completely 'let go' of my dad and Kristen. To me, that meant that I'd almost have to forget that they lived and died in order to move on and I couldn't bear that! Of course, I soon realized that I didn't have to do that in order to move forward in my life. What I feared, however, was not knowing if I could survive without the anger. Being with my anger was familiar to me. Yet, the thought of not having it would be foreign and unsettling. That uncertainty about the future, as well as some other circumstances (i.e., going back to graduate school), kept me 'tied up' in my anger and guilt.

By hanging onto it, however, it ultimately held me back from living fully and with real joy. Most of the time, my not so positive thinking paralleled my unconstructive expression/behavior of my anger. For example, **I would tell myself that I failed to protect Kristen from dying. That stemmed from my unrealistic belief that I, as a parent, should be able to protect my child from anything harmful.** Then after saying this to myself, I would find myself screaming at my other children for something they didn't deserve to be screamed at for. All the while, I would be aware that I wasn't really angry at my boys, I was angry at my dad and Kristen for leaving me and angry at myself for letting them down. In other words, out of my own emotional pain and lack of positively coping with it at times, I inflicted emotional pain on my boys. Talk about an endless cycle! To say the least, I have made a lot of apologies over the years!

All along, at some level, I realized that my anger was my 'armor' protecting my fragile, guilty, vulnerable, and hurt 'self.' It's all so strange ~ my 'self' was battered by loss after loss, yet surprisingly held together by the underlying silent belief that "Yes, I really am a good person and I deserve to be loving and loved." **Despite all that I have done out of my anger over the unfairness and injustice of my situation, I've had this quiet hope that things would ultimately be okay ~ a hope I've lived with ALL of my life.** It's kind of ironic when I think about where Kristen is buried ~ Mt. Hope cemetery ~ even in death she's 'telling' me to **NEVER GIVE UP HOPE!**

I really feel **that flicker of light and hope was, and is, being sustained by the core and essence of my being, my spiritual life force.** Even though I was almost completely shutdown when Kristen died and when we moved to North Carolina, I still held the belief that God would never desert me. She/He kept that light of hope flickering until I was ready to allow Her to do His work within me and to bring peace and healing to my inner self. **[I believe we are all made in the image & likeness of God, thus I use She and He interchangeably throughout this article.]**

Over the years, besides my anger, I have dealt with lots of other emotions that my anger most likely was a cover for. Guilt was one of them, as well as fear, vulnerability, hurt, sorrow, and loneliness (missing Kristen's physical presence). I knew that working through these would ultimately open my spiritual window all the way so I could become 'whole' once again.

Around three years after Kristen's death and while still in Illinois, I had reached a point that I felt a new sense of 'normalcy' and peace. Then came the move. So much for my stability! I was devastated and all of those emotions were triggered once again.

Then two years after the move, I felt so trapped in my pain and revived anger that I felt I needed to **channel that energy in a positive way** instead of a destructive and shameful way. That's when **I made the decision to return to graduate school in Counseling.** Holding in and back certain emotions over the years is not healthy and 'blunts' full living in the present and I needed to do something about it!

Even though I wanted desperately to 'finish' my anger work, I realized from the beginning that I **NEEDED** my anger to get me through school. My lifelong anger, despite being negatively expressed at times, had been very useful to me in some positive ways and I have been able to accomplish quite a bit when using it as an internal motivator. To me, **anger is not a negative emotion ~ it's neither good nor bad but it's how you express it that can have good and not so good effects!** So I constructively (overall!) utilized my anger as 'fuel' for three more years until I finished school in December of 1993 and started my work with bereaved individuals the following spring.

When I finally made the decision to work on my grief and to put my anger and guilt, as well as other issues, to 'rest' (even though one can **never** extinguish ALL anger, other emotions, or issues!), I found several strategies to be very cathartic and integrative ~ these included journaling, writing letters, 'talking' to Kristen and my dad about unfinished business, visualizations and 'meditation,' listening to music, reading, pounding my pillow or mattress, and my daily exercise. Overlapping with many of the strategies already discussed, I was able to **give myself permission to express my intense emotions ~ thus, fully opening the window to my spiritual life force.**

After Kristen died, the spiritual dimension of my 'being' had almost been completely shutdown or frozen over. My emotions, specifically anger, were the gatekeeper to this window and choosing not to fully express them until I was done with school, kept me from accessing the core of my being. I realized early on in my journey that by not working through my emotional work, I would pay a high price. And I did. My relationships suffered, as well as my own personal contentment/happiness. Yet, I saw and felt that flicker of light and hope and I knew that in the end, even though it took many years, I would somehow find a way to restructure and rebalance my inner world. What some people didn't understand, however, was that **I had to do it in my own time and way.**

By using my music, 'meditation,' visualizations, and several other constructive coping strategies, as well as **experiencing four 'spiritual awakening miracles'** (described in other Coping and Healing articles) and achieving my 'dream' of working with other bereaved parents and families, my inner world was re-ignited and is now again burning brightly. That didn't occur overnight, however.

In the spring and summer of 1994, while working on my grief issues and some family-of-origin issues, I had reached a point in my journey that my protective shell or armor was beginning to disintegrate. I knew my anger was no longer functional for me and it had to be dealt with more constructively. By allowing myself to 'let loose' of my emotions, I was able to allow God's love to enter my wounded heart. I was then able to finally forgive myself and receive forgiveness from God for not protecting Kristen, as well as for all of my past 'sins.' My faith in a loving and forgiving God has not wavered over the years. I knew She would always be there waiting for me to let Him in.

It's so difficult to adequately articulate the transformations I've experienced over the years on my intimate journey of grief. Yet, I strongly believe we all know deep inside ourselves why we hang onto certain aspects of our losses. For me, I knew why I hung onto my anger. It served a vital purpose for me ~ it kept me alive, but not FULLY alive. Unfortunately, some of the people that I care about and love, myself included, got hurt in the process. However, **I believe that my faith in a loving and forgiving God, my hope that I will survive, and love for myself and others, have quietly sustained me through the years.**

**Even in the greatest depths of despair, I was open (although sometimes reluctantly) to allowing the mysteries of life and my faith, hope, and love, to weave their way through and around my wounded heart.** I would have to say that my forgiveness experience, receiving Kristen's blessing to move on with my life, and officially starting my 'practice' in October of 1994 were the three final significant events that preceded my 'renewal' into living. Everything that I had hoped for was now becoming more of a reality. As my professional dream was unfolding, I too was allowing my life force to fulfill **my lifelong hope ~ the hope of healing my shattered and fractured heart.**

Even though I cannot scientifically validate and explain my 'wholistic' healing experience, **I strongly feel that my faith, hope, and love were the keys to healing my past ~ so I could live fully, joyfully and passionately in the present, thus giving me the strength and courage to move into the future as God's instrument of love and light...**

Deb Lee Gould, MEd  
March 11, 1995

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#### **CHOICE\***

Feel the energy flow.  
Let yourself feel that connection,  
the energy that moves around.  
Put yourself where you've always been,  
in the universal life force.  
Tell yourself: "I am a life form based in divinity.  
I am able to see,  
to hear,  
to feel,  
to smell,  
to touch,  
to move,  
to speak,  
to choose."

#### **BEING GROUNDED\***

Go deep inside yourself  
Find that treasure that  
is known by your name.  
Look at this treasure  
Look at the resources  
that are universal.  
You have them all.  
You can see, think, hear, feel, taste,  
smell, choose, move, sort.  
To sort ~ the ability to let go of  
that which once fit but no longer does, and  
see clearly what fits now.  
Now say to yourself,  
"I am able,  
I can do this.  
I have the energy through my groundedness,  
my relationship to the heavens,  
and my interconnectedness with others.  
I am able."

#### **Virginia Satir: Meditations & Inspirations** <sup>6</sup>

Edited by John Banmen & Jane Gerber

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## Interpretation of my

### 'Holistic Intergenerational Grief Model ~ Healing of a Fractured Heart'™

Over the years, grief clinicians and researchers have written extensively about various 'theories' of the grief process. Although many are familiar with the writings of Elisabeth Kübler-Ross<sup>4</sup>, and her process that entails moving from denial to acceptance, just as many have misinterpreted her work and see the grief process as ONLY those five 'stages' and in a very specific order. I don't believe that's how she intended for others to perceive her work, but unfortunately that's how many do. Grief cannot be fit into such a nice neat predictable package and those that misinterpreted her work and happen to work with or are around dying and/or bereaved individuals do a great disservice to all by trying to 'box' everyone's grief into an unrealistic step-by-step linear process! Because my 'complicated grief' journey over the last several years has encompassed far more than those 'stages' and concepts, I felt compelled to write about how I **'see' my transformational experience ~ going deep within my Individual heart of hearts (see my 'Holistic Intergenerational Grief Model' below).**



In working through the **shattering of my heart and life after Kristen's death on Sunday, July 21, 1985**, I discovered that **dealing ONLY with her loss was not enough** for me to feel 'whole' again and that there was a constellation of factors that contributed to that continued sense of shatteredness. I discovered that it was **necessary to go beyond mourning only her death** and to examine all of my past unresolved losses, along with my current ones, in combination with honestly exposing myself to my past 'sins' and family-of-origin issues that I had yet to forgive myself for and be released from in order to reach that point of 'pulling back into place' those fractured pieces, albeit in a different way than before her death. **It was really a 'moving beyond survival' to a richer essence of living and loving.**

It was a unique and painful experience of **learning that THAT is what it took to reach a state of spiritual individuation, of 'holistic wholeness.'** This experience also makes me wonder if this perspective of the grief process MAY be helpful for other bereaved parents in working through their own child's (children) death ~ especially if they have that continued sense of 'incompleteness' and of still feeling 'fractured' even after having worked through their child's death to some level of 'reconciliation.'

For me, it was **working within those 3 Grief Process frameworks** (*i.e. see above Table and References below for Wolfelt, Rando, and Worden*) and then within the larger framework of Jung's theory of **personality development** (*see reference 5*) that led me to move to a deeper level of individuation and growth, more so than what I felt I had already developed earlier in my life.

**The texture of this new spiritual fullness was so different than before that it was actually 'palpable' from my most inner core!** Yet, trying to put that into words and a visual model has been a long journey in itself ~ it's not easy to write about an experience that really has no adequate words to describe it!

There really is nothing new in what I am saying that makes my process so different than what's been written about grief in the past, except that **FOR ME, combining ALL of those processes WITHIN the greater context of growth and development is what it took for me to reach a new level of growth and 'healing' ~ a spiritual healing. It goes way beyond just grieving in your 'head' to a total immersion of your mind, body, and spirit ~ working from the inside out.**

It also goes way beyond the dimension of 'growing up' and becoming mature (*i.e. becoming responsible for yourself etc*) ~ I believe it's a process that requires one to already be at a level of adult maturity and individuation so that the **greater challenge of 'growing within and into one's self' can be fully embraced.**

As shown above in the different aspects of the **Grief and Mourning Process**, I view (and experienced) this intertwining process (and sometimes it feels/felt like a spiraling figure-8 process!) as **moving from and within the Dimensions of Grief**<sup>1</sup> (*i.e., Evasion, Encounter, and Reconciliation*) to the specific internal/external **Six "R" Processes of Mourning**<sup>2</sup> (*i.e., which involve cognitive, emotional, behavioral, etc aspects*) to **The Four Tasks of Mourning**<sup>3</sup>, which is where some may say that all the levels of 'working through' will **hopefully lead you ~ to that sense of 'reconciliation' with your loss(es) so you can positively reinvest and move forward with your life WITHOUT forgetting your loved ones or your past.**

But that's not the 'end' of it ~ **I see my journey as moving beyond those Dimensions, Processes, and Tasks of grieving a loss by weaving them WITHIN my entire personal and professional development of my unique and individualized 'self.'** **It's really a process within a process ~ both of which are lifelong!**

I also see this process as **interactional** in that you not only have to do your own '**work**' within your own **psyche/spirit**, but you learn that doing that work is **enhanced by 'reflective' interpersonal relationships.** Those are the types of relationships whereby you connect with someone (within your own **family, community, or world connections**) in such a way that **by THAT connection you are able to 'see' certain things about yourself and your life that you most likely would never see in someone that you don't 'intimately' connect with.** In some strange way it's as if **they are a mirror reflecting you back to you** ~ even when you are not physically face-to-face. It's one of those 'mysteries' of close or intimate relationships.

Additionally, your relationships, especially with your family-of-origin, as well as with other significant others, have a major influence in how you and your family deal/dealt with loss and grief ~ it's an **intergenerational** passing on of either positive or not-so-positive ways of coping with loss, in that **how you learn to grieve**

**(or NOT grieve) is passed on** from one generation to the next. Many times an individual's or family's style of grieving **can complicate or compromise a grief process, as well as personal development**, causing one to feel 'stuck' or 'anchored' within the process and it can have **major ramifications for living your life**. However, **you CAN make changes** in how you grieve and it's in working through all of these various processes and levels that opens you to a **richer integration of your entire being**.

One more comment about relationships ~ throughout my life I have learned that **even though loved ones have died or moved away it doesn't mean that my relationship with them is over**. It's just different. **ALL** of my '**social intimates**' (living and dead) have impacted my life in various ways ~ **it's a spiritual connection ('Life Imprint') whereby their 'light' brings light into my own life and is a source of strength for me that helps generate positive energy within myself and ADDS to my own separate and individuated identity, which then enhances all of my other connections**.

I try to focus on '**LIFE IMPRINTS**' versus Lifton's "death imprint," (cited in Rando's *Treatment of Complicated Mourning*, p. 581) which is where you have your loved one's death or others'/your own traumatic experience flashing in your mind's eye and impacting your life in ways that you might not even be aware of. It's all a matter of perspective ~ **I CHOOSE to focus on the positive energy of my loved ones' energies and that reflects on how I CHOOSE to keep their memory and spirit alive!**

It's important for me to add that these processes didn't take place in a specific order for me. A great deal of 'recycling' of past and present issues (including the difficult and ambiguous issues) took place over the years, which definitely made my experience a challenge.

For those that have **experienced child loss, there is almost a constant 'recycling' because your child 'grows up in your mind' over the years ~ so in many ways there is no such thing, in my opinion, as full 'closure' ~ although many would like us to just 'accept' it and be 'done with it!' NO child's death is 'acceptable!' Acknowledged, yes ~ 'accepted,' NO!**

Those milestones of when they were supposed to be learning to walk, graduating high school, or getting married are new and different kinds of 'losses' that will need to be mourned as well. Please note, however, that a child's death can also mean a 60-year-old 'child' ~ so this is not just a process for young bereaved parents ~ I believe parents of any age will KNOW exactly what I am talking about! **I am speaking about parental bereavement in the most inclusive sense whether it is due to death, estrangement, missing child, or adoption**. Keep in mind that it is also **not just an individual process ~ it's within the context of surviving children and other family members and friends too**. They will have their own particular issues to grieve and integrate in their own time and own way (there is no ONE right way to grieve!), but it will be within similar processes, all of which are also influenced by age, culture, religion, gender and many other factors (*described extensively in Wolfelt, Rando, and Worden*).

Amidst all of these challenges came even greater amazement for me ~ along the way, '**spiritual awakening mysteries**' occurred that were like '**stepping stones to a deeper level of learning, growth, and healing**'. They were the kind of experiences that are hard to believe ~ and if you don't believe them, that's okay, because **I BELIEVE THEM** and **THAT** is what matters to me. I have referred to these experiences in previous articles (many on [www.fodsupport.org](http://www.fodsupport.org)), but let me try to briefly describe what happened. **They have most definitely impacted my life and my perspective of my own grief journey and how I came to visualize the grief process as the 'healing of a fractured heart.'**

. . .

**The day after Kristen died**, Dan and I went out shopping ~ but not for something we really wanted. We **had to buy Kristen's burial dress**...not an easy thing to do, especially when you have a saleswoman comment how pretty she will be when she wears it at the party or the wedding. To say the least she was a bit taken aback when we told her it was for her funeral...I'm sure you can imagine the look on her face. We then had to take it over to the funeral home. **Not a very good day for us**.

Anyway, the next day the funeral director called to tell us that Kristen was 'ready.' Another not so pleasant thought...**going to view our own blonde-haired blue-eyed 21-month-old daughter in her blue and white swiss dot dress with a little orange duck on the front lying in a small white coffin with her favorite yellow quilt my aunt had made when Kristen was born**.

The **ONLY solace** we had at that thought was the actual **dress ~ that we had chosen it specifically because of its colors, more so for a symbolic reason** ~ Dan and I are Illinois graduates and the

**'Fighting Illini' colors are orange and blue and we wanted to celebrate our loyalty and love for Champaign and the University by 'grounding' us there by way of Kristen.** I know that may sound strange, but if you've ever been in a similar situation, I don't think I have to explain why or how we would do such a thing. It was a given for us.

The **first 'spiritual awakening'** was awaiting us when we walked together to the viewing room. As Dan and I approached the opened door, we stopped in the doorway. At that very moment, Dan felt a shudder go through his body and **I felt it and saw it with my own eyes** ~ we actually experienced **the ascent of Kristen's 'soul'** from her small white coffin. It was one of those surreal moments that words don't even come close to describing. As we stood there, I saw Kristen's body surrounded by various shades of rose and violet, as if in a mist of angels, and in a split second that seemed forever, her body rose from the coffin and then disappeared as she went heavenward. It was almost as if **she waited for us before beginning her new journey.** Dan and I just stood there in amazement with tears in our eyes. Even though he did not see what I saw, he 'saw' her in a different way ~ yet with the same perception ~ that she waited for us.

That was not the end of our first 'awakening,' however. A day later, another amazing thing happened. After her funeral Mass on July 25, 1985, when we were driving through the cemetery to her burial site, I looked out from the car window and saw a **lone mourning dove sitting on a headstone.** That may seem insignificant to all of you, but it was and IS significant to Dan and me. And it HAD meant something to Kristen too ~ we had been watching a dove family in a nest in our front yard tree ~ but Kristen died before she saw the babies learn to fly. **The dove we saw at the cemetery was perched on a 'LEE' headstone and Lee is my maiden name.** Out of the thousands of headstones in that cemetery, **that dove was there for a reason ~ Kristen was letting us know that she was okay and that she was with my dad, her grandfather,** that had died in 1958 when I was just 3 years old. Some may call it a coincidence ~ I don't ~ **I call it 'divine synchronicity.'**

My **second 'spiritual awakening'** occurred February 11, 1990, about a year and a half after moving to North Carolina from our home in Champaign. As I stood in the middle of our family room, **I watched in amazement as Nelson Mandela walked through those gates of apartheid to Freedom ~ I was in such awe that he (and several others) had withstood, with his integrity and dignity intact, 27 years of SHAMEFUL and WRONGFUL IMPRISONMENT** that I stood there with tears running down my face. His perseverance and resilience was so inspiring that **I made a major decision for my life** soon after that experience. That was when I decided that I needed to do something with my life that would **keep Kristen's memory alive** ~ and that decision was to return to graduate school in Counseling, so I could eventually work with other bereaved parents and families.

That was a difficult decision to make, mostly because I had thought my years as a classroom student were over! Yet, even though I knew it would take me three years to complete, I was determined to go through with it. I officially began my program in the spring of 1991 and I graduated in December of 1993.

As I mentioned above, it was then after I finished school that I really started working through more of my life and grief issues, particularly those that were partially unresolved and dangled with threads of unfinished business. Just as I was determined to go back to school, I was even more determined to REALLY address all those issues that had been pushed back into the shadows of my memories.

Late spring of 1994 was the season of my **third 'spiritual awakening.'** On one particular morning, I woke up at my usual time of 4am, in order to have time for myself before the boys got up and started their day. Yet, this morning was different, and I felt that within myself as I was resting on the couch in a deep focused state of relaxation (some may call it 'meditation'). Thoughts and feelings of my past 'sins' and losses and relationships were stirring within me despite my outward stillness. **God was speaking to me ~ and I was listening!**

Buds of new growth were about to burst forth. In a cry of desperation (even though it was spoken internally it was so startlingly real that I thought I was going to wake everyone), I raised my arm upward to reach for Her/His outstretched hand, and **asked for God's forgiveness and forgiveness from myself for all of my sins and failings of the past.** In my mind, even though it may be totally unrealistic, of all the things that I had been ashamed of, **failing to protect Kristen was by far the most shameful.** Then in one glorious moment, **every fiber of my being was permeated with the grace of God and through love and forgiveness my shame was instantly lifted.** Just as Kristen had waited for us, God waited for me to reach for Her ~ He had always been there, I just wasn't ready to let Her/Him back in ~ until that moment.

I wish I could say that after that experience everything was smooth sailing, as they say. Unfortunately, despite my internal 'cleansing,' there were some very difficult external circumstances going on around me that were extremely challenging to deal with ~ and what's even more unsettling, they are still going on and involve many people that KNOW better. Yet, despite the shameful 'conspiracy of silence' surrounding the situation, I am **NOT GIVING UP HOPE** ~ as Kristen so poignantly reminds me on many occasions. The way I see it, **because there is NOTHING that compares to or is greater than Kristen's death, I can and WILL do whatever I have to in order to deal with any situation that comes my way!**

Amidst the chaos around me, I experienced my **fourth 'spiritual awakening'** four months later, on September 24, 1994. I had seen the 'light' on those previous awakenings, but **THIS 'light' was the brightest of them all and the most freeing.** As I mentioned before, I was working toward being able to privately work with bereaved parents and families. On this particular day, I had received my business cards from the gal that had helped me design them. It may sound funny, but opening the box and seeing them for the first time was really an emotional experience. It was not only another step in the unfolding of my 'dream,' it was **the cathartic sharing of my own grief journey by way of my rose logo** that had been designed by my sister-in-law that really got to me.

As I was sitting in the rocker that I had last rocked Kristen the day she died, holding her 'Love-A-Lot Care Bear,' and listening to the verse of a favorite song about being whom God meant for me to be, **I looked up at a picture of a winter scene** hung over the couch in my office. As I looked up, **a small bright light instantly flashed out from the painted sunset.** Simultaneously, **I heard a child's voice call, "Mama, Mama."** Thinking that it was one of my boys calling me from outside, I went to the back door and asked them if they called me. They didn't, so I went to the front door. As I opened the door, **I saw a lone mourning dove perched on the telephone wire directly in front of me.** After gazing in awe for a long 30 seconds, it flew right over me and the top of our house.

Again, to many, all of this may sound unreal or insignificant, but to me **the dove was a 'love messenger'** telling me that Kristen was okay and that her 'light and spirit' will be with me forever, guiding me through any darkness I may encounter. **I finally received the 'blessing' that was meant for me ~ Kristen 'forgiving me, releasing me, and setting me free' and encouraging me to believe in myself so I can lovingly move forward with my life and help other bereaved parents and families before or after a child's death.**

All of these spiritual experiences **led to not only an unshackling of the anchor of grief** that had been weighing me down, but they were like a 'soothing balm' massaging my wounded and fractured heart. **Through each 'awakening,' there was a sense of moving to another level of 'coming through my grief and reaching the other side' ~ wherever the 'other side' may be.** For me, that came with the fourth 'awakening' and I literally felt it throughout my body, mind, and spirit.

Not that I am completely done with grief and personal growth in my life ~ since I don't believe there is such a thing as complete 'closure' with a child's death, as well as some other life issues ~ but I can continue to move forward and **embrace my 'spiritual healing' to live life with strength and courage, be whom I am meant to be, and give that which I have most of ~ faith, hope, and love ~ all working together not only in unity but in 'trinity.'**

**My journey and perception of a different path through grief is not the end all and be all...it's just one way. But I hope by reading about my own experiences, it will open your heart and mind and soul to finding YOUR own process for 'healing a fractured heart'...one that will lead you to live and love with 'holistic wholeness.'**

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***Dimensions of Grief*** from **Death and Grief: A Guide for Clergy** by Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt, Accelerated Development Inc., 1988. Reproduced with the permission of, and written by Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director, Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Rd, Fort Collins, CO 80526, Companion Press (970) 226-6050.

- **2)** Dr. Therese A. Rando, Clinical Psychologist and Director of the Institute for the Study and Treatment of Loss. Author of a variety of books on grief including **Treatment of Complicated Mourning** (Research Press, 1993), **Parental Loss of a Child** (Research Press, 1986), and **How to Go on Living When Someone You Love Dies** (Lexington Books, 1988).

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- **4) On Death and Dying** by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc, 1969).
- **5) Jung's Map of the Soul: An Introduction** by Dr. Murray Stein (Chicago, IL: Open Court, Carus Publishing Company, 1998).

**Note:** I deliberately refrained from specifically discussing the intricacies of Jung's theory, because I feel that Dr. Stein did a wonderful job of writing in 'layperson's' terms in his book ~ and there is no way I could ever condense Jung's teachings as brilliantly as Dr. Stein did! However, I believe that one will be able to discern aspects of his theory from what I have written here about my own journey. I strongly encourage anyone that has an interest in becoming 'holistically whole' to read Dr. Stein's work.

- **6) Virginia Satir Meditations & Inspirations** Edited by John Banmen & Jane Gerber (Berkeley, CA: Celestial Arts, 1985).

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