

A BROKEN HEART CAN'T BE UNBROKEN

By Nan Zastrow

In my journey through grief, Gary always told me I could find a story in everyday experiences. He was right!

You never know how you will react to the death of a significant loved one until it happens to you. Even when it happens again. It's been 30 years since the death of our son; and I knew his loss would be with me for a lifetime. I thought I would be prepared for the death of my husband should that happen before my own. But I was wrong. He died in January 2023. Someone recently said to me, "Well you should get over this quickly, you've been through this before and know exactly what to expect."

Stunned by the statement, I didn't have an answer right away. But as I thought about it later, I conceded that there is no way to describe a heart broken twice and try to persuade someone that it can't be unbroken—no matter how much you know about the progression of grief. The best that I could come up with is a story.

In my journey through grief, I've found that everyday thoughts often spring forth into a story. My husband, Gary, would always say to me..."There's another idea for a story to write." He knew how my mind worked and how I felt so many things in life lead us to that moment when an incident or thought can be transposed into meaning quite different than the actual occurrence. Each with a lesson and moral.

As I looked out my kitchen window recently, I saw the Inuit (inukshuk) man, sitting in the garden had fallen over. Gary built him after a trip to Canada where we saw them dotted along the side of the highway. I thought, "Somebody's got to put him together again. Those stones are pretty heavy. Who am I going to get to do it?" That brought to mind an age-old nursery rhyme about Humpty Dumpty. Sometimes when things in grief seem "out of place", it triggers parallel thoughts. And, behind every unintentional phrase or verse rests a moral to a story:

Grief and Humpty Dumpty: (from a griever's perspective)

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall

Why was he sitting there in the first place? Was he sad? Lonely? Or maybe even grieving? Let's assume Humpty was grieving and just having one of those days when he needed to be alone, but he chose a precarious place where there was a potential of getting hurt. In grief, we sometimes are challenged by problems and decisions. We ponder what to do. It's very much like "sitting on a wall" to contemplate what next?

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall

It wasn't just a fall; it was a great fall! Maybe he fell from the wall because he was unable to accept the reality of his loss. Maybe he felt stuck in a very dark place. He might even have had that "fall" of grief that happens when everything changes, and you feel so overwhelmed and sorrowful that you put yourself at risk. However, you might describe your fall, in grief, it hurts!



All the King's horses and all the King's men

The best recruits were summoned to help put Humpty back together. That would be your loyal family and caring friends who came to your rescue. We all typically have a regiment of caring people who would come in an instance to our aid. They come from many different backgrounds in our life. They all truly want to help but don't know what to do!

Couldn't put Humpty together again!

However, these men were faced with an unrealistic task. No one could reassemble thousands of pieces, especially Humpty's broken heart—assuming he had one. Or his protective body armor—his shell. The Kings men, try as the might, couldn't change his fate.

The moral of this story

This metaphor reminded me about the inability to repair some broken things. Unfortunate life events, like eggshells, can't be unbroken. I can realistically relate to this simple, abstract rhyme. I can also compare it to how my broken heart feels and how my disoriented grief brain juggles thoughts often confusing me more. I feel much like Humpty Dumpty. Not even my family and friends, who have tried so diligently, can put my heart back together again. Once shattered into a million pieces, the splintered edges could never fit snugly together. This would be an unachievable task!

Consider that a one-thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle is precision-cut to neatly fit back together and create the visual we expect after spending countless time and energy to make it happen. But a heart crafted by the Master will never mend back to the way it was. It just can't be unbroken.

Though hearts may heal and scar, they will never be the same nor will they ever function quite like they did before. They will always carry the memory of the damage caused by loss. But amazingly, most hearts survive—in a wounded state. The scars and damage are hidden inside of the grief and silently witnessed only by the bearer of the loss.

I had a beautiful crystal dish with a hummingbird perched upright in the middle of it. It was given to me by my son as a Mother's Day gift. I displayed it on a little round table in my bedroom. One day, I accidentally hit the leg of the table with the vacuum cleaner and the dish came tumbling down. I panicked as I tried to scoop up all the pieces hopeful that I could glue them back together again and preserve this sentimental gift. But it was an impossible task. All that would remain was a treasured memory of the way it was. It's been decades and I still remember the feeling of losing that broken dish. Though it was something so insignificant compared to my son's death, it was a tangible reminder of his love and one of his final gifts to me. I was reminded of this story when I began this article. Like the hummingbird dish, my heart was shattered all over again with the death of my husband. It reminded me of this beautiful crystal dish, that that unfortunately would never be a sacred gift again. All that remains are treasured memories of Gary's unconditional love.

There is no doubt that grief is a journey. It's a discovery about yourself and a reality of how fragile life is. The more losses you have, the clearer the journey becomes. We are human. We are not mortal. Some things don't get easier. In all my years of grief teaching to the bereaved, I've confirmed that you never get over grief. You just learn to tolerate the emptiness and live a life different than imagined. With time, you adjust to the major changes in your life that mold you into someone different, wiser, and more compassionate. It's considered personal growth. You can't protect your heart from ever being broken but you can heal it enough to show the world the other side of grief where life can be meaningful again.

So, what's the moral of Humpty Dumpty as a grief story? It's a reminder that the heart is fragile, like life. After the loss of someone loved, it will feel shattered and vulnerable to feelings, thoughts, and everything around you. Though it can't be unbroken, it can heal in its own way. No one can heal your brokenness; not even the king's horses or men. It must be your decision to live beyond your loss in a way that values family and friends who gratefully step up to walk with you through your grief. Invest in, guard, and protect those kinds of relationships. These are the treasures and the resources for healing and finding peace.