



I AM WHO I AM—after Grief

By Nan Zastrow

A high school class reunion can definitely heighten grief! Typically, a reunion is the time to reunite with dozens of friends and acquaintances from many years past and socialize for one more good time? However, a hidden agenda often requires that you “reveal” how life has treated you. For some, this event is highly anticipated, because we are all curious about the circumstances in other’s lives. But, for some, a class reunion can bring high anxiety. I admit to being one of those in the latter category. But, a promise is a promise so I decided to go. I was pleasantly surprised that my grief experiences helped me pass the tests of time and face even the toughest questions.

I haven’t gone to a class reunion since the death of our son twenty years ago. Life had irreversibly changed, and I didn’t want to fess up to almost strangers, acquaintances, and long-ago friends. I could easily rehearse how the scene would play out and how uncomfortable I would be. With leery anticipation, I primed myself for the inevitable question. “How many children do you have?”

I joked about this with my husband, Gary, before we went. “Remember that bus trip we went on right after Chad died? We went because we wanted to “get away” from grief, mingle with new people, and find some moments of joy in something new and distant from home.” It turned out that of the 20 + couples on the bus; all but one couple were strangers. Of course, their get-to-know-you conversations began with one of four things: (1) “Do you know what the weather report is for today?” (2) “Where do you live?” (3) “What do you do for a living?” (4) “How many children do you have?”

Even though it’s been 20 years, that open-ended question about children always demands a direct response. I also was dreading the questions about “how many grandchildren do you have?” How would I respond without regrets and tears? My loss of dreams was a personal, sensitive issue and destined to surface.

It's our nature as humans to be curious about the lives of others. We especially want to know if life is treating them good; if they are healthy, and decidedly happy. Perhaps that was the reason I stayed away from reunions. Some feelings were still very intimate, and I didn't want to discuss how unexpected events had changed my life and my expectations of life.

So why did I even consider going? It was a promise to a dear friend and classmate. Months before she died, I promised I would attend the reunion this year. Never expecting that she would die, I was secure that there was one person there who understood my discomfort with the "twenty question" game about life. But, a promise is a promise...so I went.

I was surprised as I greeted long-ago friends. Our conversations didn't center on the subject I expected. Perhaps as we aged, it didn't make a difference any more where you worked or what you accomplished in life. The conversations centered more about what each was doing in their personal lives now. Few people focused on their health or over-emphasized their success (though there were several Porsche, Audi, and Mercedes in the parking lot.) Most just mentioned how great it was to be a grandparent or retired and finally enjoying a less stressful life. Travel/vacations, relocation, joyous life events, and the joy of grandchildren (without asking your input) were common topics of discussion. The evenings were filled with laughter, happiness, memories, stories, and youthful expressions mimicked by our older selves. It was a relief to know that the "twenty question" game was suspended with time.

Later, at home, I realized that over the span of years most everyone had their own "griefs" of one kind or another. And the class reunion was not the time or place to focus on the ups and downs in life. Of course a large number of classmates did not attend, for reasons unknown. Maybe, like me, they were hesitant to expose the events in their lives. Perhaps they were struggling with new "griefs" at that very moment. We all have lost loved ones. We all have had disappointments. We all have had setbacks.

The definition of "grief" is the loss of something valued. Grief is normal. Grief is natural. Grief is universal. Everyone grieves something at some time. It would also be nice to be able to put grief on hold on special days and events when one didn't want it to interfere. **Grief (or loss of any kind) creates several valuable lessons that nothing else in life can give you.** You transition into a new and improved person. Your self-worth shines with healing along your journey. Your perspectives in life become abundantly clear. You learn quite quickly who you really are—deep inside.

Life is full of losses...and whether a person at the reunion was grieving the death of a loved one or the loss of another kind of a relationship, it's made an impact on who he or she is today. Some may have had, or were currently experiencing, health or disability issues that they didn't want to disclose. Some may have had children that didn't live up to their expectations and felt the loss of parenthood-pride they so desired. Some got lost along the way and found something richer than they previously imagined. (And I'm sure a few got lost and never found their way back.) Some may

have struggled with their waning youth and aging physical appearance. Heck, not one of us was getting any younger! And maybe some grieved for lost opportunities in life or in their careers. I have to admit I could never have accomplished all the goals I set for myself—but then I wasn't realistic in time or talent. Life has a knack of derailing the best laid plans.

The most awesome discovery of all was the sense of "I am who I am." Each of us was proud to be there...to be alive... when many classmates have already passed. There was no wimping about "if I could only live my life over." This was an event about being there to celebrate life—at whatever stage of maturity we were at. And the "griefs" we experienced were written in the lines in our faces, the kinks in our joints, and the color of or the absence of hair. Our successes or our under-achievements didn't need to be discussed. We all lived life in the "fast lane" and coped with the issues one at a time, making choices about what we thought was best! Today, we were celebrating a different kind of success...we were celebrating self-confidence that comes with "been there... done that" and our unique selves.

I'm sure there were stories of great sorrow, stories of unimaginable pain or fear, and sad stories that could turn your personal "grief" story into just a bad day. But there were also stories of great accomplishments, fortunes found, lasting friendships and renewed friendships, knowledge acquired and shared, sacrifice, volunteerism from giving hearts, and love overflowing that were never mentioned. This was not the day to grieve or gloat. It was just a time to "BE" whoever we were at the moment and breathe in and out with the rhythms of life.

