



The Memory of a Darkest Moment Can Change a Life

By Nan Zastrow

Spring forced its way into Wisconsin in an unusual way in April, 1993. It strangely marked the day with headline news: “Blizzard.” It was Easter-time...a time when the sun typically began warming the earth and tulips emerged. Outside my window a cherry tree with long, thin branches swayed in the wind. The branches loaded with spring buds supported dozens of plastic Easter eggs in bright colors suspended from ribbons. The sudden freezing rain and blizzard coated the branches heavily with ice causing them to strain and bend against the frozen weight. This bizarre scene mocked the event that had just unfolded...the death of our twenty-one- year-old son, as the result of suicide. The kind of news every parent fears. We tried to shake the icy chill that numbed our minds and bodies. How could this be happening to us? How would we ever forget that day?

The next morning we awoke to sunlight reflecting off the crystallized branches creating prisms that otherwise might have seemed awesome. But to us, it was still a cold day, marked by death. We couldn't see beyond this chilling tragedy to vision anything possible in the beauty of early spring. Instead it seemed like endless nothingness without a future, without a reason, and without hope.

Spring! Isn't it the time of new beginnings? Doesn't it sing to us of evolution, newness, freshness and beauty in all that nature can reveal? Isn't it the poetic symbol of hope? For Gary and me, it marked a time of hopelessness and sorrow that would create flashbacks to an unbelievable memory that created a super notch in the scrapbook of life.

Sometimes who we were meant to be is changed by a memory from our darkest moment. Memories triggered by traumatic events change the way we think, act and respond to future events. Going forward, they can create either negative or positive reactions. What we become tomorrow is molded by how we process the event when the numbness subsides. Our son's death, our darkest moment, became a turning point that changed who we are and created a life much different than we ever imagined.

We were naïve about the effects of death and grief of a significant loved one. The journey we were about to embark upon was incredibly strange. There were no rule books. The information highway lacked resources for the newly bereaved that weren't clinical in nature.



Our paths lay before us in complete uncertainty. Looking back now, I am able to understand what helped us deal with the bad memories and create the positive mindset that transformed our lives.

Acknowledge the memory:

Memories that either haunt or infatuate us may always be with us. Some trigger, such as a date, will cause the memory to re-surface and demand that we remember. Even though the memory may be unpleasant, it's very unlikely you can escape it.

Since we couldn't escape, we knew we had to deal with it. This occurs by determining what story, what message or what lesson the event brought into your life. Every memorable event makes a statement. Label the story, message or lesson so you can measure its affect on you. The recurring memory may happen year after year, or until you've exhausted any possible reason to revisit that time in your life. Eventually, the negativity of the memory will become less demanding, and you will be able to release it.

Every spring, Gary and I acknowledge the harsh reality of our darkest moment. We accept that Chad's suicide was a surprise and mystery to us, very much like the freak blizzard that occurred that April. We no longer need to dwell on what happened or why. Instead, we acknowledge that it taught us how fragile life is. We take less for granted and focus on where we are now, not on where we have been.

Embrace the experience

In grief, you are probably struggling with the aftermath of sorrow and many of its associated emotions. Real life creates pain; it's inevitable. Accept that you cannot change what happened, and accept that it has now passed. You can't change all that you went through, but you can control how it will affect new experiences, relationships and your future.

You are human; you hurt. Embrace your emotions momentarily, feel them and then release them. Our emotions speak to our love for the person who died, and grief is a price we pay for that love when it is snatched from us. Understanding what you can and can't control paves the pathway to healing.

For many years, we struggled with the "what ifs," and the "shudda, wudda, cudda" scenarios. Eventually, we recognized that it was out of our control to change the event. We had two choices. We could either accept it and move on, or allow it to destroy both of our lives as a result. We chose living a life that allowed us the freedom to gain strength, faith and courage from our experience.

Measure the outcomes

When you "let go" of pain and hurt, you become capable of seeing how this experience has changed who you are and what you can become. Letting go is not about "forgetting." It's about

releasing the control the negative experience has over your life. If you allow yourself to sulk in your pain, you position yourself for more failure and negative outcomes in other experiences.

Ask yourself what this experience has meant to you. Even though you couldn't control it, it has a lesson, so what do you want that lesson to be? Or what has that lesson already taught you about yourself or life in general?

We vowed to create awareness about grief, because we didn't want others to go through the torment we had initially experienced. As we ourselves learned what to expect, we shared our experiences. Our mission was to live a purposeful life, and that became a ministry that grew. We could best honor Chad's life by helping others reposition themselves to again live whole lives with new meaning.

Move on

When you accept that you cannot change the past, or predict the future, you give yourself the freedom to transform who you are, for the greater good. Your future can be written by you. It doesn't mean you won't have other hurts in life, but it does mean that you will gain the confidence and power to give yourself control over your reactions to them.

Be patient; this takes time. The way you felt when grief was new is not the way you will feel forever. Accept that others can help you through the transition. Get support from a buddy, a group, an advisor or a friend. To understand grief, read, attend classes, learn all you can about it.

We moved on, but not too fast. We took our time and allowed ourselves to grieve and learn along the way. For us, it was necessary to devote a lot of time to grief work to help us accept all the changes we would face. Moving on meant getting involved. That's not for everyone. Moving on may mean just resuming life in the best possible "new normal" way. It's not important how you take the steps to move on; what is important is that you are willing to move on.

You will still always remember your darkest moments. Some trigger may bring the moment freshly back to you and may even cause renewed sadness and tears. It still happens to us, but we handle it better now. Our experiences with loss have jogged our spiritual and mental awareness in surprising ways.

We can better understand some of the pain others are feeling, because of our own past pain. Our world is altered; our dreams have changed. But in some ways, we see life clearer now.

The budding cherry tree with the crystallized branches from the freezing spring rain sparkles again. We recognize that the prisms reflecting from the sunshine are a message that there will always be a miracle in spring. The ice will melt and thaw. The buds will burst forth with blossom. The sunshine will warm the chill, and nothing can stop the transformation, the inevitable awakening, the birth of hope. The birth of spring!

There is Spring in Heaven, Too!

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Dear God, it's spring!

**Give me the strength to recognize its meaning.
Your harbingers of the season cautiously grace
our presence.**

**Lo! I saw my first robin just a few days ago,
And that bush of pussy willows mysteriously
awoke overnight.**

**"Was it only yesterday that you claimed my
child to join your celebration?"**

Each spring:

**When Thy mighty hand reaches down to
perform its miracles, I'll remember.**

**When the dying grass turns from brown to
thriving green,
I'll remember.**

**When the barren branches burst forth with
blossoms, and later fruit, I'll remember.
When the frozen waters flow freely and ripple
with delight, I'll remember.**

**When the hibernating creatures awake and
trod the dry ground, I'll remember.**

**When the birds return with their cheerful
songs and melodies, I'll remember.**

**When the raindrops replenish the earth from
its ravenous thirst, I'll remember.**

**When the daffodils and tulips pop through the
crusted ground, I'll remember.**

I'll remember, Lord God. Always!

But especially every spring.

**Your plan for us is to witness the spiritual
awakening and rebirth.**

**I'll remember that The Resurrection is the
message of spring.**

**I'll remember that in heaven, other family
members and my child wait for me.**

**And I'll remember that in heaven, the
celebration of spring is forever.**