

## DISCOVERING MEANING

*After a meaningless and unfair event*

*“I wanted a perfect ending. Now I’ve learned, the hard way, that some poems don’t rhyme, and some stories don’t have a clear beginning, middle and end. Life is about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what’s going to happen next. Delicious ambiguity.” —Gilda Radner*

Maybe you used to believe that life was fair and that bad things did not happen to good people. Maybe you used to believe that good friends were forever and would always be there regardless of circumstances. Maybe you used to believe that nature was orderly and that children always outlived their parents. Maybe you used to believe that being a good parent would forever protect your child from all hurt and harm. Maybe you used to believe that a loving and just Supreme Being would spare those of faith the ultimate loss. Maybe you used to believe in some grand plan for the universe where goodness and mercy prevail. Maybe you used to believe....

Nothing challenges one’s personal beliefs like the death of a child. Nothing. Nothing brings the question of “*Why?*” to the foreground like the death of a child. Nothing. Nothing puts the tremendous degree of stress on parents and the family as does the death of a child. Nothing.

So given all of this, how can one discover meaning after such a seemingly meaningless and unfair loss as that of one’s child? There is no clear path or way, and in truth, it may not even be possible.

For some, their faith is the lifeline that gets them through. And for others, that faith is questioned along with everything else. Years ago, I met a couple whose only child, their 17-year-old daughter, was killed in a car crash that involved the three of them. This family prided themselves on their heavy involvement in their church community, yet they had not returned to their church since the funeral of their daughter. In the words of the dad, “I’m not saying I don’t believe anymore. I just don’t feel like I can spend time in the Lord’s house right now.”

- Trust that you will survive—even if you do not feel like you want that right now.
- You are unlikely to ever uncover an answer to “*Why?*” that will satisfy you, yet you have the right and perhaps the need to continue to ask and pursue.
- The pain you feel is likely to get worse before better. While it may never fully go away, it does ebb, flow and subside.
- Some people you thought would always be there for you won’t. And some people will show up for you in ways that you never imagined.



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- No one can possibly know the fullness and depth of your feelings. You never need to justify feelings.
- Find a supportive community in addition to/outside your extended family. There are those who have walked this journey and can be caring and supportive life lines for you. This may be a faith-based community or family-based grief support program.
- Your capacity for empathy and compassion may increase exponentially.
- Major challenges change people. You will have the choice of becoming bitter or better.
- Grief has neither a time table nor an end. Dominant feelings do shift.
- Closure is a myth. Closings are possible.
- You may develop a new philosophy of life to sustain you in the coming years.
- Allowing yourself to smile, laugh and begin to enjoy life again is not a trigger for guilt. Instead, these are means of affirming life and honoring your loved one...sign posts for healing.

You may never make sense of the senseless or transmute injustice to fairness. Some things just are—as difficult as that is. Sometimes we can create a context of acceptance and understanding in more of a metaphysical manner and find comfort in such.

Healing is about weaving grief and loss and joy into the fabric of your life, rather than holding them as something separate. While time in and of itself does not heal, in the passing of time, you have the option of making the story of your child about the experience and experiences of life, as opposed to the time of their death. The gift and meaning of their life is a healing story that you can live and tell.

*“Someone was hurt before you, wronged before you, hungry before you, frightened before you, beaten before you, humiliated before you, raped before you...yet, someone survived... You can do anything you choose to do.”*

—*Maya Angelou*

—*Sandra Howlett, Ed.D.*



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