

Haven Herald



Sibling Loss

by Kathleen Sebek

When adults lose a sibling, they may feel abandoned as sympathy often goes to their parents, if still living, or the sibling's spouse and children. Surviving siblings are often called the "forgotten mourners."

Survival guilt is normal. Guilt about how the relationship was maintained is common. Each travels a separate path, sometimes communication is lacking and ambivalent feelings about maintaining the relationship surface. No matter how good the relationship may have been, the survivor often believes it should have been better.

Anger over a new role in the family often occurs. A surviving sibling may be expected to care for aging parents, and he or she may have to step into the role of guardian for nieces and nephews.

Depending on whether there are other siblings, you may find that you are now an "only child." Your siblings are often the link to your past and, for some, they were the only ones left who remember you in your childhood and in your youth.

Continue on page 2

A snowflake  *is winter's butterfly!*

Letter from the Executive Director

The winter brings more time indoors and the holidays. These can be good things or not so good depending on your perspective. This season of shorter days and celebrations might leave you feeling empty and sad, especially if you are coping with a loss.

Haven slows down a bit in the winter, but we do spend time evaluating our programs as we plan for the spring ahead. We also offer a winter workshop, "Journey through Grief."

This issue of the newsletter will deal with the topic of sibling loss. Sibling loss is not often written about and its significance is sometimes overlooked when we talk about the various types of loss.

When a child in a family dies, the parents' grief may be seen as more immediate than that of the siblings. Loss of a sibling changes the role we have in the family dynamic and it may have a great effect on future family relationships. Sibling loss can be complicated by "survivor guilt," anxiety and lack of support.

It is important to take the time to feel and grieve your loss. If the loss happened when you were very young, re-visiting the grief and spending more time with it later can be helpful. Healing and acceptance can happen at any time in life.

Jill Bellacicco

Continued from page 1

If the siblings are elderly, those around the surviving sibling may feel that it is more normal for people to die as they age, and so there is no need to provide comfort or even acknowledge the death. But, these losses are still painful. Also, the surviving sibling may have experienced many profound losses in the past, leaving a void for comfort and remembrance.

In *The Mourning Handbook*, Helen Fitzgerald states: “Our identity in a family is based on many factors, including birth orders and roles within the family unit. When a sibling dies, the family structure can become confusing. Our birth order can change. The role played by the deceased sibling is no longer being fulfilled and the surviving sibling(s) need to (or are expected to) take up the role.”

The loss of a sibling is something that we often need to grow through rather than get through. Each developmental phase of our lives will find us dealing with a different part of this loss.

What Works For Me

Remembering Peter

by Dave Balderston



On a spring evening in 2008, my brother John called me from Canada to tell me that our youngest brother Peter had died in Japan. According to the Canadian consular official who had called John, the translation of the investigative report said that Peter had been found dead in a hotel room and that there were no unusual circumstances. We don't know anything more about how or why Peter died than what the consular official told John in that first phone call. There had been considerable instability in Peter's life for quite a while. He had been teaching English to Japanese school children for many years, on a series of yearly contracts. His health gradually deteriorated. He put on weight, and he drank a lot, at least when he was back in Canada. He had gout and signs of impending diabetes.

A few weeks later, we had a memorial service on the lawn in front of John's house, which is on a country road not far from the Quaker cemetery where our parents (and now Peter) are buried. During the service, one of Peter's oldest friends said that he had decided to list Peter's enthusiasms, but had stopped when the list grew to around two dozen and with no end in sight. A tradition soon developed among Peter's friends of leaving mementos on the base of the headstone marking his grave. Each memento represents one or more of his many enthusiasms, and the tradition continues. Recently, our brother Steve put a small plaque with a drawing of Mount Fuji on the base of the headstone. Peter had climbed Mount Fuji and had the photographs to prove it. Already there were a somewhat weather-beaten black plastic toy camera, little replicas of a bicycle and the Eiffel Tower, a small green heart, and a very real and efficient heavy duty corkscrew. Over the years the things along the base of the headstone have changed as the weather takes its toll, but there are always new ones.

There are many books about grief, but few of them seem to say much about grieving the death of a brother or sister. Peter lived his life as best he could, with great enthusiasm and charm, if not always with the most prudent judgment or practical success. Steve and I visit John about once a year. Peter was part of our lives from when he was born, and he is an important part of our memories. We often talk about Peter and we usually go to the cemetery.

*To the outside world we all grow old.
 But not to brothers and sisters.
 We know each other as we always were.
 We know each other's hearts.
 We share private family jokes.
 We remember family feuds and secrets, family griefs and joys.
 We live outside the touch of time.
 ~Clara Ortega*

My Big Brother

by Brian Keegan

I was just eleven years old when my brother, who was also my best friend, died. Now even so many years later I still hate saying these words. It definitely was one of the most defining moments of my life. Eleven is that awkward age when you are not a child anymore but you're not quite a teenager either. I was in fifth grade and my brother who was sixteen was a tenth grader at our local high school. Conor was one of the cool kids; I always wanted to be like him. He loved to skateboard; he had lots of friends and a really cute girlfriend.

We grew up together playing Power Rangers, kicking a ball around our backyard, riding our bikes in our neighborhood. We also spent every summer in Ireland with our family and Conor loved it there! It wasn't always fun and games; we also loved teasing each other. We fought sometimes, especially about who would sit in the front seat of our minivan - this drove my Mom crazy all the time. Our little sister Ava was much younger than us. She was three years old and Conor was just crazy about her. I was not as crazy about her because when she came along she got all the attention!

My world changed very quickly from normal and innocent to something totally different when my brother died suddenly. I felt confused, sad, and so very angry. My buddy and partner in crime and in play was gone. Forever?? I could not understand this. I could not wrap my mind around this new reality. Everyone was so kind to our family. My friends all invited me over for play dates and took me out to special places. Family came from Ireland to support us. It all helped but honestly life to me was just plain horrible. I hated this new world without my brother. My dad and mom were very sad. They missed Conor so much. I think the only one that kept us all sane in our family was Ava. She didn't understand that Conor was gone and not coming back. She talked of Conor coming home all the time. She could still smile, play with her toys and feel happy. The rest of us were just out of it. My parents kept asking me how I was doing, how I was feeling? I didn't want to talk about my feelings. All I knew was that my brother was gone; I felt angry, this was so wrong and so unfair. I missed Conor every single minute. No one had the magic answer as to how I was going to get through this and how I could ever feel happy again.

So now here I am eleven years later - I did survive, I did feel joy again. I carry my brother's memory in my heart every single day. I still have his memory box on the top shelf of my bookcase; every now and again I will open it and the memories come flooding back. His skateboard sits in my closet. There are still times when stuff happens and all I want to do is just text him. If love alone could have kept him alive he would have lived until he was 100. Conor had friends, a life, a family who loved him but he also had sadness and pain. I will always think of him as someone who lived not someone who died and for that I am grateful.

I will love and miss you forever, brother, but I also know you are happy and probably having a party where you are now because you are Irish after all!



HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at havenofnova@verizon.net



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Winter Schedule

Community Workshop

“Journey through Grief”
Saturday, January 27, 2018
2:00 to 4:00 p.m.

Snow day: Saturday, February 10, 2018

Call for reservations for the workshop.

Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

Haven also offers individual support by phone and in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.

Contact Information

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Hours of Operation

Monday through Friday
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.
www.havenofnova.org

Messages may be left on our voicemail after hours