

Finding “VERTICAL” Again

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Webster’s Dictionary defines the word **VERTICAL** as ‘an upright position perpendicular to a **HORIZONTAL** plane’. In my earliest months of grief, that *horizontal plane* was the soft, thickly carpeted floor of my closet. In that small space I felt safe to grievously weep after the death of my son, Kyle. I had assured myself that if he heard my sorrowful wails, he would come back to life in my physical world now rendered indescribably empty by his absence.

Would I forever be “*vertically challenged*” (*in the bereaved sense*) if I couldn’t find a reason to get out of bed, stand up, and stay up? There seemed to be no end to the parade of sorrows passing through the gaping hole in my shattered heart. My brain knew that other bereaved parents had survived the death of a child, but **my heart did not**. I had pictured my son’s life stretched out in front of me for the rest of mine. How would I ever find the will to keep living? I didn’t even believe it was possible...*at first*.

Through growing connections with other bereaved parents, I learned about things that were helping, or had helped them. Some mentioned that they hadn’t necessarily found the unbridled ‘happiness’ of their before life, but had managed to find ‘contentment. There was ‘no fix’, but maybe, there was hope... Much of the *advice*, and many of those *ideas, suggestions, and strategies* I received fell under the umbrella of “*grief work*” ...the hardest work a parent will ever do (as we are all acutely aware).

That being said, grief work ‘*can help*’ you find your *vertical*, a place where you can feel content in this different life. But what does grief work look like? It’s many things to many people, but “healthy distractions that provide us a way forward” are often a part of it. Grief work can be time spent with a therapist, loving and supportive family, a faith community, and/or compassionate listeners such as friends or fellow grieflings. It can be creating loving memorials for your child/children. Some parents have set up foundations or charities. Or, they have designed headstones, benches, and beautiful monuments. Parents have planted groves of trees in forests. Grief work can be doing things in your child’s honor such as participating in or hosting an event. As part of their grief work, parents have written poetry, articles, and even books. Some parents attend, or present at, national conferences and retreats. However, grief work can also be about small, compassionate actions and distractions for yourself or others. Sometimes, the smallest acts can make the biggest differences... They may be what helps your grief ‘*round a bend*’, or even ‘*turn a corner*’.

For me, small acts of kindness were some of the most important distractions for shifting my grief towards *vertical* (and helping me sustain it more often than not). As an example, the momentary distraction of receiving a call, or reading an email or card from someone else walking in grief shoes reassured me that I wasn’t alone. The questions and concerns arising from my grief were patiently validated by these lovely souls who were **willing to show up**. When I was able, I began reaching out, as well, and realized I was leaning more upright in the knowledge that I was helping another parent bear, what is to us, unbearable. If this was helping, I knew I needed to figure out additional ways to *construct my vertical*. I began gathering more ideas, suggestions, and advice to use as building tools. I tucked them safely away in my emotional bank account for I knew I would need them, especially for “those harder days. Some of the following are things that *usually* helped me move forward to where my *vertical* was waiting. Maybe, they could help you, too...

One of the best pieces of advice I received was that which taught me to STOP comparing my grief. Doing that had been self-destructive. I had myself convinced that I was doing “grief” all wrong because: a) I erroneously assumed I wasn’t making as much progress as other parents, or b) I certainly wasn’t doing it quickly enough! I was ever so grateful to the veteran griever who set me straight about that. Achieving *vertical* was easier (not easy, but easier) after that burden began lifting.

In addition, I needed to be more patient with myself. If something didn’t help, or work out as I had hoped it would, I became frustrated and easily gave up. Grief work was just too hard...

Furthermore, I allowed myself to have Pity Parties once in a while. This is NOT a journey anyone wants to take. Nobody in their right mind would trade places with you, so go easy on yourself if you feel sad, cheated, depressed, cranky, etc. It is very easy to become derailed when we are so raw and fragile. I often found myself waiting for the exhaustion of bearing the sorrowful emotions to pass before I could even think about getting back up, again.

As well, I devoted more time to grief work, but I knew when I needed a break from it, too. You can find healing in those “breaks”, and they are an important part of the grief work, as well. With grief, you may find yourself painfully dwelling on would’ve, could’ve, and should’ve... But with grief work, it’s worth a try to switch ‘should’ve-to-should’. For example, you should take a walk outside in the fresh air. And, you should lean against a tree and allow it to support you if your vertical feels shaky. Take in the smell of the bark or blossoms. In fact, you should take in as much nature as possible. It’s restorative. If possible, you should walk along the beach and let the roar of the ocean quiet your mind if only for the moment. You should try to take deeper breaths (even though there is an

invisible weight on your chest). You should travel “*when you feel ready*”. (Yes, grief may come along as a stow away, but the new distractions from your trip that your brain has to process will give you a break from grief.) You should laugh (even though it will feel foreign in the beginning). Silly animal videos on YouTube or comedic movies can help with laughter.

Also, I tried to have a “*plan for my tomorrows*” to help get me up and out. It was sometimes as structured as going to work, or it was as simple as having a cup of coffee/tea by a window and mindlessly counting how many birds, bugs, plants, or flowers I saw. Maybe your plan could be to pull a few weeds out of your yard. Maybe you could ‘plan’ to take a walk, or go to a farmer’s market for fresh fruit. Maybe, it could even be a plan to watch a movie you had been putting off. Having something to look forward to can be helpful. I really had to PUSH myself to do things. It seemed that nothing was ever going to be easy again.

Finally, I searched for little things that I could count on to be there and provide a soothing balm for my heart. If you find things that help your heart feel a little lighter, make them part of a “ritual” you can look forward to. I look forward to wearing my son’s thick, cozy socks to bed on cold winter nights. I found that kissing his picture before bed and then forming a “shadow heart” on the ceiling with my two hands in the glow of the bedside lamp while whispering, “I love you,” quickly became a ritual that helped me feel closer to him. As well, Kyle’s father and I always toast him if we have a glass of wine. At first, we felt uncomfortable doing this in front of others. We didn’t want them to think they also needed to pay tribute to our son, especially if they didn’t know him. However, we’re finding more times than not that people are touched by this quiet tribute to him and are honored to join in.

Small, gentle acts have created some soft space around my heart where healing has entered over the years. There is a lifetime yet to go, but it is in those little increments that we get by. It happens slowly, at first, but comes with increasing frequency over time. This journey will always have its ups, downs, but those times of unbearable *horizontals* will be followed more often by uplifting *verticals* to support us in carrying our children; an honorable and often amazing weight—no matter when in life we are chosen to bear it.

As I approach 5 years on this journey, please know there are still those days when “*horizontal happens*”, and I assume *there always will be*. And, although it still happens, it doesn’t stay as long anymore. As it drifts away, I know I will get back up, and reconnect with *my vertical*... a gentler place to be.