

Jacob Wheeler Foundation

December 31, 2017

NEW YEAR'S WISHES ~

I recently Googled the top 10 New Year's resolutions. Predictably, losing weight and becoming more fit were in the top three. Considering the quantity of my daughter's Christmas cookies I've inhaled over the past 10 days, those would be good to add to my list. Notably, what I didn't see in the top 10 was anything about kindness or compassion...but more on that later.

As I approach the end of 2017 and the beginning of the New Year I have found my emotions leaving me anxious. Some nights I wake up with my heart racing 100 miles an hour and other nights I just wake up and more sleep will just not come. So, what gives? All things considered, I've had a very blessed holiday season. For the first time since my daughter moved away for college, she has been able to spend extended time with us this Christmas, thus the cookies and my bulge. We've also been able to spend time with other family and more that have stayed with us. We are very fortunate, indeed. So, what's the problem? Well, January 1 marks the 4-year anniversary of Jacob's death to depression and how his suicide irrevocably changed our lives. Anniversaries can be difficult for those that are grieving. Holidays too can be difficult. And, well, anniversaries and holidays at the same time? That is fitting for a 'perfect storm'. All of that leaves me feeling a bit anxious.

I knew early on in our grief journey that our lives would never be the same. All death losses are very difficult, but I believe there is an added layer to a suicide death because of the lack of our understanding of depression and the stigma associated with suicide. Suicides are well publicized by media, which I believe adds to the stigma. Of the Montana Standard's top 10 online articles for 2017, three were related to stories on suicide or suicide attempts. This correlates to our personal experience in 2014.

I have learned much over the past four years, of which I will share some of the most important lessons here:

- Bad things do happen to good people - You can do the right things as a parent, spouse, sibling, friend, etc. and your loved one can still suffer from and die from depression. Their death to suicide is not your fault.
- Open a dialogue - Don't be afraid to ask "are you struggling" or "are you suicidal"? Not bringing it up doesn't mean the thought isn't already there. Sometimes, not always, asking this simple question starts the conversation.
- The stigma associated with depression and suicide needs to end. If we have cancer or heart disease or diabetes, we go and get treated. People with depression need to be able to do the same without judgement.
- If you are in a black hole, if you are suicidal, please ask for help. I have talked with many over the last four years who were in once this spot that said the key to changing their life for the better was finally reaching out for help.
- There is a reason to live - We need to find that reason whether we are suffering from depression, grief, or both. If you know someone that is suffering, share with them how much they mean to you. Help them to recognize that reason to live.
- Grief is not something you get through but rather a journey - It is something you carry with you for the balance of your life.
Grief is individualized - My grief journey will be different than yours and that is OK.
- Joy and Grief can co-exist - This is probably the most important lesson. Your loss becomes a part of you but you can carry that loss and still experience joy. Don't feel guilty about smiling. Your loved one would want you to smile again and to experience joy.

The *Jacob Wheeler Foundation* provides memorial scholarships and support to the community through activities that promote suicide awareness and prevention and offer survivor support. The *Jacob Wheeler Foundation* is a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit organization. Jacob Wheeler Foundation, P.O. Box 3883, Butte, Montana 59702-3883

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- Everyone is carrying a burden or multiple burdens – This also was one of my most important lessons. Whether it is cancer, marital problems, or tragic death, etc., we all have burdens we carry in our life journey.

All of this bring me full circle to New Year's resolutions and 'kindness and compassion'. One of the common themes I've heard from loss survivors is the kindness and compassion of their loved one that died. In a world that all too often anymore spews hatred and violence, it seems to me that a little kindness and compassion would go a long way to healing some of our hurts. As you put together your resolution lists, I ask you consider adding a daily or weekly kindness and compassion task to your list. The good news is that your kindness and compassion given will come back to you with a multiplier effect.

My 2018 wish for all is a renewal of HOPE. HOPE for finding joy again amidst grief and HOPE for kindness and compassion for those suffering from depression and other life burdens.

I would love for you to join us for a prayer service and Lantern Lighting at the Original Mine in Butte at 7 PM January 1st. Pray for good weather.

Blessings~ Bill Wheeler