

It's Happening Again **By Sandy Goodman**

It's happening again. Right outside my front door, under an inch of leftover snow, a daffodil is pushing its way up into the sunlight. The bare places in my lawn are thawed and messy, and the steady drip from the roof lulls us to sleep. Yesterday, I strolled the thirty feet to my mailbox without a jacket. Spring has reappeared.

Spring is a time for optimism. Suddenly living seems easier, happier, and less stressful. Depression lifts and a feeling of hope fills the air. We shed our winter blues and replace our frowns and cantankerous attitudes with smiles and loving kindness. We visit with our neighbors over fences, clean up the barbecues, and start leafing through seed catalogues. Life is good . . . but not invariably and not for everyone.

I remember a spring that bore no resemblance to what I have just described. It was the spring of 1997, six years ago, and it was the first spring after my son's death. By the time the first warm day arrived that year, the numbness of Jason's death had disappeared and I had entered what I call the "pit of grief." Simply typing this paragraph takes me back in time and once again, I am there . . .

. . . and it is cold and dark. I am alone, curled up in a corner of this make-believe place where only my pain exists. The sorrow is my only link to him, my only awareness, the only thing that matters. If I allow myself to move away from it, I may lose him again. I cannot do that. I cannot take that chance. And so I hold it. I cradle the pain in my arms, shielding it from those who want to take it from me, and I weep . . .

However, spring arrives without invitations and it calls on everyone. It skips in like a long awaited guest and expects to be welcomed with open arms. I recall what seemed like the entire world growing jovial and lighthearted, which merely pushed me to tunnel further into my corner and the sanctuary of my grief. I longed for the reappearance of winter because it had kept the "ones who do not know" away from my door. I remember feeling betrayed. How could the earth suddenly wake up and come alive when my son had no opportunity to do so?

It's happening again. Spring is once again knocking on our doors. Each of you know, love, or can befriend someone who is precisely where I was six years ago. Someone who is hurting and building walls around his or her heart to keep you, and the entire world, out. You are unfamiliar with the grief process and are most likely very uncomfortable with just winging it when it comes to the subject of death. Therefore, I am going to give you a few suggestions that should ease your apprehension. If you can coax just one

bereaved person out of the pit for a few hours this spring, you will have accomplished more than many people do in a lifetime.

GET HIS ATTENTION. Go to the bakery, grab some doughnuts, then to the garden shop and buy some plants. Ring his doorbell. When he wearily opens the door a couple of inches and peers out, stick your foot in the door really fast. Tell him, “I really need coffee to go with these goodies, and will you show me a good place to plant these flowers for Jim?”

SAY HER NAME. While you’re digging and planting those flowers, talk to her about something you remember about the deceased. If you didn’t know him, ask questions. Get to know him. Use his name, as often as you can until both of you feel comfortable.

GIVE HIM THINGS. Take him books that seem inspiring, candles he can light when he needs a connection, photo albums for his loved one’s picture, and journals that he can write in at 3:00 a.m.

INVITE HER TO BREAKFAST OR COFFEE. It may be the only reason she has to get out of bed at all. The bereaved use sleep as a shelter from the world.

TAKE HIM TO A DOCTOR IF HE IS A DANGER TO HIMSELF OR OTHERS. Grief is depression. If it is severe enough, medication may help alleviate some of the pain until the bereaved person is strong enough to face it head on. Offer to go to a counseling session or a grief support group with him.

CALL HER OFTEN. Don’t just call her once a month, call her once a day. Always ask her how she is feeling, what you can do, and then **LISTEN.**

SEND A CARD ON SPECIAL DAYS. Special days are the deceased’s birthday, death date, all holidays, anniversaries, and special family events such as weddings, confirmations, etc. Always write something like “Thinking of you and knowing that you must be missing John.”

ENCOURAGE LAUGHTER AND REMEMBER THE POWER OF TOUCH. It is healing.

ALLOW HIM TO SHARE HIS SPIRITUAL BELIEFS OR LACK THEREOF. Be open and willing to listen to anything he may be experiencing, feeling, or searching for. Your job is not to judge, but to support.

Last but not least, HAVE NO EXPECTATIONS for the time she spends grieving. It is individual, nothing is “normal,” and if she doesn’t feel it now, grief waits. Just go with the flow. Stay with her and walk at her pace.

Once again, spring is fast approaching. You are feeling optimistic and excited about the upcoming season and all of the things you can accomplish as everything comes alive again. The winter has been long and hard; you are ready for a new beginning. I understand. I share your anticipation. Six years ago is not now. My corner of the pit has been occupied by many since my stay there, and I have no intention of revisiting it. But there are many who have just descended and they are burrowing in, seeking solitude. Although I firmly believe that being there is a necessary task in getting to the other side of grief, I also believe that we must come out occasionally for fresh air and sunshine. It is up to you, and to me, to go into his world and reach out for his hand. Once he’s taken hold, his chance of successfully climbing out is greatly increased. So go on, go buy those doughnuts – someone is waiting just for you.