

# Grief

## by Beth Hall

First we got the call from Sophia's teacher: "Sophia hasn't been concentrating for two days. This morning when we had a break, the kids were playing Mancala. Sophia accused Elena of cheating. Elena had different rules for the game than Sophia. Sophia got hysterical; it took over an hour for her to calm down and come back into the classroom. We talked about what happened and agreed that from now on we would determine the rules of games before we begin to play them. But I thought maybe you should come in for a conference and we could talk about what is going on. I thought maybe there was something at home causing the changed behavior."

Next, we went in for the conference. We were nervous and found ourselves feeling the need to defend our life at home and to demonstrate our extra-ordinary and exemplary parenting skills. Beneath that, I think we each felt the need to assess honestly whether or not something was going on at home that we hadn't recognized, something that was perhaps provoking a negative reaction in our daughter. We were not sure we trusted our daughter's teacher with this vulnerability, but we wanted to help Sophia. We wanted to understand her pain.

Pain is something I have been intimate with myself, of late. When my mother died, I joined a group of other women who had recently lost their mothers. Our group went for 8 weeks, 2 hours per week. Somehow it never seemed like enough. I found myself and my fellow "Motherless Daughters" wanting to talk and talk among this group of women who understood in a way that it seemed no one else on the planet could. My need to grieve found refuge and expression with people who would listen and who would accept my process — whatever shape it took — as one to which I was entitled. I lost my mother through death, but my grief has reminded me that my children have lost a mother through circumstance. As a motherless daughter and as the mother of a "mother-lost" daughter, I offer my insights, with the understanding that no matter the source, grief — our own or our children's — takes its own time and warrants its own expression.

### **Sharing and Listening, Finding Refuge Among Ourselves.**

In our motherless daughters group, we each took an opportunity to share pictures, stories and legacies of our mothers, both positive and negative. In speaking about our mothers, in an uninterrupted and un-interpreted way, we were in fact honoring their significance in our lives. The very act of naming them to an audience who actually cared and paid real attention allowed each of us a profound opportunity to identify our grief and caring for them, which felt enormously healing.

Within the group, we were able to unburden our feelings without anyone jumping in to try to fix them or explain them away. We all found ourselves relishing the opportunity to cry, ventilate or even get angry in a non-judgmental environment that validated our feelings without pushing us to move on.

All of us felt as if the world's agenda for us was to "feel better" and "move on" from the deaths of our mothers far more quickly than any of us found possible or reasonable. We experienced fear that we might lose our connection to who our mothers had been, and as a result perhaps even who we are, as we moved forward.

### **Acknowledgment That Losing Our Mothers Has Changed Us Forever.**

We talked of recreating our own selves, becoming new people. Finding a way to do that in the context of the selves who already exist presents many challenges. Sometimes it was hard to accept that something which hurt so much, and which all of us would undo in a second, could also result in positive changes or outcomes by which we came to feel better. This ambivalence was difficult to admit within the group. All of us felt it impossible to explain our experience to outsiders. They too often jumped in to interpret our feelings as meaning that somehow our mothers' deaths were "for the best" or a "relief" in the face of sad circumstances, a response we universally found appalling.

All of us found ourselves caught off guard by unexpected triggers or experiences that brought up strong feelings about our mothers. We each had felt angry or vulnerable when we didn't want to expose our true feelings at the moment they arose. Sometimes only after we had had a reaction did we realize that the emotion had anything to do with the deaths of our mothers. This was unnerving and frightening. We wondered if we would ever be able to operate normally again. The consensus was no, but finding understanding and recognition helped in creating our new "normal."

### **Permission to "dwell on" the details of our mothers' deaths.**

Each of us found that most people outside our group did not want to hear stories about our mothers' approaches to death or their actual experiences of death, and were relieved the minute we moved to any other subject. Within our group, our need to tell and compare intimate and sometimes gruesome details was accepted as normal.

Only at the very end of the conference did I suddenly wonder what they had been doing during the two days when her teacher had described Sophia as distracted. "We've been continuing with our normal units," she said, "and we had a wonderful story teller who did a session with the kids on the importance and meaning of naming."

As Sophia and I sat in our special talking chair, I listened for a long time to the recounting of classroom lessons. "You carry from the tens place when you need some extra ones for subtraction." An even longer explanation was needed for the importance of Mancala rules and her assertion that our family rules were certainly best. When she finally responded to my questions about the story teller, she got straight to the point:

"I don't think my birth mother really loved me. She didn't give me a name. I wanted her to give me a name."

"I can't imagine how hard it must have been for you to realize that right in the midst of your class. I wonder if you even felt you could say anything about it."

Her 7-year-old body was wracked with tears for an eternal eight minutes. I found myself thinking of my mother and did my very best to pay attention — not try to fix, not interpret — to the grief of the baby, the 7-year-old and the teacher all commingled in the one small body on my lap.