

Wounded Hearts: A Journey Through Grief

By
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Before Tom died, I painted serene landscapes. Here is an example.
[ContextWH282.tif]

On September 11, 2008, my world was completely shattered. On that day, my beloved husband died, an unbelievably short 5 ½ weeks after being diagnosed with stomach cancer.

I will never forget the exact moment when I felt my heart break. We had just gotten the diagnosis. It was a diagnosis that left no hope. I held on until I was alone, and let the finality of it wash over me. I remember clearly thinking to myself, “this is what it is like to have your heart break”. This was the real thing – all the past broken hearts paled by comparison. It was utter devastation...emotion beyond words...

How did I get through this dark and terrible time? At first, I was pretty sure I wouldn't survive. In fact, I would have preferred not to.

When Tom was diagnosed, we anticipated that he would need a comfortable place to rest. We bought a recliner – hoping that this would be a place that he could go to heal. Ironically, it became the place where I went to heal, instead. When he died, I sat down in that chair, and stayed. I sat in that chair with my grief all around me like a blanket. And as I sat, I looked out the window. I watched winter come. I watched the leaves turn yellow and fall from the trees. I watched the fog roll in. I watched the frost on the deck. I watched the crows as they congregated in the tops of the trees. Each moment seemed like an eternity, and yet even

grief cannot hold back the passage of time, or the miracle of spring...

In our culture, grief is something that is suffered in solitude and isolation. There are few avenues that allow you to give voice to it. Few have the courage to hear it. This compounds your grief, since it reinforces the fact that you are utterly, completely alone. Well-meaning friends try to distract you from your grief, but grief takes up every nook and cranny of your psyche, and it is impossible to be distracted. It becomes who you are. For a long while, it becomes your entire identity.

I was desperate to find a voice for my grief. Before Tom's death, I had been an amateur painter. My life was peaceful and happy, and so I painted pretty, peaceful, landscapes. It took several months after Tom died for me to pick up a paintbrush again. When I did, I began to paint my broken heart. Once I started, I couldn't stop. These paintings became a catharsis, a voice for my grief, a documentation of my fight for survival.

Grief is one of the most universal of human experiences, and yet it has been driven into the shadows. Each of us grieves in our own way, and in our own time. This is my own very personal journey through grief. I share this journey with you to bring grief out into the open; to give it a voice. And although this journey depicts intense pain and despair, it is ultimately a message about hope, transformation, and the miraculous resiliency of the human spirit.

Painting captions:

The Abyss [ContextWH283.tif]

Tom's death was like falling into an abyss. My lifeline was ripped from my hands. I lay at the bottom, broken. I lay there a long time before I had the strength to begin to claw my way out. I would advance a little way, and then fall again, over and over. The abyss will always follow me...I know now that solid ground beneath my feet is only an illusion.

Withered Heart (May, 2009) [ContextWH284.tif]

I would often sit down at a canvas and begin to paint without having a clear idea of what I would paint. I have learned through this process of "painting my grief", that the brush sometimes knows what the mind does not. My heart was dead. I'm not sure if I am being embraced or strangled by the withered vines. Perhaps both.

Angel Heart (May, 2009) [ContextWH285.tif]

Once I started to paint "wounded hearts", I couldn't stop. It was the only way I knew to express my grief. It provided some relief. The wings represent Tom reaching out to me from the other side, as if to say "I am with you; I know you can do this; you will make it through."

Hung out to Dry (June, 2009) [ContextWH286.tif]

There are so many of us "walking wounded" out there -- hanging by a thread, blowing here and there in the wind, unraveling, raw. We are invisible, but we are your neighbor, your coworker, the person standing next to you in line. If you hung us end-to-end on a clothesline, how many times would it stretch around the earth?

Rescue Me (June, 2009) [ContextWH287.tif]

I'm not sure how it started, but sometime after Tom died, I began to associate hummingbirds with Tom. I had fallen into hell; I was consumed by pain. I could get through anything if Tom was by my side, but he was irrevocably gone. The finality of it was too much to bear. Could he reach out from another dimension and rescue me now?

(Many months later, I learned to my astonishment that some Native Americans believe that hummingbirds are the spirits of those that have passed on.)

Heart of Stones (August, 2009) [ContextWH288.tif]

Grief is incredibly heavy. For months it felt as though there was a weight pressing against the middle of my forehead. My body felt like lead. My mind felt like mud. My heart had turned to stone.

Metamorphosis (October, 2009) [ContextWH289.tif]

I met Tom at the age of 17. We had known each other for 37 years. When he died, my sense of self died with him. Every single aspect of my identity, was intertwined with him. Like all couples in long relationships, we had slowly, willingly, lovingly, molded each other. Like two puzzle pieces – carving here and there, rounding off the hard edges, so that we could fit together more comfortably. So who was I without him? At first, I was completely lost. After a time, I could feel myself transforming; a metamorphosis was occurring. My first birthday without him, seemed truly like a day of re-birth. I was giving birth to myself. What would I create?

Gratitude (November, 2009) [ContextWH290.tif]

After a long while, I was able to look beyond what I had lost, to what I had been given. Tom had given me so much, including even the strength to handle his death. To be bathed in his “light” was the most precious gift I will ever be given. I will always be grateful.

Nest (December, 2009) [ContextWH291.tif]

Grief is a lot like drowning. At first, you can’t keep your head above water. You can’t breathe from the pain of it. After awhile, you begin to tread water, but the waves continue to wash over you, pushing your head under water over and over again. You are exhausted from trying to breathe. Eventually you begin to float. A temporary peace – you are directionless; going nowhere. When you are strong enough, you realize that it is pointless to float, and hopeless to fight the current. You begin to swim with it, hoping it will take you to a safe harbor. Here, I had found a “nest”. There was some comfort here, but I was still floating aimlessly, tossed around by the waves, in search of a connection; in need of a line to grab onto; someone to pull me into shore.

Once in a Blue Moon (May, 2010) [ContextWH292.tif]

You never expect to feel joy again, but “once in a blue moon” you are given this precious gift. You feel that joy is impossible, so it is utterly astonishing when it occurs. It feels miraculous, transformational – you are reborn. There is hope...

I carry your heart (June, 2011) [ContextWH293.tif]

In the weeks before he died, Tom would tell people “If you want to find me when I’m gone, look into Colleen’s eyes. “ It was true. You will find him in my eyes, in my heart, in every breath, in every thought. He is woven into the fabric of my soul. I will carry him with me always.

(It wasn’t until later that I remembered the poem by e. e. cummings, “I carry your heart with me”. It was the perfect title for this painting.)

Surrender (June, 2011) [ContextWH294.tif]

Elizabeth Kubler- Ross proposed five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. I have never liked the word “acceptance” because the word implies that what happened was OK. I will always believe that the universe made a mistake. So I prefer the word “surrender”. When the earthly bond was broken, it was as though a boulder had been tossed into lake, creating ripples that extended into every aspect of my internal and external world. There was profound loss in every ripple, and I am still discovering them. I have surrendered to this. Surrender is what has enabled me to crawl out of the abyss, but I still live precariously close to the edge. The journey continues...

Memorial Wall

[ContextWH279.tif and ContextWH295.tif]

During the time that *Wounded Hearts* was on display, viewers

were invited to decorate a paper heart in memory of a departed loved one, and hang it near the exhibit area. The response was incredible – over 250 hearts were decorated and hung. Every heart that was put up has been placed into the University Archives. They have also been scanned and put on permanent display within ScholarWorks at CSUSM, the campus Institutional Repository.

The invitation to participate read:

Please join us in honoring the loved ones we have lost.
Decorate a heart in your loved one's memory, and hang it on the
clothesline.