

Love Remembers: Helping Kids Heal After a Death

by Deborah Marshall

I miss . . .

my mom
baby brother Sean
Daddy
my dog Sandy
Grandma & her house
my favorite aunt Holly
my best friend, Steve
Grandpa
my cat Tiger
my third-grade teacher
my Uncle Jack
my guinea pigs
my big sister Liz
the old man next door.
They are all dead.
They are all still loved.

Even though someone's body dies, the love we feel never has to die. Our love remembers them forever.

Many kids have lots of other feelings after someone special dies.

Feelings

Sad

When Katie's heart misses her dad, she asks her mom for a long hug.

When Brent cries for his grandmother, he holds and talks to her photograph.

When Ricky thinks about his dog Webster, he walks where they used to run together.

When Annie misses her Uncle Jonathan, she writes letters to him in her journal.

When Joshua is longing for his mother, he asks his new baby-sitter to make his Mom's special chocolate chip cookies.

Mad

When Tyler misses his baby brother, he pounds and stomps on a big pillow.

When Ali has math homework, she is mad that her dad isn't alive to help her. Now she has to ask a neighbor for help.

When D. J. remembers his cat is dead, he runs long and hard and yells out loud.

When Andy starts to practice his lesson, he becomes furious that Grammie died. He bangs loud, angry songs on the piano.

Sara's homework is to write about "Moms." She's the only one in class whose mom is dead. She rips up the assignment and tells her dad.

Scared

When Hannah is nervous at a swim meet, she dedicates her laps to her grandpa.

When Scott thinks of his dead brother, he worries that he could die, so he asks his parents more questions about cancer.

When the school bully teases Kevin that his mother is dead, Kevin is terrified. He tells his teacher as soon as he can.

When Erica is afraid of the dark, she puts on her dad's favorite shirt and finds comfort in its smell and feel.

After bad dreams about the cemetery, George hung a dreamcatcher over his bed.

Glad

Suzanne drew pictures and wrote a poem about all the good memories of her sister.

Keith often plays his mom's favorite song. It always makes him smile and cry, too.

Sara and Tom plant bulbs every fall in celebration of their grandmother.

Kim created a memory album of all of her favorite photos of her dad. She always looks at it on his birthday.

Nathan named a new stuffed animal after his dog Boris who died last year.

Grief is . . .

what adults call the invisible hurt in your heart when someone you love dies. Grief or the missing of someone doesn't get better in a straight line like an arrow. It moves like the tangled-up Slinky at the bottom of the toy chest. It is a messy process, and it hurts.

To heal, kids need:

to understand what has happened,
to feel all of their feelings,
to honor the dead in their own special ways,
and to remember the love.

Healing takes time. Love takes time.

Thoughts for adults

While we cannot protect children from the reality of death as a part of life nor rescue them from loss, we can be present with support and patience for children working through their grief. As witnesses, we can help children to feel understood and cared for during their healing process. As role models, we can show our own grief, perhaps by shedding our tears openly. As guides, we can encourage questions and establish a sense of comfort around dialogues about death. We can invite questions and celebrate their arrival.

In our responses we can be simple, honest, and direct. Our language will change depending on the children's ages and circumstances, but the truth remains. We can be courageous enough to answer, "I don't know." If the questions are vague, we can ask for clarification, "Just what is it that you want to know?" We can learn to trust ourselves to seize opportunities to serve as gentle guides for children's healing.

As adults we may find ourselves in a crisis of meaning. We, as Unitarian Universalists, may seek support and resources from the church. Our grief may lead us on a deeper exploration of a spiritual dimension, as part of our free and responsible search for truth and meaning. Having no fixed theological answers, the sharing of our experiences and perspectives in dialogue with children may foster mutual growth and healing.

Deborah Marshall, an expressive arts therapist who uses the creative arts to facilitate healing, works with children, adults, and families who are coping with life-threatening illness, death, and bereavement issues. She is a member of the First Parish in Wayland, MA.

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