

Dear Survivor: A Letter to You

From Eleanora "Betsy" Ross - Iowa City, Iowa

It is said that death is a part of life: that it is the other side of birth. I believe that death can also give meaning to life, a meaning that may escape you now while your grief is fresh and raw, but which may someday bring a special quality of peace to your spirit. As terrible as your loss seems now, you will survive it even though that may seem unbelievable right now. Once that happens, you will have touched upon a new and incredible inner strength.

But for now you may be a mixture of thoughts and feelings. Despair, longing, anger, guilt, frustration questions and even understanding, tumble over each other, striving for but not quite reaching comprehensible sense and shape. You seek relief-you need to heal. It is a journey, and you must work on it.

And so, Cry.

The pain is real, but the tears are healing. Often we must struggle through an emotion to find the relief beyond.

And so, Talk.

Talk to each other about your loss and pain. Don't hide or deny real feelings. Tell others that you need them. The more you deny something or address it in silence, the more destructive power it can claim over you.

And so, Search.

Over and over, you will ask "Why?" It is a question you must ask. Though you may never find an answer, realize that it is still important to wrestle with the "why" question for a time. Eventually, you will be content to give up the search. When you can willingly let go of the need to question "why?" it will lose its hold over you, but it will take time.

And so, Speak.

Speak as often and freely of your loved one as you need to. He or she will always be a part of you. Not to speak of the deceased denies his or her existence. To speak of the deceased affirms his or her life. Believe that in time, the pain of loss fades and is replaced by precious memories to be shared.

And so, Grieve.

This time of sorrow can be used to draw a family together- or pull it apart. You may be one who needs to feel and express guilt so that eventually you will gain a more balanced view of your actual degree of responsibility. You may need to give yourself permission to feel and express anger even though you think it is inappropriate.

And so, Grow.

We know we cannot control all that happens to us, but we can control how we choose to respond. We can choose to be destroyed by an experience or we can choose to overcome and survive it. When we choose to grieve constructively and creatively, we come to value life with a new awareness.

And so, Become.

Become the most you can become. Enter into a new dimension of self-identity and self-dependence as you come to love others more fully and unconditionally. In letting go of love, we give it freedom to return to us. Become all that your loved one's death has freed you to become.

And so, Accept.

Accept that in some strange way, his or her death may enable you to reach out with a new understanding, offering a new dimension of love to others.

I believe in a loving god who is with us, offering strength, guidance and solace as we struggle with our anguish. I believe that as we regain balance and meaning in our shattered lives, we can come to see that death can indeed bring a new meaning to life. This is my prayer for all of us.

Spiritual Reaction:

---"If my faith were stronger I would be able to handle this."

---"If I really believed, this wouldn't have happened."

---Anger with God, doubts about the reality of God's existence.

There may be times when you will feel depressed and will have to force yourself to take action and face the many new responsibilities that have suddenly become yours. For a while, you may remember only the good things about your loved one. Later you may focus on his/her faults. After a while you will be able to remember your loved one as a good and loving person who had human faults.

There may be times when you will be angry at God who would take away your loved one, angry at people who are living, angry at others for reasons you may not even understand. There may be times when you will be angry at your loved one because he/she left you to carry the burdens alone.

The sleepless nights, confusing details, and new problems to face nearly every day may be exhausting for you. You may feel a need to make sudden changes in your life and you may find yourself doing and saying things that don't even make sense to you. Hold on, because it will pass, just as the other phases have passed.

I would remind you that what you are, and will be, experiencing is normal. While the work of mourning is a growing process for you, it will not be easy. At first it will seem to be an overwhelming task. As time passes, you will begin to realize that you are making adjustments to your new life. You will never forget your loved one and there will always be times when you will still grieve, for the work of mourning is not to forget, but to make the loss more bearable. No matter how hard it is, you know; you can cope.