Noticing - A Life Lesson

Learning to “notice” during my first year of grief was not only the number one grief survival mechanism but through this action I recognized a major life lesson. I realized that noticing was the vehicle through which I have come to accept my life experiences as well as be able to move through them and learn from them. All the major events in my life, those that caused the most pain and eventually precipitated the most growth in my life have also caused me to reflect upon and recognize that the suffering was present for a reason. I always knew that “everything happens for a reason” and “there are no accidents in life” but these events, these traumas that caused my world to rattle, shake and shatter were ultimately the vehicles for my spiritual growth.

I learned to notice during my first year of grief after the October 1, 2000 death of my son Zac. I cannot take all the credit for this awareness as he helped me see how important “noticing” was and could be in my life. During my grief journey, I could see the importance of reviewing my life’s history and learning from it but noticing added an important step to the process. I was unable to notice anything during my early grief, as I had to move past the denial (of my loss) to be able to even acknowledge the importance of anything else in my life. I needed to be able to see beyond my pain. Therefore, the first step was to identify that something else (beyond my pain and grief) was (still) important in my life. This was the primary goal. Claiming and then accepting the object into my life were my second and third steps. If I had not learned claiming and acceptance, I would still be in my grieving process and I would not be where I am today in the acceptance of my life.

How did I do it? How did I notice, claim and accept? How did Zac’s death demonstrate a major life lesson in my life? I had to experience multiple steps of acceptance through my grief process during that first year of bereavement.

I first had to develop a historical framework from which to evolve. In the first few months of my grief, I was not able to see beyond the excruitiating pain, my depression, my frustration and the view that my life was and would forever be this total abyss of negative being. Once I was able to have an inkling of light at the top of the pit of my life that I felt surrounded me, I was able to see beyond all the darkness. Time allowed me to crawl up to the top of that pit and gaze backwards into my despair. With eyes that had adjusted to more light (and time to see not only a brighter world but also another world beyond my blackness), I was able to open my heart to another view of my life. Shifting that view allowed me to not only move beyond the physicalness of my being, but it also enabled me to be aware of other persons, places and things in my world. With a wider focus to other stimuli in my environment, I was able to recognize that I had a grief history. With this timeline of pain laid out before me, I could see and feel changes in me that were not possible in my earlier grief. Slowly I shifted from an egocentric world to an expanded realm beyond my pain.

Noticing became a new life focus. I was no longer in constant pain, I could venture out of my inner uncomfortableness, and I allowed outer stimulation to enter my reality.

Observing what was occurring in my world was the first step in my changing through acceptance. The slow process of claiming, although not easy, was necessary in order to reach an acceptance of my life situation. Yes, my brain knew my son was dead but now, how and what did that mean in my life? Yes, I would never see him again. However, how was I to live in “this “world (my present world) without him in it? Of course, this is an obvious question and answer but I needed to ponder the thoughts before I could move through to acceptance. Daily examples of noticing continually bombarded the reality of my new world. Yes, I HAD to accept the reality of his death but I was unaware that I had to go through this acceptance of my new world with new eyes. The shifting to my view of the new world (my world without Zac and the recognition that I could “go on” in this life without him) is what provided me with my foundation to move toward claiming my new life and on to acceptance.

Claiming my new life involved much repetition. Zac’s insistence to “notice the cows, notice the changing landscape and notice the everyday occurrences in my life solidified my desire to feel, act and be different. I did not want to feel devastated, hopeless, helpless and sad all the rest of my life. I knew I could not live my life like that for an extended period of time. I had to decide to live differently. I had to decide how to live without him. I consciously chose to accept that he was gone but I gave myself permission to grieve, to have my moments of sadness but decided to move from my despair. Once I claimed that decision, I was actually able to move on and through the many steps of acceptance.

Unlike my decision, acceptance was not a one-time moment or life event. I have continued addressing this issue for the eight years since his death. It has been a part of my daily life. Not only have I dealt with the acceptance of Zac’s death on a daily basis but also I have come to realize that I face acceptance in some form or another every day. Unhappiness with the work environment, disagreeing with political decisions, changes in television schedules, opinions concerning environmental issues, taking responsibility for one’s own life choices when facing the consequences, as well as death, all test our level of acceptance.

In this case, “choosing life” does not denote an abortion stance. Moreover, it does not mean that we are taking on someone else’s responsibility. We choose our own life when we work through the steps of acceptance after the death of our loved one. We choose how we want to live the rest of our life without them. We are all living our individual lives. I realize that I only have control over my life and my choices. Nothing happens in God’s world by mistake. Everything in this world is exactly as it should be. Although we would all like to have our old (pre-grieving) life back, we have to recognize that each of us entered this life with our own purpose and our own goals. I know I can only change the way I view my life and myself. Zac will continue to live in a place where I cannot hug him, my mother will soon succumb to her struggle with Alzheimer’s but I will continue to accept what is and learn from my life experiences. I have learned much about life and living after Zac’s death. With Zac’s help I have learned to “live what is.”