

Dealing With Death

by Mirah Riben

The Greeks told the story of the minotaur, the bull-headed flesh-eating man who lived in the center of the labyrinth. He was a threatening beast, and yet his name was Asterion — Star. I often think of this paradox as I sit with someone with tears in her eyes, searching for some way to deal with a death, a divorce, or a depression. It is a beast, this thing that stirs in the core of her being, but it is also the star of her innermost nature. We have to care for this suffering with extreme reverence so that, in our fear and anger at the beast, we do not overlook the star... Life lived soulfully is not without its moments of darkness... the soul becomes greater and deeper through the living out of the messes and the gaps.

—Thomas Moore,
Care of the Soul

Those of us who have been helping birthmothers search since the late 1970's, remember that for many years we never even thought about the possibility of any of our children being dead. We knew that adoptees had to be prepared to find a grave at the end of their search, but not birthmothers. That was then.

Sometimes I think it's because we have all aged. We were young mothers when we started out, our children at home just babies and our surrendered kids barely teens yet. What harm

could have come to such innocents? Then two birthmothers discovered that their babies died in infancy. Nothing's ever been the same since.

Now, we cannot in good conscience *not* tell a perspective searching Mom to expect anything and everything... to be prepared for the worst possible outcome. Our members have found kids who have been abused; adoptive parents who got restraining orders; troubled kids who moved in with their birthmothers. Kids have been found in homes totally opposite of what the agency had told the birthmother in terms of ethnicity, religion, education and socioeconomic class. Irish babies in Puerto Rican homes, interracial children in lily white homes, an orthodox Jewish child with Catholic Germans. One child was placed with fundamental religious parents and not allowed to listen to music, another was living in a car to escape his drunken adoptive parents. We have found children who were virtually "thrown away" and left at boarding schools or foster homes. And these, though not the "better life" we had been led to believe, were the good ones. The ones that were alive.



Finding a deceased child is becoming more and more common place. Since the beginning of 1995, we've heard of three or four birthmothers who searched and found that their children had died before they were found. They were barely out of their teens... auto accidents, suicides, murdered all before they were found. Those whose children are alive live with the fear that "but for the grace of God..." It could be any of our kids.

I cannot imagine what it would be like to *never* see your child. While I have the joy and peace of having met my daughter before she chose to end her precious life, I do, sadly, share membership in the club of mothers of deceased children. I would like to share what's gotten me through, in the hope that it might be of help to another who mourns.

First and foremost...I get by with a lot of help from my friends! My *triad* friends. They don't have to have experienced a death to understand and to allow you to just be able to talk about it freely with no diminishing of your love for a child you may never have "known" — no matter how subtly — that we hear from "others" who don't know. My personal guardian angel, a birthmother who lost her surrendered son and another son she's raised, initiated me into the "club" which wants no more members, but which will welcome any who need us with open arms and broad shoulders.

Other help that I got to get through my 27 year-old daughter taking her life within two weeks of the death of my mother was a very compassionate and understanding therapist, medication, and reading from Kirshner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. Rabbi Kirshner wrote this book in order to help himself and others deal with disastrous situations regarding illness and loss of loved ones, without losing faith in God. His message was of great help to me in a secular, emotional way, as well. Today, many schools of psychology are

recognizing that we cannot treat the psyche separately from the spirit and the soul.

Losing my mother and daughter within such close proximity of one another, I felt a tremendous sense of having lost both my past and my future. I felt disconnected from the human race. I also lost the hope of my daughter "some day" marrying, having children of her own and perhaps wanting the relationship with me I had long hoped for. I lost the ability to believe that placing her for adoption had been "in her best interest."

In many ways, the living can cause us a great deal more pain and be more cruel than the dead.

Like many of us, I had worked very hard to rebuild my life after having lost my first daughter to adoption. Now I had to mourn her loss yet again. During the years of my marriage I rebuilt my self-esteem which had been sorely damaged by the experience of surrendering a child to adoption. Just when I felt empowered enough to leave an emotionally abusive marriage, I lost custody of the three children I had breastfed and full-time mothered. As I was trying to recuperate from the loss of my marriage and custody of my children...came these two deaths back to back.

I remembered feeling like I did as a kid at Jones Beach. Just as you'd pick yourself up from one wave knocking you

down and wipe the salt water out of your eyes...boom!...another wave would come and knock you down again! I asked what had I done to deserve such torture. I wondered what karma I had brought with me into this life which required me to suffer so.

Now every time I feel these depressed "why me" feelings I recall Kirshner's book. God did not take my daughter's life or have my children not live with me after my divorce to "punish" me or to teach me anything. God gave us all free will and there is chaos in the universe. Things just happen. What God gives us is the faith and the ability to cope with what hand we draw in the game of life. I'm very grateful for my spiritual beliefs because they keep me from beating myself up with feelings of low self-worth.

I consciously reject any thought that I — or any of us — *deserved* what happened because we are "bad." Instead, I consciously affirm that I am a good person because I have coped with great adversity, not given up, not become bitter, not lost my faith, and try to help others. I also find no solace in dwelling on anger.

Am I angry? Yes, I've been in touch with my anger, I'm not suppressing it. I'm angry that I was lied to as we all were when we were told this would be "best" for our kids and for us, that we'd forget and get on with our lives. I'm angry that my daughter was put in a loyalty tug-of-war by her adoptive parents and not allowed to know all the love that was here for her. But dwelling on my anger will not change anything. Channel-

