The inevitable dance we have with grief

By Chaplain Jack L. Carver

Having completed a workshop on the subject of grief in La Crosse, Wis., I was boarding a plane for Chicago when my mother contacted me about the condition of my grandmother, who was dying of cancer. Her condition had just worsened and the family was gathering to see her. Rather than taking a flight home to Norfolk, Va., I purchased a ticket to Memphis, Tenn., where I spent the next five days.

Finally, it was time for me to leave. Her oncologist stated she would not be with us long, but I had to get back home. While awaiting my flight in the Memphis airport, I thought about what I had learned about grief and what losing my grandmother would mean to me and all my loved ones. I felt thankful for the opportunity to say goodbye to her and for the many wonderful memories we shared.

Across from me was a young couple with a child just able to walk and wander around. The child entertained many of the weary travelers awaiting their flights. She seemed to love exploring the confines of the seating area and seemed intent upon testing the boundaries her parents attempted to establish.

Two seats to my left sat a lady who engaged in interaction with the curious little wanderer. The little girl approached us, stopping about four feet in front of us. She looked at us and then smiled. Then, she turned and ran back to her parents. She repeated this cycle of events several times, helping us to pass the time.

"You seem to take great joy in playing with the little one." I said to the lady on my left.

"Well, I love kids. She reminds me of my granddaughter. In fact, I'm on my way to Norfolk to visit with her."

"So, you're excited to see your granddaughter."

The kind lady paused and sighed. She looked down. Then, she asked, "So, are you traveling to Norfolk, too?"

"Yes. I tried to get an earlier flight but couldn't get a ticket."

"So, are you on business?"

"Well, I was on my way home from a grief workshop when I heard my grandmother took a turn for the worse. So, I changed my plans to go to Memphis so I could visit with her."

"Oh, that's nice that you got to be with her. Could I ask what led you to the grief workshop? Are you a grief counselor or do you work in that field in some capacity?"

I told her I was a Navy chaplain assigned to Naval Medical Center Portsmouth.

"Well, I'm really quite taken by all this."

"What do you mean?"

The kind lady explained, "Tomorrow will be the second anniversary of an accident involving my daughter and granddaughter. The accident took the life of my daughter. Fortunately, my granddaughter survived. It's interesting…you're a chaplain, coming back from a workshop on grief…and you're grandmother is dying. I'm so sorry." she said.

I felt quite taken back by the incident. The connections were remarkable. I tried to sort out my feelings. I wanted to honor my own grief over the imminent death of my grandmother. But, I was compelled to think about the loss this lady had suffered.

I told her, "You really seemed to take joy in connecting with that little girl."

She smiled and looked down with embarrassment. "That's the way I've dealt with my daughter's death. I loved having my daughter with me. When she was a baby, I thanked God every night for her. She was a dancer and loved to play the piano. I said a prayer of thanks at every dance recital I took her to, every piano lesson, every beauty pageant. Whenever I see a young couple with a little child, I root them on the best way I can. We've helped several struggling families finance piano, ballet and dance lessons, just so we can keep my daughter's memory alive."

By that time a tear was seeping out from the corner of her eye. "That's how we keep her memory alive. And having gone through a grief workshop, you know what I'm talking about, don't you? I mean, I've read everything I could get my hands on. I know I'll never bring my daughter back to life, but I can love every child I see like I loved her and I can go see my granddaughter and love her in the same way."

Observing her grief response and journey through her loss, Psalm 30:11 came to mind: "Thou hast turned for me my mourning into dancing." I thought to myself, "What a healthy, courageous way to grieve! She loses her daughter who once danced. From her mourning, the lord has helped this lady to dance despite her loss." She touches and impacts the lives of others in a loving, kind way as a means to remember and honor the daughter she lost.

I have learned about grief from various training venues. I have spent many hours researching grief and bereavement in academic journals. I have applied my training in my own grief experiences. Yet, nothing has taught me more about grief than the conversation I had with the lady in the Memphis airport Aug. 26, 2005.

For most of us, the word grief introduces thoughts we wish to avoid. Unfortunately, dealing with loss is unavoidable. When we lose a loved one, we lose the hopes and dreams we planned to share with that person. We don't want or ask for these experiences, but they find their way into our lives.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross, in her book "*On Grief and Grieving*" wrote "…those who grieve well live well...grief is the healing process of the heart, soul and mind."

While grief is a topic we wish to avoid, it behooves us to learn about it. I recommend picking up a book on the topic and asking help from health professionals or clergy. Even more helpful is listening to the stories of those who speak openly about their losses and the many ways they have grown. More importantly, it's important to come to terms with the losses you've experienced to determine if you've handled them in a healthy manner.

Heads Up Yokosuka

Community Announcements

CFAY PWD Adopt-A-Monument Eco-volunteer Program – CFAY Public Works Department Environmental Division is looking for eco-volunteers for the Adopt-A-Monument Program. There are more than 20 historical monuments on base that need routine attention. Eco-volunteers will be responsible for picking up any debris and weeding the area around the monument at least once a month from March through September. Call 243-5136/4100/9578 or e-mail to Ryouko.Araki.JA@navfacfe.navy.mil for more information.

Tobacco Cessation Classes at USNH Yokosuka – U.S. Naval Hospital (USNH) Yokosuka now offers the American Cancer Society's Freshstart tobacco cessation program. It consists of four weekly one-hour group sessions that provide important quitting information and strategies. Any hospital beneficiary, active duty, retired, spouse or family member, interested in getting help with quitting tobacco use should contact Paul Langrehr at 243-7137 or HM2 Jemuelle Magat at 243-5026 or send an e-mail to paul.langrehr@med.navy.mil or jemuelle.magat@med.navy.mil.

Fleet Check-in at USNH Yokosuka – Now through Aug. 31, U.S. Naval Hospital (USNH) Yokosuka is holding a weekly fleet check-in for all hospital beneficiaries. From 9-11 a.m. on Mondays. Beneficiaries should bring their medical records, sponsor's orders, family entry approval and command sponsorship letter to the command auditorium on the third floor of the hospital for a one-stop check-in to medical records, dental, preventive medicine and the TRICARE service center. Call 243-5252/046-816-5252 for more information.

Pet of the Week

This week's Pet of the Week is Alice. Alice is a three-month-old female black and white kitten looking for her forever home. She is a shy girl but is very loving once she gets to know people. Alice is very playful and gets along great with other kittens. She would do best in a home with children eight years of age and older. To find out more about Alice or any animal at PAWS, contact them at 243-9996, by e-mail to usskittytalk.yokosuka@gmail.com or visit the PAWS Web site at www.pawsyokosukajapan.com.

Photo courtesy of PAWS