

Peace in the Midst Of...



Guidance for Those Suffering Grief & Loss
And For Those Who Love Them.

By Eric & Amy Osborn

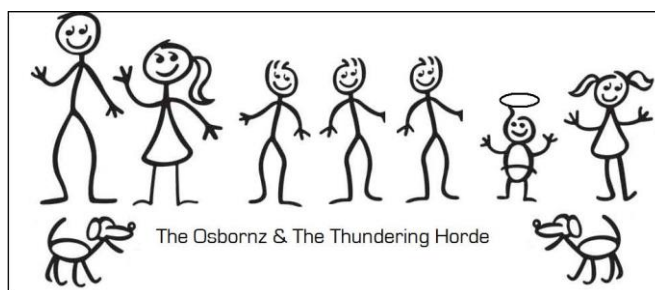


“In the Midst Of...”

There are times in our married life when we definitely felt we were outnumbered and outgunned – that it was just us against the world. We felt locked into a seemingly never ending cycle of crisis that was truly wearying to the soul. It is our hope that we can pass on what we have learned and in so doing, encourage others to persevere. We especially have a burden for Christian parents of special needs children. Four of our five children were adopted (they have the same birth mother) and came with unique special needs. In the midst of parenting them, no simple or easy task, we also experienced the tragic death of a child. Quite frankly, as we groped about trying to cope with what seemed like an excessive amount of trauma and loss in our lives, we often found ourselves feeling very much alone. We found that the depth of our trauma made others very uncomfortable and it was extremely difficult to find others who could relate or give counsel to us and our unique situation. We wished for a resource just like the one we are creating and sharing with you now.

Our surname comes with a family motto, “Pax in Bello.” Translated it essentially means, “Peace in the midst of Strife.” It is our desire to not only be at peace in the midst of the various trials life has for us, **but to thrive** in the midst of them. In our efforts to do this we have encountered what seems like a unique set of problems that required us to grow and learn. It is our hope that, in passing on what we have learned, others will have an easier time. This is not meant to be a scholarly book but a sharing of information that we have picked up on the path of our journey that we were very thankful to learn and wish we had learned sooner! We don’t pretend to be experts in any field. Some of the information we have learned we have quite forgotten the source but we both remember the information. We have included a bibliography so that, if you wish, you can look things up for yourself. Please do!

We affectionately refer to our family as “The Thundering Horde.” Sometimes it really feels like they fit their name well! However, God has shown us in each situation, how to thrive and find peace “in the midst of” each situation. The way was certainly not easy. In fact, some of what we have learned was extremely difficult and painful to go through. But we found, in the end, that God’s grace was sufficient for our every need.



In the Midst of Grief and Loss

Our story

Our journey through grief and loss really began 27 years ago when we faced the devastation of infertility. We also had to face grievous loss again as we realized that our adopted children were going to require a very different kind of family life than we had dreamed about and eagerly desired and prepared for. But the darkest valley was yet to come.

In 2002, during the adoption process of our third son Jason, Amy began to feel ill. Because of her PCOD, she began to be afraid that she might have developed some kind of ovarian or uterine cancer because the sensations that something was amiss came from there. We had brought Jason home only recently and we had three children under the age of 7 running around the house.

She went to the doctor who examined her and gave her the astonishing news. She was pregnant! We were both elated at the news. Now we would have a biological child to add to our family. The scourge of infertility was over! We threw ourselves into the preparations for a new baby. We usually only had one baby at a time so we needed another crib etc.

It was a difficult pregnancy and Amy was bedridden for the last month or so. In the little rural community we were living in it was extremely hard to find help for the children and our families were several hundred



miles away. But God was good and our son, Joshua Bruce Osborn was born on May 29th 2002 in Coos Bay Oregon. He was healthy though a couple weeks premature.

A few months after his birth, we moved our not so little family to California to be near our extended family and especially the children's grandparents. It was hard for Eric to find work as the California economy had recently taken a dive due to the "Dot.com Bubble" bursting. But with the help of family we muddled along.

In January of 2003 Joshua seemed ill and had trouble breathing. Eric, as a life-long asthmatic, recognized the symptoms of asthma and we took him to the doctor right away. Both Amy and Eric had a history of asthma in their extended family as well. We felt Joshua was likely going to be an asthmatic and that we should be prepared for that. The doctor considered this but didn't want to jump to conclusions since at 7 months, she said, a baby's lungs are so small that they can exhibit asthma like symptoms for lots of reasons. They treated him for the asthma and it helped.

A month later, on a Friday, Joshua exhibited breathing problems again. Eric and Amy both took him to the doctor. There, they gave him two breathing treatments and tried to get him to take some prednisone because a chest x-ray revealed he was developing a respiratory illness called RSV. As is typical for children having breathing problems, he could not keep the prednisone syrup down and kept spitting it up. The breathing treatments only helped a little. The doctor then sent us home with the prednisone and urged us to give him small amounts at a time until we could get the full dosage in and to give him nebulizer treatments. "If things get worse, call me," she said. (We later learned that the protocol for dealing with RSV in an asthmatic infant would have been immediate hospitalization, especially after not responding well to the nebulizer treatments and not being able to keep down the prednisone.)

Trusting our doctor, we took him home and did as she prescribed. It was a very hard night and he did not sleep at all and we had to take turns rocking him and trying to console him and giving him breathing treatments. It wasn't worse but it wasn't better either.

At 5 a.m. we noticed his lips had little color and we took him to the Emergency Room. They checked his vitals and whisked him inside. People came running from all over the place. His blood oxygen levels were too low was all they told us. They intubated him but apparently he fought it in some way. A helicopter from Sacramento was on its way to take him to a larger hospital with a special unit for babies. As we waited they tried to regulate his heartbeat to sync it to the rhythm of the machine when his blood pressure crashed and his heart stopped. CPR did not resuscitate him and he died that morning on February 22nd, 2003. He was only eight months old. He had been ill for only 22 hours. Thursday he was a healthy baby learning to crawl. Saturday he was gone.

It was like walking in a nightmare. We called our families and the shock of Joshua's death was like a lightning strike. Amy was numb and sat motionless. I noticed, with irritation, that most of the ER staff had vanished. After waiting for a while I called the mortuary and made the arrangements myself. A nurse took out most of the tubes and wrapped him in a blanket so that we could hold him and say good-bye. I can tell you without a doubt that I howled in anguish and a part of me died that morning. Both of us are no longer the same people we were before. The children stumbled into the room, confused and horrified. Our oldest held him and said a tender good-bye. The others were just too little and were afraid of the room. I don't blame them one bit.

So we went home with an empty car seat. In the next few days I stayed strong and greeted people and dealt with the funeral arrangements. As a former minister I knew exactly what to do and I did it, but I did notice that I did an awful lot of it alone. No one from the hospital ever came by (we found out later that they normally do intensive follow up after the death of a patient). They actually made it harder to pay the bill all at once so we wouldn't have to keep getting small bills in the mail week after week. The pastors of our church and Grammy Merrill's church came several times. Churches definitely know what to do when death occurs in their midst, and they did a good job of it for sure. They were a blessing and God used them very well. But after the funeral the real journey began.

What is grief?

We have come to understand that grief is best understood as the thoughts and feelings we experience from a deep loss that is profound enough for us to feel changed in ways **we do not want**. Thus we are overwhelmed and refuse to initially accept the new reality of our future life. We cling to what was lost and resist losing it.

It used to be quite popular to talk about stages of grief that most people go through on their grief journey. It was thought to be a fairly linear process, though its creator, Elizabeth Kubler Ross denied that. The idea most took away was that healthy progress meant that you were experiencing and moving through all of the stages one at a time until you came to the end and, apparently, life resumes a more or less normal state. The stages were first listed by Elizabeth Kubler Ross in her 1969 book, On Death and Dying as; **denial & isolation, anger, depression, bargaining and finally acceptance** (DADBA). It was considered unhealthy for someone to jump over a stage or get stuck in one and not be moving forward. Imagine all the suffering grief stricken people would go through wondering if they were “doing it right.” Thankfully, this rigid approach has been discredited (I know our experience didn’t fit the mold either) though some of what it teaches can be helpful. Here is what we have discovered in our grief journey.

Primary realities of grief and those who are grieving

Everybody grieves differently - do NOT try to make them grieve a certain way. Everybody is unique and put together differently. Not everyone starts with the same sense of loss though you might all experience the same tragedy. We ought to know enough about humanity to know that there is almost never a “one size fits all” kind of recipe for anything as complex as grief.

Though the stages of grief are good handles to try to describe what grieving is like, they are not linear at all nor do you move in an orderly fashion from one to the next. Grief is a fairly chaotic process for most. You might jump over one “stage” only to jump back to it later when something triggers a fresh wave of grieving feelings. Because, bottom line, **it takes as long as it takes**. Rushing people or having them move too quickly often derails healthy grieving

The hard truth of grief - acceptance is required

We initially resist this catastrophic change because we DO NOT WANT IT, but it happened, and you cannot wind the clock of life backwards nor can wishful thinking recreate reality. Your world and you

are NOT the same anymore. It makes so much sense why we resist this! What keeps us from accepting can sometimes be that we feel so altered. We feel changed in ways we do not desire and it makes us feel un-whole, damaged. I used to think of it as having a huge invisible hole in my heart that never seemed to go away. I used to lament the fact that I felt so maimed. That was the best word I could describe what I felt like. It was as if I had been mauled by some horrific beast and left half dead with a limb missing. I once wrote:

*I feel so used up, worn out, damaged beyond repair. I feel like Frodo after saving the Shire only to be haunted by past failures and injuries so badly he can't enjoy living in this world anymore. Alas, he found solace in the uttermost West with the elves. But that is a fairy tale and there is no place to go to find the kind of deep healing I need. **I need to be un-maimed not just temporarily repaired.** That requires a miracle.*

I know that others have lost loved ones and suffered much in this world too. But that does not comfort me. It only deepens my sorrow knowing that so many are maimed as I feel I am. We may pretend to be whole and even find a way to deceive ourselves and others with a "prosthetic limb." But we are NOT whole.

We have survived something that is SO wrong. We were not made to die but to live. Death is a usurper who invades and wrongfully steals away those we love. There is no comfort for that. Pretending it is natural and "the cycle of life" doesn't make it the truth, nor does it lessen the severity of the injury to those left behind. Death is nothing but a thieving unnatural monster to those who remain behind. It maims us and leaves us to slowly suffer with our wounds.

And if we turn to God, He can stop the bleeding and teach us to live again. But on this side of the Veil we are always a little crippled, a little less than what we were, a little more ... damaged.

That's why people hold you at arm's length. You are damaged goods. You remind them of a truth they fear, find unpleasant and don't really understand. I don't begrudge them that. Let them live on whole w/out knowing the monsters. I was once that way myself.

But still, it is so very lonely. I am learning that as we turn the page (or are forced to turn the page) on each chapter of our life, it is both exciting and sorrowful. We gain the new and lose so much in the exchange. I understand this and realize you can't go backwards and have things be the way they were. It is gone forever.

I think it is about feeling so ruined. So much less than what I once was. This too will pass, I suppose. But I think I will still feel diminished. I think I will always be maimed. Is there any healing left for me?"

Face it - you ARE maimed and changed forever. **You will NEVER be the same but that doesn't have to mean you will always be miserable.** I have found tremendous strength in acknowledging that reality.

God will more than meet us in our weakness and sorrow. He does not erase the past but holds us tight as, together, we walk through the vale of shadow and tears. As the fires of the forge burn away what is not precious in the ore, so we are burned and marred, but in the end prove more precious despite it. There is that miracle I was looking for.

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The inescapable reality we have found is that only acceptance and trust in the goodness and wisdom of our loving Creator truly resolves grief (*truly integrates the past w/ the new and often undesired future*).

It is a journey with a crooked path for sure. So many things will set off a fresh round of raw grieving and you often go back to the beginning or have set backs - *but we found that it is easier to navigate back*. I used to think my feelings were like a bottomless well with a flimsy wooden lid. Sometimes, to my surprise, it was as if something broke that lid apart and all of the sorrow came gushing out. Anytime we saw someone in pain or suffering, or drove by a hospital or even just got really weary and tired....the well would be breached for a time. However, God was always faithful to help us find our way back out of the well. In time, I found it wasn't actually bottomless though it took 10 years to feel that way. But I have to confess, I still cry when I watch certain kinds of scenes in a movie now. Good thing theaters are dark!

What happens if you DON'T grieve

Explosion! We NEED to grieve. After all, our life as we used to know it, really has been destroyed and we need to put the pieces together in whatever new fashion it will be and live on. If you try to hold on to the old life it will be as vain as trying to hold on to a section of water in a river so it can't move downstream. Kind of pointless and exhausting to try, but sometimes that's what we do. When we sense that failure we can react in all kinds of bad ways (anger, despair, bitterness...). People suffering grief and loss must eventually reach the point that they face the truth and accept what is now and trust God knows what He is doing in our lives. I used to say, "God has never done me any harm and I don't believe He is going to start now." Believe in His goodness and wisdom. Only in Him will you find lasting rest for your weary and maimed soul. Anything else is only temporary.

It is at this point that many people refuse to trust God. They find their loss so intense they refuse to see His goodness or His wisdom and especially, His love. How that breaks His heart. He sees a child He loves so dearly and in so much pain lashing out at Him, but He can take it, after all. It wouldn't be the first time people have shaken their fist at Him.

You see, God knows how we are made. He knows how weak we can be. He knows how handicapped we are not being able to see Him and cling to him physically. In 1 Kings 19 we see that even the prophet Elijah pouted and whined after the show down with the prophets of Baal (where God was victorious through Elijah in chapter 18). Ever notice God doesn't rebuke Elijah? He lets him sleep and has angels bring him food. God was so gentle with Elijah, and I know that is still the way He is with us today.

Let's face it, God has big shoulders and knows better than to take everything we say while suffering to heart. What a loving God He is! I remember saying to Him that I just wanted to crawl into that chasm I could feel in my heart and never come out. I could almost hear His voice gently say, "Not today child, go inside and love your family." This repeated for several days and then I found I didn't need to say it anymore. He never once rebuked me or chided me for saying what was in my heart truthfully. He just drew me close and loved me. It was what I needed for sure. He is like that.

Critical time for a marriage

Many times marriages fall apart after the death of a child. As I said before, grief rests on the fact that we do not want this new reality and miss what or who once was. One spouse often tries to deal with this by blaming the other as if, somehow, by assigning blame it will make things better. Of course, it does nothing of the kind and only makes things worse. The spouse who is blamed is devastated that the one they love would make such an accusation. Because Amy and I were both involved with the short process of Joshua's illness, thoughts of one blaming the other were ridiculous. We never once considered such a thing. We stayed a tight unit – married couple against the world so to speak.

Another cause of marital distress after such a loss is due to the differing styles of grieving. We all assume our way of expressing love, devotion and grief for those we have lost is the right way. So when those ways are at odds it can cause a lot of intense friction. Amy and I really did have very different ways of handling our grief. Thankfully, my ministerial training prepared me for the reality of different ways of expressing grief. That made a huge difference, although there was still a little friction. We had

to keep reminding ourselves and each other that we all are unique in how we express grief. It has continued to really help us.

Last of all, I think sometimes the reason why marriages fail after such a loss is due to the nature of grief. I mentioned that part of me died that morning and that we both feel that we are not the same people we once were. Sometimes one spouse will really feel altered to the point that they just want to be alone. They may want to move to another house or another community altogether to get away from the constant reminders of that horrible loss and their spouse refuses to do so (maybe due to their own grieving process). If they don't work these issues out it could certainly lead to a break in their marriage, especially if their marriage had been fragile before the loss.

However, Amy and I had a strong marriage and were both well prepared to deal with problems by talking things out and seeking help when necessary. We are both thankful that we didn't need to cope with divorce or separation in addition to the loss of our child.

How to make it worse for those who are grieving

In general: talk! People can be SO clueless. They feel the need to try to bring comfort but mistakenly think they can say something that will help. Most of the time there is nothing you can say that will truly make someone grieving feel better, and even then, timing is everything!

Don't try to manage their grief or force them to grieve "well" - a cookie cutter approach will only make them feel worse (or guilty).

It's OK to say something cheerful after a while. They need some light after all. But be careful and it probably isn't a good idea to force humor on them. A little goes a long way. Giving a distraction is OK but be careful and thoughtful.

Please don't use platitudes or theologize and try to help them determine why it happened? You will rarely ever know the truth and the grief-stricken really couldn't accept the truth anyway. God isn't obligated to tell us why (and doesn't do so because He knows it will not comfort). I remember someone asking us at the funeral of our son, "What do you think God is trying to teach you through this?" Wow. I think I mumbled something like, "I dunno but I'll be sure to tell you when I do." Honestly, rather than

feel angry about such a ham handed comment I felt sorry for the person who obviously felt they needed to say SOMETHING. See what I mean?

A good rule of thumb for what to say to those who are grieving is, "If you don't know what to say - don't." Just **be there** for them **and look for something practical to do for them** so they don't have to worry about doing that. Also, don't encourage them to make big changes in life. They might lean in that direction anyway and sometimes it is just running away from the loss and pain. You can't do that because you carry it with you inside. Running away will only make things worse because you will be farther away from friends and family that you will need in the days to come.

How to truly help those who are grieving

Be kind, helpful and patient with those grieving, because they often feel alienated from everyone else. People stop talking when they walk in the room. People seem awkward and tongue tied around them. They feel like Typhoid Mary because they remind others of things they don't want to think about, and you really can't blame "normal" folk for that. It's only human. Heck, the grief-stricken were once like that too.

You can help distract them and provide them with something to do or a place to go for an hour or two (or longer if they are willing). You can help them deal with the uncomfortable worldly details of what has happened as much as you can or as much as they will let you. (pack up rooms, make arrangements with funeral home or insurance, help them pay bills, bring them meals or take them out if they will do so).

Grief is raw and many people shun the bereaved because it makes them uncomfortable - that makes things worse. YOU be patient and **give them the gift of your presence no matter what they say or do**. BE THERE for them. They WILL notice it and come to appreciate it. Be the lifeline back to reality for them - for they sojourn in a dark pit - a valley of the shadow of death. Let them talk, let them cry, let them vent. Someday you may need them to do the same for you.

Be there for them LONG after everyone else stops coming around (which often sets them back again and reopens the wounds). The first few days or weeks they might get a lot of attention. But when everyone has to go back to their life - it can be terrifyingly lonely for the bereaved. It has to happen eventually but maybe in stages would be more compassionate instead of all at once (which is what usually happens).

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