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Aug 13, 2018

## Learning the Fine Art of Quietly Grieving

Michael Burcham - Guest Columnist

Saturday, Oct. 24, 2015, the day my son died in an auto accident, I didn't think I could survive a week.

Being without him a year was beyond my capacity to imagine. More than 1,000 days without him have passed, and I have discovered that I am not born with a fixed amount of resilience.

I have more capacity than I knew to get through just about anything. I am stronger than I ever imagined.

For nearly a year, I was awash with the deepest-aching pain. Profound grief is debilitating. Losing Ryan was an around-the-clock, unrelenting, inescapable horror show.

Throughout year two, the acute pain was slowly replaced with a sorrowful ache and the permanence of his loss. Tears were always just below the surface, and the most ordinary conversation would trigger a return to the abyss.

This third year has been one of reflection - and trying to focus on the moments that made memories. Grief visits most frequently in the night and on holidays. And in those moments, my sorrow is as raw and real as the day Ryan died. I don't expect that to ever change.

I was so naive to the grief a parent feels in losing a child. I assumed that grief would be resolved over time. But I've learned the hard way that this is simply not true. The initial intense, debilitating grief has become waves of grief that show up at unpredictable times.

Sometimes the pain is deeply acute. This is especially true on Ryan's birthday, Thanksgiving, Christmas. My worst day is Father's Day — the harshest reminder that my son is no longer alive. I spend the day - dreaming about a phone call or a card that won't be coming.

It's also the holiday when I tend to do a hatchet job on myself emotionally, reliving every interaction and every regret (every ball game I missed, every "I love you" I didn't say

enough). While counselors and clergy have suggested that is not healthy, I suggest they try losing a child and then follow their own advice. It's not possible.

There are also other events in the lives of his friends, like college graduations, weddings, birth of their children, that trigger a deep sadness as I find myself thinking about how old Ryan would be, what he would be doing if still alive, and the cold hard reminder that a big part of my family's story is ripped away.

I hear his favorite song, see a grey 300Z (his car), and occasionally a voice that stops me in my tracks--another young man with that same voice.

For bereaved parents, our grief lies just below the surface. Even when I'm laughing or absorbed in a conversation, if you were to scratch me just a little bit, my grief would come bubbling up. I've come to view grief not as the enemy, but rather as a part of my DNA that I now can acknowledge and move into. I know eventually grief will go back under the surface and I'll just carry her around with me, hidden from other's view, but always there.

At 1,000 days, my head and my heart now shift back and forth between my grief and remembering what a gift Ryan's short life was to me. I spend most holidays overwhelmed by sorrow and loss and a sense of what might have been if he were still alive. I find strength in the memories of the joy and richness Ryan brought into the world.

This moment-to-moment tension, the never-ending pendulum between these two powerful emotions - the grief of loss and the gift - are enough to drive one mad. I've also learned that most friends and family have all "moved on" past my sorrow, so I wear a mask and make polite conversation while inside, I hurt.

I've learned the fine art of quietly grieving.

*Michael Burcham is chief executive officer of Narus Health and the founding president and CEO of Nashville Entrepreneur Center.*