

Pregnancy and Infant Loss

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Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of the Rappahannock

October 14, 2012

Devi:

On September 26th, last year, our daughter, Mikela, lost her son, Caleb, four months into her pregnancy. We have learned so much since then.

Since October was designated by Ronald Reagan, back in 1988, to be Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month, we thought this would be a good time to share with you what we have learned from Mikela, from the many people who, in an effort to console us, shared with us about their own pregnancy losses, and from many health professionals and grief counselors.

Ron:

We were really surprised at how many women told us of their pregnancy losses.

Just out of curiosity, how many of you have been affected directly or indirectly by perinatal loss? (More than half the congregation raised hands.)

Devi:

I was shocked to learn that 1 in 4 pregnancies end in miscarriage. Out of those miscarriages, 80% occur within the first 12 weeks.

At 16 weeks Mikela's doctor told her that everything looked perfect and that her risk factors had dropped so low as to no longer be a concern. Imagine her shock when her water broke the next day and she learned that her beloved baby, Caleb, would not survive.

Ron:

I've lost both my brothers, my parents, uncles and aunts and several close friends, but nothing compared to the sadness I felt when we lost Caleb.

To see what Mikela went through was heartbreaking. But beyond her loss, the messages communicated to Mikela at the time of her loss seemed very different from the messages that were communicated to me, when I lost loved ones.

People rallied around me, shared in my sorrows and memories, and supported my grieving process.

When Mikela's water broke, she called her workplace from the hospital and her boss asked her if she would be back at work the next day.

Devi:

There is an insensitivity about pregnancy loss. We, ourselves, had no idea that it was so devastatingly common, until it happened in our own family.

Unlike weddings, graduations, and funerals, we have no special tradition, no unique custom, for mourning the death of children, much less an etiquette for perinatal loss.

Well-meaning people say things like:

At least you are okay; that's what really matters.

You're young. You'll have others. Don't worry.

It just wasn't meant to be.

There must have been something wrong.

Everything happens for a reason.

Try getting that reason though. The doctors just say they are sorry but they simply don't know the cause of most miscarriages.

Ron:

We discovered that even counseling services, which offer free care to the underprivileged, find it difficult to convince doctors to refer women who have suffered pregnancy loss.

The doctors are desensitized, it seems. They're so used to the statistics, that they simply offer the consolation, "you can try again soon." The message is that all this is quite normal; move on. They offer no real explanation for the loss.

Not knowing the reason you lost your baby causes a lot of anxiety.

Will it happen again?

How can I prevent the problem next time, if I don't know how it happened this time?

Was it something I did?

Was it my fault?

Is there something wrong with me?

The mother's mind goes a bit loopy trying to find an answer for an unanswerable question.

#4 Devi:

Not only is it unanswerable, pregnancy loss also becomes unspeakable for many women.

The silence is perpetuated because:

1) Many times people don't even know the mother was pregnant by the time of her loss. Because of the fact that so many pregnancies are lost in the first trimester, it is fairly common for women to conceal their pregnancies until they get to their 13th week.

2) The people who do know of the miscarriage feel uncomfortable discussing such a sensitive topic. Despite the fact that pregnancy loss is so common, the topic remains more taboo than the broader topic of death, in general.

3) And the mother is very often consumed by personal guilt and shame surrounding the experience, so she rarely wants to go public with her feelings.

Ron:

And, depending on the relationship the mother has with the father, she may, or may not, even be entirely supported by him.

I can say this because I'm a guy: guys often have difficulty expressing their feelings.

Many relationships are not strong enough to endure this type of deep and prolonged challenge in which the parents' defense mechanisms and communication styles are so starkly contrasted.

Devi:

Mikela refused to stuff down her feelings even though her fiancé preferred to put it all in the past.

Mikela's milk had come in and Caleb was not there to suckle. She had to tape down her breasts and endure the physical and emotional pain of that and she refused to, metaphorically speaking, tape her mouth shut too.

Our whole family stood in awe of her courage and tenacity in this regard. She hung Caleb's photos on her wall and shared them proudly with everyone. She talked about Caleb and how much she loved him to all of us. She wrote to Caleb everyday. Mikela has given Caleb's life meaning. She brought Caleb to life in herself and in our family.

Ron:

I'd like to read you a poem Mikela wrote to Caleb.

You follow me like the moon.
I keep you in my heart.
I always want you to know,
You were mine from the very start.
But God needs you now,
And hopefully I will understand soon.
But as for right now,
You are the beautiful moon.
I love you more than life.
You are the only thing I lack.
Now the only thing to do
Is love you to the moon and back.

Devi:

Mikela intuitively brought healing to herself and the rest of us. It was one of the most profoundly inspirational things that Ron and I have ever witnessed.

Ron, having previously written two screenplays, one which won a first-place award, thought to ask Mikela how she felt about him writing her story as a screenplay.

Ron:

I knew this was a story that needed to be told. She agreed.

But man, writing a screenplay and actually producing a movie are two vastly different things. "You Follow Me Like the Moon" is in full swing and we will be filming at the end of the month. It is a monumental task; more than I ever imagined, requiring housing and feeding more than 20 crew members for a week! So, why would I do such a thing? you might ask.

When I was 2 years old, my eight-year-old brother died from polio during the polio epidemic in the 50's. I don't have a conscious memory of him. But thirty years later, I saw the movie, "Ordinary People", which revolves around a family's experience of loss of one of the two teenage brothers in a boating accident, with the surviving brother attempting suicide. It created a major emotional catharsis, in which I cried uncontrollably for three hours.

Movies move people and in my case, I was moved to the realization that I had been unknowingly living with survivor's guilt most of my life, which - when I look back - had diminished my ability to function in my career and in my personal relationships.

Our purpose in producing “You Follow Me Like The Moon” is to bring awareness and move people to understand the emotional devastation a mother undergoes with a perinatal loss.

Devi:

There are sequential steps, or layers of the healing process, that must be completed, before a loss can become integrated in a way that is not constantly painful.

Without knowing what to do to bring this relief, the alternative is to repress the loss... to stuff the feelings into a locked down compartment of the subconscious mind. I am all too familiar with that process!

When you are a child, and the people in charge of you are irrational and abusive, your normal path to learning and development gets skewed. Instead of playfully learning how you fit within a loving family and a welcoming community, complete with civil rights and civic responsibilities, you become focused on developing defense mechanisms, survival strategies and avoidance tactics.

There are so many things I avoid even now. I have entirely organized my life around avoiding my fears and my triggers. How much has this cost me? How much has this cost my family and my community?

Who knows what it looks like in the very instance when a child loses forever her ability to trust others?

Who knows what it looks like the moment a mother helplessly realizes her nightmare is hers, and hers alone, to bear?

The loss of trust is a secret and invisible loss, just as pregnancy loss is an unspoken and invisible loss.

When we have our capacities diminished by whatever degree our resources are diverted toward burying unhealed wounds and away from delivering our creative gifts, that deficit trickles up to the society in which we live.

Collectively, our society bears the hidden costs of our invisible losses. So, it behooves us all to learn how to facilitate grief work, for the collective good.

Ron:

Even though I can't remember my brother, Bobby's loss has affected me profoundly. Today, my granddaughters are approximately the same age as my brother and I were when he died. When I look at their relationship and how close they are, I can only imagine how Vivienne would feel if Savannah were to suddenly disappear from her life.

For three decades, until I saw *Ordinary People*, I had unknowingly lived with survivor's guilt. Even today, as I am now conscious of it, I still have not broken all the habits of withholding myself in various ways.

Especially with speaking...My mother told me that I started stuttering right after Bobby died. Although I've pretty much outgrown this, I do remember stuttering and it lasted for quite a long time. I still have somewhat of a disconnect between my thoughts and my ability to form words. That's why I like to write; I'm less hampered by this issue when the words are written rather than spoken.

I know my invisible loss took a toll on me, in that I have lived a life, less full than I might have otherwise. Unfortunately, I added to that trickle-up deficit Devi mentioned.

Devi:

Our project will, at the very least, trickle out a healing force, hopefully we will create a tsunami where the healing force is felt by all.

Inspired by our hero, Mikela, who retained her empowerment under unimaginable duress, this project will increase awareness, convey empowerment principles and lead to compassionate support systems and wholistic processes that facilitate on-purpose grieving.

Accompanying the DVD at distribution, will be a three-part booklet.
Part One: Effective Grieving, Layer by Layer;
Part Two Sensitive Support Systems;
and Part Three: Hidden Costs of Invisible Losses.

The movie will be cathartic and it will shine a light on an issue whose societal costs are incalculable.

The complementary booklet will give direction, resources, and a voice to women and families who need to heal their invisible loss.

Ron:

Mikela inspired us with her courage and tenacity and her unflinching ability to make her decisions based on what was best for Caleb in the fleeting moments of his life.

After Caleb's passing, Mikela commemorated his existence in her life. He was to be forever her first son, and he will always be our first grandson.

Devi:

That a tiny six inch baby, who lived only for a minute or two, can restore the fullness of life to those who have spent years in sorrow, will be the legacy of Caleb Ryan Gouldin.

Afterword:

Information about the upcoming filming of our movie is available on our website:
<http://www.midvalemovies.com>

A nice article in Northern Neck News, is available at: <http://tinyurl.com/9hl4v3x>