

## Each Loss Is Unique

Expecting my first baby was like realizing I was truly in love for the first time ... I was convinced I was the only person in the world who had ever felt this way! No baby had ever been wanted as much as mine; no expectant mother was ever happier or more appreciative of her blessing.

I remember those days with bittersweet feelings: sweet because of my hopefulness and because I have the memories of my baby, bitter because I did not have him long.

Benjamin was born three and half months prematurely, and throughout that day of labor, we knew the chances our baby would live were small. Benjamin was born alive, but very shortly afterward the doctors told us his lungs were too immature for him to survive.

We held him throughout his lifetime. For a short two hours, we knew a heart was beating in the tender, little body in our arms, and we watched as gradual signs let us know our baby boy was dying. All through the time he was with us, I felt the most incredible peace I have ever experienced. Fragments of that peace come back to sustain me now; I know it as my continuing connection to Benjamin.

After Benjamin died, I felt lost. I'd never experienced grief before; I'd never lost anyone I really loved. I desperately wanted to share my feelings, to find someone who would understand them -- someone who could get inside my pain with me so that I would not have to be alone with it.

My husband was grappling with his own grief and, though we shared this experience on an objective support level, we seemed to innately recognize that we would be limited in helping each other.

Those around me tried to be sensitive, but my expectations (though I did not realize it for a long time) were unreal and no one could have lived up to them. I wanted to put words around the confusing mixture of feelings I was having and I wanted to talk about Benjamin -- the same things over and over. I had so short a time with him that repeating my memories was what made him continue to be real to me and I desperately wanted to make him real for others.

Not only did I fail to find that one individual listener, but most of our friends could not identify Benjamin's death as truly the loss of a significant person in our lives. There was recognition that our hopes for beginning our family had been destroyed, that we were disappointed, that we must have been curious and concerned about our ability to ever have a family. But people didn't seem to understand that in losing our baby, we'd lost much more than just our immediate family plans.

There was little acknowledgment of the fact that losing a baby -- whether in miscarriage, stillbirth or infant death -- is a tangible and important loss. It is the death of a loved one. It is not merely the interruption of plans.

Nearly a year to the day after Benjamin's birth and death, I had a miscarriage. I will never know what it is like to have a miscarriage -- only what it is like to have a miscarriage after losing a newborn. That feels like an important distinction to me. The abstractness of losing a baby I never held was something with which I struggled. At first, I felt less cheated about losing her (we found out later through chromosome analysis that our second baby was a girl).

With both losses, I was not ready to move from the emotional experience to the discussion of it clinically as quickly as those around us seemed to expect. The loss of a baby at any point is a painful deprivation, but there was even less recognition of our grief about the miscarriage. Now, among those trying to offer us comfort and support, there was even more focus on discussing our interruption of plans and the potential for diagnostic testing. They seemed even less able to recognize our pain as real.

As I struggled through this new loss, I was also facing Benjamin's first birthday and the resurgence of intense grief it brought. Others expected me to be fine very quickly and I began to adopt these expectations as my own. Therefore, I pressured myself into not admitting my need to share this pain.

Though deep down I wanted to talk, this time even I wondered just what I would talk about. Benjamin had been an identifiable little person. My husband and I had held him, and his aunt and grandparents each had the opportunity to be with him. In talking about him to others, I could refer to him by name, describe his features and express what it was like to have him.

I felt a great deal less able to communicate about my miscarried child. I never physically met her; I had no memories of her to focus on or to talk about with others. If she does not have a distinct identity even for me, she certainly cannot become a clear image for anyone else. This may, in part, account for the sympathy that focused on the practical impact of this loss on my future. There were times when I wanted to scream and tell people the future didn't exist for me; I just wanted someone who would mourn my baby with me.

Any concerns I had about bringing another baby to term were deeply buried beneath the blanket of grief I felt. In time, as my grief became more manageable and emotional healing began, I was able to consider the impact of the loss on our future family plans. I still speak about either loss to only a few people; but even among them, I find a benign unwillingness to acknowledge my pain.

For almost three years, I worked for an organization that offers emotional support to the terminally ill and their families. My experience taught me how uncomfortable some people are with the pain of others and how the best-intentioned and most loving family members and friends sometimes just can't reach out on an emotional level. Possibly those of us who need to talk about our grief do not give clear signals to the people we love as to how they can best help us.

On the six-month anniversary of Benjamin's birth and death, I felt more lost and alone than ever. I finally knew I needed help to work through my grief. Under the patient guidance of a wise and sensitive psychologist, I came to better understand by reactions to and feelings about both my losses. I've also found strength again in remembering God as my empathetic ally, something I'd lost sight of in the midst of all this hurt.

The need to talk and to feel understood is a natural human response, but my fierce drive to find understanding on my most primary emotional level was not realistic.

The search for someone who will truly understand is probably pointless, but there is a special bonus for me in knowing that my feelings about Benjamin and our second baby are mine alone. Like a rare treasure, I know my feelings exist only for me.

Describing the loss of both babies is as impossible as trying to come up with a definition for the word "love". In fact, if I could describe my feelings and define love, maybe I would find myself using the same words.

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