

IT'S BEEN A YEAR ALREADY...YOU MEAN IT'S ONLY BEEN A YEAR?*Daniel Dubovsky M.SW, L.SW*

Dan Dubovsky has worked for 30 years in the fields of mental health and developmental disabilities. He has presented regionally, nationally and internationally on Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders (FASD) for the past eight to ten years, focusing especially on interventions for children, adolescents and adults. For this work, his son Bill has been his mentor and best teacher. Dan is currently the FASD Specialist for the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) FASD Center for Excellence. In this role, he provides training and technical assistance to individuals, families, programs, agencies, communities, and states on FASD.

Dan has a keen interest in the development and provision of quality services to those with FASD, mental illness, substance use disorders, and/or developmental disabilities, and their families. To this end, he has provided education in the areas of loss, partnerships, psychopharmacology, development, mood disorders, violence in youth, anger management, team building, stress and burnout, transition, and life span disorders such as Attention Deficit Disorder, Mood Disorders and Schizophrenia.

First anniversaries are most often a time to celebrate a happy event. A marriage, the date two people met, the date one started a new job, a year after a new pet joined the family, a year in a new home, a year after a child joins the family through adoption, or a year after an adoption is finalized. Unfortunately, there are other first anniversaries that, although equally remembered, are not such happy occasions. First anniversaries that seem to have occurred much too quickly and yet, at the same time, seem to have taken forever to arrive. It's a strange dichotomy, but one that occurs all too frequently.

My son Bill died a little over a year ago. He was 28 years old and I raised him as a single parent from the time he was 6½ years old. As the first anniversary of his death approached, I

dreaded it. There were times when I felt that the year had passed by very quickly. I couldn't believe that it was 12 full months already.

It had seemed just the other week that I had been talking to Bill; that we had been walking and laughing together; that, at 28 years old, he put his arm around me, looked down on me (him being 6 foot 1 inch tall and me being 5 foot 6 inches tall) and told me "I love my daddy." It was twelve months since I had yelled at him for smoking so much or spending all his money or waking me up early in the morning. Was it really that long since I had asked him to mow the lawn and he asked me how much I would pay him? Was it a year already since we went to see *Lord of the Rings* together? Did our birthdays really pass by? Did we really have winter, spring, summer, and then fall? Was it truly a whole year and I still hadn't done anything with his clothes other than to wear some of his t-shirts? I hadn't even finished washing all of them, but it seemed as though it had only been a month or so. Time seemed to speed by without my knowing it. Was it a year already since I had regularly paid my bills? Although repeated calls from creditors indicated that it was, I could hardly believe that.

It seemed like just the other day that I was at work and got a call that Bill had been found on the highway, had been hit by several cars, and was dead. I remember so clearly my response of screaming "no" and crying hysterically in my office, not caring who heard me. Of making calls to my family, and of my colleagues at work driving me the 3 hours home. It is so vivid in my mind that it seems as though it happened only yesterday.

I can see myself planning Bill's funeral, making the decision to wait a week and a half so that my brother, whom Bill idolized, could be there, and then wanting to postpone the funeral further so that I could be with Bill a while longer. Making the agonizing choice between burial and cremation, and deciding that I couldn't bear Bill being buried in a cemetery where I couldn't visit

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him every day, especially if I moved away. Deciding that if I had his ashes, he would always be physically close to me, and then worrying whether he would have wanted that. Meeting with the funeral director and discussing what I wanted. Struggling with whether to have an open casket or not. Hearing arguments from both sides and worrying about others' views, and finally giving in to others' ideas that the casket shouldn't be open, but then arranging for it to be open a couple of inches so Bill could hear what people were saying about him at the service.

It seemed that it was only a brief moment ago that I was talking with friends about what I wanted at the service and asking dear friends to create a program with photos, music, and writings; writing a piece about Bill for the program; picking out the music and asking a friend to put together a CD; calling people to tell them that Bill had died and when the funeral was; asking people to speak at the service; writing an obituary for the paper; going through photographs and choosing about 100 to copy and put on poster boards to display around the room at the funeral home; deciding that I wanted people to wear Hawaiian shirts since Bill loved Hawaii and his Hawaiian shirts; deciding that I wanted Bill dressed in a Hawaiian shirt and jeans, and having to deal with family who thought that it would be more respectful for people to wear suits and for Bill to wear his suit; cleaning the house; arranging for food for after the service; and visiting Bill throughout the time between his death and the funeral.

I remember so clearly what he looked and felt like, talking with him, and feeling comforted that we could have that time together. I remember asking if it was OK to cut a lock of his beard and hair, but being worried about not ruining his haircut. I remember being worried that only a few people would come to his service and being heartened that over 100 people were there. I remember clearly his 4th grade teacher coming to the service and speaking about Bill and the effect he had had on her 18 years earlier. I remember what each person who spoke said about Bill, the funny stories and the sweet remembrances. I so clearly see myself being the last one to speak and telling the gathering some of my thoughts, and then saying goodbye to Bill after the service.

Everything was so fresh in my mind. It couldn't possibly have been a year already since Bill died. Could it?

At the same time, I could not believe that it had only been a year since Bill had died. It seemed like forever since I had seen him, talked with him, and gotten a hug from him. He gave such great hugs. Had it only been a year since I heard "Dad, I love you" or "Dad, I need some money?" Was it really only five months since his birthday? I remember planning what to do on that first birthday after Bill died. I anticipated it with some dread. There were moments when I just wanted to sleep through the day. Then I decided that of course we needed to celebrate Bill's birth, because if he hadn't been born, he wouldn't have been my son and we wouldn't have had the years together, just the two of us, that we did. I immersed myself in planning what to do on that day and who to ask to participate in the celebration of Bill's birth. What would be the best way to celebrate? Since Bill loved the ocean, we had to go to the beach. It was the beginning of May and a group of us started the day eating breakfast at Bill's favorite restaurant, having Bill's favorite breakfast meal, "the buttermilk five." I got some balloons and asked everyone to write a note to Bill to put inside the balloon. We then filled them with helium and took them with us to the beach, about 2 hours away. We went to the ocean's edge, wrote "Happy Birthday Bill" in the sand and sang Happy Birthday to him. Each person then said a little something and released his or her balloons. We watched for quite awhile as they ascended into the sky, got caught by the breezes, and eventually disappeared in the clouds. It seemed like a fitting celebration for Bill. But that must have been years ago.

Could it have just been a year since I asked Bill to clean up his room? Only a year since we went to visit his grandmother in the country and he bounced up and down in the car, singing "A Little Bit of Monica" while we all laughed? A year since I said "enough already" after the 15th time of his singing "The Devil Went Down to Georgia?"

Was it really just a year since we were planning to present a workshop at a national conference in Washington, DC and another at a conference in Anchorage, Alaska? Was it only a

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year since I had done those presentations alone? Although the feelings that I had doing those presentations and the responses of those audiences are still palpable, it seemed as though eons had passed since those events.

Had only a year of holding onto all his ashes gone by before I thought about possibly spreading some of his ashes on the island of Kauai, which Bill loved? Was it just the first anniversary of his death when I had a little ceremony on Kauai early one morning in the rain and threw a lei with a picture of him and me attached, along with a few of his ashes, into the ocean near a school of dolphins that were swimming back and forth just offshore? I could have sworn that was several years after Bill's death.

This juxtaposition of feeling like time had passed so quickly while, at the same time, that time was standing still is not unique to me. As a parent whose child has died, wanting to feel that "it was just yesterday" that I was with my child and yet wanting not to feel the exquisite pain of that initial moment at the same time makes sense. When one's child dies, life becomes so painful that these mixed experiences often occur. We want to hold onto the last moments we were with our beloved child as if they were yesterday. We don't want time to move forward and distance ourselves from those moments. We want to remember the good times, and even the tough times, and yearn to have them back again. I don't

know a parent whose child has died who would not trade everything for just one more argument with their child, or one more time of rescuing him or her from a dangerous or embarrassing situation. Yet, there are occasions when we cannot tolerate the rawness of the pain and recollections of those horrid moments around our child's death. The saying "time heals all wounds" rings in our ears, and although we know that our wounds will not be healed, we look forward to some future moment when perhaps the pain will not be quite so raw. We look forward to the distance that time can place between the moment of our child's death and our current daily living.

Perhaps it's helpful to recognize that these mixed reactions are a normal part of the experience of this incredible grief and that there is neither a set timetable for the grieving process nor a set process for grieving. Emotional pain is a powerful experience, and one that is uncomfortable for many, especially for those closest to us. It is important to remember that when people say "it's time to get rid of his clothes" or "it's time to move on" or "he would want you to be happy" or "maybe you can turn her room into a studio," it is their need to ease or avoid the pain and not necessarily our choice. At least that is true for me.

It all seems like so long ago. It all seems like yesterday. And truly, it is both.