

Grief From Three Feet  
Fred H. Kitchen

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Although many children may recognize the rituals of a funeral, most do not fully understand what death is, and in many instances, they do not express themselves outwardly. As adults we often overlook the emotions of children and discount the concept that their emotions do not run as deep as ours, nor can their emotional experience be compared to that of adults. Therefore oftentimes children are not configured into the funeral process.

I was inspired to write "Grief from Three Feet" some ten years ago when I came in contact with a small boy I met one evening some time ago during calling hours at funeral home.

As the family began to enter the funeral home for the initial private family viewing, the emotional anxiety and tension in the air was heavy to say the least. As I greeted this family I made every attempt to provide an atmosphere of warmth, kindness and heartfelt compassion.

And yet, this time felt different to me. As I spoke with the deceased's young wife and other family members, I noticed one particular child who walked along side of his mother. He was a nice-looking child, seemed well-behaved and well groomed.

I couldn't help but notice the fashion in which this child was clinging to his mother. The grip that he had was as if he was never going to turn loose of her. Not only were his tiny hands shaking, his small body was also shaking and trembling in what I perceived as nothing more than passionate fear.

One hand gripped tight to a piece of the material of his mother's dress, while the other one was firmly wrapped around her body. I closely observed as he fought to keep his face hidden against his mother's body. He refused to look at anyone in the room.

As the evening progressed and his mother moved around the room, he walked along side her, trying to keep pace, always falling behind his mothers much larger footsteps. His tiny feet stumbled across the carpet, and his balance became unstable for a split second, but he was able to regain his stability. Still, it was obvious this child was in fear but I wondered what was really going on in his mind and small world.

When he did choose to show a portion of his face, his pupils in his eyes seemed as though they were quite dilated. There were numerous time that I attempted to initiate conversation with this child. He would always quickly turn from me, yet looked back at me from time to time. As time passed and all of the family had gathered, I slowly escorted the family toward the room where the remains of this husband and father were placed for viewing and receiving family and friends.

Later that evening when the visitors began to dwindle, I found myself seated in the entrance of the funeral home reflecting on how exhausted I felt. Alongside of where I was seated was an empty chair. I couldn't help but notice this same young boy as he edged himself closer to the empty chair and eventually sat down beside of me. I offered him candy, and he eagerly accepted. As he slowly unwrapped the candy, I asked him what his name was. He replied softly, "Seth."

I said, "Seth how old are you?" He responded by holding up five fingers on one hand and one finger on the other hand and said softly, "Six."

After a long pause, he looked at me with quite different looking eyes than what I had seen earlier. They now appeared to be droopy, puffy, and full of genuine grief and sadness. He looked as though he was emotionally exhausted.

He looked at me and said with his soft high pitched voice, "Mister, why is my daddy in that coffin in there?" Before I could even process the first question, he followed up with a second one, "Why did my daddy leave me? Mommy said daddy had to leave us."

I literally stared at him and sat motionless. I experienced the feeling of temporary paralysis and was speechless, and really did not know how I should respond. As I became momentarily saddened myself, I looked at him and in the back of my mind; I tried to recall text book psychological "words of wisdom" from my early education days. But it seemed the old memory bank was empty.

I did however, recall that children around the ages of 4-7 were very inquisitive about death, but really did not understand it. At that precise point in time, I was not too sure I understood death and grief either. I was not even sure I knew what I was doing or emotionally feeling myself. Nevertheless, I had to respond to this child. After all, I had initiated the conversation with him, and he was waiting on a response.

After a long pause, I looked at him and said, "Seth, your daddy did not leave you because he wanted to and you know that your daddy loved you, your mommy and your brother very much. The reason your daddy died is because his body stopped working and he is now very peaceful and feels no pain. I also told him that his daddy probably would like him to help his mommy and make sure that he would do everything his daddy would have wanted him to do. I told him that he was now the oldest man of the family and need to help care for his younger brother and his mommy.

After a brief pause, he looked at me, smiled and said, "Daddy always called me his little man, guess I really am, huh?" I looked over at him and replied "Yes you are."

I thought to myself "I sure am glad that conversation is over." Then I looked for an excuse to get up and get as far away from this encounter in an attempt to avoid any additional tough questions. Before I could get up out of my chair, he continued to ask more questions such as, "Why is everything so big here?"

For a second I was confused. I didn't quite follow what he meant, but after a moment, I thought "I guess everything does look big to him for he is no taller than about three feet."

From our conversation, I quickly learned that I had a smart boy on my hands, and I had better be ready for anything he asks. I also realized he was one of those children who knew if someone was trying to fool him. I looked at him in an attempt to respond. Then he said, "when I came here tonight with my mommy to see my daddy, I seen the front doors. They were so big and heavy, and when we came inside this building, the rooms were so big. The ceilings are so high, and the chairs are so big."

He continued, "Sure is a big place you have here, mister." I again smiled and said, "Yes, I guess it is." That night after going home, I replayed the events of the evening and the conversation that I had with this child.

That night, I came to the realization that the same grief that a child feels may very well be the same grief that we as adults and young adults feel. We have questions, fears, loneliness, waves of sadness and uncontrollable crying. While all of these reactions to a death are natural they are also healthy. It is healthy to cry and to talk about how you feel.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross stated in her "Grief Cycle" that there are stages of grief that we may experience such as,

- **Denial** - I refuse to believe this has happening to me,
- **Anger** I am so frustrated at the person who left me, the sickness which took them, GOD, etc.,
- **Bargaining** – oftentimes prior to the death but can be after, I will do something with more efforts, if this death does not happen to me.
- **Depression** – I don't care about anything or anyone including myself.
- **Acceptance** –I accept that the death is real has affected my life and I am prepared to take the appropriate steps to move forward with my life.

We cannot ignore nor encouraged those grieving neither to simply move on nor to get over their loss. We owe it to ourselves and others to do something as simple as offer a smile or words of support and encouragement. For those grieving they need to at least be offered compassion or empathy and they may just need someone to talk to. Sometimes a simple touch or genuine pat on the back is enough to encourage. If enough of us would make conscious decisions to be to truly care then compassion would naturally evolve all around us.

*Fred H. Kitchen, CFSP is a licensed funeral service professional and has authored over one-hundred internationally published articles in funeral and grief related professional journals in the U.S., U.K., Russia and the Netherlands.*