

He Really Helped Me...

By Tish Vincent

The funeral service was held on a clear, crisp December day. Finding a parking place was a challenge because so many people were there—family members, friends, colleagues, and townspeople filled the hall to honor the passing of someone important to them. To some, he was a father, uncle, grandpa, or spouse. To others, he was a lawyer, the person they turned to when they were in trouble or scared.

Those who eulogized him spoke of his love, dedication, and caring for others. They spoke of how he took children to Tigers games throughout the years, kids who may not have had that experience if not for the benevolence of someone with a big heart who knew of their love of sports. They spoke of how he kept them out of trouble, got them out of trouble, or supported them when they were in trouble. Everyone who spoke at his service said, “He really helped me.”

It was amazing how many cars were in the funeral procession. From my vantage point in the middle of the line, there were cars as far as I could see in front of me and in the rearview mirror. As we drove through the Michigan countryside he loved to his final resting place, I kept thinking of those who spoke of him. Here was a man, a lawyer, who practiced in his community and used his legal training to help people in need. A number of people said he did not charge them because they had no money when they needed help. I thought of the call to attorneys to offer pro bono services. He met—and exceeded—that call.

I was touched by the warmth and compassion this lawyer demonstrated in his legal practice and I was also touched by the warmth and gratitude of those he helped. His help lifted them up, and there they stood honoring him.

Suffering a loss during the holidays

Grief is always painful and difficult. Sadly, when we suffer the loss of a loved one, friend, or colleague, or the loss of a job or breakup of a marriage during the holidays, the pain can be amplified and navigating the holidays can seem almost impossible. In the days following the funeral service, I spoke with Molly Dean, a case monitor with the SBM Lawyers and Judges Assistance Program, about dealing with grief through the holidays. Molly specializes in working on grief and loss issues. She generously shared the following guidance.

When people suffer a loss during the holiday season, it is common for them to feel like the holiday isn't really happening. Those grieving may find it difficult to celebrate with others. It is advisable to engage in activities to a lesser extent but keep a sense of tradition intact. It will be a painful holiday; the loss will be strikingly apparent. Acknowledge your feelings and express them to others close to you.

A practice Molly suggests is weaving acknowledgement of your loss into your future holiday traditions. Moving forward, your holiday season will include memories of loss and grief. Rather than try to avoid or deny them, honor them. There are many creative ways to do this. You could purchase a special ornament to honor a deceased

family member. Perhaps there is an activity your loved one particularly enjoyed that could become a form of memorial. Whatever you choose, be certain it can be sustained as a way of honoring the loss.

Talking with children about loss

A particularly challenging part of dealing with the loss of a loved one is telling children about the loss and helping them cope. Parents worry about how much to tell children and how to offer emotional support for their grief. Just as adults are overwhelmed with grief and mourning, they must provide emotional support to their children.

The following suggestions come from the publication *Talking to Children about Death*¹:

- Encourage children to talk about their feelings by listening attentively, respecting their views, and asking questions.
- Remember that children experience loss differently based on age and experiences.
- Sometimes it is best to respond to a question with a question. If your child asks, “Are you going to die?” you may want to respond with something like, “Are you worried there might be no one to take care of you?” Try to understand the feeling behind the question and refrain from giving too much information.

They spoke of how he kept them out of trouble, got them out of trouble, or supported them when they were in trouble.

- Keep your communication brief and simple. Repeat it as often as necessary. Small children have a hard time absorbing difficult news.
- Realize that children often feel guilty and angry when they suffer a loss. Provide reassurance that they are loved.
- Children may grieve for a long time. Offer support and understanding. If you are concerned that a child is not moving forward in processing grief, seek professional help. A child therapist can offer support and the clinical knowledge to help your child mourn and move forward.
- If your child wants to visit a dying loved one or attend the funeral, prepare him or her beforehand with simple explanations and emotional support. Do not pressure

a child who does not want to attend a funeral or visit a dying relative. It is important that the child makes the decision and feels supported in doing so.

- Remember that your own feelings about loss will be conveyed to your children even if you don't openly express them.

The publication includes a comprehensive list of books for parents to consult when talking with their children about the death of a loved one.

A life well lived

This man lived a life of service and showed others with love and understanding. Those who loved him are left in mourning, honoring his life with their grief. He was drawn to the law, became learned in the law, and used his knowledge to help those

in trouble. Honoring his passing that day, I was moved by his commitment to others and to his profession. ■



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ENDNOTE

1. National Institutes of Health Clinical Center, *Talking to Children about Death* <http://www.cc.nih.gov/ccc/patient_education/pepubs/childdeath.pdf> (accessed January 15, 2015).

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