

GRIEVING WITH GUSTO

Why You Should Have Fun in the Midst of Your Sorrow

It was hard for Alison to know that her grandfather had only a few weeks to live, but she was looking forward to flying with her dad from their home in Las Vegas to Richmond, Virginia, to surprise Grandpa for his birthday with the rest of the family.

Two days before they were to board the plane, tragedy took them by surprise.

Alison's dad, complaining of chest pains, finally allowed her to call an ambulance, and within a matter of hours, he was gone. He died from a heart attack at age 52, way sooner than he was "supposed to" go.

And then, two days later, on the day that the family was to gather for his birthday, Grandpa died.

Within the space of 48 hours, relatives and friends were forced to absorb the shock of losing these men—and it was especially hard for the two children who had lost their father *and* grandfather...for the woman who lost her husband *and* her son.

But before their double funeral, Alison's brother had an idea that made no earthly sense at all in the context of deep sadness. Alison said,

We were sitting in the kitchen, having a discussion about how much we were dreading this weekend of complete sadness and grief and people and everything that funerals entail that you never think about until it's your turn to bury someone you are so close to. We were just completely petrified and scared of how we were going to react to everything...how draining it was going to be.

And my brother decided (wisely) that after the really hard stuff was over, it might be nice to have a day of laughter...because that is what Dad would have wanted. Dad was such a joyful person...When I think of Dad, I think of his laugh. I think of me and my brother and him laughing. All the time. And where do people go when they want to laugh and have a good time all day long? Well, King's Dominion [an amusement park] of course! Why not? We mentioned it to my grandma and I honestly didn't know how she would feel about it since we wanted to go the day after she buried her husband and her son...but she was all about it!

Were these people crazy, daring to think that they could actually have fun in the middle of their sorrow?

Absolutely not—because they were honoring the memory of their father and grandfather, husband and son—by doing something both these men would have loved. To do so is not only therapeutic, it's also a picture of one of several reasons you really should feel free to play in the midst of your grief.

If you, too, are going through a season of loss, you may find that periods of play just might help you heal, because they can also help you to:

Celebrate your loved one.

In honor of your loved one, try doing something that celebrates his loves, his gifts, his personality. Even if (maybe *especially* if) the activity is a bit out of your own comfort zone, you might find that you can experience a measure of joy by pulling his spirit into yours, and then letting it loose, and inviting the rest of the world to celebrate with you.

- If you can think of someplace fun that he would have loved to go take a special trip (as this family did), and do what he would have enjoyed doing.
- If she was a shameless showoff, you could go do some karaoke.
- If he was an adventurous soul, you might do something exciting, like whitewater rafting or parasailing.
- If she loved the gathering of friends, go ahead and have a party (maybe even a tacky party!).
- If he was prone to mischief, play a harmless but mischievous practical joke on someone in his honor.

Feed your own soul by remembering.

Leonard Sweet, in his book *Learning to Dance the Soul Salsa*, says, “If you are not constantly recalling back to life meaningful memories and stories, your soul is being starved to death...Memories fall to the ground and fertilize the soil so that the soul can grow.” For this reason—the growth of your own soul—you might find it helpful to

- **Set aside a time to reminisce about the joy and fun that you had with this person.**
This is often done at funerals, much to the comfort of friends and family, but try it a little later, too. Personally, one of my own favorite recollections involves my father, who died when I was ten. I was very much a Daddy’s girl growing up, and used to love the rituals we had. Every Saturday, we had a habit of going to a very special place, a place that came to be “ours,” a place that I would always, even as an adult, associate with fun and security: the dump. The dump was simply the best. Mountains and mountains of trash and stinky stuff, it’s true, but also endless piles of fascinating junk were ours for the taking. Actually, we rarely took anything back home, but the time spent hanging around the landfill

with my father was priceless to me.

And my own soul is fed every time I remember my father in his undershirt, with a microphone in his hand, singing, “Give me some men who are stout hearted men!” into the gargantuan reel-to-reel tape recorder we used to have. And I’m fed even more soul food when I think of him throwing his arm around my mother in the front seat of our Rambler station wagon, singing, “Ridin’ along in my automobile...my baby beside me at the wheel!” The mere thought is making me smile right now.

- **Make the memories tangible and shareable somehow—on paper or on a digital recorder.**

This not only helps you remember all the good and wonderful times you shared with your loved one, it also helps future generations to know and love him too—even if they’ve never met him. Years ago, I gathered my father’s three sisters around a table, set a family picture album in the middle of them, and said, “Tell me everything you can remember about these people.” Then I turned on a recorder. *Three hours* later, I had a priceless collection of stories—and some of the most valuable are the ones about my dad that I can share with his grandchildren who never had a chance to meet him.

You can also write your memories out and make your own book, or make a photo album complete with commentary. Priceless!

Remind yourself that you are so much richer for having known her...and then pass the riches on!

One of hard truths about losing a loved one is this: the world won’t be the same without her living in it...and you won’t be the same, either. You will always miss her; for the rest of your days, there will be pockets of grief and emptiness that surface at the most inconvenient or surprising times. Occasionally well-meaning people will be so sad to see you grieving that they will try to rush the process, encouraging you to “get over it” or telling you that it’s time to “move on.” You should know, however, that when you are missing someone, it’s okay to go ahead and miss her with all your might.

It’s okay to admit that you (and the world) won’t be the same for missing her.

But be encouraged by also knowing that you (and the world) won’t be the same for *having known her*.

How does she live on in you? And how can you pass that on to others?

- Did she teach you to have fun in the kitchen? Make her specialty—then share it with someone who’s going through a hard time. Or a good time. Or for no reason at all!
- Did he write funny notes to you? Write one for someone else.
- Did she love playing a particular game with you? Teach it to a group of friends.
- Did he share a hobby or talent with you? Maybe he showed you all there is to love about fishing. Do the same for a child...or even an adult.

Having fun in the midst of your grief isn’t as odd as it may sound. Just as deep sorrow is a part of this life on earth, so is great joy—and the two can walk alongside each other, even in the worst of times. Alison and her family learned this on the day after the hardest day of their lives:

At the park with Grandma on that warm, sunny day, we rode rides and would take turns sitting with her...or sometimes she would just sit and watch us ride. My favorite part of the day was when we passed the carousel, and Grandma was like, “You know, I think I could handle that.” So we all got on the carousel, and I remember looking at her, my Grandma, this woman who had been through as much if not more than my brother and I had been through that week, and she was just smiling and laughing on her bobbing horse. And I was so grateful to be alive with her in that moment.

It was a good day. It was something we needed. We needed to remember my Dad and my Grandpa, and we needed to remember we were still here and we could still laugh. Even then...