

For Siblings



I'm Not Contagious

~*excerpts*

In the two or three weeks immediately following my brother Nick's death, I received numerous calls, cards, plants, flowers, and offers of help. My loss sat on the front burner of many wonderful people's stoves for about 21 days. I was in their thoughts, prayers, and blessings.

Unfortunately, many issues and events vie for front-burner status. Part of me understood why the love, attention, and concern started to recede. Another part of me wanted to throw a full-blown temper tantrum live at Madison Square Garden. "My brother, Nick, is dead. Gone. Finished. Have you forgotten?" I would cry, and have a grand time berating others for overlooking my plight. No wonder I resonated so deeply with Madeline Sharples' poem, "Aftermath." I could have written the same poem, simply replacing her word "son" with my word "brother."

In my fantasy, I would tattoo a large "G" for grieving on my exposed forehead so that no one could possibly forget what had recently happened. They would have to remember to ask me, "How are you doing?" Either that or they'd be feigning blindness!

Inside of me, there's a voice screaming to be heard: "No, you don't get it! I just lost my brother! Lost my brother! One of the most significant people in my life! Don't you dare move on to the next topic . . . I'm still on this topic and I am not ready to move on and I won't be ready to move on for quite some time."



My heartfelt request to the world goes something like this: "If you feel like you don't know what to say, don't say much. Just show up! I have not just come down with strep throat! I'm not contagious!"

When you have strep throat, a kiss, hug, or even a handshake is discouraged. The well-wisher will keep a distance, offer sincere apologies, and the sick person will understand. But we don't have strep throat. We have grief. It's not a sickness, but a condition with symptoms and circumstances. Sorrow. Pain. Longing. Regrets. Tears. Unanswered questions. Forms to fill out. Belongings to give away. Shock. Insomnia. Memories, good and bad. Wills. Death certificates.

These symptoms last much longer than two weeks or a month; perhaps some will last a lifetime. They may be acute at first, but they don't go away when the initial wave of sympathy cards, visits, and other greetings ebbs. The intensity of the symptoms may ease, but they do persist. Unfortunately, many well-wishers disappear or forget or have new things on their own front-burners. Under our breath, we grieverers are saying, "Please don't disappear. I need you." We don't really need that much, yet some friends and family members seem to feel like attending to us is the equivalent of running a marathon. In fact, all that's

needed is empathy . . . that ability to walk a mile in our moccasins, as the old saying goes.

What do we need? The answer may be a bowl of chicken soup because we've forgotten to eat. We may need some groceries or a prescription filled at the drugstore. We may even need some solitude. However, don't confuse solitude with solitary confinement or quarantine. We are neither dangerous nor contagious. Well-wishers accrue karmic gold stars for showing up at a time when many can't.



We may need someone's presence or vitality or willingness to listen. We may need someone to hear the same story or memory or lament twice, three times, or more. We need others to let us move through our grief at whatever pace our particular journey selects. We do not need to be talked out of our feelings, unless we have asked for it. We don't need cheering up or problem-solving, unless we have asked for them. No one can hasten our return to pre-loss levels of activity or interest. The gift of attention we need is one that permits us to just be where we are in our grieving process. We will get better. Our condition will improve, but it takes time and patience: gifts we can give to ourselves and hope to receive from others.



In our country, grief can be invisible. If you met someone who was unaware that you'd recently suffered a major loss, how would that person know? Perhaps you appear a bit sadder or more distracted than usual. More than likely, you look much the same on the outside as you looked the day or two before your beloved died. By comparison, if you were walking on that same sidewalk with crutches, it would be instantly obvious that something was not right. Your injury would elicit a question and open the door to further conversation about the trauma: "What happened?" "Are you okay?" In the aftermath of a death, crutches are not prescribed for treatment of our heartache. Because there is nothing visible to signal our grief to the outside world, it's easy to feel even more contagious.

I like to think I'm wearing my grief badge when I talk or write about my brother's death. By sharing my experience with others, my grief becomes more visible. I join a community. I hear and feel nods of recognition and support, and I feel a lot less contagious. This isn't a community that any of us wanted to join, as the entry requirements are very painful. It is nonetheless a loving community with sympathetic arms to hold us. What a gift to receive in the aftermath of such a profound loss.

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