

Conor Jeremy McAuliffe

By Lyn Atkinson

A GRANDPARENTS LAMENT

I submitted the poem "A Grandparents Lament" to you after a friend had emailed me saying, "Don't you think you should have got used to living without your little grandson by now? You have five others."

It is ONLY nine months since he went to Heaven, although sometimes it feels like a lifetime but all the memories we have of his three short years are still so vivid. I know I will NEVER get used to not having him in our life. This was only one insensitive comment. I have heard them all. Of course, I forgive my friends because fortunately they have not experienced this grief, the loss of a grandchild, and I hope they never understand.

When the unthinkable happens and you lose a grandchild you quickly find it difficult to find people who really understand. In NO way can I relate my pain to that of a parent who has lost a child and I know that they must find this almost too much to bear. My daughter and son-in-law are two of the most amazing, caring and courageous people I know and I know there are many more out there who somehow continue to live and care for their children while their grief must be absolutely crippling in every sense.

I can only speak as a Grandmother and one who is only nine months down the grief journey but I know in the first few weeks I felt I had lost everything. I had lost a grandchild, and until you have had one of those you cannot comprehend the love you feel for them. Although you have not given birth to them they are of your flesh and blood and steal your heart. When my little man died I felt as if a piece of my heart had broken off and will not be re-attached until we meet again.

I also mourn for my daughter, who is not the child I knew before she lost her child. When you bring a child into this world your aim is to nurture and protect them and make sure they grow into adults. When they don't and they suffer the immeasurable pain of losing their child you feel, as a parent, that you too let your child down and you cannot fix it but that is what you strive to do. Once a Mother, always a Mother. In hindsight I realize this drive to help your child probably only adds to your child's grief, I think that to survive grief you need to be selfish and in a way I think the grieving parents feel as if they may be expected to help the grieving grandparent. Of course, the grandparent does not want to be helped by them; they just want to ease their pain.

As I struggled with this I forgot myself. I subscribed to The Compassionate Friends but live too far away to attend meetings. I knew if I phoned it was at a desperate moment and all I would do was cry. I wanted to be hugged. I tried counselling with some success but once again an eight hour round trip to get there and afterwards I was exhausted. I read books on helping others in their grief, some helped but I felt a failure because I was not close enough to help my child with every day chores, as is suggested in nearly every book. I could not just call in and let her sleep in her exhaustion while I took the other children. All the books say DON'T ASK WHAT THEY WANT, THEY DON'T KNOW. But I could not risk driving four hours to find I was not needed and in fact I may have been in the way, an extra body in their house. It was so hard; I felt useless, exhausted myself and could not seem to find a good place to be with my grieving child.

I was falling into a deep dark cavern where I wanted to hide away with my own sadness, some days just go to sleep and stay asleep. I am in a good marriage but my husband did not understand my grief nor feel that sadness himself. Our relationship suffered as I withdrew, as he just expected

me to be the normal, happy wife I was before. He could not understand why I could not find the enthusiasm for things I once loved. I felt like a shell.

After searching and searching finally I was directed in the right direction and I found a website called www.agast.org/ and went to forums and registered. It is for grandparents only. As I read the posts in the beginning all I could do was cry for all the other grandparents but finally I plucked up the courage and posted my story. I could have written the words they wrote in their answers. THEY UNDERSTOOD. I was not crazy!! The sadness I felt for my grandchild, for my daughter, for the other children, for not being able to find a way to help, for the friends I have lost...they ALL understood. These grandparents are now my BEST friends despite the fact most of them live in the States. I have found others who have faced the death of toddlers, some also to cancer, who understand my personal grief and we help each other. However, NO matter how your angel died you are still a grieving grandparent with slight variations. Some of us have 100s of photos, others none, others a few. Some got to "know" their babies, others never held them but we are all in the same place, where no one wants to be.

My own friends do not understand when I answer the phone and still cry...so they have stopped phoning. I cannot party as I used to so the invitations are not so forthcoming. I do not have the energy to organize to visit people so they don't visit me.

The BEST piece of advice given to me on the agast forum was ...as in an aircraft the hostess says.. "Put your own oxygen mask on first then you can help others". I took this on board and faced my own grief for the first time and in the beginning I crashed. I felt my own pain for the first time in months. I was grieving for my grandson, for my child and her husband and their children, I was hurting, I was suffering some post traumatic stress and I was just not functioning. Gradually I read and posted on the forum and found ever so gradually that some days got better. I now know I am normal, I am a long way from being whole again. Maybe I never will be. I exist...I think about my grandson and his family EVERY mini second of EVERY day and I cry every day. Some days I sob all day but I can normalize that now. I do have ok days too.

I again have hope that one day I will learn to live again and feel happy. I will never forget my precious grandson, I will love him forever. I value the lessons he taught me, I try to do something in his honour daily and I value every day I am here. I am lucky. My relationship with my daughter is healing...I know it was a normal hiccup and no matter what, our love and respect for each other will survive. We will always have a link missing in our family chain but we will learn to gently negotiate that pain.

Now I am not sure WHY I wrote this essay...maybe part of the healing process I need and I did wonder if you are able to publish the Agast website in your newsletter. Just as parents whose children have gone to heaven need a safe place to talk to other parents who have experienced the loss of a child, so do us grandparents. Some people say grandparents are forgotten in grief, some say we cry twice. I cannot answer that because fortunately I never lost a child but I can say it is a complicated and difficult journey. Thank you for listening and for the work you do.

CHRISTMAS 2007

Christmas looms...People ask, "What are your plans for Christmas this year?" I want to shout, "Well to be honest I could NOT care if it came and went unnoticed."

This is ME writing these words...one who loves, (or used to love) Christmas, the family, the feast, the festivities, the parties, the excitement and the joy of giving, but this year I feel none of that enjoyment. The buying of gifts at Christmas is no longer fun, I see toys and books and clothes we should be buying for Conor and the tears flow, unstoppable at times. Our family walks on

eggshells, we watch our words for fear of hurting someone, the joy of cooking and entertaining has faded. So if one asks again, my answer may be ... "Christmas...forget it."

I KNOW this "new" normal that grief brings has created a "new" me and I have a "new" daughter who I have to get to know all over again and I hate it.

Yes, there is the religious aspect, which is the reason we celebrate, but if there is a God, what happened to Him where our precious grandson Connor was concerned?

My apologies to those who perhaps feel I should not write those words but today I feel a need. Am I angry...yes I am. Why does anyone allow an innocent child to die of a cruel disease like cancer and then LEAVE the whole family in a total mess? I know there are no answers to that question. In saying that though I do believe that my precious grandson is at peace and will remain with us forever in spirit and I also believe we will meet again. I want to believe that there is that magical place called Heaven but until I get there I will not know for sure but we will be united somewhere.

Then there is the "grown up", sensible side of me which says...how dare I dishonour Conor and be an angry, sad and bitter Grandmother. I have a husband and children and grandchildren and part of me knows they need me...not just a cut out or a token me, but a whole me, so I will try. I acknowledge that the other members of my family deserve more than my shell, they need their daughter, sister, mother and grandmother. If I completely lose my mind, I will also lose Conor. By allowing myself to be held captive in the gloom of grief and despair, I am not giving myself any chance of exploring the life lessons presented to me by Conor. I remember promising Conor to live my life for him, to honour him every day, to thank him daily for teaching me about courage and love so I know that the truest, most heartfelt way in which I can honour Conor is to re-invest myself in living and that includes holiday times.

As the months have now become a year, I am determined not to lose sight of the resolutions I made to Conor as I shared precious time with him in those last days. I have certainly changed, but in ways that aren't readily visible to others. Am I normal feeling like this...yes because I have read enough on grief to know it is my "new" normal. Am I crazy? No...I am grieving and that is OK. Will I get through this gloom, yes because it destroys me to see our grief affecting members of family, particularly the young ones, so perhaps I should set an example?

I hold Conor in my heart but I have other beautiful grandchildren whose hands I can hold as well and they deserve happiness and to see their loved ones enjoying time with them. How are they to understand our grief? It would be selfish of me to destroy their childhood dreams in my grief. I have to make up my mind not to let that happen. In a way I need to separate, not my love for Conor but my grief into another part of my life. Not that I will not feel it any more. I just must not let it control me. I am wondering if some how or some day I can really do that with the grief. Will it get easier, I cannot say, grief has no timetable but those who have been before me say yes. It is a journey, it is hard work and lonely but one day I hope I can approach Christmas and other "special" days with true joy. In time may my smile come from within. Until then I wish you all strength as we face the Christmas holidays. I cannot wish people a Happy Christmas any more but I wish us all some peace. If I feel like this my heart aches not only for all my fellow grandparents but especially for the parents and siblings of those who are living with the thought of a Christmas without a loved one.

I love you Conor and Miss you more than you can imagine.

Your Nettie Lyn Atkinson, Grandmother to Conor McAuliffe 3.5.03-22.7.06

When my precious grandson Conor died, aged three on July 22nd 2006, I kept a journal and this is my entry for today which someone suggested I share. The first phone call was from a friend whose son has cancer and undergoing chemotherapy in the same hospital that Conor was treated. She

was saying how she never understood what Conor and his family went through while he was undergoing treatment, until now. I believe this little boy will survive and I will rejoice but I will also wonder WHY he did and Conor didn't. This is not selfish; it's just part of grief.

Just as no one can prepare you for the cancer journey, no one can prepare you for the death of a child, or in my case a grandchild, no one can tell you how MUCH it physically hurts, how much you will miss that grandchild, how much you grieve for your daughter/son, their partner and the siblings, how it tears your heart apart seeing the sadness in their eyes and knowing that their grief is so immense and that you cannot make it better, the feeling of total helplessness, how you will often contemplate going to join that child, how tired grief makes you feel, how you sometimes feel as if you are losing your mind. How can anyone understand really unless they have walked in those shoes and even then each person's experience is different?

The second call was from a friend asking for help to prepare for the first anniversary of her grandson. I really had no answers because once again each person's grief is so personal. Was the second year easier than the first, I don't think so. Maybe one learns to expect bad days, to expect the tears. Maybe you learn to cope a little better on those days. Perhaps you have more moments of peace than you did in the early months but easier...I don't think so. You probably accept that grief will ALWAYS be part of you and so you learn to live with it which allows you to find hope and joy that was missing in the first few months of raw grief.

The days we know and expect to be difficult are sometimes not the hardest ones. Some days are ones of mixed emotions, sadness and happiness. Your grandchild's birthday and the days before it are always going to be hard, anniversaries are a date we wished we had never had to think about, Christmas, Easter, Mother's Day, the birthday's his parents have to survive without their little boy, going on holidays, for me the day Conor's baby sister was born was one of mixed emotions, the first day of school and all the milestones we hoped to celebrate and share with ALL our precious grandchildren are difficult. When I watch the family I always see a space, the place that Conor has left. Many, many more days jump out from the calendar but I think the hardest days of all are those unexpected days when the waves of grief tear you down. Sometimes the trigger is unknown, other times it is something just unexpected. My birthday is a day I find difficult because

I remember my last birthday with Conor, just a couple of weeks before he died. On that day his Mummy bought a little blue thong (flip flop) for Conor to give me to hang my car keys on. Last week I lost it and that brought me to my knees, I cried and cried. Such a small thing but I treasured that little blue thong that Conor had held. Conor's little brother's third birthday was a sad day because all I could think of was Conor's last birthday, his third. His big sister's birthday when he should have been sharing in the fun, this year a tea party, painted nails and all. Watching his little brother play sometimes brings me to tears as I wish so much that he had his big brother to play with, a brother who is very much part of his life but one he cannot play with. Those mixed emotions again because I also find joy in watching his little brother play and being part of the other children's special birthdays and know that I am lucky to have my grandchildren in my life. I am also very aware that there is always someone who has experienced more sadness than me.

Some days grief tears you apart, other days it clothes you in gentle warmth, some days it makes you angry. I have no answers to make it easier, it is just part of who I am now. Life is made up of the person I was before Conor died and after. For me to give to others in Conor's memory or to donate or work for charity helps. Some days to sit quietly by his grave and thank him for cherished memories, for the gifts he left us and just for loving me helps, other days it just makes me terribly sad. Some days just looking at the moon and stars gives me peace, really enjoying and appreciating nature and its beauty is comforting.

Talking to Conor, writing letters to him, these things do help me but for others that may not bring them comfort. Visiting and enjoying his siblings brings joy as does remembering him amongst the



family. I find being alone on those “difficult” days is very hard but I also know sometimes that is the way it has to be. There are no rules to grief, no time frame. It is just living day by day. When my heart aches I try not to think of it as being broken but believe it is the imprint Conor has left in my heart. He was the bravest most amazing little boy and I miss him. May you all find ways to find hope, joy and peace as Christmas approaches again.