

Losing Shawn

March 27th, 2018 at just five minutes past midnight, my oldest son, Shawn, died. He was 38 years old. His death was entirely unexpected. I was in Strasbourg, France. My husband and I were living there for his job and planned to stay until May 26. Having finished my morning yoga, I noticed the time was after 8 and wondered why I had not received a text from my husband who was on the road in Austria, when my Skype rang him in. I knew immediately, from the look on his face, something was wrong before he even said, "Babe, I have something terrible to tell you," and a number of worst case scenarios went through my head in a split second, but nothing came near the truth.

When he told me Shawn was dead, I threw down my phone and threw myself onto the floor howling in pain. I sobbed for I don't know how long, then knew I had to pick up the phone and talk to him. My son Matt had called his stepdad to tell him what had happened, thinking we would be together, but my husband was twelve hours away in a rental car, unable to get to me. I then called my sons Matt and Paul, twins two years younger than their brother and cried with them. I have never been so alone as I was that day. I knew no one in Strasbourg. I had no one to hug me. No one to comfort me. I had to put myself on autopilot, find a way home, pack my bags, and clean things up as well as possible.

I called Delta and through my tears managed to tell the agent what happened. She spent an hour looking and finally got me booked on a flight out the next morning, putting me into Albuquerque at 5:45 the next evening. I heard her crying at one point with me. I will never forget her kindness in being so patient and diligent in getting me home. Then, I sent messages to my sisters and my best friends asking them to let me know when they woke up that day, that I had to talk to them, and then calling them and giving them the news. One of those friends, after I told her we couldn't figure out if we could even get my husband home, unbeknownst to me, she got on the phone with him and told him she would figure it out, but by then he had been working on it too, and finally found a flight for himself.

My husband called me several times that day to check on me. I know it was painful for him to not be with me at this time. Late that afternoon he told me to get out of the house. He knew I had been eyeing a dress in a store window, wanting it for a wedding we would be attending later that year. He told me go there. Buy the dress. Buy one for the funeral. I didn't think I could, even when he kept insisting, but eventually I did get out and wander around. I watched people and envied them their lives at that moment. I did go to that shop, and maybe that seems hard to understand, but one has no idea what one will do when in shock. I tried on dresses till I had two that fit, one blue, and one black, but what I remembered most about that experience was simply having someone be near me. The ladies in the shop did not speak English, and my French was very poor at that time, but just being near someone made me feel better. I did not want to leave. I wanted to tell them what happened. I wanted to throw myself in their arms and be comforted, but I picked up my bag and walked back to the apartment, slid my dresses into my suitcase and poured myself a drink.

I don't remember eating anything, but I finally made myself go to bed. I had to leave the apartment at 4:00 the next morning to get to the airport, and didn't realize that I hadn't updated the card on my Uber. After several attempts at summoning an Uber, I finally realized what was wrong and got a credit card in my profile and had someone on the way. The flight to Amsterdam went without a hitch, but when I entered the security check for my flight to the states, my ticket had been flagged for the change. When the agent questioned me, I broke down trying to tell him why I had changed my ticket. He stepped away and left me there. I was lucky there was no one in the queue at the moment, because one of the other agents, a very tall middle eastern man stepped over to ask me what was wrong. When I told him, he took me in his arms and hugged me. A hug has never felt as good as that one did in that moment. I had had no human contact since I learned of Shawn's death, and that hug helped me so much. Human contact is so vital for us that we don't even realize how necessary it is to our well being until we are without.

Finally on the plane, I tried to watch movies, I cried a lot, but was sitting by someone who did not speak English, and so not a word was said to me during that flight. The flight attendants came and went. I slept. I tried to eat. Then we were landing in Salt Lake City, for my last flight to Albuquerque. When I got off the plane in Albuquerque, three of my closest friends were waiting for me. I have never been so happy to see anyone in my entire life as I was to see the three of them. We all cried and hugged and cried. They took me to my sister's house where I spent the night and then the next morning made the drive to Portales with my sister, to my waiting sons and their families. I was relieved beyond imagining to see them and be with them. My husband arrived the next evening, having been driven down by our dear friends who refused to let him drive himself. What a relief to be with him and have him with me for the funeral the next day.

The funeral day was second in difficulty only to the day he died. I cannot describe the pain of the loss of a child. Only someone who has lost a child can understand, and it's something I wish no one had to know. A part of myself died with him, just as the day he was born a part of myself was born in him. He was an English teacher, like I had been. He was a writer. He was an incredible musician and song writer. But most of all, he was love. There is no one who didn't love him or didn't see how truly special he was in this world. He was human kindness at it's finest. Over 600 people came to his funeral. There was not even standing room left. I found strength in knowing all these people had come together in love for him and in love for our family. Funerals are an amazing ritual, wrought with such emotion both from the loss of a loved one, and the joy that comes from being surrounded with the love of family and friends. A gruesome day, made livable through love.

My husband and I stayed with my son a few days, then went home for a few days. He had to go back to France to finish his stay there, and I chose to head back to Portales where I stayed with my son Matt and his family for the next six weeks until my husband could return. I was fortunate that a friend of my son parked their trailer at my son's house and I lived in that trailer, allowing me my grief to have some privacy when I needed to be alone, but gave me the ability to be with my son and his family. My other son lived only 90 minutes away in Lubbock, so I could

be with them both. It allowed for all of us to begin the healing process and to support each other through this most difficult time. I am always grateful for that time we had together.

When my husband returned to the states, and I went home, I slowly got back into the routine of daily life, but nothing has ever returned to normal. The loss of a child is out of the norm. A gaping hole is left in the heart where the love of a child once lived. The pain is inexplicable, and though goes unseen by the world, I am aware of it each and every day of my life. That first year was full of ups and downs. Holidays were a landmine of memory. Shawn's former band, Liquid Cheese, held two benefit concerts the following January, for my grandson, in honor of his father. Their kind and loving gesture started a college fund for him that is much appreciated.

March of 2019, a year after his death, we were in France again, this time in a town outside of Paris, as I knew I could not go back to the apartment where I had been informed of his death. We landed in a beautiful place that has helped in the healing of my heart. My closest friend came to spend the week with me on the anniversary of my son's death. We spent that day in Paris, where Shawn and I had been together some eighteen years earlier on a mother/son trip, and she and I climbed to the top of the bell tower of Notre Dame Cathedral, as Shawn and I had. I let a small jar of his ashes fly into the wind and left a small pile next to his favorite gargoyle, one I had bought him a replica of years before his first trip to France. Two and a half weeks later, Notre Dame burned. I wonder if his ashes are still there, perched away from where the fire took place?

On April 5th, 2019, just barely a week after the anniversary of Shawn's death, my father died. His death was unexpected, even though he was 86, he was doing well. His heart had been healthy when I had taken him for his annual checkup right before my departure. But he fell in his closet and spent the night on the floor, causing the assisted living facility to take him to the hospital where he died of a massive heart attack brought on from congestive heart failure acquired from being given too much fluid. I'm glad he did not linger. He would have hated that, but I so wish he hadn't died just yet. I flew home for his funeral and to help clean out his apartment, but 8 days later returned to France.

As executor of his estate I've spent a great deal of time this last year seeing to all the elements of his small estate for dispersion to me and my sisters. Though he and I had prepared for this, there was still so much missing that took tracking down. He and I had made plans before I left for France to spend some time when I returned going through everything and updating, but we never got the chance. Now I worry if I have prepared enough for my eventual death, so my sons will not be overwhelmed.

Right before my dad died, I had been working on getting my website off the ground again. I was updating all the apps when I got what's referred to as the "white screen of death" on my Wordpress site and my site went white and I could not fix it. The next day I got the call about my dad, and so it has languished for another year, because it just didn't matter and frankly, I didn't care.

Around mid-January of this year, I started feeling as though I was coming back to life. I describe this feeling in that way, because I have felt so dead inside for almost two years. That's not to say I didn't find joy in many parts of my life, but everything has been dull and grey in a way that's hard to explain. Grief is a process that is individual and cannot be timed, or metered out, or steps followed. Grief just is. The grief of losing my father was far different than that of losing my son. My father was 86 and had lived a long, good life. And parents are supposed to die before us. My son on the other hand is different. The grief of losing him will be with me always. It will never go away, but as my friend Julie, who lost her daughter in a scuba accident over a decade ago, tells me, it softens, and I think this an accurate way of putting it, as that best describes what is occurring for me as I feel myself coming back to life, that maybe it is starting to soften a bit. As the anniversary of his death approaches though, I feel the tears a little closer to the surface, I find him more often in my thoughts, and I know the next two weeks will be a little tough, but that is grief.

The last two years have been rough. I will miss Shawn everyday until the day I die, but I have learned that indeed, life goes on, that my two living sons need me to be in this world and to be there for them. I have learned to put all things in life in perspective. I know I will have sad days, but the joyful happy days far outnumber the sad. I understand that a pause and deep breath can overcome most any anger or frustration and I know that my life is what I make of it. There are lessons to be learned no matter the circumstance.

If someone you care about is going through a period of grief, allow them to grieve as they need to. There are no steps, there are no rules, there is no time limit. Grief is sadness, not depression and suggesting anti-depressants is not the answer. Though time may not completely heal the grief, it goes a long way in softening it and making it bearable. Ask them what they need and honor their request.

If you are grieving, allow yourself time. Allow yourself to be sad. Know that you may feel anger at times, your frustration level may be higher than normal. You might be forgetful or confused. These are normal. Grief is different for each of us. Grief is not depression, it is sadness. Don't let anyone tell you they are the same. Feeling your sadness and working through it is part of the healing process. However, if at some point you find yourself unable to function at all, then seek outside help from a professional who understands grief. Do your best to get enough sleep and rest. Eat a healthy diet. These do help our minds stay calm.

Please feel free to reach out to me if you need someone to talk to about your grief. I am not a counselor, but I know from experience, sharing your story, as I have here, can be helpful. I found the book *Resilient Grieving*, by Lucy Hone to be one of the most helpful I read. You don't have to go this alone. Read and reach out, they both help.

If this has been helpful to you, please share your thoughts in the comments and feel free to share this post with others. As we age we will undoubtedly be faced with the loss of loved ones. Let's be there for each other during these times.

Thank you for letting me share my story with you, and thank you, those of you who read this lengthy post.

