



Children & Grief

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Littlefoot Loses His Mom



I took my grandsons to see the classic children's film, *The Land Before Time*. This heartwarming tale of baby orphaned dinosaurs teaches many life lessons in its 69 minutes.

Littlefoot loses his mother following a battle with a Tyrannosaurus during the great earthquake. There were four important scenes for me that beautifully depicted the sorrow of losing a loved one and the grief journey we endure as a result.

The first was Littlefoot's mother explaining to him that she was dying but she would always be with him even though he won't be able to see her. He asks, "What do you mean? I can always see you." She tells him to let his heart guide him as he journeys to the Great Valley to reunite with his grandparents.

In another scene, Littlefoot feels immense sadness and even anger. He meets up with an older dinosaur and tells him that his mother died in a fight and he is angry that she took on a Tyrannosaurus... What was she thinking? Then he shifts to guilt... "I shouldn't have wandered so far from home."



In the picture shown here, Littlefoot has lost his desire and passion to search for the Great Valley. He is lethargic and dismisses any signs of hunger. Here he doesn't even acknowledge the food brought to him by his new friend, Petrie.

Littlefoot Loses His Mom



The scene that gripped my heart the most was when Littlefoot sees his shadow, which is larger than life in the distance on a rock bluff, and he thinks it is his mommy. He calls her and runs to her. The closer he gets, the smaller the image becomes. As he jumps up and licks the image, which is now his size, he realizes that it is only his shadow. My heart broke for this little cartoon character, knowing that we all long to see our loved ones again and it's common to be caught unaware and think we may even see them in a crowd after they have died. Logically we know it can't be real, but our heart refuses to follow logic... it simply skips a beat (or many) and leaves us yearning and wishing that it were possible.

Littlefoot bands together with four other orphans along the way as he searches for his extended family. These little creatures are from different species and would not be allowed to associate with one another, let alone travel together, had the great earthquake not happened. But they put aside the prejudices they were taught to stick together. They fight famine and danger and beat all odds, eventually coming to the area of prehistoric Earth (Great Valley) which was spared from the big disaster. Littlefoot learns to follow his heart and look to his mother's spirit as she guides him, just as she promised. He is reunited with his grandparents.

As we left the theatre and walked to the car, I chatted with my grandchildren about the great lessons of life that this film taught. It wasn't lengthy. I kept it brief and talked about how our loved ones are always in our hearts even though we can no longer see them and that one day... no matter how long it takes... we will all meet up together in the lush, beautiful and carefree, Great Valley.

Pocket Angels (are for Children & Adults)



When my husband died, my daughters and I went to stay with family. Within a few months, I put our house up for sale and purchased another home. As we made plans to move from my brother's home into our new house, I realized it would be important for us to go back to the house and say goodbye. My husband had been renovating the house for four years, so his influence was everywhere.

My husband died at home and it was traumatic for all of us. The girls were naturally apprehensive about going back into the house. Once again, I did not know what to do, so I came up with an activity called "Pocket Angels." My hope was the exercise would reduce their anxiety and to help them recall memories that were fun, loving, and meaningful.

Children Understand Grief in a Way Adults Don't

Here is how it worked: Once we arrived at the house, we went from room to room together and holding hands. We paused in each room and I instructed the girls to close their eyes and recall their favorite memory of us as a family or them with their dad. I encouraged them to add sound, smell, and touch to whatever memory they were recalling. Once they had all the details they wanted, then they mentally folded up the memory and tucked it into an imaginary pocket to stay forever. On any given day, or whenever they missed their dad, they could close their eyes, and imagine pulling out their "Pocket Angel" and remember him. Although this was emotional to do, it was also healing.

On page 186 of my book, I have included a lovely drawing for you to photocopy and have your child draw a picture or record a memory on. Make as many copies as you like. Store them in a binder, a special memory box, or folder. They will treasure them over the years. To order a copy go to the top of the page at www.janellebb.com.



Children Understand Grief in a Way Adults Don't

Children may not fully grasp the grief process; however, they understand it in a way that adults don't. I learned more from watching my children and nieces and nephews grieve than I did from watching adults.

We are often afraid for children to experience the pain of loss. As parents and adults, we understand how loss feels; therefore, we want to shelter our children and protect them from feeling that overwhelming sadness. The reality is that children, even if you shelter and protect them, will experience loss and they will feel sad. Isn't it better to give them the tools to reconcile grief so they have the coping mechanisms needed to face life head on? I think so.

Children cannot be fooled. They know when something is wrong or when something "bad" has happened. Not discussing it with them, doesn't make it go away. Allowing them to see you cry because your heart is broken is not weak or shameful. Letting them know that they are safe in the midst of chaos and that you will all get through this together... is a gift. Children are strong and they will give you strength. More importantly, children have a "natural rhythm to their grief."

Children will allow themselves to feel the pain and sadness and when it becomes too much for them they will shut it off for a while and go off and play. Children will cry and express their sorrow one minute, and the next minute they will ask if their best friend can come for pizza and a sleepover. They inherently understand the need to "pace" their grief. We would all fare better if we allowed ourselves to "grieve like a child."

Children Understand Grief in a Way Adults Don't

Children have the same potential responses to grief that an adult has: confusion, sadness, sleep and eating disruptions, and tears etc. They are also at risk, as an adult is, if they are not given a safe place to do the work of mourning. The difference will be that an adult may be able to express what they are feeling, but the child may not be able to verbalize what is going on for them. Therefore, watching for signs of regression (e.g. a child who is potty-trained now has accidents), acting-out (e.g. outbursts) and eating/sleep disturbances are all “signs” that a child is struggling with inner turmoil.

Yes, children are resilient, but they will be even more resilient when given the tools to cope with life's tragedies.

Janelle Breese Biagioni is a Registered Professional Counsellor who was widowed at 34 years of age when her husband, a 17 year veteran with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, died as the result of a duty-related injury. Their daughters were 12 and 10 years old.