

The Whistle of the Train Calls “All Aboard!”

Joanne Wade

Ten years ago, on November 9, 1999, my son Brent, 22 years old, was working in the mechanical/construction field when he became a statistic – a workplace fatality. That day is embedded deep in my heart and soul. It seems like just yesterday, but also like an eternity. Brent, driving a fully loaded dump truck coming out of a pit in Acton was going up a grade when his vision to his right was obstructed with brush. He never saw the Via Rail train #45 that killed him.

That day my life-long journey of grief began. I was riding this train of grief, taking me into a world completely foreign to me. This train, like my life, was travelling out of control, no sense of direction, no sense of purpose. I was oblivious to everything that passed me by. The train kept going, yet I seemed to be standing still in the moment. My heart ached, my mind and body numbed by excruciating pain, pain far beyond anything I could ever have imagined. My actions were robotic, my spirit weakened and broken, my parenting skills non-existent. I felt



Far left: Brent and Joanne

dead inside. I was travelling through a continuous dark tunnel that seemed to have no light at the end. As I looked back to the tracks we were leaving behind, my memories

of Brent brought so many tears that I couldn't look forward. There was no future, no definite destination. I used to think I had control over my life but “The Whistle of the Train” showed me the reality of life: we have very little control and life as we know it can change in one second. We must live and love and appreciate in the moment.

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This train I was on travelled through all the emotions of grief, stopped and stood still at each important date and family event in my life over the past ten years. I'll never accept Brent's death as having to be, nor will I ever “get over it” as some people, unfamiliar with grief's journey, suggest. But as I look back, I see each stop as part of my journey to healing and dealing with my loss.

Stop #1: My first Christmas. Somehow I decorated our home and Christmas trees, but there was no beauty, no joy. I was robotically going through the motions for my daughters, Chrissy and Laura. As I struggled to decorate through my many tears, I asked Brent to give me a sign that he was here with me. I

received such a very positive sign from him that it gave me strength to continue.



Brent & his sisters, Laura & Chrissy

The first three years we decorated a very small tree with LED lights and set it at his grave site. His friends would visit his grave and leave snow angels and writings in the snow to say they were thinking of him. This was so comforting to me. I periodically received supportive letters and cards from his friends and mine, letting me know he had touched their lives and was being remembered. Each year I decorate an imitation Christmas tree in my kitchen with the Christmas ornaments that I had bought for Brent over the years. One clear Christmas ornamental ball with Brent's picture hangs prominently amongst his many tree ornaments and I feel he's in our presence. Everyone's life does go on and everyone moves forward, but Brent will continue to be kept alive in the hearts of we who love him so.

Grief was still deep, but I was learning that it's important to do what I must to get through those very difficult dates.

Stop #2: Brent's birthday following his death. I had planned a celebration of his birthday. Before Brent died I had found a dining room table-and-chair set in Sudbury that I wanted but when I went to look for it later I couldn't find it anywhere. A month before Brent's birthday I was driving in our town in Little Current when I passed the furniture store two minutes before closing time. Something was urging me to stop and go in. To my disbelief there was the same table I had looked for all over in Sudbury! This table-and-chair set were in my dining room before Brent's birthday celebration. I knew Brent was with me and had led me to this furniture store. His birthday celebration had come with this wonderful guidance from him and the reassurance that he was with us. The girls and I celebrated his 25th birthday in Toronto at the launch of the Young Worker Life Quilt (his photo and story are part of the quilt). Positive things were happening and moving me forward.

Stop #3: The first anniversary of his death. I celebrated Brent's life on the first anniversary of his death. This was met with resistance with some of my family because they thought it was inappropriate. Confused, saddened and questioning myself, I wasn't sure what to do, but with my daughters' support I went ahead. Friends and all of my family met at our

church for a memorial service followed by a visit to his grave site to give him a toast, and then back at home we shared stories and memories. Being surrounded by family and friends was a good thing for me. It was the right thing to do. Grief was still deep, but I was learning that it's important to do what I must to get through those very difficult dates.

Stop #4: Threads of Life. In 2003 my girls and I attended the first Threads of Life Family Forum and met many other families living with similar pain. I found great comfort and felt slow but sure growth every time we got together to share our stories of our loved ones. Threads of Life helps families feel safe, accepted and understood. You can listen and share if and when you're ready. You can vent your anger and hurt amongst those who understand and care, and they are there to listen and hold you up; they've been where you are. The power of peer support is immeasurable. By seeing people at different stages of grief and seeing and feeling growth within myself, it has given me hope that we can recapture joy. Acceptance and validation of my feelings by this extended family have been such a big part of my journey towards healing. I know I'm not alone. Being part of the Speakers Bureau and sharing my story has been such a good thing. It validates Brent's life. I honour him every time I share his life story to raise awareness of the importance of workplace safety so that workers come home safe. If by speaking out, one or two lives have been saved, Brent's death has not been in vain. We're making a difference. Attitudes are being changed which will inevitably result in system changes.

Stop #5: A turning point. I was at a Speakers Bureau training session when we heard a young woman talk about losing her father and brother to an explosion while they were doing maintenance work inside a large tank. My daughter Laura had met me for lunch and I introduced her to this young woman. As I moved down the table I heard the young woman say to Laura, "Not only did I lose my brother and my father but I also lost my mother at the same time, as she is so changed." Laura said, "I understand. I've often told my husband 'I wish you could have known my mom before my brother was killed.'" I did a lot of thinking about who I had been and who I had become and what I could do to try to regain some of the old me back. I hadn't realized how much of me I had lost, how much of me had died with Brent. This was an awakening. I bought an ATV and rediscovered bush trails, fishing, etc. I even went downhill skiing that winter for the first time in years. I was starting to feel life again.

Stop #6: Finding Teka. In May 2008, Chrissy and I were on our way to Sudbury to walk in its Steps for Life – Walking



Joanne and Teka

for Victims of Workplace Tragedy event in memory of Brent. We were five minutes from home when Chrissy spotted this little puppy running back and forth on the road, and she was worried it was going to get run over. We didn't need another dog, even though I was really missing my last one, who had died two years earlier. I picked up this cute little bundle of fluff and unable to find her owner, she became my dog. Chrissy and I both believe that Brent gave this young pup to me as things were happening in my life that were causing me to have a sinking feeling again. When we suffer one loss and other losses come along, they all seem to rush forward to meet us at the gate. Within a day this pup had touched my heart. She had boundless energy, was full of mischief and devilment, changing the quiet surroundings that my two cats had enjoyed for years. She needed all my love and attention and in exchange she's brought back much laughter into my life. Petting her is soothing and helps bring a sense of calmness and inner peace. Teka's companionship and her unconditional love have helped fill a void. With my children gone she's helped my house feel like a home again.

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Stop #7: I'm going to be a Grandma. Laura and Scott announced that I will be a grandmother in January! Although I've socialized and laughed with others over the years I feel like I haven't felt true joy since Brent's death. I've lived so long in the absence of joy that life without it became normal. I felt guarded; was it safe to let myself feel that total feeling of joy again? Now with this great news it's like a rebirth of this emotion within me. It needed time to grow, mature and be nurtured; to feel that it wasn't going to be snatched away. At the last Ontario Family Forum with both of my parents and daughters attending, and our unborn baby, I felt overwhelming joy. I can, in all honesty, say I have recaptured the joy. It's like I'm on a new track.

The never-ending journey. The train hasn't stopped but is travelling slower now. I can see the beauty of our world again as it goes by. I can see the tracks behind me but I can now look forward and look at all the gifts Brent has given me and the memories and love he has left with us. My glass is half-full, no longer half-empty. I hear the whistle of the train calling "All Aboard"; there is more to do, more distance to cover. Never forget: our losses and experiences make us who we are. They give us strength, understanding and compassion. Until we meet again, my son.