

# THE GIFTS OF GRIEF

## Finding ways to heal mind and spirit after tragedy

by April McCarthy

**W**e had purchased a home in a new town and our kids were excited about starting at their new school and taking the bus to school each day. We were all excited about the move, especially my husband Chris. He had plans with our middle son Ben, who was 9, to play and coach hockey at the local arena, just minutes from our house. There wouldn't be a long commute to the boat for work anymore – it was a happy promising time. Our oldest son Mackenzie was 12 and had made a new best friend instantly and was happy with the opportunity to go to a more modern school. That summer we celebrated our daughter Lily's 6th birthday with her new little friends and on September 6, 2009 we celebrated Chris's 34th birthday, not knowing it would be his last with us.

My husband Chris was lost at sea September 12, 2009, after the crab boat he was working on took on water and sank coming in from the fishing grounds. Despite search and rescue efforts Chris's body was never recovered.

In the moments after I heard the news, I thought immediately 'it's over'. I knew the life that we had was over.

Ten years have passed and some days it seems like another lifetime I lived and some days it feels like yesterday since I last saw Chris. I can still recall clearly the last time I saw him, the last words he spoke, how his voice sounded, how his hair smelled and what his hand felt like in mine. A perfect fit.

I would be lying if I said that to be widowed at 33 wasn't hard – it was excruciating at



Chris and the kids

times. A physical, tangible ache, and that's how I felt for the first couple years: like I had suffered some permanent brain damage from the impact and I was just running slower because of all the worries and stresses of having to make all the decisions on my own now. The fog of grief was muddling my brain all the time.

I couldn't focus and concentrate, and I was often scared, left with not only my own heartache but that of three innocent children who were looking to me for everything now, their own sense of security dashed in the face of such an unexpected tragedy. At times I was also angry that they had to be touched by any of it.

The grief of losing Chris has taken so much from me, but it has taught me a lot and given me gifts as well and for those I am grateful.

The first lesson I learned, which I will tell you is the hardest, is acceptance: accepting what is and letting go of what can never be has been my greatest gift. It hasn't come easily. But with acceptance I have been able to find peace in what is our life since he died.

Grief gave me presence. It taught me to slow down and live in the moment.

A few months after Chris died the kids and I were cuddled up on the couch watching the coverage of the earthquake in Haiti and I really had an "Aha!" moment. There were these people who had lost everything. Lost their homes. Lost family members. They didn't know where they were going to sleep at night. They didn't have anything to eat and in that moment I thought to myself this could be so much worse. And I changed my perspective from there on. There is always someone who has it worse. So there's no point in wallowing in self-pity although I still have pity parties for one every now and then. You have to look at what you have and what you had, and really appreciate it. And I do, so much.

Very quickly I knew I could not stay in the darkness of grief. I began to focus on trying to meditate and live in the present moment as much as possible. I began to sit quietly by myself and just watch out the window while I ate my breakfast – just little things to try to quietly heal my mind and spirit. I wanted to feel happy again... have hope.

I had grown up in a small town, where

everyone knows each other and your business. I had been wishing for this move for years. I was so thrilled to be in this new town where no one knew me and I could have a new beginning in my life ... well, be careful what you wish for. After the tragedy, everywhere I went everyone knew who we were.

I was that little widow with three children who had lost her husband. I couldn't go to the store. I couldn't go to work. I couldn't go to the garage. Everywhere I went people knew who I was. They knew my story.

At first I found that very hard and I was a bit resentful because I didn't want to be identified as just the little widow, but now I feel it is part of who I am and it has been a gift because now I can share my story with others and they share their stories of loss with me and I feel honoured to be able to help them in some way.

### **Grief gave me the gift to appreciate my health.**

I had a car accident the December after Chris died and had been going to physio and massage therapy for a year when in April 2011 I began working with a strength coach to rehabilitate my core. I remember after our first session I was shocked to find out how out of shape I was. He put his hand on my Jelly Belly and said 'engage your core'. I wanted to rip his arm off and beat him to death with it and hide his body under my basement stairs. I was so mortified!!

That set a fire inside me. I began researching everything I could about healthy eating and portion control. I wrote my goals on a little card and stuck it on my mirror. I started walking five miles every day with a friend and in May I started going to the gym four days a week. By October 2011, I had lost 67lbs, 97lbs in total from 2008 to October 2011. I wanted to build muscle because I wanted to be strong enough to carry my daughter to bed every night, just like her daddy used to. Now she is 16 and I am proud to say I can still carry her to bed! If she would let me!

This change in lifestyle led me to a passion for fitness and helping others and after struggling to get past my widow brain I got my personal training certification and became a fitness instructor. But grief gave me another unexpected and unwanted gift: Fibromyagia, brought on from post-traumatic stress and just not resting enough and taking on too much. So my old lesson of acceptance was taught to me again and I had to make a career change and return to post-secondary school.

### **Grief gave me gratitude.**

I know some people might think, how can you be grateful after everything you've been

through? But ... what's not to be grateful for? I am grateful for how it has made me become a better mother. I am probably a better mother now than I possibly ever would have been before this tragedy. A few days after I heard the boat sank I made the choice that I would not let my children lose the mother they had known as well as their father. Looking back now I know that was a very powerful choice. I could not lie down and bury myself in my grief...I had to be present for them.

I am grateful for the relationship I have with my children. We are so close. It has bonded us and brought us together in a way that I can't imagine anything else would have. I am blessed that I got to really enjoy them as children.

We had dance competitions in our kitchen, played 'would you rather' when we were out to supper, we traveled together and laughed so much. I feel so blessed to experience new places and make memories with them; to watch them grow into the amazing people they have become.

Although in the beginning I was very unsure and very scared making decisions that would affect them and our lives, now they are 24, 19 and 16, and I am so proud of the people that they are and excited about the future that they will have. Recently my boys moved out and got an apartment together. It was sad but I am grateful that they are starting their adult lives. Some friends I met through Threads of Life who have lost children remind me some kids don't get to do that.

Several months after Chris passed away my oldest son Mackenzie was very quiet. He

didn't talk very much about his father and what happened and of course I was concerned. I was concerned that maybe he wasn't grieving as I thought he should have been and in his infinite wisdom at 12 years old he said to me, "Mom I just want to be a kid. I just want to spend time with my friends and go to school and I don't want to focus on this every day." And I thought 'oh my God you are so right Mackenzie.' I learned not to judge someone else's grief journey. Everyone deals with grief in their own way and I had to let him deal with his in his way.

Years later we were driving out to the city to pick up his tux for his graduation and on the way I was feeling very nostalgic, and a little emotional. I said I hoped he thought I did a good job with him. He had stepped in at a very young age and become Man of the House and that maybe he had missed out on some things.

And I will never forget what he said to me: "Mom you know what I tell people when they ask me how did I get through losing my father? I say I got through it because my mom is the strongest person I know."

### **I guess I didn't do too bad after all.**

I am grateful for the fact that I was married to my best friend, who was a wonderful father to my children and somebody that they could look up to as a man.

I got to spend time with an incredible person. I was blessed to have his presence in my life for as long as I did. I got to be a main character in his life story and he was the key witness to mine. And for that I will be eternally grateful.



The McCarthy family today