

September 29, 2022

Stephy's Place Reflection by Kevin Keelen

PUTTING IT TO WORK

I've been inspired lately by many things...

First was our annual ***Mourning Walk*** which took place on Sunday September 11th. As I looked out on the huge amount of beautiful faces, I quickly and solemnly remembered how I met some of you 21 years ago, shortly after that fateful date. You looked very different then. You looked like so many of the mourning faces watching the sunrise on this particular September 11th 2022. There are no sufficient words to describe all the emotion, the deep sadness, the communal horror and grief that ensued in the shattered aftermath. You were pushed and shoved into the spotlight back then, an unacceptable and unavoidable spotlight. But gradually that spotlight drifted to other 'news,' and left you utterly alone in the wake and wilderness of grief. I watched you find each other and care for each other and love each other. I watched you share your deepest sorrows and tiniest achievements. I watched you slowly begin to heal over the course of time and the tedious work you all did in allowing yourselves and your families to grieve and mourn. When everyone around us was broken, when all hope seemed shattered, light pierced the darkness and called you into healing and hope. Now all these years later, after all that journeying through sadness and darkness, after riding the roller coaster from hell, you are the beacon of hope and healing, you have become the support that only you can provide from your own experiences of shatteredness. You rebuilt yourselves, with the help and support of one another, of others, and of God, - piece by broken piece, one long day, one long hour at a time. There were many, many difficult days on that journey, but you did not give up, you did not give up on yourselves, you did not give up on your families, you did not give up on each other. And healing happened. Where you stand now, you stand as that beacon for all of us.

I was also inspired that day by the walk itself, the wonderful amount of people who participated, the teams honoring loved ones, the courage that it took for so many of you to even be there. The feeling of solidarity and experience of being with others who understand and are also mourning is unlike anything else; it was a beautiful yet bittersweet moment of remembrance and collective compassion.

I think there are reasons that there are tenants in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and every religion about helping others. It is a centuries old proven fact that helping others helps ourselves; when we reach out of our own pain with compassion for another, it distracts us briefly from our own anguish and we put it to work. We realize that we now have something we didn't have before, something totally unexpected and unwanted. We now know what this loss feels like, we now have an inkling into what someone may be feeling and experiencing in this loss. This 'gift' of empathy comes at a great cost, the very highest price, it sucks, and yet it can be 'put to work.'

I mention this because I have been seeing this happen at Stephy's Place on a daily basis, as people reach out of their own brokenness to one another and care about one another in our groups, it's not only inspiring, it's quite fulfilling.

Some of you who have experienced healing, and then felt ready, willing, and able, have been volunteering here at Stephy's Place in many different ways. And like my dear friends of twenty-one years, you arrived looking very different. Now you are reaching out of your own experience of grief and mourning, of sorrow and brokenness, toward the newcomers to the wilderness of grief. In this barren wasteland we reach out our hand and say 'lets walk together.' And what a difference that makes.

You all now know that nobody can truly understand loss until they have experienced it. Your experience, for good, or for bad, puts you into the category, or in the crappy club of 'those who get it.' When we've had some healing, when we're ready, when we're able, and if we're willing, don't be surprised if you find yourself somehow putting it to work.