

'Set Free'

The last several months have been a time of reflection for me. On December 8, 1993, my three years of graduate study came to an end ~ opening the door for me to begin my career as a professional counselor. My feelings about ending one chapter in my life and beginning another are difficult to express and sometimes words just can't capture the intensity of those feelings. Therefore, an analogy may best speak to those feelings.

Several years ago, South Africa was in a state of universal turmoil, more so than today. Then an event occurred that would set the wheels of change in motion, albeit slow. Even though I was physically far removed from the happenings of South Africa, the impact of this event on me was the impetus that led me to my decision to return to 'living' life.

You see, since **my daughter's sudden death in 1985**, I was in a state of sheer survival, which for me meant functioning on the outside, but barely feeling anything on the inside. When Kristen died, **a huge part of me died with her**. I literally went numb and was 'frozen' for 5 long years. I experienced some feelings, especially at the births of our sons, but the feelings were tinged with great sadness at not having Kristen here to share in our joy. I had consciously made a decision that I was never going to be happy or whole again, no matter how many good things happened in my life. It wouldn't be fair to Kristen ~ after all, **it wasn't fair that she died!**

Then on **February 11, 1990**, I stood in the middle of our family room watching the television as **Nelson Mandela**, leader of the African National Congress, **walked through the gates of freedom after 27 years of being unjustly and shamefully imprisoned**. As chills covered my body, I thought to myself, "What is this man experiencing at this very moment?" I could not fathom what that was like for him and the others being released. I was so overwhelmed that I stood there with tears in my eyes for the longest time.

When I think back on that moment in history, I can only imagine some of his feelings and thoughts. On one hand, he may have felt rage at the injustice and unfairness of being imprisoned and in a place he didn't deserve to be. On the other hand, however, he may have also felt exhilaration at the thought of being set free, in more ways than one ~ **empowering himself to channel 27 years of rage into something positive for himself, his people, and his nation**.

At that moment 4 years ago and now since I have finished my degree, **I can attest to experiencing my own sense of being 'set free.'** I have empowered myself to do what I need to do in order to become more open to living again and not just 'surviving.'

Since 1985, there had been something within me pulling me in an entirely new career direction. When I began my grief journey, I had an idea that I would like to be able to do something to help other bereaved parents cope with their incomprehensible loss ~ that something turned out to be grief counseling. Even though I had this idea for several years, it took me 5 years to actually implement it. My cathartic experience watching Nelson Mandela being set free gave me the extra strength I needed to pursue my 'dream.'

Choices, decisions, and action are the key words in my story. For the longest time I was anchored in my grief, barely keeping my head above water. The possibility of releasing (and being 'released by') that anchor was nonexistent. If I 'let go,' I would have to let go of Kristen. There was no way I could live with that. Well, **when I finally realized and believed that 'letting go' did not mean forgetting my daughter, I could allow myself to move forward with my daughter's memory and spirit within me to help me to 'heal' and to grow.** I wanted to keep her 'light' burning within me forever, never to be extinguished.

The way I chose to do that was to use my daughter's love as a driving force in my work with bereaved parents and families. My role is not to tell them how to grieve or where they should be in their grief after a certain amount of time, but to be with them and 'walk' with them as they discover their own way to 'travel' on this lifelong journey and of keeping their child's love, spirit, and memory burning within them.

Helen Keller once said, "The most beautiful things in this world cannot be seen or touched, but only felt by the heart." This is what love is all about ~ in your heart and in your mind. It embraces what I am feeling right now and how I feel about my family and friends who have supported me throughout my lifetime. We may be separated by either distance or by death, yet love will forever connect us. It may be years before I see many of them again, yet that everlasting love will sustain and nurture me until that time.

For me, **love and faith have created hope ~ and my hope is to share Kristen's love with anyone willing to be 'set free' to live and to love again.**

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