

THE BEREAVEMENT PROCESS FOR TWINLESS TWINS

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Twin Loss

When we lose a twin, it feels for many of us like the literal end of our lives. That is true, in that it is the end of life as we have known it since the moment of our conception. As one twin explained to me: "The day my twin died, the lights went out." Another twin said to me, "After Daphne died, it was as if I couldn't breathe. I'd never in my life thought about breathing. I just took it for granted that Daphne and my breath were part of being alive." When our twin dies, we must begin to breathe again; we must begin again with our lives, starting with what truly feels like the end.

In order to better understand our individual healing journey, let's begin here by looking at the larger context of our twin loss. One of the most challenging things about twinship and twin loss is that for twins, the subjective "I" is often seen by them to be in the framework of "We." We see ourselves in the context of another person. This is really important! – it is the issue of our identity – the question of "Who am I?" – this intrinsic perception affects not only how we see ourselves, but others as well. It affects the meaning we ascribe to ourselves in the world. When our twin is lost, the "We" is broken. It is physically destroyed. We are often left feeling half of a person. We lose our grounding, and we are off-balance. We often feel unable to negotiate our world. The twin that remains for us is both a physical and psychological memory, accompanied now by crippling pain. So not only are we bereft as twinless twins, but our sense of who we are as individuals can be severely affected, even threatened and dramatically challenged. Therefore, how we are affected by our twin loss depends a lot on the meaning of our twinship to us, and to whom we believe we are as individuals.

Identity and Twinship

Twins begin their identity formation in the womb. Whether fraternal or identical, they receive different stimuli and resources in the womb environment and, therefore, have different experiences that affect their fetal development. But from their cellular origins, they are ushered into the womb in relationship, both to their mother and to each other. And early on, they begin to show distinct, individual, and also interactive patterns of behavior and temperament, which have been observed and documented by researchers with the use of ultra-sonography. These patterns are often repeated after birth. I think it is fair to say that the rudiments of separate identity and relationship formation in twins have been clearly identified through ultrasound during the womb experience.

The powerful significance of an in-utero bond between twins, and its effect on their identity is more difficult to analyze from the inter-twin responses researchers

describe to date. Much more research needs to be done. We do know, however, that reports from twins whose twin has died in utero or in the early stages of life, indicate that a significant and prolonged experience of loss can result in the surviving twin.

We further learn about the formation of identity in twins from the significant work of Ricardo Ainslie. His work focuses solely on the experience of twins at birth. His research concludes that the character of the twin bond and the sense of identity for each twin is fundamentally formed by the environment the twins encounter after birth; most significantly, the twin relationship, that the parents and/or caregivers and siblings help to create by their conscious and unconscious perceptions and attitudes, and their interactions with their twins. He also found that the twinship experience itself affects the psychological development tasks that face each twin. He points out that the key factors here are somewhat independent of whether twins are identical or fraternal.

Two infants born with the same developmental needs, in the same time frame, profoundly changes a baby's usual environment at birth. The manner in which the significant people in the infants' lives accommodate themselves to this altered context determines how the twins are affected.

The twinship experience presents twins with psychological challenges to their development. Basically, the stretching of resources in the womb and in the home can negatively impact the psychological support and nurturing each twin needs, making the developmental challenges more difficult for the twins to meet. In this context, twins will often turn to each other for the comfort and nurturing they might have missed. They tend to meet each other's social needs, and as a result, often experience fewer outside interactions than other children do in early childhood. This makes it more difficult for them to obtain a sense of themselves as separate individuals and hence, to form and consolidate their own identities. Twins, therefore, often separate and individuate in later stages of psychological development; for example, in early or late adolescence (see Ainslie in recommended reading list at end of article). Some of us, maybe even more of us than we realize, may reach adulthood without having fully achieved this important developmental goal.

The twinship bond is manifested across a spectrum of possibilities from an enmeshed psychological interdependency to a significant, closely bonded, but less entwined, psychological closeness – all the way to a highly conflicted and/or disconnected relationship and a conscious or unconscious decision to abandon the twin bond altogether. Personally, I would suggest these conflicted twins' psychological separation may be difficult to successfully achieve, given the formative experience of twinship in the womb.

Taking into consideration that the issue of identity can be a source of vulnerability for twins, I think it is important to note that the research shows most twins, despite their challenges, go on to lead engaged and competent lives. The closeness, intimacy, and myriad of shared experiences create in many twins an ability to empathize and effectively achieve a genuine connection with other people. At the same time, they often persist in finding their own individual path. Possibly as one researcher put it, "They are affirming their long sought-after identities." Understanding the meaning of twinship and the twin bond to our lives, and to our sense of who we are as individuals, we can be more sensitive to the challenges we ourselves face in the grieving process.

Loss and the Bereavement Process

We meet twinship now at the point of loss - at the place where some of you are struggling with your first months of loss, with the numbness, the depression, and the disbelief. And for others here - at the place where death and loss have begun to sink in - sometimes with a vengeance - and can no longer be denied. For some of you, you are at the place where you, with a deeply imprinted and unconscious memory, yearn for and miss the twin you never knew, except in the womb. And then there might be others who are at the place where you continue to suffer from your loss, though years have passed, and you have long since been left behind with your grief, hiding it in isolation. Wherever you are in your own place of loss, you are on your healing path; for the grieving process is an essential part of the healing from any loss.

An effective healing process is an active process. It entails being present for, and actively engaged in, the grieving process as it unfolds naturally within us. Sadly, our culture does not readily support or give adequate time for the healing process that nature offers us. As a result, we must reach out to find ways to engage and support it and ourselves. It is very important to understand and accept that periods of numbness, pain, fear, disconnection, despair, sadness, anger and guilt, as well as the whole range of human emotions, are common stepping stones along the healing path of loss. This path unfolds before us in an uneven, repetitive and seemingly cyclical way. We can feel we have finally moved to being able to cope and be present on any given day, and then be unexpectedly jerked back again by a sight, a piece of music, or maybe a smell, into a memory that holds pain and loss. The up and down emotional waves of our grief are a natural characteristic of the healing path. The psyche knows what needs to be revealed and when. It is as if all the corners of the twin relationship that we lost must be engaged and borne witness to.

An effective healing process involves understanding and feeling entitled to the unique character and duration of your own process. This allows you to find your own individual pace and to attend to your own needs as you walk your path.

The very core of effective healing entails listening for and bearing witness to, through experience and sharing, the emotional memory of your relationship to your twin. Your physical or sense experience of your twin was taken from you; but your emotional relationship imprinted in your body, in your heart, and in your psyche, is left behind, clinging to the shadow of the departed physical presence of your twin. In other words, one says goodbye to the physical reality of one's departed twin in a way that allows healing by bearing honorable witness to the many memories of one's relationship. Finally, an effective healing process entails courage, courage to be present for the places of feeling that sometimes seem unbearable. And it entails trust, trust in your own natural process of healing. And faith, faith that if you stay actively engaged in this process, you will integrate the trauma of your twin's death and heal from the wound.

The healing process begins to happen naturally after the death of your twin. Often in the first stage, the symptoms are numbness and depression. You feel distant and removed from your life. You are without appetite, overtaken by tiredness, unable to engage others, even your loved ones, or to care. Tasks and chores are done mechanically, if at all. Some twins at this stage lose the ability to function for a period of time. This, to your family and friends, can seem like a further disaster on top of the loss that has already happened. Yet it is not - it marks the start of your

healing. It is as if your mind and body must stop in order to deal with the shock and mobilize for the healing tasks ahead. The process then begins to slowly unfold as the body and psyche open little by little in order to take in and integrate the loss. As I have indicated, healing from the death of a loved one is accomplished mainly through the experience of, and expression of memories and/or feelings. They arise naturally in the bereaved one. They need to be honored and respected and made room for, so they don't get repressed and buried.

Relationship -- Therapeutic and Group Support

In order for the healing process to unfold successfully, it needs to be made safe. The best way to make it safe is in relationship. Twins are born and grow in intimate relationship. Finding themselves twinless, they experience the essence of loneliness, and need the support and safety of relationship in order to heal. Family's and friends' continued presence and non-judgmental caring become an important support to their healing tasks. Another major source of support can be a group experience, ideally made up of bereaved twins. The knowledge that your burden of twin loss is shared and that your grieving experiences are also often shared, is an immeasurable gift, in terms of the comfort and healing potential it offers bereaved and lonely twins. I will be forever grateful to Dr. Raymond Brandt for starting this international support group.

I realize that with the exception of TTSGI and its more localized regional groups, a twin bereavement group can be difficult or even impossible to find. But, other groups focused on loss can also significantly aid and nurture our healing process. Your local hospice will often offer excellent bereavement support groups, as well as the Grief Recovery Institute in CA, which sponsors bereavement workshops in several US locations and in Canada. One-on-one counseling can be very helpful, providing your therapist is sensitive to and educated about twin loss and your special needs. Advocating for your own needs is important to your healing process. You can share the reading list at the end of this article with your therapist or group. TTSGI also offers more reading information on its website.

Personal Support

One way to support and engage the healing process yourself is by expressing your feelings in a journal; through an art form or through movement, for example in dance. And you can nurture your healing process by expressing your feelings in a letter or a series of letters to your twin. The idea is to feel and be present for these feelings as they arise, and to express them in some form, thereby honoring and releasing them. Finally, creating ceremonies and ongoing programs in honor of your twin helps to bring closure to the physicality of your relationship and to carry forward the enduring qualities and spirit of your twin.

Grieving Your True Relationship

For all of us twinless twins, being honest to the best of our ability about our loss and our reactions to it, is essential in order for our grieving process to unfold. It is important to be in the reality of our relationship, as opposed to an idealized fantasy of twinship. This is often hard to do as our tendency is to want to remember only the good things about our twin history, especially in loyalty to our departed twin. A truly

healing bereavement experience entails bearing witness to all the events and feelings you remember and experienced. This includes the unrealized plans and dreams you had with your twin, the things you wished you had said, and the other places of disappointment and regret you still hold. It includes the negative as well as the positive. Every intimate relationship, by its very nature, holds both.

In order to heal and to fully acknowledge and honor the importance of your twinship and your twin's presence in your life, you must allow time for the full experience of their loss. It is very hard to accept that the experience of loss and healing for twins is most often long and painful. The time your healing will take is very much geared to your individual background and personal experience. We must be patient with ourselves and the process. Take one day and one step at a time. The more you have loved and felt connected, the more loss you will feel and the more feelings you will need to process.

For most of you, there will be pieces of your emotional history that are less accessible and take time to be felt. They may present themselves years later. They become a post script to our healing process to be experienced, expressed, and released. Your major healing work, however, will have been done.

Challenges Stemming from the Special Character of Twin Bereavement

The complex identity issues and the often deeply mutual, gifting, and intimate relationship between twins, stemming from their beginnings in the womb, create a special character for twin bereavement. It also can create some confusing and difficult challenges. I'd like to mention a few of these here.

For some twins, there is an important need to acknowledge the significance of their twinship bond, both to themselves and to how it affects the way they experience their lives. This acknowledgement is necessary before they can move to grieve and integrate their twin loss. I'd like to give you a couple of examples. One would be a twin who has never been told that he was born a twin, when actually his twin died at birth and was not ever acknowledged by the parents. He then finds out about his twinship at a much later date. Another would be a twin whose twin died at an early age. Here, the parents refuse to talk about the death of the twin or the precious nature of the twin's short life, as well as its meaning for the family unit, thereby disallowing the grieving process for the family and the twin.

The fraternal twin experience can become another example. Biologically, fraternal twins begin their lives from two separately fertilized eggs, like singletons. For many years fraternal twins were assumed to have a relationship that was more akin to siblings. Society's idea of real twins meant identical twins. The close psychological bond of many fraternal twins has only been fairly recently acknowledged and validated in twin research literature. Here, I'll use my own experience as an example. After developing a very close relationship with my twin brother, Michael, during the first six years of our lives together, we were forceably separated; my twin bond was discouraged at home - and outside we were sent to different schools. Years later, after Michael's death, the bond I felt was invalidated by the first therapist I went to. It took me about twenty years after his death to be able to fully acknowledge my core relationship to my twin. Under societal, family and therapeutic pressure, I repressed the significance of my twinship, and it was years before I was able to see how deeply his death was affecting my life. I had to acknowledge the importance of my twin bond before I could grieve its loss.

A second important challenge for twinless twns is to recognize that out of longing for our lost twinship, we often try to re-experience our twin bond in relationships. We actually subconsciously transfer or merge out twin memory with the person we are relating to. Our feelings and expectations can, therefore, relate more to our past twinship than to the present relationship at hand. These expectations create confusion, misunderstandings, and unrealistic demands. They can also postpone our grieving process. Gaining an understanding of this common dynamic for twins enables us to bring self understanding and important perspective to our relationships.

Supporting Our Individuality

Understanding that our identity can be seriously challenged when we lose a twin, we realize that growing into and/or consolidating a sense of ourselves as a separate individual becomes an essential part of a successful bereavement process. I believe that it is important to engage in experiences that afford us the time to listen to, and get to know ourselves. In so doing, we find out more about our own likes, dislikes, needs, personal challenges, and special gifts, and we learn to express them. Through our personal endeavors and experiences we learn to bring forth who we are in our own right. As we are able to define, understand and grow to feel safe in ourselves as separate individuals, we become ready to take the risk of acknowledging and accepting in the deepest part of ourselves that our twin has died; moving forward to do our major grieving, and thereby to heal.

I believe that by this acknowledgement and acceptance, we are able to set our twin free, releasing him or her out of the bonds of their death experience.

Misunderstandings and Isolation

As we take in the character and challenges of the twin bereavement process, it is important to note that family, community, and the psychotherapeutic attitudes towards twin loss and the timing of twin bereavement have an important effect on twins. When others misunderstand the special nature of twin loss and twin needs during their bereavement, twins can begin to mistrust their own healing process and to repress and negate their feelings. They then pull back into isolation and loneliness. And for some, the bereavement process is interrupted.

Twin grief is easily misunderstood. Other members of the family heal and "move on" leaving the twin still deep in their loss. In experiencing their loss, many twins feel half of themselves have died. Some feel they must start living their departed twin's life, trying to take on the twin's role and responsibilities as they struggle under their own severe loss. Twins also experience a survivor's guilt attached to twin loss: They ask, "Why wasn't it me who died?" or, "If I'd done something different my twin would still be alive." When there's a stillborn or in-utero loss, some twins blame themselves for robbing their twin of the nutrients it needed to survive. All these twin feelings and experiences underline the unique quality of the twin bereavement process and its needs, and of the importance of not only the twins themselves but also their families and counselors to understanding this special bereavement process.

Through the Twinless Twins gatherings and its website, www.twinlesstwins.org and other internet resources, twins are meeting and standing for each other, and finding

and gaining understanding of their special healing needs and process. This shared knowledge and opportunity for relationship breaks the isolation that feeds protracted grief.

Completion of the Healing Process

I believe the healing process can be, in its essence, completed. The emotional history of your relationship to your twin is as deep, as delicate, as mutual, as powerful, as challenging, as complicated, as your twinship was. Our innate healing mechanism, as we mentioned, helps us to remember and to meet the different feelings that are present in the experience of and loss of our twin life. In engaging fully in our healing process, we bring honorable closure to that physical life, and the pain that has been held in the memory of our twin experiences begins to slowly subside. The memories can then become present for us in a positive way, and can act as a loving reminder of the gift of our twinship.

The loss of pain, as the chief component of twin memory, signals that the major part of this process has been completed. This does not mean that we never feel sad or cease to miss our twin and our twinship. How could we not miss someone and something so innate, so unique and so precious?

Healing does not mean "moving on." It means being able to move forward with your life. It means we are able now to go back to a full engagement of our life; to see our life as having meaning beyond the physical reality of our twinship, which was so cruelly taken from us. Healing does not mean giving up our relationship to our twin or accepting that we are no longer a twin – we will always be a twin!!!

When we have essentially completed the bereavement process, our twin relationship is free to transform. Our twin, through many pain-free memories, and through the love that transcends death, can be profoundly present for us and our lives. Freed from the boundaries and stigma of death, our departed twins may now walk with us in our hearts, sharing the gift of who they were to us, and supporting us in our freedom to feel free to explore, to express, and to bring into being, the fullness of who we are.