



Joanne Cacciatore says America's "happiness cult" prevents us from dealing with loss and grief in healthy ways.

THE MISS FOUNDATION:

A lifeline to grieving families

By Mary Ann Bashaw • Photo by Rick D'Elia

JOANNE CACCIATORE of Sedona started the nonprofit MISS Foundation in 1996 to provide counseling, advocacy, research and education services to families who have endured the death of a child. To say she has been busy since RAISING ARIZONA KIDS magazine's 2011 series about her foundation is an understatement. Between nearly losing a second child in a horrific car crash in 2014, educating Arizona State University graduate students about trauma and bereavement

Cacciatore continues to lead MISS's efforts to support grieving families. She also has written a book, "Bearing the Unbearable," which will be available June 2017 from Wisdom Publications.

How has the MISS Foundation changed in the past five years? The foundation is growing exponentially, cultivating new chapters, doing more training and getting more providers involved, which is really good because that's where change takes place in the ways the traumatically bereaved are treated in our culture. Obviously, I can't be at every crisis-response scene. So it's always been very important to us that medical and professional staff are well-trained to provide compassionate psychosocial care to families that is not just evidence-based, but heart-based. There is no more important time for grieving families to have a fully present, openhearted provider who is not afraid and who is not avoidant.

Hundreds of individual providers — physicians, nurses, social workers, psychiatrists, psychologists, first responders, funeral directors — are trained through MISS's Compassionate Bereavement Care certification program. We've been running it for two years, and the feedback has been phenomenal. They are trained in MISS's "mindfulness" way of being fully present with people and their grief. You can go to missfoundation.org, type in your ZIP code and find the nearest MISS provider.

How can we practice such "mindfulness" when approaching others experiencing grief? It's a hard thing to talk about. Most (parents who have lost children) share with me that it's

exceedingly hurtful when no one talks to them. When they reach out by phone and no one answers. When they see people at church who say, "Oh, hi! How are you?" as if nothing happened. When others turn the other way at the grocery store.

We should be teaching children from kindergarten on how to integrate grief, how to feel painful emotions without needing to change them — how to really *be* with those emotions. If we create space for them, they change on their own over time. The pain subsides a little and then increases again — that's the natural movement of grief. In fact, the word emotion comes from the Latin word *emovere*, meaning "to move through."

The implicit message of what I call the "happiness cult" of America is that you have to be happy all the time — the pursuit of happiness. But the more we pursue it, the more elusive it becomes. And then when things don't go our way and we don't feel happy, we feel unhappy about not feeling happy! It's a pervasive problem in our culture. I talk about this in my new book, "Bearing the Unbearable." We have moved so far away from the centers of our hearts. We have a lot of work to do to get back to it, but it's happening.

I think it's incredibly important for us to see that love and grief are inextricably linked. This idea that we can't feel sad and happy, grief and joy, simultaneously is really limiting. Just because we're grieving doesn't mean we're not content, that we can never be happy or live a full life again. On the contrary, many families with whom I work say they have a deepened appreciation and value for life — that they can appreciate moments in a much more sublime way ... almost transcending words.

Your son Arman ("Ari," then 27) was seriously injured in a May 2014 car crash caused by an impaired driver. How does one deal with the near-loss of a second child?

I've lost one child — nothing protects me from going through it again just because I do this work. But either I can be paralyzed by it or I can provide a foundation on which I can feel more gratitude for them. When you know, "I could lose this person at any time," it sure does change the way you look at this moment. Nothing protects you. It can happen more than once. It's heartbreaking.

As an associate professor of the trauma and bereavement graduate-certificate program at Arizona State University, do you continue on your own path of healing?

I don't imagine there will ever come a day when my personal story won't be relevant to the work I do. Even if I never speak of it, of what I endured in 1994 with losing Cheyenne (at birth), it's always relevant, always there. It informs everything in my life as a human being: as a parent, partner, professor, researcher. And I wouldn't change that. It always comes with sadness and grief. And yet ... while I have life, I'm not going to squander it. Because I know that so intimately, I guess I live big. I don't have a lot of fear.

I think people are finally ready to start talking about this. It's incremental changes, but they're monumental when you consider how stagnant we've been as a culture around grief and loss. That we can thrive after such trauma is incredible. But we also need a lot of love, support and compassion from people. It can't be rushed.

Mary Ann Bashaw of Phoenix is a freelance writer and editor. She is the mother of Claire, (25) and Hannah, (23).



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