

REMEMBERING TO HEAL

by Joan S. Bruner, LCSW

For most of my fifty-five years of life I have not considered myself a twin. I mean, I always knew I was a twin, but for me my twinness was in the past tense. I believed that when my identical twin, Jan, died at age three and a half my specialness and my uniqueness as a twin also died.

The process of re-discovering my twinness started about five years ago when I began to really look at some of my deeper psychological issues. I am a psychotherapist in private practice and I also have worked as a counselor for 15 years with severely emotionally disturbed students. So personal growth, therapy, doing inner work, getting in touch with the lost child, etc. were not foreign concepts to me. But as I looked more intensely at my own life, I began to realize there were subtle themes all surrounding the fear of feeling loss. I began to examine my fears and quickly made the connection to Jan's death.

It is not uncommon to over-look the significance of death/loss to a very young child. Often it is believed the young child has no concept of death and therefore has no need to grieve or go through the mourning process. And at times, other family members are too preoccupied with their own grief process to recognize the child's needs.

J. William Worden in his excellent book, *Grief Counseling and Grief Therapy*, discusses a child's understanding of loss. He states, "In our current understanding of child development, the child who is under 18 to 24 months of age does not fully understand that a physical object has an existence separate from his sensory perception and manipulation. Between the ages of two and five years, this object constancy is achieved and the child has a better, although still incomplete, understanding of death. Children this age also reflect more of the adult feeling states following a loss, but the risk is that they may perceive the loss as due to their own responsibility and/or their own sense of badness. At this age children also exhibit a strong tendency to idealize the adult who was lost.

Between the ages of five and seven years, the child has a better understanding of death from a cognitive perspective but still lacks ego skills to deal with the intensity of the feelings. From the age of seven to adolescence, the child approaches mourning more like an adult, with more sufficient understanding and better coping skills. All this is to say that loss through death is experienced and expressed in different ways at different development phases.

So how does a child of three and a half react to the loss of her twin? I began to examine this issue and found the key phrase to be "remembering to heal" Thus the title for this article.

The title has double meaning for me. First, there is the importance of dealing with the wound directly and giving yourself the time and space to heal, as John Gray so ably presents in *What You Feel, You Can Heal* and Elizabeth Kubler-Ross discusses in all her works on death and dying. Secondly, for me, there has also been the need for going back and remembering - of having to remember in order to heal.

For many of us who lost our twin at birth or in the early years of age, our twinning has at times been a nebulous concept. It has been difficult to fully understand the impact on our lives of just having been born a twin. The conscious memories of our twin are not available, so we have to rely on tapping into unconscious material or other forms of awareness. But as much of the research is now discovering, we do have the memories - even of sharing the womb with our twin and also the memories of early crib bonding.

Science has a wealth of knowledge on how a "sense of self" is developed through the separation/individuation stage of approximately birth to three years. And we know that twins use each other for this developmental task. In fact there is some speculation about whether twins ever do form the same bonding with the mother as singletons do because of this unique twin bonding. When we realize that much of our sense of identity is formulated in those very early years, it is clearly understandable the tremendous impact on our whole development of having been conceived and born a twin.

It is crucial that we remember our twin connection to be able to examine how it has affected our entire life. If a wound has not healed, it continues to fester and to seep into all areas of our life. Wounds can be a result of many varying events, i.e. an abusive parent; a severe physical illness; a major trauma; an emotionally unavailable parent, but none compares to the loss through death of one's twin. No other wound is so directly connected to our core identity as our sense of self. For identical twins, the genetic and chromosomal patterns plus the energy connection enhances this bonding.

The road to remembering is not smooth, nor is it easy. It often brings up the pain that our strong defense mechanisms have fought hard to shield us from feeling. When we allow ourselves to remember, many of us re-experience the excruciating pain we felt at the moment of our twin's death, that moment when their energy left us. For me, it literally felt as though half my body was being torn away. Getting in touch with this memory was very painful.

There are many issues unique to those of us who lost our twin at a very young age. As already mentioned when there are no conscious memories of the loss, a special effort has to be made to remember the twinship. An important step in any grief process is making the loss (death) a reality. If the twin dies at birth or a young age, there are few "realities" to hold onto. I encourage you to look at early pictures if you have them, or talk with your mother about her pregnancy in order to make the twinship more of a reality.

This leads to another special circumstance - the additional sadness of never knowing what it would have been like had your twin lived. The loss of "what could have been" haunts many of us who experienced our loss early in life. The pleasant, happy memories of times together which comforts many twinless twins is denied us due to this early loss.

Another important part of the grieving process is to participate in the funeral or ritual at the time of death, but as a young child you usually are not included in these rituals. Again, unavailable at any early age are these important ways of honoring the connection you had and of making the death more of a reality. You may want to consider holding a funeral now or conducting some rituals if you did not participate in these experiences earlier.

What might also happen if you have few conscious memories of your twin is that you minimize the significance of your twinning, believing that without memories it cannot be very significant. Or, like me, you may have confusion later in life as to why certain feelings or experiences take on such importance for you. To gain clarity and a deeper understanding of your psychological make-up, you must accept the profound influence on your entire life of starting life as a twin.

Many of us go to extreme measures to protect ourselves from feeling bad, especially from feeling the pain of loss. But you cannot work through the grief if you do not allow yourself to feel the pain of the loss. To truly heal the pain, you must allow yourself to remember the separation and to feel the pain from that loss.

The ultimate goal in the grieving process is to regain your normal level of functioning - to go on with your life; to be able to remember without the devastating pain; to form new attachments. The loss of one's twin makes this process more complicated because of the loss of half of your resources. The reliance on one's twin for coping with all of life's developments started in the womb. Until their death you have never had to function alone. The loss of your twin at an early age, before you even have the understanding of how you use each other, causes an incomplete grieving cycle, which cannot be concluded until you acknowledge your twinning.

Listening to twinless twins relate their stories you hear over and over again how their loss complicated their development. There are many similarities in their stories; inability to trust; a longing for connection; fear of loss; difficult relationships; hopelessness; wanting to join their twin; the stress of over achievement; and dependency issues. From their stories come tales of suicide attempts, divorce, loneliness, and yearning.

Existing twins live with the task of learning who they are as an individual - not just "the twins." As Betty Jean Case writes in her book, *We Are Twins, But Who Am I?* "My research has convinced me more than ever of the importance of nurturing self-esteem in all individuals. It has also shown that certain aspects of twinning, mostly the ways in which other people respond to twins, can often have negative effects on the twins' development of self esteem as separate, whole individuals. While the vast majority of twins I've encountered value their unique bond with their partner-in-birth, most agree that the bond creates special problems as well.

Twinless twins left alone must learn to live with the feeling of half of us missing - half our identity - half our energy. We often continue to search for that identity and for the oneness, the wholeness, and the connection we felt in the womb.

It is frequently difficult for us to be in relationships as none ever measure up to the connection we felt with our twin. Some go through multiple relationships trying to avoid the pain of losing another connection. However, along with the trauma experienced in losing your twin there is another side. After the remembering and after the healing, there is the beautiful memory of twinning. As Dr. Raymond Brandt, founder and director of Twinless Twins Support Group International, says, "Once a

twin always a twin." Twins experience something very unique even if for a brief period of time. I believe there is a purpose for our having been born a twin and that we each have the ability to discover that purpose. We also have the ability to be in touch with our twin's energy allowing it to nurture us even now.

It is common for existing twins, especially identicals, to talk about their unique communication system or psychic (paranormal) connection. This connection does not end with the death of one twin. Many of us twinless twins experience the daily presence of our twin & sometimes in ways unexplainable with words. It is this unique presence which feeds us.

I have been very fortunate to be able to work with an extremely capable teacher who is assisting me in re-discovering my uniqueness - and even in a broader cosmic sense of remembering who I am and what I came to do. I encourage all twinless twins to work through their pain. You have support to accomplish this. I encourage you to remember. There is a sense of wholeness in remembering. There is healing in remembering.

Case, Betty Jean, *We Are Twins, But Who Am I?*, Tibbutt Publishing Co., Portland, Oregon, 1991, p. 6.

Worden, J. William, *Grief Counseling & Grief Therapy*, Springer Publishing Co., New York, 1991, p. 124.

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