

# Healing with Haven

May 2008

## Hats Off To Grief

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It has been said that a picture is worth a thousand words. Over the years I have found it frustrating to find words big enough and deep enough to explain the depth or breadth of my pain following a significant loss. That is also true when we are working with other bereaved people; our vocabularies can be shallow in the face of great grief and anguish.

Some years ago, I was at a garage sale and spied a huge, foam chicken hat for the tidy sum of twenty-five cents. I inquired as to whether they knew anything about the origin of this wild-looking hat. Evidently it was produced by our local blood bank and originally had a card attached with the slogan, "Don't be a chicken; donate blood."

When I saw that hat it reminded me of how, as bereaved persons, we often feel that we stick out in a crowd. After our two sons died, I sometimes felt that people were going out of their way to avoid me. After all, I might talk about "it." I have heard some folks describing themselves as feeling like "Typhoid Mary," with all sorts of people avoiding any topics about the person who died.

After Dan and Mark died, I sometimes found myself trudging around the house in my old, red bathrobe, crying my eyes out and wondering if there was any light at the end of the tunnel. Occasionally, I put on my chicken hat and tried to remind myself that someday I would be able to laugh again. I could not imagine ever again laughing or enjoying life, but intellectually I knew that it was possible. When our other kids came home from school and saw this ridiculous picture of their mom wandering around the house with fistfuls of Kleenex, dressed in a ratty bathrobe and a chicken hat, I know they thought that I had slid over the edge. The twenty-five-cent chicken hat was a great object lesson for me: While I knew that things could change, I certainly could not imagine things changing for the better.

Over the years I started collecting hats whenever I found one that I thought might have a message for me or that I

might be able to use when reaching out to other bereaved persons. I had no idea that there were so many unusual varied hats. Now, I use my hat collection when I am teaching about grief experience or when I am doing a program for bereaved people.

Quite often I will begin by donning a crash helmet. When someone dies, whether it is sudden or from a long-term illness, our world as we know it can crash. I follow the helmet with a baseball-type cap that has a fish head sticking out of the bill. This reminds me that as bereaved people we can often

feel like a fish out of water. When grieving a major loss, we can feel set apart from others. I follow up with my hat that has a tomahawk sticking out of the tope, because often we feel like our world has been chopped to pieces, and us right along with it.

So often we hear from well-meaning friends that we cannot question why things happen, "It is for the best," and, "We are not given more than we can handle," are statements we hear ad nauseam. Hearing those well-intended, but usually not helpful, comments reminds me to put on my alligator hat because I and others have felt like snapping at someone when we hear such comments. Some clients have told me that people close to them have set themselves up as experts on other's grief. One of the

things that I have learned is that while we can be experts on our own grief, we are not experts on anyone else's grief. When I encounter people who give advice, but have no experience with grief, I remember saying, "Don't let the turkeys get you down." So, I whip out a turkey hat complete with velour feathers.

Knowing that we will get better and believing it are very far apart. In the early weeks and months of grief, it can seem impossible that we can ever come to terms with our world having changed so much. My "when pigs fly" hat really makes that point. It is a pink pig hat complete with wings.

Tolerance levels are often quite low for bereaved persons,

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and it can be hard to participate in social gatherings with others. We may feel like we are removed from everything and everyone. My dinosaur hat makes that point quite nicely. And, because of low tolerance levels, we may feel really crabby. My crab hat illustrates that story nicely.

Anger is another common emotion. Sometimes we can pinpoint where our anger is directed and at other times we may have generalized anger. My concern is that we find constructive ways to work through anger. However, during this process, my shark hat satisfactorily expresses the feeling that I want to take a bite out of someone or something.

I have a baseball cap with two bills and the saying, "I am the leader, which way did they go?" Confusion is a frustrating but very normal part of the grief experience.

I often hear stories of bereaved folks driving in the wrong direction, missing appointments or showing up the wrong day and so forth.

Once, after our sons died, I was having company for dinner and reached into the oven for the baked potatoes. They were not there, so I quickly shut the oven door and then reopened it, thinking that my potatoes would reappear.

Of course they still were not there. With my company all ready to eat dinner, I was frantically going through the kitchen to see where I had put the potatoes. I had them baking in the refrigerator; so much for being in charge. After telling that story, I whip out my "bonehead" headband.

We often find ourselves talking to ourselves and putting ourselves down. With the baked potato incident, I was really busy telling myself what a bonehead I was. It is sometimes hard for us to give ourselves permission to make mistakes, and when we give ourselves a hard time, it only makes us feel worse.

My construction helmet is a reminder that for a very long time in grief, our lives are under construction. It takes a long

time to begin rebuilding and looking toward the future. Part of learning to adjust to a new reality is taking risks and trying new things. That could be a support group or counseling. We can also find ourselves with new roles in life. For some, that may be assuming the role of both parents, or perhaps we need to manage a household for the first time. My giraffe headband, complete with long neck reminds me that when we are adapting and taking risks, we are sticking our necks out into new and unfamiliar territory.

My butterfly hat serves as a reminder that our world has changed and that to learn to adjust and embrace life we will need to take a lesson from the butterfly and be open to change. Though many times we would like to go back to the way our life was before our loss, that is not an option.

I have a piano keyboard fashioned as a hat. The object of that hat is to point out that we need to play our own tune and dance to our own music, whatever that might be for us as individuals.

An old but longtime favorite book of mine is, *Me, Myself and You*, by Vincent Collins. I took to heart what the author had to say in his opening paragraph, "It would be great if we were daisies, because even bugs do not bug daisies." We are not

daisies and my daisy headband underscores that message.

My star hat is bright and rainbow colored and is a reminder that our horizon changes with a death and often our goals and dreams change as well. However in processing and working through our Grief, we can find new stars on our horizon.

A top hat trimmed with roses is my finale and one way of saying that we can be the leader of our own parade. We are not in charge of what circumstance come our way, but we are in charge of working through our grief and discovering a new world for ourselves.

Hats off to you as you work through and process your own grief and pain. 🎩



## *Six Strategies for Conquering Adversity*

By Christopher Novak, Marcellus, NY

Reprinted with permission from Bereavement Publications, Inc, *Living With Loss Magazine*, Winter 2006 (888) 604-4673,

[www.livingwithloss.com](http://www.livingwithloss.com)

All of us have — or will — face serious adversity in our professional or personal lives. It's not a matter of if — it's a matter of when.

As professionals and leaders, adversity is a normal part of our workday. We are our organization's pivot points, constantly balancing the precarious and ever-shifting needs of employees, shareholders, vendors, customers, retirees, staff, and public relations. Our employer expects us to be

adept at wading into crisis and solving problems, to be on the frontline, leading the organization through an endless series of challenges. Our employees expect us to be emotional navigators, capable of steering them through professional and personal storms. They come to us seeking advice, insight, compassion, guidance or just "an ear" for any number of issues. Finally, we have our own struggles and challenges to overcome inside and outside the workplace. The pressures of

balancing work and home are constantly rising.

Adversity is an all-too-frequent companion in our lives, and conquering that adversity can often seem like a superhuman challenge. As a result, we may find ourselves searching for a hero — someone who can lead us through even the most challenging times. The good news is that we all have one! There is a hero inside each of us just waiting to be discovered and unleashed.

The secret to conquering adversity is to tap into that hero. But how do we find it? How do we strengthen that “can do” sense of determination in our psyches? There are some strategies — six to be exact — that we can use to develop our internal heroes:

**Affirmation** — This is recognition of your bedrock values — those unshakable elements of your character that do not change with the wind. Heroes don’t just stand for something, they stand on something — and that something is an unwavering set of principles and values that help them regain their footing when they’ve been knocked down. Most of us spend more time deciding what food to put into our grocery carts each week than what values to put into our lives. The strategy of Affirmation reminds us to regularly reflect on our bedrock values so that they are ingrained in us and easily accessible when we need them most.

**Expectation** — Life is not fair, plain and simple. So we shouldn’t expect it to be. The underlying truth is that life does not adhere to a fairness standard — bad things happen to good people. We are often faced with situations that are unjust, uncalled for or untrue. The reality is that even in the midst of these disappointments, we must still excel. It starts with the conscious decision to act rather than lament. Searching for the answer to the question of why something happened diverts our attention, delaying the response we must generate and reducing our capacity to succeed. Some questions need action, not answers. So put unfair situations behind you and move forward.

**Communication** — To be effective in overcoming adversity, we must be as comfortable speaking our hearts as we are speaking our minds. Communication is about sharing what we feel, not just what we know. This is a difficult habit for many of us to develop because we guard our emotions closely. Yet, the strongest leaders throughout history had the ability to connect with those they led on a deeper, more personal level. Give people a plan, and they will follow it. Give them a vision, and they will move mountains.

**Locomotion** — In the struggle between stone and water, in time, the water will always win. This Chinese proverb captures the essence of the Locomotion strategy. Purposeful

motion is a powerful tool for reshaping our reality, especially in the face of adversity or crisis. We must accept the burden or leadership and make decisions, adjust to outcomes, and then make even more decisions in the endless stream of responsibility that keeps things moving forward. It is impossible to create momentum without motion, so engage the challenge.

**Collaboration** — Conquering adversity is a team effort. Collaboration is about building a network of relationships before adversity strikes. You can’t build a shelter in the midst of a hurricane, so developing a strong circle of support now is critical. Who can you count on? Who will be with you through thick and thin? What partnerships can you encourage or strengthen? People are generally more than willing to help when they know that help is both welcomed and appreciated. Take the time to develop your support team before you need it.

**Celebration** — Even in the midst of serious adversity, there will be small victories. Celebrate them! Celebration

recharges our emotional batteries, strengthens the ties with our support team, and acknowledges progress no matter how modest. What have we already achieved? How far have we come? Find reasons to share a smile or a laugh, or to pass on a word of encouragement. Celebration is the fuel that drives us forward through adversity, so top off the tank as often as possible.

Often, the collision of serious personal and

professional challenges creates an opportunity to rise to new levels. These six strategies are insights born of such a tempest. They are more than theory, more than fictitious case study and more than intellectual musings. Instead, these strategies were forged in the fires of a real world calamity that most people will never have to experience.

On August 10, 1998, my 37 year-old wife, Cynthia, was killed as she drove home from work when a man high on drugs and speeding ran a stop sign. She was seven months pregnant with our second son. I was at work when the phone rang and my life changed forever. In the blink of an eye, my world was devastated and I was left to pick up the pieces for my 9 year-old son, Ryan and myself. It is from the journey that followed that these six strategies emerged. If wisdom is what remains after life’s harshest moments, then these are truisms that offer us a glimpse of the hero we all have inside.

You are capable than you know, more resilient than you can imagine, and stronger than you realize. As a leader, if we can demonstrate that truth and share it, then we are well on our way to conquering any adversity. 🏠



## *Grief & Loss Seminar Series*

The monthly Healing with Haven seminar-support group is currently taking a break and will start up again in the fall of 2008.

## *Individual/Group Support*

The Bereavement Department of Haven Hospice offers individual support. For more information or to make an appointment for an individual meeting please contact our Bereavement Coordinator, Tina Stephenitch at (562) 426-7500 ext 406.

## *Volunteers*

Are you ready to become a Haven Hospice Volunteer? If you are interested in this rewarding opportunity, or you know anyone who is looking to volunteer his or her time, please contact Tina Stephenitch, Volunteer Coordinator (562) 426-7500 406.

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