

My Grief Journey

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Although a large family is sometimes viewed as a happy family, my story demonstrates that the bigger the better or the more the merrier was not true in my case. I am the oldest son and third in the birth order in a family of nine children. A large family in a small house creates limited space, time, money, and energy for everyone's needs to be met. Like steam in a pressure cooker, the pain of re-living my family dynamic began to increase in my emotional tank, which led to a grief explosion at the age of 53. Some of my grief was rooted in two embarrassing memories, with the first involving standing in line to receive government commodities. The second memory involved Debbie Gregg, a girl whose attention I highly valued, who laughed at me because she noticed I wore a number of sweatshirts to school several days in a row, which was not the kind of attention I wanted. These types of experiences created shameful inferiority and insecurity in my psyche, which followed me during the formative years of my life.

I discovered during my grief journey, the potent emotions flowing out of me like lava from a volcanic eruption, were linked to more than sadness but also to anger. Anger, because the size of my family required both mom and dad to find full time employment, and this placed an adult sized responsibility on my shoulders to help "raise the kids" during what should have been much more carefree years for me. Beyond the stress that came with the caretaking of my younger siblings without parental authority, I was also thrust into the public work force at the age of 13. My first job was serving as the dishwasher at a restaurant on the week-ends to help subsidize my school lunch money.

The biggest impact of my grief was tied to the events that followed my mother entering the job market as a licensed practical nurse. Her life in the medical field provided access to high powered drugs, which led to her drug addiction. Her addiction intensified the marital tension between my parents that could have easily led to a divorce. The need for my caretaking responsibility escalated, which impacted my involvement in sports, hanging out with friends, and personal time for myself. One humiliating incident I experienced happened the morning following the day I preached my first sermon at the age of 17. That morning my responsibility was to wake my siblings, serve breakfast, and see to it that they were ready for school in time to make it to the school bus. Unfortunately, my brother James was creating havoc, and his behavior required some "parental correction" on my part. Since I was told to "keep my hands off of the children," my mother whipped me after she arrived and was told of my behavior. After my father

learned of my correction of brother James, he kicked me. Later, when my father learned the facts of the incident, he apologized, but my mother never did, which created in me a burning inferno of hate for her.

The explosion that took place in my 53rd year of life involved a process which included tears, angry outbursts, and other kinds of emotions. My traumatic childhood was the foundation for adult depression.

The most recent time I addressed the pain in my grief journey was the week of the first doctoral module. It was at this time I recognized how my drive for recognition and validation, due to my shameful insecurity and inferiority, has hurt my wife's quality of life, personal growth, and our relationship. As I began to understand the ramifications, I began to feel guilt and deep regret. The good news is my ownership of my brokenness, accompanied by repeated tears and apologies, has created a closeness we have not experienced for years. Another benefit is that in spite of my childhood pain which led to adult dysfunction, my early experiences have provided me with a strong work ethic. I have also shared my story with others, which gave them permission to grieve. By God's grace, I am becoming healthier and believe my best days are ahead of me, and I am on the way to experiencing a better quality of life.