

NEVER LOST

by Dawn Atkins (copyright 1991)

When we speak of loving someone, what we mean is that that person acts as a mirror for the place within us which is love. That being becomes our contact with ourself. When that mirror is shattered, the grief that we feel is the loss of contact with that place within us which is love. Thinking of that person as other than ourself, we mourn our loss, we reexperience our sense of separateness and isolation that originally motivated us to look outside ourselves for that essential unity we call love.

Stephen Levine, Who Dies?

When my dad died, people told me that the grief would lessen and go away. "Time heals all wounds," they told me. Yet, as I held my dying Andy in my arms, I screamed out for my Dad, the grief ripping me apart as if he too had just died again. The pain was no less intense than it was sixteen years ago. The collected pain of losses old and new washed over me in waves of agony and grief so strong that all pain became one pain -- first crying for my Dad, then my brother, Michael, then begging Andy not to die, then back to Michael, and then to my friends, John and Robin -- all dead.

You know how when you are used to living someplace quiet, then you move to a city and the noises are so loud they keep you awake all night, but if you live there a while, you become accustomed to the noises and they become part of the background of everyday life. Grief is like that -- it never goes away.

It is a loud, low tone that rattles your teeth and sends vibrations into your heart, but as we live with it, somehow we learn to take it in and make it part of ourselves. The overwhelming sound of it becomes the baseline for all our emotional life -- woven into the melody that includes and sharpens the higher notes. When a new loss comes along and adds to the baseline, we become aware of it, and by focusing on it, become wrapped

in it again. But it is never gone. The stronger the loss and grief, the more complexity it gives the person's life.

It is in this way that our relationships are never lost. That connection with love lost is maintained in the grief we feel at their absence -- the stronger the connection in life, the more intense the pain. To keep alive the memories and feelings we had for the person, we must maintain the grief -- otherwise, we lose both them and a part of ourselves.

I do not believe that grief is ever "healed" -- I think it permanently changes us at a very basic level. We cease to be the same person and are transformed by the fire of agony. As the grief burns in my heart, lungs and eyes, I can feel it working magic on my soul. Andy was always a part of me and now he is no longer a separate entity. The grief sears Michael and Andy into my spirit joining now with my Dad and all the others I have lost. In life, I saw myself reflected by their love -- in death, that part is brought inside and joined with all that I am.