

## *Professionally Speaking*

...by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

### The Pearl – A Result of Hard Work

For many years I had the privilege of working as the Grief Specialist at a Center for Grieving Children in the suburbs of Philadelphia. I facilitated grief support groups for children of all ages who lost a parent or a sibling. The children and their caregivers were permitted to attend the bi-monthly support groups for as long as they liked. Some children stayed for as long as 4 years! On their last day we held a ritual that was called a “Rock Ceremony.” A small cloth bag containing 3 smooth stones and 1 rough stone was handed to the child and each friend in the group said good-bye and offered them wishes for strength and happiness in the future. The smooth stones symbolize the beauty of life, the parts of them that are shiny and whole, and the grief work that they have already done. The rough stone with its sharp edges represents the painful feelings and memories of the person who died. We always told the children that the smooth stones symbolized the work that they had already done in processing their grief, and the rough stone represented the work that they still had to do in the months and years to come. In truth, it takes many years of processing in order to integrate a loss into your life and make the grief feel less sharp and rough. However, for children who grieve very differently than adults, the symbol of the bag of rocks was very helpful and concrete.

The concept of a stone being smoothed by hard work led me to investigate the process that is involved in making a pearl. The process of forming a pearl inside of an oyster begins when a particle, or what is referred to as an irritant, gets inside the mollusk. Once the particle becomes trapped, the oyster begins to coat it with thousands of layers of a substance called *nacre* as a defense mechanism. The *nacre* is also known as mother-of-pearl and it coats the irritant, which is most likely a grain of sand. This process takes approximately two to four years to complete before a beautiful iridescent gem is formed. An important point to mention is that the oyster has the ability and the choice to reject the particle and spit it out, therefore never having to deal with the hard work of forming a pearl. It is only in accepting the pain/the irritant and working on it that it becomes a thing of beauty.

*Pearls are the product of pain.*

Every pearl is the product of an oyster that has been wounded by a grain of sand. Like an oyster, you too have been deeply wounded. Your deep wound was the death of your baby inside your body. Your body and mind, like the shell of the oyster, try to build defense mechanisms to your pain, while trying to heal from the trauma of the intrusion of death. Your wound is your pain and sorrow. If that wound is not acknowledged and covered with layers of love and attention, then it will never heal. The pain of losing your baby lies deep within you and it will take years of honoring that pain and tending to its impact on your life in order for you to heal. Grieving is a process, just as forming a pearl is a process. Here are some ways that you can layer your wound in a purposeful way to find healing:

- ~ Attend a grief support group, like UNITE, Inc. where you can share your feelings with others who have had a similar loss.
- ~ Wear a piece of jewelry with your baby's name or initial on it.
- ~ Light a candle in memory of your baby.
- ~ Plant a tree or flower garden in honor of your baby.
- ~ Get a memorial tattoo in remembrance of your baby.
- ~ Donate hand-made blankets to a hospital in memory of your baby.
- ~ Write your thoughts down in a grief journal.
- ~ Talk about your feelings with a trusted friend who understands what you are experiencing.
- ~ Visit the cemetery if your baby is buried.
- ~ If your baby was cremated, create a special spot in your home to honor your baby's remains.
- ~ If your baby was so small that you have no tangible remains, then place a statue or some symbol of their life in your home.

It will take years and years of painful grief work for you to process the pain of your loss. Ultimately, my wish is that you remember your baby with more love than pain, and that your pain is transformed into a precious pearl.