



## Perinatal Bereavement: A Lifelong Process

*By Deb Rich*

It is the day after Yom Kippur, ending the 18th Jewish New Year holidays since my daughter Shoshana was stillborn. In Jewish tradition, the Hebrew characters adding up to the number 18 spell "life," and the number 18 is imbued with significance. Am I sure it is 18 holiday cycles? I count on my fingers. No, it is actually the 19th. I can hardly imagine how I got through the first time!

Yesterday, as I listened to the quarterly memorial service, I unexpectedly found myself sobbing and breathless. Where did this come from? Those who know me nodded lovingly assuming, "Ah yes, she is thinking of Shoshana." In truth, I had no words or thoughts; only what felt like a deep well of sorrow.

### **My Story**

Like many professionals in the field of perinatal bereavement, I came to this work through personal experience. It was July 1985. I was a 29-year-old psychologist and had been married to an attorney for five years. We launched our careers, saved money, bought a house and planned a pregnancy. According to plan, I became pregnant immediately and had a normal uneventful pregnancy. . . until my weekly exam at 38+ weeks gestation.

Even after 18 years, I remember the sequence of events in vivid detail. Other than an unusually long wait for our favorite doctor, the exam began quite ordinarily at 5:00 p.m. Monday July 29. However, the doctor's face dramatically changed when she couldn't hear a heart tone through her stethoscope. She shook my belly aggressively; still no heart tone. She had me hop off the table, sheet wrapped around my bare bottom, and move to the exam room that had a low-tech ultrasound. I saw the black spot on the screen and the look on her face. I said, "This isn't good, is it?" She suspected the baby had died, but wanted us to go to the hospital the next day for a more sophisticated ultrasound. She gave us a few minutes alone to cry. When she returned, we could see she had been crying, too. We came out to an empty waiting room. The nurses helped us get ready to go home and offered use of the phone; the only person we could think to call was our rabbi.

The rabbi arrived shortly after we returned home, bringing a resource book and, more importantly, the name and number of another couple who had a similar experience six

months earlier. This wonderful couple prepared us for the difficult decisions we faced as I waited to go into labor. After several days of waiting, labor was induced. I delivered my beautiful baby girl, Shoshana, on Friday morning August 2, 1985. Despite the lack of formal protocol, I received excellent care. Everyone just figured it out as we went. As a result, I have wonderful memories and no regrets.

### **My Career**

This experience had a profound impact on my career development. I began by offering professional training, and then developed a part-time private practice specializing in pregnancy loss. Over the last 17 years, my practice broadened, and in January 2004, I founded the Shoshana Center for Reproductive Health Psychology. When I took the job of Perinatal Bereavement Coordinator for a multi-hospital and clinic organization three years ago, I did not work? Isn't it sad?" In truth, having survived the horror myself, I felt strong and capable of being with parents in their grief. Instead, I was unexpectedly overcome with emotion witnessing the daily *live* births in the hospitals. Here were couples full of promise, naïve to the experience they had escaped. They had the potential to live "happily ever after." Of course, most people hit bumps in life, and happily ever after was only a fantasy on my part. Still, I found myself being anxious when on the maternity ward. I lovingly observed the healthy babies, and I cried back in my office. Over time I made sense of this: I still longed for the experience that I would never have.

### **Perinatal Bereavement Is a Lifelong Process**

Looking back, I cannot disentangle the personal from the professional learning. They have been and always will be interwoven. Because of my work, I am continually exposed to babies dying and pregnancies ending prematurely. These experiences inform my personal journey of self-discovery that aids me in integrating my loss. At the same time, my loss gives me a unique window into the experience of my patients. Still, in 18 years, I have not outgrown or become immune to episodic unexpected traumatic grief.

As caregivers, we try to prepare parents for the return of intense emotions at particularly evocative times such as the anniversary of the due date, the birth day, Mother's Day, and holidays. We address the first few years pretty well. However, we are not specific or explicit enough about the lifelong ramifications. Hopefully, sharing my personal learning will enable you to deepen your insight and enhance your practice.

### **Anticipatory Guidance**

I was well prepared for the first year post loss. I attended a support group, stayed close with friends and family who could acknowledge Shoshana, and detached from those who could not. I returned to work after a six-week maternity leave, but for months I just went through the motions of my responsibilities. I read voraciously, sobbed, screamed, walked, lay awake. Sometimes I thought if I lay still long enough, I would just die from grief. Gradually, I came back to life.

I also was well prepared for the paradoxical experience of a subsequent pregnancy being both healing and restimulating. It was a long nine months of worry marked with moments of joy and excitement. My first pregnancy was at the beginning of a year of pregnancies

in my friends. My subsequent pregnancy was at the end of that procreative cycle. As a result, the cohort of children remained the same while I was pregnant with two different groups of women. Over time, my two pregnancies have blurred to some friends but remained distinct to others.

It took a *few years* of experimentation for me to find meaningful and comforting rituals that corresponded to various anniversary dates, such as the Hebrew date of death when I go to synagogue go to the cemetery. I have not found a comforting ritual for the due date. So each year it arrives and I am caught by surprise that it still bears emotional weight.

For the most part, I have integrated this loss. Still, I get anxious as the end of July approaches every single year. I remember the events of the days from July 29 when the demise was diagnosed to August 2 when I delivered Shoshana. Then I require a few days to regroup. Some years the time before is hardest; some years the time after. I never know and preparation does not really help. Over time, I have come to expect the unexpected during this time period. Even so, I was completely unprepared for the first time that the exact days and dates coincided on the 17th anniversary of Shoshana's death. Monday July 29 was the day we got the bad news. Tuesday July 30 was the day we went to the hospital for the ultrasound and the admitting clerk said, "Is this your first baby?" to which I replied, "The baby is dead!" The intensity of reliving the days was unimaginable. I had vivid nightmares and waking flashbacks. I had difficulty concentrating and felt dissociated from reality for moments at a time. As a psychologist, I recognized the signs of post-traumatic stress. At the same time, I had difficulty coping with such intensity after so many years. Once I realized the power of the days and dates being exactly the same, I was able to harness my anxiety a bit. I relied on my rituals, and got through the week. The weekend passed, and I returned to life as usual.

### **Lessons Learned**

Eighteen years ago, I dragged myself through the first Jewish New Year after Shoshana's birth. But, the following year, when I was pregnant with my daughter, Yael, I approached the holiday recommitted to life. So, in fact, I *am* celebrating 18 years of life. Once again, I notice that I experience grief even as I celebrate life. That will forever be my life experience.

### **About the Author**

*Deb Rich, Ph.D., Licensed Psychologist, is the Coordinator of Pregnancy and Newborn Loss Services for Fairview Health System in Minneapolis, MN and the Clinical Director of Shoshana Center for Reproductive Health Psychology in St. Paul, MN. She is a published author and lectures nationally.*