

# THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS

A self-help organization offering friendship and understanding to bereaved families

## FEBRUARY 2013

### Inside Valley Forge

**Meetings are on the first Thursday** of every month at 7:45PM (ending at 9:30PM). We meet at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church Fellowship Hall, Valley Forge and Henderson RDs, King of Prussia, PA. Phone on **meeting evenings only** is 610-265-0733. All other times please call Rhonda at 484-919-0820.



### Valley Forge Chapter

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### Meeting Schedule and other TCF Events of interest Please Mark Your Calendar

- Feb 7 Parental General Sharing  
Sibling Sharing, ages high school & older**
- Mar 7 General Sharing & Death by Suicide  
Sibling Sharing, ages high school & older**
- Jul 5-7, 2013 TCF National Conference  
Sheraton Boston Hotel, Boston, MA**

**We encourage newsletter writings from our members.** You may also submit articles written by others, please include the author of all articles submitted. **The cut-off date for newsletter entries is the 15th of the preceding month.**  
**ARTICLES SHOULD BE SENT TO THE NEWSLETTER EDITORS.**

There are no dues or fees to belong to The Compassionate Friends, or to receive our newsletter. Your tax deductible donations (which we call love gifts) given in memory of your loved one enables us to defray the cost of chapter expenses, particularly the newsletter, meetings, and our outreach to the newly bereaved. **Please include any special tribute you wish printed in the newsletter along with your gift.**

If you donate to **United Way** at your place of work, and wish your contribution to go to the Valley Forge Chapter of The Compassionate Friends, you may do so by entering: **The Compassionate Friends - Valley Forge Chapter United Way ID# 04-104.** on your pledge form.

**PLEASE MAKE ALL CHECKS PAYABLE TO:  
TCF VALLEY FORGE CHAPTER  
SEND TO: CHAPTER LEADER  
RHONDA GOMEZ**

#### TCF Mission Statement

When a child dies, at any age, the family suffers intense pain and may feel hopeless and isolated. The Compassionate Friends provides highly personal comfort, hope, and support to every family experiencing the death of a son or a daughter, a brother or a sister, or a grandchild, and helps others better assist the grieving family.

**REFRESHMENTS**

Refreshments may be donated in memory of loved ones, please call **Rhonda (484) 919-0820**, or you may sign the refreshment chart located on the refreshment table.

**Rhonda & Frank Gomez**, in honor of all the children, grandchildren. & siblings.  
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**LOVE GIFTS**

**Nina Bernstein** in loving memory of my beloved son, **Andrew Voluck**  
on his anniversary Feb 9<sup>th</sup>.

**Robert & Kathy Grossi** in loving memory of our son, **James Michael Grossi (23)**  
We love and miss you.

**Nancy & Gerry Hall** in memory of our beloved son, **Douglas Bryon Hall (27)**

**Joyce, Vern & Michael Kaiser** in memory of our son/brother, **Brian** on his birthday  
Nov 9<sup>th</sup> & his anniversary Nov 2<sup>nd</sup>.

**Lynette Lampman** in memory of my beloved son, **Shawn Lampmann** on his birthday  
Feb. 10th, and his anniversary Feb. 13th. Loved and missed everyday.

**Lynne & John Malloy** in loving memory of our son, **David Paul Gross (32)**

**Robert & Melissa McCullough** in honor of our daughter/sister,  
**Caroline (2)** whose angelic blessing are felt each and every day.

**Connie & Dick Nolan** in loving memory of our son, **Christopher** on his birthday Feb 9<sup>th</sup>  
and his anniversary Jan 3<sup>rd</sup>.

**Carol Sannella** in memory of my beloved son, **David (19)**, and my husband, **Bob.**

**Harry & Merrily Spiess** in remembrance of our son, **Ryan Spiess** who departed 20 years  
ago and grandson, **Charles A. Smith** who departed 6 years ago.

**Ronda Stansbery** in honor of my daughter,  
**Susan Anne Stansbery Stamman (stillborn)**

**MEETING CANCELLATION NOTIFICATION**

It is impossible to notify all members who are planning to attend a meeting. If there is a need to cancel a TCF meeting due to inclement weather, power shortage or any situations that may occur preventing safe travel, **Please view the Valley Forge web site: [www.tcfvalleyforge.org](http://www.tcfvalleyforge.org)**, for the latest update or call the TCF phone 484-919-0820.

We have approximately 600 in our database mailing list. Not knowing who plans to attend, this would be an impossible task to contact everyone by telephone.

**RESPONSE FEATURE ON VALLEY FORGE WEBSITE**

The Valley Forge website ([www.tcfvalleyforge.org](http://www.tcfvalleyforge.org)) has a feature for you to leave comments and suggestions that you would like to see in the Chapter Program. Please voice your opinions on how the Chapter is being conducted, and ways we might improve the program. The chapter belongs to all of us, please support it.

**THE COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS  
NATIONAL BOARD OF DIRECTORS**

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**TCF Facebook**

Join 22,000 people who are sharing their grief journey at The Compassionate Friends Facebook page. The page is designed to be informative and supportive. Check out the question or quote of the day. You can find the page by going TCF's website home page at [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org) and clicking on the Facebook icon. Or you can go to Facebook and do a search for "The Compassionate Friends/USA." Join us and contribute to the conversation.

**IMAGINE**

Imagine for a moment a mobile. All the shapes are of different weight and design, but they hang together harmoniously, each catching the sunlight and creating a melodious rhythm in the wind. Now snip one of the pieces; there is chaos. Each of the remaining pieces smashes into another one, and what was a melodious sound in now a clanging, almost wailing in the wind. When a child is snatched by death from a family, the results are the same, multiplied innumerable times.

*By Stephen Barrett, TCF, Ottawa, IL*

**THERE IS NO LOVE WITHOUT LOSS. AND THERE IS NO MOVING BEYOND LOSS WITHOUT SOME EXPERIENCE OF MOURNING. TO BE UNABLE TO MOURN IS TO BE UNABLE TO ENTER THE GREAT HUMAN CYCLE OF DEATH AND REBIRTH.**  
*Robert Jay Lifton*

**OUR CHILDREN & SIBLINGS LOVED, SADLY MISSED AND REMEMBERED**

Each month some of us must face those special, but difficult days of birthdays and anniversaries. This month we ask your thoughts and prayers for the parents/siblings/relatives of the following. children:

**We will no longer list the birth and death years of deceased persons in our newsletter.  
We have concerns this information could be misused, and result in an adversity for the families.**

**FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS**

Madeleine Adler, son *J. Peter Adler* 2/5  
William & Charlotte Bodulich, son *William W. Bodulich* 2/14  
Ann Bruner, sister *Katy Wade* 2/8  
Donna & Gregory Class, daughter *Megan Maria Class* 2/7  
Wendy Coleman, daughter *Gabrielle* 2/19  
Liz & Scott Conaghan, brother *Jan* 2/6  
Jane Cox, son *Bill* 2/21  
Bud Cunnane, son *Patrick* 2/14  
Marie D'Angelo, son *Mark Anthony* 2/15  
Jim & Ruth Fairley, son *David Fairley* 2/5  
Rochena & Pat Fatale, son *Mark Longan* 2/21  
Charlie & Jill Fick, son *Michael Sternberg* 2/10  
Laura Giordano, son *Peter* 2/12  
Sandra Greenly, son *Michael Greenly* 2/18  
Cathy Grosshanten, son *Gary* 2/16  
George & Kay Hartman, son *Thomas R Hartman* 2/4  
Jean & James Hayden, son *LCDR. Timothy M. Hayden* 2/17  
Othell & William Heaney, son *Kevin* 2/14  
Nora & Peter Heiss, daughter *Noreen Schmucker* 2/15  
Kimberlee Hills, brother *Chuck Hills* 2/10  
Charles Hills, son *Chuck Hills* 2/10  
Thomas & Virginia Hoesch, son *William E. "Buddy" Hoesch* 2/16  
Marlene Hoffman, brother *Barry Hoffman* 2/4  
Sally Ivory, son *Jimmy Ivory* 2/4  
Joan Jagers, son *John Costello* 2/17  
Deborah Keevill, son *Brandon* 2/23  
Shirley & Philip C. Kennedy, son *Philip V. Kennedy* 2/22  
Margaret & Edward Kiefski, Sr., son *Edward Kiefski, Jr.* 2/11  
Lynette Lampmann, son *Shawn* 2/10  
Carole LaSorsa, son *Stephen* 2/17  
Liz & Joe Loeper, son *Jamey* 2/27  
Julie & Richard May, son *William L. May* 2/25  
Jennifer McGowan Clark, brother *Joseph McGowan* 2/25  
Sue McMaster, cousin *Laura* 2/28  
Kathleen Mitchel, brother *Jeffrey Hathaway* 2/19  
Audrey Morasco, son *Christopher Morasco* 2/22

**FEBRUARY BIRTHDAYS continued**

John & Mary Ann Murphy, daughter *Maureen Murphy* 2/13  
Dale & Helen Ninneman, son *Dale Ninneman II* 2/24  
Connie & Richard Nolan, son *Christopher Nolan* 2/9  
Emil Nunez, son *Oliver Nunez* 2/12  
Robert & Jean Phillips, son *Robert Phillips* 2/23  
Carol Phipps, daughter *Casey* 2/18  
Joan & Earl Reigel, daughter *Melissa Reigel* 2/19  
Jeri Reinert, mother *Theresa Volpe* 2/27  
Tony & Toni Riccardi, son *David Riccardi* 2/17  
Jacqueline Rider, son *Matthew Rider* 2/14  
Barbara Rossman, daughter *Kickole Lyn* 2/13  
Linda Sandlin, brother *LCDR. Timothy M. Hayden* 2/17  
Bernice Scheinfeld, son *Richard Scheinfeld* 2/18  
Frank and Kay Shinnners , son *Erik Shinnners* 2/22  
Janemarie Smith, daughter *Beth Jovanovic* 2/6  
Gary Snyder, daughter *Alyse* 2/16  
Margaret & Wade Stallard, son *Wade Hampton Stallard, III* 2/21  
Elaine & Joe Stillwell, son *Denis E. O'Connor, III* 2/4  
Robert & Nancy Thompson, friend *J. Peter Adler* 2/5  
Esperanza & Libardo Toro, daughter *Maria Eugenia Toro* 2/9  
Barbara Torrens, brother *Robert Birmele* 2/18  
Mek Wagner, daughter *Paige* 2/1  
Henry & Elizabeth Weaver, grandson *Donald Smith, Jr.* 2/24  
Gisela Witte, son *Bruce G Edlund* 2/24  
Mary Mulholland, son *Joseph McGowan* 2/25

**FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES**

Gary & Phyllis Adler, son *Matthew* - 2/18  
Marilynn Anton, cousin/godmother *Douglas Hofmockel* - 2/7  
Nina Bernstein, son *Andrew Voluck* - 2/9  
Donna & Gregory Class, daughter *Megan Maria Class* - 2/9  
Lisa Connolly, daughter *Elyce Pindjak* - 2/10  
Janet Cozzone, daughter *Jesika* - 2/19  
Allison Crowder, daughter *Amber* - 2/21  
Emilie Degville, daughter *Madeline* - 2/8  
Harold & Marcia Epstein, grandson *Andrew Voluck* - 2/9  
Danielle Evelyn, son *Samir* - 2/12  
Rita & Thomas Gibbons, daughter *Patricia Gibbons* - 2/1  
Jack & Freda Gross, daughter *Linda Joy Gross* - 2/25

**FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES continued**

Kimberlee Hills, brother *Chuck Hills* - 2/24  
Charles Hills, son *Chuck Hills* - 2/24  
Marlene Hoffman, brother *Barry Hoffman* - 2/12  
Marie & Ken Hofmockel, son *Douglas Hofmockel* - 2/7  
Robert Huss, son *Daniel* - 2/27  
Judy Kahl, son *Mark* - 2/16  
Barbara & Michael Kaner, son *Max Steven Kaner* - 2/7  
Sandi Kensicki, sister *Rose* - 2/5  
Tobie Kessler, daughter *Beth Kessler Waasdorp* - 2/9  
Rhoda & Melvin Kreiner, daughter *Anna Kreiner* - 2/10  
Lynette Lampmann, son *Shawn* - 2/13  
Sue Lawlor, son *Jim* - 2/17  
Janet Leflar, son *Scott* - 2/22  
Mary MacFarland, son *Marc* - 2/12  
Carl & Josie Malitsky, daughter *Cynthia Malitsky* - 2/8  
James & Mary Beth Mattiford, son *Scott Mattiford* - 2/26  
Debra McKinley - Hastings, brother *Ken* - 2/17  
William & Carol Meehan, son *Patrick W. Meehan* - 2/11  
Alexandra Milas, sister *Demitra Vallianos* - 2/17  
Jeffrey & Christine Miller, daughter *Teresa Leanne Miller* - 2/20  
Andrew Miller, daughter *Perri* - 2/5  
Leonard & Thelma Miller, son *Lowell Bruce Miller* - 2/23  
Betty Miller, husband *Dick Miller* - 2/8  
Kathleen Mitchel, brother *Jeffrey Hathaway* - 2/27  
Fran & Kathy Moran, daughter *Denise Nicole Moran* - 2/3  
Anthony & Mary Morrell, son *Andrew Michael Morrell* - 2/2  
Aminah Na'im, son *Dawann* - 2/14  
Kathy Nicholson, son *Frank* - 2/3  
Dale & Helen Ninneman, son *Dale Ninneman II* - 2/29  
John O'Rourke, son *Brian J. O'Rourke* - 2/25  
Carol Phipps, daughter *Casey* - 2/16  
Thomas & Jeri "Bubbles" Reinert, son *Thomas Reinert, Jr.* - 2/19  
Susan Reynolds, son *Craig Anderson* - 2/3  
Jacqueline Rider, son *Matthew Rider* - 2/14  
Pamela Schneibolk, brother *Douglas Hofmockel* - 2/7  
Priscilla Shober, son *Jeffrey R. Shober* - 2/2  
Melissa Smith, daughter *Ava* - 2/5  
Penny & Steve Stanaitis, daughter *Mikayla Faith* - 2/20  
Ellen & Frank Svitek, daughter *Kate Elizabeth Svitek* - 2/9  
Mary Ellen Swider, daughter *Kelly Swider* - 2/8

**FEBRUARY ANNIVERSARIES continued**

**Elaine & Tim Thomas**, son *Seth Peterson* - 2/9

**Marilyn Toole**, son *Ted Toole* - 2/26

**Ann VanLandingham**, daughter-in-law *Rita VanLandingham* - 2/12

**Laura & Leo Weishew**, brother *Steven McGowan* - 2/2

**Terry & Bob Wolfe**, son and stepson *Steven Moyer* - 2/15

**Rose Yanni**, nephew *David Yanni* - 2/10

**Frank & Dolores Yanni**, son *David Yanni* - 2/10

**Anthony & Cindy Zalesky**, grandson *Max Zalesky* - 2/12

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**SHARED THOUGHTS ON REMEMBERING THE SAD AS WELL AS THE HAPPY TIMES**

February is the month we express our love to those significant persons in our lives. For many bereaved parents and siblings, it can be a time of increased pain. We miss the exchange of love from the person who has died. Our Douglas died on February 7th. Valentines day has always been a difficult time, because of being so close to his anniversary. Both holidays and anniversaries can renew our person grief.

Our love does not end with the death. There still is a need to talk of our deceased, and how much they mean to us. Caring relatives and friends that will listen without judging, can be very helpful. We need to express our feeling, and feel understood, when we are both happy and sad. It is important to tell those trying to help us, that remembering that very special person who was such a significant part of our life is essential to our healing. They also need to know the importance of remembering the sad times for tears, as well as the happy time for laughter and smiles. Most non-bereaved feel only happy memories heal. Perhaps, this is because that is what feels most comfortable for them.

There is no way of knowing what another bereaved person is really experiencing. There are times we all hide our feelings. Often, we are concerned about family members close to us, and are afraid of adding to their suffering, so consequentially we avoid talking about the issue. We must remember they too may need to share their feelings, whether it be good or bad memories. We can offer comfort, understanding, and give them permission to express themselves.

Siblings tend to consider their parents the primary grievers, and often try to "be strong" for them. No one needs to be strong for another family member. The pretense of "holding it together" can be very damaging, and even deepen our depression. Depression can cause us to withdraw, so everyone needs to put effort into working very hard in keeping communications open. Frequently, it is much more comfortable for siblings to share with peers, on any subject. When we sense we are pressuring them to talk, we must back off, and respect their wishes, or this can lead to their avoiding family gatherings. Sharing can not be forced.

Many time our support has come from the people we would least expect. Everyone must choose those they feel most comfortable with when sharing their grief. Give our children the same privilege when sharing such a personal part of their life.

One of the ways we can help our family most, is to do our own grief work. This means saving time for ourselves to face our pain, and not run away from it. If we heal and gain some normality back into our lives, it will make it easier for the rest our household.

God Bless, Marie Hofmockel, TCF Valley Forge

**THOUGHTS ABOUT PROGRESS**

One thing that is frequently discussed at our meeting is the despair of thinking you are on the road to "recovery", when all of a sudden you seem to be back at square one. But are you really? Let's keep in mind most of us have had no previous experience in "recovering" from the loss of a child. Therefore, we have no point of reference- it's all new to us. Actually the 'roller coaster' of emotions is perfectly normal. In the very beginning most of us seem to vacillate between total numbness and excruciating pain. Constant crying until not a tear left... just dried up and limp...we actually ARE living minute to minute.

After a couple of months, we might possibly have a few hours that we have not cried or felt that deep overwhelming despair. Then... WHAM. . back to where we started. We tend to panic and think something is wrong with us. Let's be realistic! There is something wrong--- terribly wrong-- we have each lost a child. Let's be fair to ourselves. We started to play a role to the outside world. Like the old song says, "laughing on the outside, crying on the inside." "We want to be acceptable to society." You are doing so well, we have heard from friends and family. IF ONLY THEY KNEW!!! We may feel we have to fool others, but let us be really honest with our feelings. To deny our grief, particularly to ourselves is to block the road to recovery. Remember, that recovery in this case does not mean "getting over it,'... it simple means to gain control of our lives again.

So, let's not worry about what other people think, say, or expect. Our friends (well-meaning as they are), sometimes members of our family, even someone who has lost a child, should not sit in judgment. Each person grieves differently, in different times, and in different ways, Unless someone has totally withdrawn from everything and everybody over a lengthy period of time, the chances are all is in the realm of normalcy.

Only after we have walked down the long road of grief and can look back, remembering those early days and weeks, can we see we really are NOT on square one again. We have just slipped backwards for a time. That is all. Allow yourself that. Then strive forward again. It takes time, a lot of time! We tend to expect too much from others; others expect too much from us; and, therefore, we tend to expect too much from ourselves. Remember, grief work is the very hardest work you will have to do in your entire life.

*Mary Ehmman, TCF Valley Forge, PA*

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By my helping I will be helped  
If I accept your anger then my anger is  
accepted.  
By my caring I am cared for.  
When I listen I will be listened to.  
And all these things mean  
On the lonely road of grief I will not be alone.  
My recovery will be a little gentler,

And my child will not be forgotten  
Because the memory of him can be shared  
With you who understand how I feel --  
My special Compassionate Friends

*Shirley Egan*  
TCF, New South Wales, Australia

## REFLECTIONS

With the death of my sister come some painful realizations; that life isn't always fair or predictable; that sometimes even my best still isn't good enough; and that from the day of her death, the happy events in my life would always be tinged with sadness.

Despite the pain and loss, death has also left me with some valuable lessons and precious gifts. As a result of my sister's death, I have a greater appreciation of life and a greater compassion for those who hurt. I have learned to be a survivor and to have a successful career and productive life in the face of tremendous grief and loss. I have been gifted with good friends and special people to help me through the rough times. But most of all, I have been given the gift of time – time to heal and time to replace those painful memories of death with priceless memories of my sister's life.

*Cathy Schanberger*

The breath of winter  
painted fragile stars  
on all the windows  
of my quiet house.

And there I found  
your face,  
more fragile even than  
the season's art,  
a wonder to my eyes.

How can it be  
that winter paints  
such secret things  
in white-and-silver sheen  
for those who cry alone  
at frosted windows?

*Sascha Wagner*

I wish I could tell everyone who has lost a loved one how important it is to let themselves, and their family, remember. Forget, if you can, the sickness or tragedy that took them, but give them a place in your life. My family speaks very naturally of their father and their sister. We remember the fun, the love, and the closeness... We have memories to cherish, and we shouldn't cheat ourselves by not doing that. I don't mean that we should constantly talk about them, but when something we're doing reminds us of something good that happened when we were still a whole family, we don't hesitate to say so.

*Lettie Petrie*

## Love Lives On

Those we love  
are never really lost to us --  
we feel them  
in so many special ways --  
through friends  
they always cared about  
and dreams they left behind,

in beauty that they added to our days ...  
in words of wisdom  
we still carry with us  
and memories that never will be gone ...  
Those we love  
are never really lost to us --  
For everywhere their special love lives on.

by *Amanda Bradley*

**Friends are those rare people who ask how we are and then wait to hear the answer.**

*Ed Cunningham, TCF Savannah, GA*

**RESPECT THE LONELY SAILOR ON THAT VAST, DARK OCEAN**

Recently, two acquaintances were discussing a man whose wife died a few months ago. It was time he gave away her things, they said. It was time he got over it.

I listened, silent, but started writing this column in my mind.

Dear friends, we have such a small understanding of grief and so little patience with the bereaved. It's time to find more of both.

Grief has no schedule. It would be so much easier on all of us if the pain of bereavement ended after three months, but it just doesn't work that way.

Sometimes after three months the reality of the loss is just beginning to sink in.

Grief is neither a sickness that can be cured nor a stage one can outgrow. Like any other milestone, it's a permanent addition to our self-definition. After the loss of someone we love, please don't expect us to snap out of it and be who we were before. Our old self and our old life died with our loved ones. However prepared we might have been, when they died we stepped through a door that has forever closed behind us. We can't go back.

Sometimes we feel like we're just going through the motions for the first year after a loss. Each holiday, anniversary and birthday looms like a tidal wave and hits us about that hard. The weeks or months in between are simply recovery from or preparation for the next unbearable event.

We have to get through all these significant dates at least once before we can understand how we'll get through the rest of our lives. It takes a full year to go through all of them, and then we still face the worst one of all, the first anniversary of the death.

Everyone grieves differently. Sleep, often elusive, is at least oblivion. Waking is dreaded. We may be clingy, we may have nightmares, we may be remote, we may cry often, we may never cry again.

We're often told time will heal us, but time is the enemy. We want to turn back the clock but it goes forward. It slows down in the worst parts and speeds up through the easy parts. Some days are excruciating. Some seasons are endless.

Eventually, things do change. But each person's grief takes its own good time. While a 1-month-old grief is unbearable and a 1-year-old grief is still raw, a 10-year-old grief is different.

Even after much time has passed, gently and caringly asking about a loss can be a kindness, especially when well-meaning friends have decided it's a taboo subject. One of the hardest parts of losing someone you love is the fear that he will be forgotten. So many times, the people who recognize our need to talk are those who've been where we are.

There's a strange kinship among the bereaved. We have lifetime memberships in a club no one wants to belong to. More than once, I've initiated conversations with near-strangers about subjects so private and painful others might have been shocked. But we understood each other. We recognized each other because we spoke the language of tragedy.

Everyone reacts differently to a loss. Some of us do things we'd never do otherwise. Please, be gentle in your opinions and understanding in your expectations. If you haven't gone through what someone else is experiencing, then trust me, no matter how compassionate you are, you don't know what it's like.

People speak of grief as if it were a tide that's come in and will soon recede. But grief is not the tide. Grief is what's left when the unimaginable occurs. It's the residue of horror, the aftermath of heartache, the uninvited guest who will not leave. It lingers, it hovers, it smothers. It's unrelenting.

Bereavement puts us on a small boat in a great ocean. Time, faith, love, friends and our own inner strength are the tides that can carry us to shore. But grief is the ocean, vast and overwhelming.

Once you've seen the ocean, you never see the world the same.

*Jennifer Hansen*

## THE MYTH OF MANAGING GRIEF

Not long ago, a friend in New York said that she often feels cut off from the rest of the country because Sept. 11 is still so much with most New Yorkers.

“We’ve all gotten on with our lives, and if you don’t go down to the (World Trade Center) site, there are no visible traces,” she said. “But there’s still so much grief and sadness hanging in the air.”

People outside of New York can’t really understand, said my friend.

“You talk with them and, if you didn’t lose someone directly in the twin towers, it’s like their tone says, ‘Hey, shouldn’t you be moving on?’ They don’t get that there’s a collective grief. I actually prefer it when people don’t even ask how it’s going. It’s easier.”

Our American culture boasts many virtues and several strong suits, but grieving — collectively or individually — isn’t one of them.

Unlike older societies, we have few formal grieving rituals in place to guide us. So, we try to tackle grief in our typical American way — as if it’s a problem to be solved, an illness to be cured, an unnatural, machine-gumming breakdown that needs to be fixed, ASAP.

Perhaps more phobic about suffering than any society in history, Americans tend to start the clock ticking early in “managing” grief. While solicitous and caring of the newly bereaved, we encourage heartbroken mates and parents to medicate themselves so they can “keep it together” through the funeral.

This ignores the fact that wailing and keening and “losing it” are a pretty accurate rendering of what humans inside feel like when someone we love dies or leaves us. But, in our culture, public wailing and keening are considered bad forms; they are seen as unwelcome reminders of pathology among “healthy” people.

Even the most devastating loss — that of a child by a parent — seems to carry an unwritten statute of limitations on grief, something I learned several years ago when I reported on an international organization called Compassionate Friends.

Founded in England in the late 1960s, the massive support network’s chapters provide something that bereaved parents and siblings can’t get from the rest of the world: “unconditional love and understanding” (as its informal credo states) with no expiration date.

As one member told me, she knew that a Compassionate Friends meeting was the one place she could go and never hear the unintentionally accusing question, “How many years ago did you say your child died?”

Grief is not like an illness, to be fought and cured with medicine or chemotherapy and radiation.

Generalizations can be made about human behavioral tendencies, and time lines can be drawn for predicted “healing,” but each person’s grieving process is unique.

Some people never “get better.” And nobody survives grief unchanged.

As Stephanie Ericsson wrote in “Companion Through the Darkness,” grief is “a tidal wave that overtakes you, smashes down upon you with unimaginable force, sweeps you up into its darkness, where you tumble and crash against unidentifiable surfaces only to be thrown out on an unknown beach, bruised, reshaped.”

Or, as a man who lost his 7-year-old son once confided, “I’d always thought of myself as a happy man, but that’s gone now. We have moments of happiness, some of them long and filled with laughter, but the sense of what is lost is never far away.”

In her book, Stephanie Ericsson also warned:

“Grief makes what others think of you moot. It shears away the masks of normal life and forces brutal honesty out of your mouth before propriety can stop you. It shoves away friends and scares away so-called friends and rewrites your address book for you.”

By *Stephanie Salter* - San Francisco Chronicle - Sunday April 7, 2002