

## ONE FOOT IN HEAVEN, ONE FOOT ON EARTH

### *Interview with Annette*

***'It is every parent's worst nightmare to receive that phone call. I miss her presence every minute of every day. I seriously wanted to go and knock on his door and say do you realise what you've done to our family? I wanted him to know how much pain, you know, the serrated sharp, jagged edges of a mother's pain.'***

**Celia:** You're listening to Messages of hope and I'm Celia Fielke. Today I'm talking with Annette about coming to terms with the death of her 19-year-old daughter and her journey through the grief. It's a phone call every parent dreads and a situation that no parent should have to go through. How do you navigate your way through the unthinkable?

**Annette:** Elise was hit by a speeding motorist. After two long agonising days, Elise was declared brain dead. The bottom dropped out of my world. I miss her presence every minute of every day. I miss tangibly being able to give her a hug and a kiss. She was a beautiful young lady. She used to dazzle at four o'clock in the morning! Like any 19-year-old she loved music, she loved selfies and eating chocolate and shopping. She loved the colour pink and so do I so that's that common connection between mother and daughter.

**Celia:** That's a really beautiful bond. I'm wondering when the reality of Elise's death hit home, what was that like for you?

**Annette:** I lost 10 kilograms in weight immediately. I lost my concentration skills. I had to take a break from work because I was chronically fatigued and yet I couldn't sleep. I had some recurring nightmares constantly, and I was eventually hospitalised for a delayed shock. For me, the first year was bad enough after Elise died, but the second year was worse.

I was in such a deep, dark, broken place, I wore blacks and I wore browns. Any bright colours repelled me. Every time I remembered that my daughter had died, it was like a punch to the chest. It was searing pain. It felt like a butcher's knife had been plunged into my heart and it was slowly turning.

**Celia:** What were you feeling about the person who crashed into Elise's car?

**Annette:** I wanted him to know how much pain, you know, the serrated, sharp, jagged edges of a mother's pain, dealing with her 19-year-old child. He'd stolen that from me. He'd taken that away from all of us. He was stealing my joy and my hope for the future. He invaded my thoughts; he lived in my mind constantly. I knew his name, I knew where he lived. I seriously wanted to go and knock on his

door and say: 'Do you realise what you've done to our family?' I wanted him to feel some of this pain.

It was a crossroads, really, when I thought to myself, 'you're this man's prisoner. You're putting the welcome mat out for him 24/7 to the expense of grieving the loss of your beautiful daughter.' That became the crossroads of my life. I knew that I needed to do something.

**Celia:** What was the next step for you?

**Annette:** There was one moment when I knew that I was at rock bottom. I was in my lounge room, and I fell to the floor. I knew that I didn't like the person I was becoming. Where had all that kindness and generosity of spirit, where had that gone? I was bitter and I was twisted and I just didn't like me.

I made a conscious decision and a conscious choice to scream out to God for help. I know I've hit rock bottom, but I don't know how to get myself back up again. I asked God to help me, but I didn't know how he was going to help me. I didn't know how I was going to help myself. And I remember saying a prayer, you know, 'Just help me God, I'm at the end of my rope. Please just help me to get through, not just the intervening years, but just today, one minute, one second, one day at a time.'

And do you know what he asked me to do? The hardest thing that a parent can ever do besides organising a funeral for your child - he asked me to start forgiving the man who had killed my child! How do you do that?

How do you do that?

I remember it just kept coming back on my heart all the time: Start the process of forgiveness, start the process.

**Celia:** It must have been really hard to get your head around that idea.

**Annette:** I think I was resistant at the time because forgiveness is a very difficult thing to enact. It's much easier to shelve, it's much easier to be resistant and say I'm not doing it, I'm not doing it, I can't do it, it's too big, it's too immense. I don't even know where to start and yet I knew that God was offering me freedom. Freedom from driving myself crazy, going round and round in different directions, still coming out with the same result.

**Celia:** So how did God help you find that freedom?

**Annette:** Forgiveness is a process. It's not a feeling and it's definitely not an emotion. And it might take the rest of my life before I feel that I have completed that forgiveness, but I've started the journey. I still wish I could grab him and let him know, you know at the difficult times when I go out up to the cemetery, that full realisation that Elise will never be with me in this lifetime ever again. But allowing God to deal with him and not dwell on the things that I can't change.

For me, that's important. And I know I am no longer that man's prisoner. The speeding driver that killed Elise – I no longer rent a room in my head and invite him into my thoughts. That is so healing. That is such a release for me. It means I've released all of that pain and all of that bitterness over to God.

The minute that I started to feel that peace, that burden lifted from my shoulders, I started wearing brighter clothes, wearing brighter and longer dangly earrings, which for me was a real sign to say that I was emerging.

**Celia:** Annette, have there been practical, physical things that have helped you process your grief?

**Annette:** I've been very proactive in my grief about doing something, you know, planting rose bushes and journaling. Getting out kayaking and walking. In the early days I used to walk for miles and miles. Being out in the fresh air always helps to revive me.

It doesn't mean I don't have my bad days or my pain or my bitter times. I still do, especially on an anniversary or a birthday or a family gathering, the bigger life events. I have my extremely bad days, but I've learned that they don't last forever.

Grief work is the hardest work you will ever do. As a bereaved parent, you sit with one foot on the earth and one foot in heaven. I'm not ever going to allow myself to go back down again long term. Short term, I'm allowed to, but you know, I just, I live in this freedom now. I live in this lightness of spirit. I like the me that I am now.

I don't project and think too far ahead. I don't have any grand plans. I know that life can change in an instant so I'm very mindful of living in the moment. God gave me a second chance in life, and I grabbed it and I'm running with it. I still know that I have so much to give.

I am so thankful for having God in my life because where would I be if he wasn't? I would be a bitter, broken-hearted mother that has no hope in the world. I don't want to be that person. I know that he's got a plan for me. I know that he has a great plan and purpose for my life. I don't know where it's going to take me, but *he* does. I have no idea what's going to happen tomorrow, but *he* does.

I'm making the best of whatever time is left for me, making a difference with purpose in other people's lives as well as my own and hopefully inspiring others to know that wherever their journey takes them, that there will be hope for them.

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