

To my family and friends:

The GriefShare class that I am taking has suggested that I compose and send out a “grief letter” to everyone I know. Wow! In this letter, they are suggesting that I describe what I have experienced and how I am feeling about it. They also suggest that I let people know what they can expect from me in my current state. And finally, that I give you instructions on what you can do to help me.

I guess I will start out with what I’ve experienced and how I’m feeling. When Justin first died, it was like a bad dream that I couldn’t wake up from. My sister, Debbie, her husband, Bob, and daughters, Ryane and Katie, were my lifesavers in a rough sea where I couldn’t catch my breath. They kept me safe and protected me from all the waves crashing around me. I am extremely grateful to them for being there for me and creating the protection that I so needed. In the months since that initial wave of shock and disbelief, I am learning to navigate on my own, but it has been a slow and scary process. My life will never be the same. I miss Justin every day! So much so that I think I can actually feel my heart ache sometimes. There have been many nights that I don’t sleep well, but those are getting fewer and fewer as I walk through this process. I am learning to adjust to my new reality – never getting a phone call from him or having him come over to the house and raid my refrigerator for a BBQ at the apartments, or watching one of our favorite programs (Numbers) together, or having him talk to me about his latest paper and asking me to proof read it, or going out to lunch with him after church...no hugs, not even any arguments. It’s all gone. And if that wasn’t bad enough, the salt in the wound is that the future that I had imagined is gone forever as well. I will never be able to feel that sense of pride as my boy walks across the stage to accept his college diploma, hear him talk about his first love, watch him marry his bride, or see the look in his eyes when he holds his child for the first time. All my dreams of being a grandmother are gone forever. Those are hard realities for me!

I share all of this with you to give you some idea of what I experience each day. I know some of you have called or attempted to reach out to me and I have not responded. I try to respond to as many people as I can and it’s not that I don’t appreciate your concern, but many days it is all I can do to get through my workday, come home and just try to process all of this. So what you can expect from me in my current state? I think that depends on the day, but most of the time I’m pretty functional. I try to return phone calls, but I’m still not really good at initiating them. I communicate on Facebook a lot (it’s safe!). I love getting cards from you and I save every one. I like spending one-on-one time with people. I’m still not really good in a crowd. If you invite me to a party or a wedding, please don’t be offended if I don’t come. But don’t stop inviting me – eventually I will be brave enough to come. If we do spend time together, I love to talk about Justin. As one person put it “The sound of my son’s name may bring tears to my eyes, but it will always be music to my ears.” Please don’t stop talking about him! I’m not always the life of the party, but I don’t sit around and cry all the time either. So that leads to what you can do to help me. Don’t expect me to be the same person I was before his death. She is gone forever! I would love to build a new relationship with you. Please don’t tell me how to grieve or what you think I should do in a particular situation. This is a very personal journey for me and I am doing my best to seek counsel on how to walk through this in an authentic and dignified fashion. I don’t want to drown in my feelings, but I wouldn’t be honoring myself or Justin if I denied them either. I’m learning to ask for help around my house, but that’s not always easy for me. If you see something that needs to be done, maybe you could offer to help. Last but not least, the most important thing you can do for me is to love me through this. I know I’m not the easiest person to be around these days, but I need your love and friendship.

This may seem like a strange thing to receive from me (I even think it’s strange!), but it is an exercise I was given to help me grieve and heal, and I’m trying my best to do that.

Thank you all,

Donna Woodard