



THE GIFT OF LOSS

When her son Dan passed away suddenly, Karen Chaston was forced to reassess her life, work and relationships, taking the first step on the journey to becoming her own best friend.

WORDS BY KAREN CHASTON

Before 2011, I didn't think much about loss. It made me uncomfortable. I didn't want to talk or think about it. I stumbled through my own and other people's losses. I suffered mostly in silence. I used all of my coping mechanisms to get through it ... although in hindsight, some of them should really have been called 'non-coping mechanisms'.

In July 2011, I was 54, living with my husband, Andrew, our 27-year-old son, Dan and his girlfriend, Georgie. I had slept in and at 8:30am was starting to think about breakfast when my husband yelled out, "Bloody hell, Dan is passed out at the back door."

I ran downstairs to find Dan lying there in the foetal position. We started to push him: "Dan, Dan, wake up." He had saliva coming out of his mouth, but he wouldn't wake up. The paramedics arrived quickly, and within seconds they said the words no parent ever wants to hear: "Sorry Ma'am, he is dead, probably has been for a few hours."

The morgue attendees removed Dan's body from the house on Sunday afternoon. The police gave us the morgue phone number and suggested that we call after noon on Monday. By then, they would know when the autopsy would be performed and when they could

share the findings with us. The next day, we called and were told that we could come in around 2pm. Andrew, Dan's brothers Ben and Josh, Georgie and I all went, not really knowing what to expect. When we arrived, a lady greeted us. I am sorry I do not remember her name, so I will call her Grace as she was totally amazing. Amazing Grace.

AUTOPSY RESULTS

Grace took us into a sitting room and started to explain the autopsy findings. She also told us that when we viewed Dan's body, we would see some marks – some from the autopsy and some that had already been there, probably from his fall.

The two major findings were that Dan had a brain tumor that was benign; and that his lungs were so bad that even if he had heavily smoked cigarettes from the time he was 15 (which he had not), he could not have done half the damage that they had found.

To our knowledge, Dan had not been aware of either of these things.

Grace talked to us for about 20 minutes, without notes. Even though I was stricken with grief, uncomfortable and apprehensive, I was still aware of Grace's empathy for our situation. She had taken the

time to remember every detail so she could sit and talk to us without a barrier of notes and files. We all decided to view Dan's body. Andrew, Georgie and I were very happy we did. A clean Dan lay in front of us. He looked asleep, if very pale and cold. It was still a better memory to see when we closed our eyes each night than the one from the previous day.

After viewing the body, we went back into the sitting room. Grace asked us if we had any questions.

Once they were all answered, I flippantly said, "OK Grace, enough is enough. Can you please wake him up so we can take him home?"

Not realising I was being sarcastic, Grace replied, "Yes, of course you can take him home, a lot of people do that." I told Grace I was not being serious, though it was interesting to learn that some people do choose to act that way.

We quickly thanked her and left. Initially, we were all very quiet in the car, alone with our thoughts.

Then I said, "Could you imagine what would have happened if we took Dan home?"

For the next 45 minutes, we were laughing and joking about all the antics we would have gotten up to if Dan had come home. The 1989 film, *Weekend at Bernie's* would have looked tame compared to what we would have done. Our banter was such a great release of tension. We all started to top each other's suggestions, each bringing on more laughter.

THE BEST MEDICINE

What made us laugh the most was knowing that Dan would have loved every minute of what we would have done. He would have been the first one to do the same thing if the situation had been reversed. Laughter is the best medicine; especially in traumatic times.

Above left: Karen Chaston realised she needed to make major changes and develop new coping mechanisms after losing her son, Dan (above).

Chaston runs workshops through her organisation Live Love By Design.

After Dan's funeral, I chose survival and went straight back to work. At the time I was a chief financial officer of a publicly listed company. I just carried on eating more, drinking more and working even harder.

These were my mechanisms for coping with stress. The funny thing is that at the time I did not even know they were. I just thought that this is how people acted when they had high-powered jobs. The majority of my peers were exactly the same.

I now know that my CFO lifestyle was unhealthy on many levels and the stress of it all was taking its toll, long before Dan passed. I now feel that Dan's death was always meant to be my wake-up call.

Yet I did not allow it to be because it was easier for me to stay in survival mode and just carry on.

CHOOSING ANOTHER PATH

About 15 months later, I was given another life-changing choice to make when life threw me another curve ball. The company I had given my life to went through a merger. I was offered a lesser role, with less pay and more responsibility, or redundancy. This time, I chose me and took the redundancy. When I chose redundancy, at first, I was really angry. How dare they treat me like this; I'd given them my life. I thought I loved my job, but in time I realised I just loved the money.

And, to be honest, I was wasting most of it just to cope with life and my feelings of unfulfilment. Accepting redundancy gave me back the gift of my life and my health. This was my first step towards unwrapping the gift of loss. Along the path I noticed that we are taught to acquire things but we are not taught what to do when things and people are lost to us.

I noticed that we all experience many events of loss and that it can lead to grief and suffering. While our friends and family have the best intentions, they move on, leaving us to suffer in silence.

You begin to realise who your true friends are; the ones who are there for you no matter what. The ones who realise that you are never going to be the same again.

They love and care about you so much, but they are also willing to learn how to love the new you. In the end I decided that I had to find another way to be.

DEALING WITH GRIEF

Karen Chaston shares her top five tips.

1. Stop

"It is so important to deal with what is happening then and there instead of suppressing it. It is in stillness that you will have insights into what has happened to you and what it means for you, moving forward."

2. Accept

"Acceptance is about taking responsibility for what happened, what didn't happen, what we would have loved to have happened, and to understand the changed circumstances."

3. Identify

"We all have relationships with ourselves, our loved ones, our job, our health, our wealth and so forth. Identify is all about understanding your hopes, dreams and aspirations within these relationships."

4. Complete

"The completion stage is very powerful. It assists you to understand that while the physical relationship has ended, the emotional and spiritual relationship continues."

5. Pivot

"After completing the first four steps, you will have a clearer understanding of where you are at present and where you want to be. This will provide the clarity to put an action plan together to move you forward in a positive way."

I was done with merely surviving. Instead of thinking that if I kept busy all would be OK, I learnt that I needed to stop, honour Dan and myself and learn how to reconnect to my true self.

About this time, I heard a saying that really resonated: "If you feel there is something missing in your life, maybe that something is YOU!"

This was the first step on my journey to becoming my own best friend. I had to start treating myself

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as I treated my other friends; being honest, firm and always having their highest interest at heart.

I took a good hard look at me, the way I was looking after myself and talking to myself. I knew that if I had been like this with my best friend, she would not stick around for long!

I had a realisation that I am the only person I am going to spend my entire life with ... so why am I putting myself last and giving up on my dreams? This was huge. This allowed me to get out of my own way. To take responsibility for my life: all areas of my life. I started to look and delve into at every aspect.

Me: physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually.

My relationships. My career and my wealth creation.

It can be so easy for us to blame others for all that has happened. To forget that we are an equal part in all relationships. I started to take responsibility for my part in every relationship in my life.

I decided it was time to improve the relationships I wanted to keep and to lovingly release the ones that were no longer serving me.

My first relationship I worked on (after myself) was the one I now had with Dan. Sure, he was not here physically, though he was travelling with me in every other way. I could feel the spiritual connection and it was time for me to create a healthier

emotional relationship with him moving forward. Every relationship has hopes, dreams and aspirations. It was time for me to reconcile what these were with Dan.

The boys grew up on five acres in the Gold Coast hinterland. Dan would always say that he would build his family home on a section of the property and he would tell his kids that if they crossed the creek to visit me and his Dad, they had to stay there all day.

Even before Dan passed, I knew that I was holding this property for this dream to become a reality. I knew now that it was never going to happen and it was time to sell the property, since the others never had that dream.

It's not easy to end any relationship. It is even harder when it is abruptly ended, even if there is a beautiful process that can assist you to stop all the grieving and suffering.

It takes honest contemplation. You end up apologising, forgiving and acknowledging every aspect of the relationship – the love as well as the not-so-loveable.

That is how I unwrapped the gift of loss; with Dan and with every other relationship in my life.

In many ways I wish that I could have come to this awareness, perspective and wisdom without Dan having to pass away. Yet if I am honest with myself, I really don't think this would have happened.

I was too plugged into what I call My Groundhog Day Daze. I thought I was living a successful life. I now know that I was not. I was going through the motions, squashing my emotions down with all the vices, just to get through the day.

I am so grateful to have woken from that daze. I now work in a fulfilling role as a loss mentor, as well as an author and speaker, to assist others to walk an easier path. 

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