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Chapters

turning the pages through grief

Letting Go of Control

By Sarah Longfield

Caleb was an unexpected gift. He snuck into our life as quietly and peacefully as he left it. My husband and I had been talking about trying for another baby, wanting to time it out perfectly. Balancing life, work schedules, our then-2 year old, and the timing for the new baby's arrival. Without regard to our perfect plan, *poof* there he was, two pink lines on a pregnancy test.

I had a normal pregnancy. This was something I could control – rules to follow, a timeline, and check list of things to go through. I could control this 40 weeks, it was the after that scared me; when the world can get its hands on your perfect little person and control goes out the window. A perfect pregnancy. Until it wasn't: 36 weeks and a sudden lack of movement. Two emergency room visits later and *poof*, he was gone.

Ask anyone who knows me and they will tell you that I am incredibly type-A: a textbook people-pleaser

perfectionist. Control is something that is familiar to me; it is comforting, it makes life less messy, less scary. I have always wanted to do it all and I rarely asked for help. I needed people to view me as having it all together. That outward view of perfection was a blanket that shielded me. If people looked at me and saw things neatly put into place, there would be nothing that would separate me from other women. Seeking perfection was never a way to

be better than anyone; it was always the way I thought I could just blend in.

Early in this grief journey, I was asked what I was most afraid of, and I think my answer shocked the people around me; though as they processed it, those who truly know me understood.

I was afraid of grieving in the "wrong" way. I needed to control grief. To do this perfectly.

Their response to that was, "what is the right way?", and I didn't have an answer. I didn't know what the "right" way was to grieve, especially in grieving for my child.

After Caleb was born still, I didn't just lose him, I lost that control. I could not control his death and no checklist of things I did perfectly would bring him back to us.

Looking down at him and seeing nothing but perfection in him just simply existing, something changed in me. Not

continued...

AUGUST
2022

*There's an important difference between
giving up and letting go.*

—Jessica Hatchigan

...continued from front

just the obvious things that one would imagine would change in a parent when they lose a child, but other, more subtle things.

Losing a child is something no parent should ever experience. It is gut-wrenching and horrific and unimaginable. The grief that it brings is uncontrollable, messy, and so, so far from perfect.

What I began to realize early on is, while I cannot control what happened to Caleb, and no amount of doing things perfectly will bring back my son, I can control how I choose to navigate this life without him.

Slowly, my desire to be perfect and to have everything be perfect is beginning to fade. I am realizing each day that there is no perfect way to grieve. As time moves on, every day is different. There are days when I don't cry, but I feel guilty for not crying. There are days where tears well up as if from out of nowhere. There are also days with laughter and unspeakable joy. And that perfection that I sought for so many years is less and less important with each day that passes.

What has taken the place of unattainable perfection is joy. Joy in knowing that I was chosen to be Caleb's mom. Joy in being able to be an earthly

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mother to his older brother. Joy in a loving husband who walks this path with me. Joy in knowing that one day, I will hold Caleb again.

Joy that has come from the blackest darkness. Navigating it is one of the hardest things I've ever done, or ever will do. Never being one who asked for help, I didn't know how to ask. Grieving the loss of my son, I didn't know what to ask. From the moment we knew Caleb was gone, the love just poured in. In my deepest moments of despair and darkness, I had people throwing me stars. I started to gather them, slowly at first, a few in each fist. As time went on, that shifted so that I had an armful. More time went on and I needed a satchel. Months later, I carry that satchel, bursting at the seams, but light as a feather.

Those stars are love and hugs and support and tears. They are anger and compassion and prayers and unexpected gifts of remembrance. They are meals and check-ins and mentions of his name. Those stars are hope. They are joy.

And on the darkest days, days when I cannot imagine a time when the tears will be dry, days when the mess is just too much, I open that satchel, and the light from those stars bursts out. I am reminded that Caleb isn't forgotten by the world; that people are choosing to remember him by supporting me. The dark days are brighter, more manageable, less scary. They do not make me miss my son any less, but they do remind me to look for more stars and to spread their light as far as I can see.

My life is not perfect. No one's is. Caleb's was too short, but he is serving a perfect purpose. Through his life, he is teaching me to seek perspective, not perfection. To allow the mess so that I can feel the love. To let go of the control so that I can find the joy. To reach for the stars so that I can come alive.

Sarah Longfield lives in Cleveland, Ohio with her husband Chad. She is mommy to Colin, Carter, and Cadence on earth, and Caleb in heaven. She and her husband founded The CAL Foundation in 2015. Their mission is to financially support families of stillborn babies through payment of medical bills related to labor and delivery. Visit calfoundation.org for more information.



MYTH: There are good emotions and there are bad emotions.

Nope, there are actually just emotions. Emotions are our brain's natural reaction to external stimuli. Yes, some are easy and pleasant while some are difficult and tough. But that doesn't mean they are good or bad. Emotions just are. We feel them for a reason and it is important that we are open to that, not running the other way.

Emotions developed evolutionarily for a reason—they tell us something about external factors in our life. In many ways, they are actually a tool that can help us out... yes, even the tough emotions. If you're feeling guilty about something, that is often a reason to consider that you shouldn't repeat certain behaviors in the future. If you're angry at someone, this may be a sign that they have done something hurtful and you should be aware of that to keep yourself safe. If we ignore or numb negative emotions about a relationship, a job, or other things in our life, we are less likely to make changes in areas of our lives that might need some changes

The problems arise not when we have difficult emotions, but a) when those emotions turn into behaviors that are problematic or, b) when we get "stuck" on certain emotions and they continue impacting our feelings or behaviors in a way that negatively impacts our day-to-day life.

~whatsyourgrief.com



"Don't be ashamed to weep; 'tis right to grieve.

Tears are only water, and flowers, trees, and fruit cannot grow without water.

But there must be sunlight also.

A wounded heart will heal in time, and when it does, the memory and love of our lost ones is sealed inside to comfort us."

Brian Jacques -Taggerung

AUGUST

Flower:
Gladiolus

Birthstone:
Peridot

Color:
Sun Orange

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