



## Our First Year

By Mary Miskulin-Sjogren

Rebecca was born on September 10, 1995 and died of SIDS on December 28, 1995. Our lives were shattered and we had no idea how to continue. How would my husband Tommi and I ever begin to deal with it?

I started a journal shortly after Rebecca died and continue to write in it, although not as often as before. I read it for the first time on the anniversary of Rebecca's death. It amazed me how much we had gone through in the last year and how far we had come.

For those of you whose pain is new, whose sorrow seems endless and whose lives seems so empty, this article may not mean much to you at this time. After Rebecca died, I tossed articles and books aside and thought, "That is your story, but I have mine. All I know is my pain and grief. I have no room for yours." I could not take comfort in others' stories. My hope is that at some point you will be able to read this and know you are not alone in what you feel and think as you try to come to terms with your loss.

Guilt is one feeling that does not seem to ever go away. It is amazing how often I still am overcome with guilt, and how many different reasons I have to feel it. In the beginning, I felt guilty for even being able to function. I did not realize it at the time, but I was numb. It was my body's way of helping me to cope until I could handle the feelings that overwhelmed me.

I felt guilty for doing OK. I eventually realized the bad days come soon enough, and I could accept the OK days as a reprieve. I felt guilty for laughing, for having fun, for starting to put Rebecca's things away, for not crying on days when I felt I should and for not remembering her 4-month birthday.

I felt incredibly guilty the first time I was in a casual conversation with a stranger who asked if I had children and I replied no. I felt I had betrayed Rebecca by denying her existence. In time, I came to understand that it is OK to not tell our story if I don't want to.

We made it through Christmas and Rebecca's anniversary and, although they were difficult, I felt guilty because they had not been more difficult. The times you feel guilty may not be rational to those who haven't experienced it. But if you feel it, it is a valid feeling you have to deal with and work through. You can't let it eat you up inside. Sooner or later you have to let the guilt go, but not because someone tells you it is illogical. It has to be because you have worked through it and are ready to get on with the next step of your loss.

I got tired of people telling me how strong I was or how well I was doing. They did not realize that, in the beginning, I was numb and I functioned, but the true devastation had not hit and wouldn't for a while.

Time goes on, and it seemed to others that I was dealing with it well. But they did not see or feel the anguish I felt inside, or see me when I finally lost control. They were not reminded day after day by the toys that still were where I left them, the baby bottles in the kitchen, the silence at night instead of the restless noises of our baby. I did not call them when I was sad or breaking down because that was my time for grief, my time to connect with what I lost. And, because they did not hear from me, they thought I was doing well and that I was strong. Yet all I was doing was trying to survive.

Many people rely on their faith during times of adversity. I went in the opposite direction and felt I was floundering spiritually. More often than not, I would spend my time in church fighting back tears. I did not feel going to church helped, so I stopped going. I stopped praying. It almost was like I did not know how

anymore. I didn't know what I would pray for. I never asked, "Why?" of God or anyone else. I felt no answer would be good enough.

I do not think that I have a renewed faith, but I have started attending church again. And, although I don't do it often, I have started to pray again. It was not something I planned or made a conscious decision to do. It started on a day I realized how lucky I am to have Tommi's love, support and comfort. I offered up a prayer of thanks.

There are many different parts of you that need to heal after the loss of your child. Some parts take longer than others. There is no time frame for healing and there is no great revelation when it happens. Accept that it will happen at some point, in its own time.

I talked to many people during the first year: SIDS organizations, the medical examiner, our pediatrician, my physician, SIDS experts, grief counselors, support group members, friends and relatives. It seems I was trying to find answers by talking, but I did not know what answers I was looking for. I was searching for something and I always came away disappointed that they could not satisfy me and give me the answers I was looking for.

Often in my journal, at the end of another paragraph describing my disappointment, I would remark that perhaps the answers lie within me and that somehow, someday, I would come up with the answers myself.

Recently, when I explained this to a friend, she asked me if I had found the answers I was looking for. At first I said no, then I don't know, then it came to me that maybe I had. Maybe the question that you want to ask but cannot verbalize is how in the world am I going to survive the unsurvivable? How are we going to get through this? What are we going to do? And, because everyone is different, there is no one answer. The question cannot even be answered; it has to be lived. Your answers come through your thoughts and feelings, actions and reactions and events. And, without knowing it, you are living the answer.

So my answer to my friend was maybe I had found my answers without even realizing it.

For Tommi and me, a challenge was getting through it together. It was learning how each other grieved and allowing that to be OK, different as it was. It was supporting each other when we needed it, being strong when the other one couldn't be. It was talking about our feelings right from the beginning, and being in sync with how we wanted to remember Rebecca and how we wanted our lives to continue. It was doing things in time, but not because it was time to do something. It was loving each other and caring for each other because that is what Rebecca taught us to do.

The pain and emptiness never completely go away, and maybe that is OK, because it keeps Rebecca real in our lives. She is a part of us and always will be.

A few days after Rebecca died, Tommi asked me the following question. If I had a choice, would I choose to not have had Rebecca and the pain and heartache, or to have had Rebecca for those three and a half months and have to deal with life without her. For me there was no doubt about the answer.

I would not trade our time with Rebecca for anything, and neither would Tommi. ☹