

Professionally Speaking...

by Denise M. Paul MA, CT, CPLC

Memory Keepers

A “visitation” or a “viewing” is a common way of offering people the opportunity to see the person who has died, and offer condolences to the surviving family members. This ritual addresses one of the basic Reconciliation Needs of Mourning, because it allows the mourners to view the body and see for themselves that the person has really died. We know in our heads that someone has died, but seeing the person confirms it in our hearts. Bereaved loved ones often tell me about the hundreds of people who waited in long lines to offer their condolences, and share memories of how the deceased person touched their lives. While this may be tiring, it is also comforting for the family members to know that so many people care, and so many people were willing to witness their sorrow and share in their grief.

This is not the case when a baby dies. Mothers and fathers are often the only keepers of their precious baby’s memories. When a baby is stillborn, he or she is acknowledged and loved by his/her parents, and perhaps grandparents and a few close relatives. The memories are formed in the few short minutes or hours that you are able to spend with your baby in the hospital room, before the baby is taken from you. You can count on two hands the number of people who ever got to meet your baby. The doctor, a few nurses, and a few family members are the people who were witnesses to your baby’s existence. You may have shared photos with other close friends and family, but that’s not the same. They didn’t get to meet and experience your baby.

You are your baby’s memory keepers.

Hundreds of people did not come to offer condolences to you. Thousands of people never met your baby in his or her lifetime. There are not volumes of photos capturing milestones in your baby’s life. The only heart that he/she touched was yours. You hold dear the memories of what your baby looked like, and felt like. Your tangible memories may include photos that were taken during an ultrasound or in the delivery room, or footprints pressed onto a card. If your baby was miscarried early in your pregnancy, you have even fewer memories. Your baby existed to you, but not to society. Keep those memories alive by talking about your baby with people who care. Display photos (if you have them) in your home for family and friends to see. Wear a piece of jewelry with your baby’s initials or birthstone.

As a Bereavement Counselor who specializes in Perinatal Loss, I can appreciate how you feel. I've heard the voices of parents in my UNITE, Inc. Support Group who yearn for their babies to be recognized and remembered. The dilemma is that your loss was very private and personal, and known only to a select number of people. Parents have the awesome responsibility of keeping those memories alive. Treasure them in your own hearts, but also share them with others. Your memories may be few, but they are very powerful. Cherish every one of them.