Grieving a Dream
by Susan Blanchard

In March 1992, my first and only child was born. I had a delightful pregnancy; despite some nausea at the beginning, I was very happy being pregnant. I loved feeling my child inside me. I envisioned a labor ending with my child being laid upon my chest, everyone smiling and happy.

I didn’t get the dream I envisioned. Marie was born not breathing. Doctors immediately carried her to a table on the other side of the room to be revived, then rushed her out of the room to the neonatal intensive care nursery. Alone in the delivery room shortly after her birth, her father and I wondered if she would live. We cried, but mostly we were in shock. Nothing could have prepared us for a birth like this.

Later, when I learned that my daughter had cerebral palsy, I didn’t just cry; I wailed. I went home and I cried and I wailed and I was very loud about it. I did not like this news; I did not want my daughter to have a disability.

Taking the Blame

I believed God was punishing me for past sins—if only I had done something differently, my daughter would not have cerebral palsy. If only I had picked a different doctor; if only my body had not been in labor so long; if only I had finished that art piece before her birth. It was easier to take the blame for Marie’s condition than to accept it. I desperately wanted to talk with other parents who had been through similar experiences. I finally found a group sponsored by the Arc of Multnomah County—a seven-week support group entitled “Accepting a Difference.” The parents in the group discussed how hard it had been to find emotional support for our experiences. How wonderful it would have been if someone had been there to offer support immediately following a traumatic birth, someone to counsel us during and after the initial diagnosis.

Finding other parents who understood my pain helped me to stop blaming myself for Marie’s condition. I began to see the child beyond the disability. Even though I didn’t get the daughter I had dreamed of—one who could walk and talk and move independently, I had a daughter who was beautiful, sweet and happy. Still, the “dream child” I had wanted hovered in my consciousness, sometimes blocking the view of my real-life daughter.

Grief Ritual

Other members of the group suggested that I do a “grief ritual.” As soon as I heard these words, I knew I would do this ritual, and that it would be important for my mental health and for my relationship with Marie.

I began by leafing through magazines to find pictures of my “dream child”—the child I didn’t get. I cut out any picture that moved me. I especially looked for pictures of the ideal birth where everyone is smiling and the wet, shining baby is laid on the mother’s chest. I found pictures of babies sitting up and crawling, of young girls running and playing.

I cut out a paper doll from a large piece of blank paper and was amazed that holding this piece of paper to my chest caused me to cry. I glued my dream child pictures all over the paper doll. I decorated her with glitter, paint and colorful markers. I cut out a back for her, and stuffed her with more of my “dreams.” I wrote the ideas that corresponded to each of my dreams directly onto the pictures I had cut out. It was important to make this paper doll as real as possible, to name each of my dreams and to bring them into the light so they could no longer haunt my subconscious.

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Finding Freedom

In the short time that has passed since I performed this ritual, I have felt a great sense of relief. I realize, however, that the grief process is a continuous one, and I will continue to seek support from other parents, my friends and my family.

I encourage other parents who have a child with a disability to be aware of the need to let go of their "dream child." A personal ritual or a simple prayer may allow you to express your grief in a safe way. Learning how to accept what is—and to let go of what had been hoped for—can be very liberating.

Our culture is not very practiced in expressing sorrow. Sometimes we feel guilty when we express disappointment or sadness. But if we don't express our grief, it will covertly affect us and those around us—most of all, it will affect the child with a disability.

I encourage other parents to get the help and support you need to deal with the sadness and disappointment that can come from having a child with a disability. Letting go of your dream child will give you and your real-life child the freedom to find your own way to a happy life.

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Paul Blanchard with Marie, 15 months.

After my paper doll was stuffed and decorated, I held her in my arms and cried some more. This was my dream child; I wanted to hold her, but I knew I needed to let her go. I love the daughter I have; I didn't want my grief about her disability to get in the way.

Four friends gathered to help me with the ritual. Each of them shared stories of lost children and lost dreams. I

I had decided to burn this dream child—to transform her energy and let her float away. So, after discussing my dreams with my friends, I put the paper doll in the fireplace, lit a match and let her go.

then presented my dream child to my friends and shared my dreams with them. I talked about all the things I had wanted but didn't get. I had decided to burn this dream child—to transform her energy and let her float away. So, after discussing my dreams with my friends, I put the paper doll in the fireplace, lit a match and let her go.

After the fire died down, I shared the dreams that became reality for me—a wonderful pregnancy, being able to breast-feed, a loving and playful child. This process helped me to realize that although my child has a disability, many of my dreams about motherhood did come true.

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