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Commentary, analysis and investigations  
on issues affecting African Americans  
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**December 11 , 2008 - Issue 303**

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**A Book Review of the Grieving Garden:  
Living with the Death of a Child  
Color of Law  
By David A. Love, JD  
BlackCommentator.com Editorial Board**

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There is perhaps no greater depth of sorrow one can experience than the loss of one's child. It is the type of feeling that you would not wish on your worst enemy.

Regardless of the age of death – whether a baby, a child or adult - or the circumstances - death *in utero*, or by car accident, gun violence, suicide, domestic violence, war, illness, what have you - the pain is just as real for the parent, and just as cripplingly intense.

Not seeking membership in this cruel, tragic club, those who have experienced the death of their child (there is no appropriate descriptive term for them, such as orphans, widows or widowers) are members of a secret society. Sometimes it feels not unlike the functional equivalent of a leper colony. And in a world where everyone is expected to smile and say that everything is alright, these grieving adults often are marginalized, isolated and misunderstood.

Authors Suzanne Redfern and Susan K. Gilbert, who are themselves the surviving parents of lost children, have compiled the experiences of grieving parents in [The Grieving Garden: Living with the Death of a Child](#) I should say in the interest of complete disclosure that I was not a neutral, impartial observer when I read this book. As of the writing of this book review, it has been three months since my wife Sarah and I lost our son, [Ezra Malik](#) (a.k.a. Little Peanut Boy), who [died stillborn](#) after an otherwise blissful, uncomplicated, problem-free, 8-month pregnancy. But perhaps this background only makes me a more informed reviewer.

As The Grieving Garden points out, there is no one proper way to grieve (except maybe

to not to allow yourself to grieve at all), as this will depend on the individual parent. But this is certain: membership in the club of bereaved parents is a transformative experience. Those who emerge from the depths of despair are not the same people they once were before their loss. They are changed forever. Some find their faith in God and religion strengthened, while others conclude that God is dead, or that God betrayed them. After all, they posit, how could a Supreme Being be so cold-blooded, so ruthless as to take one's child? Others become much more spiritual beings, in tune with their feelings and sensitive to the concerns and needs of others, and most of all, very aware of the presence of their child's spirit. A number of parents even hope to be reunited with their children. New priorities and new careers are created in the process - stockbrokers, scientists and office managers turn into artists, writers and social service counselors.

And often for some, there is far less tolerance for exchanging pleasantries, keeping up appearances and cooperating with the plasticity and fakeness of some social interactions, as one woman suggested:

"I do remember my husband telling me I wasn't being 'nice' when I refused to keep doing the things that made others happy, things I couldn't stomach anymore. The social niceties fell away. I did only what I had to do for my family and for myself to survive; beyond that I only did what felt right to me in the moment. Everything else was below my radar." (p. 31)

Moreover, there are many awkward and inappropriate comments that friends, coworkers and acquaintances may make to bereaved parents, such as "are you better yet?", or "you're so lucky that God wanted him," or "it was for the best," or "you can always have another child." After telling an acquaintance that her child had died, one contributor to the book was told that "Kroger has a special on Saltine crackers." Some people just don't know what to say or how to say it. Others prefer to maintain their silence and fail to acknowledge what occurred. Death, after all, is not an easy subject for many. While such a tragedy has the potential to strengthen friendships, it also causes many people to run in the opposite direction, both figuratively, and literally (in supermarkets and other public places). Unwilling to be a part of the pain that the grieving parent is enduring, or unable to provide support to that person, or simply afraid to broach the subject, some friends will fade into the sunset.

As one parent in the book noted, "Some of us felt burdened by expectations that we should just 'get over it.'" (p. 69) In reality, there is no such thing as getting over it, getting over the guilt, sorrow, anger, and other emotions which come and go without warning and without reason or rhyme. Rather, there is a "silver cord," as the writers of *The Grieving Garden* discuss, which forever binds the grieving parent to the child who has passed. These parents find a way to keep on living, yet to remember and honor their child's life through rituals such as the lighting of a candle. Holidays, birthdays and anniversaries can be particularly hard for such families.

The experience of losing a child may be likened to someone yanking your heart out of your chest, stomping on your heart, and then handing it back to you. It is particularly cruel because you are deprived of the opportunity to use your parental instincts, to protect your child from danger, and to see his or her potential realized. I was particularly moved by the story of a woman who dreamt of seeing her dead son:

"I dreamt a young child was asking me, his mother, if he could go and play with the big kids, who were standing next to him, three of them, teenagers I guess... And my heart just broke. The child was Sean and I had to tell him, no, he couldn't go and play with his friends because he was dead... But I didn't have the heart to tell him; he didn't know he was dead. I knew I had to tell him but I just couldn't. I was so sad. And this is how I feel. I am so sorry that Sean cannot go out and play with his friends.

I am really sorry, Danny and Jen and Cassie, that Sean cannot play with you anymore. I am really sorry, Jeremy, Matt and Elvin. *I am really, really sorry, Sean.*" (pp. 175-76)

If you have not experienced the loss of a child, I pray you never will. But regardless, I recommend to you *The Grieving Garden*. The book allows parents with a diversity of backgrounds, religions, and ethnicities the space they need to tell their stories, free from judgment, or the requirement that they justify their feelings and circumstances to others. This book, unlike much of society, allows them their humanity.

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