

# Your Child Died and There Is One Thing You Know for Sure: "I Am Because of You": *Umbutu*

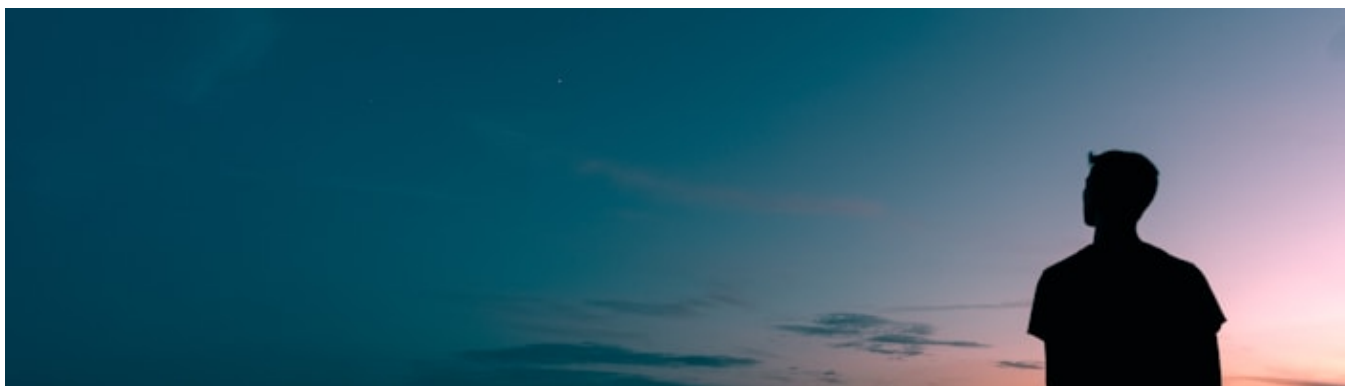
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What does the death of a child have to do with the strange word in the title? I first heard this term in my July 2005 visit to South Africa. What a joy to land in Cape Town and feel my feet touch the earth of a continent I'd wanted to visit all my life. During my month stay as a part of a twelve-member college group of Fulbright Scholars I learned a great deal of the African perspective of the world. However, the word—the concept that struck me more than any other was *Umbutu*. Literal translation: brotherhood. A better translation came from my friend Ashraf who said, "Bob, the closest I can come to it is: "I am because of you."

I am because of you. You are reading these words because your child died. No matter how many children you have or if you now have none, this beautiful word captures much of what your precious child means to you: I am because of you. This goes both ways: Your child is your child because of you. And you are the person you are today because of your child. Not because of your child's death, but because of your child's life. He lived. She lived. You live (even though at times you haven't wanted to). Think back on the memories of this child. Now ask yourself the question, "Who would I have been without this child?" I want to take you back before your child was born. Try to imagine what your life would have been if this wonderful human being had not come into your life. Go ahead, imagine it. Imagine having lived days and months, and years without this child in your life. Can you really do it? Why can't you? Umbutu.

Try for a moment to untangle the pain you are feeling from the memories of your child. Difficult to do, right? Grief and pain have become blended in with the thousands of memories of this precious person: the things you did for and with your child, the places you went, things you saw your child do, the songs that once brought smiles, the smells, the pictures of innocent times. Despite all the pain, you are you because of your child.

When I tell my college students that I've met thousands of bereaved parents, the most common question they ask is: *How can anyone survive the death of a child?* To help answer this question, I invite Lew, a bereaved dad, to speak to my students. His daughter died more than 30 years ago, and his story is as powerful today as it was back then. I want my students to begin to understand that you never get over a significant death—especially the death of a child.



How then, have you survived this, the worst experience of your life? If you are like most parents I've met, the answer is something like, "Time has helped a little, However, more importantly, I found someone—a person who listened, who seemed to understand, someone who didn't run away." And you may be one of those parents who uttered these three letters: "TCF," which stands for "The Compassionate Friends." If this is a new term for you, please Google it to find what this incredible organization has done for hundreds of thousands of bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents.

Remember when you walked into your first TCF meeting? Were you even able to you look into the faces of any of these folks? And, if you did, did you say, "Who are these people? And why are some of them laughing?" But, despite your hesitation, something made you stay; and guess what? You got to know these people. It may have been during introductions when you heard someone tell a story like yours. Or perhaps someone across the room revealed something that you, too, had been feeling. Maybe after the meeting you chatted with a mom or dad and during the conversation, found yourself saying, "This person is amazing. Her son died three years ago, she still has tears, but she can also really listen to me."

Or maybe you got a phone call or a text a few days later from a TCF parent who was, "...just following up to see how you are doing since the meeting." In whatever way it happened you began to grasp that these people "got it" and you began to realize that TCF had become a lifeline.

Who are these people who began as strangers, people who perhaps followed a religion or political belief different from yours? People you would not have noticed in a grocery store, people whose lives never crossed yours—until now; people who you've come to know better than many of your relatives; people whose children you have gotten to know from stories of tragedy, grief, and love. Like some TCF parents, you may have arrived at a place in your life where you've found yourself saying, "I don't think I would have made it without TCF and the wonderful parents I've met." Umbutu.

Yes, your life has taken you through hundreds of valleys and hills, aches, struggles, tears, and pain. But one thing is for sure: some wonderful people have come into your life and have become part of it in ways you never imagined.

You have seen the words in the TCF credo: *We are The Compassionate Friends. We Need Not Walk Alone.* Now you have one more way of saying this. It is a word I bring you from a continent of humans who know pain and suffering. It is a word I hope you carry with you as you move from the ache in your heart to reaching out to help those parents who come after you: Umbutu.