

Bereavement Packet

By

Rosemary C. Smith

WEBSITES

Drew & Jeremiah Smith
Memorial Web Site

www.childrenofdome.com

Space Between Breaths

www.spacebetweenbreaths.com

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Andrew Siler Smith

April 27, 1974

July 23, 1992

Parents: Luther G. Smith and Rosemary C. Smith
P.O. Box 346
Beattyville, KY 41311
Home (606) 464-3078 Work (606) 464-3901

Brother: Jordan C. Smith

Symbol: Yellow Butterfly

Our first-born son was Andrew Siler Smith whom we always called Drew. His birth was our happiest day and his death on July 23, 1992 with his younger brother Jeremiah was our saddest. Drew was eighteen and the driver in the single car accident that occurred on a straight stretch on the Mountain Parkway in eastern Kentucky. Drew and Jeremiah were very close and enjoyed the same heavy metal music. They spent their last night at a Guns N' Roses concert that they had been anxiously looking forward to for months. As a family, we had spent our best summer, a joyous summer. All that was shattered in a brief second.

Drew's life was at a turning point and in some aspects at its peak. He had just graduated from The McCallie School in Chattanooga, TN, after four years as a boarding student. Drew had entered McCallie as an insecure fourteen-year-old with serious doubts about making it and had just graduated Cum Laude with a 3.57 GPA. His happiest time had been his graduation day at McCallie on May 30, 1992.

Drew's accomplishments at McCallie were numerous. His academic performance had earned his acceptance at Rhodes College in Memphis for the fall semester. He had finally realized his potential and earned the self esteem that had eluded him for so long. Musical participation dominated Drew's years at McCallie. He was a member of the Candlelight Chorus, McCallie Pep Band, and orchestra for all four years. Drew's sax was his favorite but his vocal talents were extraordinary. He enjoyed being a cast member in several McCallie musicals and during Camelot in his senior year, he met Erin Grist. Drew and Erin had gotten engaged on July 5th, only eighteen days before his death. To say that Drew's

life changed when he met Erin is an understatement. They had planned on getting married in two or three years after both had started college.

Drew was a handsome, intelligent, sensitive young man. He was the light of our lives and a wonderful big brother to Jeremiah and Jordan. His love of rock music and writing forged his dream of someday either being in a rock and roll band or writing for a magazine like Rolling Stone. This seemed odd for a young man who was going to Rhodes as a pre-med major but his true love was music. Who knows what course his life might have taken. His intelligence would have taken him far in anything he chose to do.

Like his brother Jeremiah, Drew was such a caring young man. His religious beliefs had blossomed during his years at McCallie and with his relationship to Erin. Although his life was short, he had experienced the world in so many ways. He had traveled to Spain with a group from McCallie and had just spent his spring break in the Bahamas. He was a certified scuba diver, an accomplished snow and water skier, and a lover of collecting comics and baseball cards. He had developed many close friendships with other students and faculty at McCallie. Over eighty McCallie staff and students attended Drew and Jeremiah's funeral at our home in Beattyville including headmaster Spencer McCallie III. We have established a Drew and Jeremiah Smith Scholarship Fund at McCallie and at Lee County High School. Both of our sons would be so proud that other students are being helped in their memory.

From Drew's McCallie Yearbook

His Senior Quote – "People have been telling me to forget my dreams, but those dreams keep me going. The dream of rock-n-roll, pleasing my parents, and a life with Erin will never cease."

Drew's dreams had to cease on this earth, but his memory will live on. His smile, his teasing, his concern for his family will always be treasured by all who knew him.

Jeremiah Cottle Smith

July 4, 1977

July 23, 1992

Parents: Luther G. Smith and Rosemary C. Smith
P.O. Box 346
Beattyville, KY 41311
Home (606) 464-3078 Work (606) 464-3901

Brother: Jordan C. Smith

Symbol: Yellow Butterfly

Jeremiah Smith was an extraordinary young man. He died at age fifteen, only nineteen days after his July 4th birthday. He and his older brother Drew were killed instantly in an automobile accident on July 23, 1992. They had been to a rock concert the night before and were driving home early that morning.

Jeremiah's life began, as it should have, in the midst of fireworks. Looking back, we always knew that Jeremiah was a gifted child. Even as a baby, he was acutely aware of everything going on around him. As he grew up, he gravitated toward adults and was a keen conversationalist. Jeremiah was always in the gifted and talented programs in the Lee County school system but was also an athlete and musically inclined. The absolute love of his life was his drums. He would play his stereo at full volume and accompany the music on his drums. Our house would absolutely shake with the commotion. Jeremiah was also involved with other musical endeavors. He was an excellent piano and keyboard player. Often, Jeremiah would sit at our piano in the living room and play by ear the many songs that dominated his life during his last year, his freshman year in high school.

Jeremiah had gone away to high school in August of 1991 to The McCallie School in Chattanooga, TN. His brother Drew was starting his senior year at the same school. Jeremiah was very familiar with McCallie. He had spent each summer at the McCallie Sports Camp since he was eight years old. As a tribute to both Jeremiah and Drew, the McCallie Sports Camp presents The Smith Award each year to the MVP of each camp

session. Jeremiah had been presented an award in June of 1992 as the boy who had attended sports camp for the most years in the history of the camp.

Jeremiah distinguished himself his freshman year at McCallie. His GPA was 3.81, which is remarkable for a boy away from home at a boarding school who had a rural, eastern Kentucky educational background. He auditioned for the McCallie Candlelight Chorus and was selected. He joined the McCallie Pep Band and orchestra and performed in many productions with his brother that year.

Jeremiah's major impact on this earth during his short life had to be how he cared for other people. So many young men wrote us from McCallie and from the many friends he had all over the country that he had been their best friend. What a tribute that each one felt his love. He totally gave himself to others. Their problems were his and he felt responsible for their lives. Jeremiah affected many young people in a positive way and they will keep his memory alive.

Traveling was second nature to Jeremiah. He had just gone on a McCallie Spanish trip to Costa Rica and had traveled to New York City, New Orleans, Washington D.C., and Colorado on his own in search of adventure. Snow skiing was his favorite sport, and he was an expert skier. He had been selected as a Nastar finalist and invited to a pre-Olympic ski camp. His last skiing trip was with a group of McCallie students during his Christmas break prior to his death.

Jeremiah Smith has left a definite mark on those who knew him. Not only have we his family glowed with his warmth, but so have so many others. His huge blue eyes always blazed with intelligence and wonder at what he was to face next. We have no doubt that both he and his brother are with our Heavenly Father and shining there as they did on this earth.



Dome Dedication

June 11, 1994

Cumberland Inn at Cumberland College
Williamsburg, Kentucky

The beautiful music we have heard was presented by Jim and Judy Rose. It was they who presented us with the beautiful piano in the Athenaeum. It was given in memory of their son, Scott, who died on July 4, 1983, and in memory of Jim Taylor II, who died May 20, 1991. Thank you Jim and Judy. That instrument has given many hours of pleasure to those of us who frequent the Athenaeum.

The artistry in this memorial dome was commissioned by Luther, Rosemary and Jordan Smith in memory of their sons and brothers, Drew and Jeremiah, who died on July 23, 1992. I can't think of anything that would have graced this lobby more beautifully or appropriately than a memorial to children loved and lost.

The artist who made this dream become reality is Wayne Taylor, an alumnus of Cumberland College, class of 1972. Wayne prayed over this work of art, asking God to inspire his vision and guide his hand as he interpreted the grief, the hope and the assurance felt by all who have lost children. Thank you Wayne for expressing the inexpressible.

The symbols contained in the painting were suggested by many of you; and each symbol has individual and special meaning. As I gaze upon this heavenly portrait I see things that you have seen, and perhaps some things that you have not. I would like to tell you what I see.

The background of blue is the impenetrable sky which forms a boundary between this world and the world beyond. It is a filter through which the rays of

heavenly light are refracted in such a way that, in this life we see (as through a glass darkly) only the one color, blue, but we know by faith that beyond this limiting canopy are all the other colors of the spectrum, which we see now only in reflection, but one day we will see them and their creator face to face.

The cherubs are our children who are a little less than angels, but nevertheless immortal.

The clouds are billows of emotion which bear the myriad symbols of our emotions as they change from day to day as the tide of grief ebbs and flows.

The hearts are our hearts, and some have been pierced by the pain of loss.

The bird is the symbol of freedom which we long for to soar beyond doubt to faith.

The lightning bolt is the power that God has loosed in us to overcome and strike down the temptation to give in to faithlessness and hopelessness.

The balloons symbolize the joy which the children surely share.

The daisies are for endurance. They live and grow all through the spring and summer, and bloom in the fall, as though they are saying to the chill of winter, "We will overcome..."

The musical notes are for the new song He puts within our hearts.

The doves are for peace.

The star is for guidance.

And the roses are God's gift to us on blue and rainy days.

The teacher is the Christ who guides us through our pain; the apple is our gift to Him; and the horn is there to announce His coming--the Day of the Lord--when the gates will open for us too.

The horse, Pegasus, is our transport.

The rainbow is the promise that pain shall cease.

And the smiley face reminds us to celebrate life and seek joy in every moment; for joy is God's way of lighting the world for other pilgrims.

The butterflies. Oh, the butterflies! They tell us of metamorphosis, the way life changes through time and eternity. They show us the stages we must go through, the stages of life and the stages of grief. We start as eggs in mother's womb; we emerge as pupae, in need of mother's milk and the humanizing care of

our parents. In the larval stage we wrap the cocoon of life's threads around us; threads of faith, threads of fulfillment. Then, when that day comes, we emerge victorious over death and enter that final, eternal stage which is more beautiful than all the others.

That's what I see; perhaps you see more.

There is a veiled plaque on the wall. A plaque which dedicates this beautiful dome and all that it means. It is time now to unveil it. Rosemary and Luther, will you do us the honor of removing the veil so we can all celebrate the moment? The plaque reads: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls a butterfly." (Richard Bach) Dome dedicated in loving memory of Drew and Jeremiah Smith.

Remarks by Mr. Chuck Dupier



The Dedication of the Dome

Grace Crum Rollins Fine Arts Center

Cumberland College

June 2, 2001

Once again we dedicate a dome, which honors your children and all children--those who have been prematurely lost and those who are yet on loan to us from God, perhaps for too brief a time. At the dedication of the first dome--the one which graces the lobby of the Cumberland Inn--we extended our thanks to Wayne Taylor (Cumberland College Class of 1972)--for his inspired rendering of the inexpressible. Once again, the inexpressible has been expressed by the hand and heart of this artist. Wayne is with us today; and again, we express our heartfelt thanks for his labor of love.

This dome and its symbols, which hovers above the lobby of the Grace Crum Rollins Fine Arts Center here at Cumberland College, is our second tribute to children loved and lost. As in the first dome, the background of blue sky is symbolic of the impenetrable boundary, which separates mortality from immortality, and we can only perceive the shadow of what lies beyond--the shadow that will become crystal clear only when we pass through and join the children. In the meantime, we can only gaze upon the cherubs, the clouds, the butterflies, the pansies, the hearts, and the stars and such, and wonder how God will manage to wipe all our tears away and give us eternal peace and happiness in the presence of the heavenly host and all who have gone before us. Only then will faith become sight.

Please permit a moment of theological reflection: Please remember the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 18:14, "It is not your Father's will that the least of these little ones should perish." Let us not charge our losses to God's account. If we do, our grief will never mature into victory. God did not take the children. Blame accidents, disease, carelessness, recklessness, or whatever chaotic occurrence befell them, but don't blame God, because God loves them and God loves us. Even though our faith is in God through

the saving power of the Christ, we are not immune from any kind of tragedy. However, it is the unique power of the Christian Faith that we are given by the Grace of God, the strength and the means to turn any tragedy into triumph. All who have preceded us, including the children would urge us to accept the power of this Grace.

Now it is my distinct privilege to join you in dedicating this dome in the memory of all the children.

Remarks by Mr. Chuck Dupier

Cherubs and Symbols for the Grace Crum Rollins Fine Arts Dome

The Grace Crum Rollins Fine Arts Dome features cherubs involved in the Arts. Dance, Music, Drama, and the Visual Arts are divided into quadrants in the front row of figures. Backing up the "Arts Angels" is a row of familiar babies from both the original dome at the Cumberland Inn and the chapter illustrations from Rosemary Smith's book, "Children of the Dome."

The center of the "Music" area appears behind the chandelier as the viewer walks under the dome. The cherub holds a horn in one hand and the lamp of education in the other. She is flanked on the right side by a singing angel reaching for a monarch butterfly. Next is a stooping angel with a bouquet of pansies in her hand and an orchid in her hair. You might recognize the next pair of boys chasing yellow butterflies as you continue around the circle. Before moving on you might try to find a spoke wheel and a crown in the clouds. The dancers are next in line with a marching pose down front and a scarlet-winged dancer in the distance. Near the dancers look for an evergreen shape, a ball and glove, and a football. Dr. Taylor thought it would be interesting to pose a curious cherub looking over the edge of the clouds down at all of us. This serves to make a connection with the viewer drawing our attention into the "Visual Arts" area. Many of the subliminal symbols are hidden in this area in addition to the obvious dolphin heart being sculpted, the John Deere tractor being painted, the rainbow and palette, roses, eagle, red bird, and blue bird. In the clouds there are, a hawk, to the left of the easel painter, a football, basketball, praying hands, stars, and a basketball with wings all built into the composition in shades of blues and white. A fly can be found in two places, on the easel near the cardinal and on one of the sprinkler heads. Overhead an angel takes moving pictures to represent the media center located within the building, just another form of visual art. A crawling cherub plays with an airplane while a bending angel looks at the drawing of the Rainbow Cat. In the clouds, look for a heart, a guitar, and a UK basketball as we move toward the theatrical angels holding comedy and tragedy masks. Moving on we enter the "Music" area again with a happy cherub holding a stringed instrument

the Lute. Inside the sound hole of the lute is the peace sign. On the hair ribbon of the lute player is a ladybug. There is another crown hidden in the clouds in this area. Looking at the harp player we see musical notes displayed on the sheet music that lies before her and an Evergreen Angel on the parchment at her feet. With the backlit rider on the muscular flying horse "Pegasus" we arrive at the point where we began.

The circular dome is the perfect architectural devise for displaying the cherub theme because it gives visual depth and understanding of the direction to heaven and the hope of traveling through the portal overhead to be reunited with those we love. The circular design allows for an unbroken blending of lives and activities in an eternal panoramic view as each scene melts into the next.

Remarks by Wayne Taylor, artist of the dome.



HEAVEN'S CHILDREN

Do you suppose they meet like us
To lend support and love?
As we assemble, do they gather too,
Watching from above?

Do you suppose they ask our God
To care for parents here?
Just as we beseech Him
To hold our children dear?

Do you suppose, among themselves,
They comfort one another?
When they see deep grief consume
Their father or their mother?

Do you suppose, together,
They wipe away our tears?
Holding hands, as we do,
To cleanse away our fears?

Do you suppose they listen
To the breaking hearts we share?
As we tell our stories
Our tragedies laid bare?

And, do you suppose they know the Truth,
These children whom we adore?
Knowing fully that God's love
In abundance He will outpour?

And, do you suppose they understand
Far better than we mortals?
That peace and joy and soul's content
Await us at the portals?

And do you suppose until the day
They see us face to face
They're tugging on God's heartstrings
To keep us in His Grace?

Sue Smith
Los Osos, CA

On Cherubs, Combs and Cumberland College

Christmas at Cumberland College in the mountains of southeastern Kentucky brings to mind the little boy in heaven – riding Pegasus, the winged horse – surrounded by other children living up there in the hereafter.

A delicate mural in the dome atop Cumberland Lodge, painted by an alumnus of Cumberland College, symbolizes the miracle of earthly birth and spiritual re-birth, the horror of death, but the greater hope for eternal peace. The little boy riding Pegasus represents the only son of Dr. and Mrs. James Taylor.

James Taylor II was killed in a car wreck in his 18th year, the night before he was to graduate from high school. His father, Dr. Taylor, is currently the president of Cumberland College.

"I knew how I wanted it to look," said Mrs. Taylor, who insisted that the artist would have to accept her judgment in the matter.

"Members of the families of children who've died come here, and when they look up at the faces of the angels, they say they see actual resemblances with living relatives," said Mrs. Taylor.

Cumberland College, the largest private college in the Commonwealth of Kentucky, is a place where no one seems to feel awkward about praying or talking about spirituality. Founded in 1889 by Baptist ministers of Appalachia, Cumberland College has produced two Kentucky governors – Edwin Porch Morrow and Bert T. Combs – and generals, an admiral, lawyers, judges, doctors, ministers, and teachers.

This Christmas will be the fourth since Governor Combs was swept away by Red River floodwaters. He was buried in his native Clay County, just north of his

alma mater, Cumberland College.

When I spoke with Governor Combs' widow, Sara, for my book, *Peace at the Center*, she told me:

"The idea he had for Kentucky was that it should quit apologizing for itself, especially Eastern Kentucky. It should never be ashamed. He used to always say that he never wanted to hear young people from Eastern Kentucky apologize for being from Eastern Kentucky – that they could do anything. That the key to it was education, and that if they could get an education, that they could go anywhere in this country and do anything. That what we had to do in this state was to quit consuming our seed corn and to lay back for the future, to invest in our young people.

"He had a vision of education and technology, I think, that was beyond his years, and he had had that all of his life...

"So his vision for Kentucky was to make it a better place, and to never quit, never give up. To take the leap forward that was necessary. To bite the bullet. To make the investment in our infrastructure, (the state parks system) but first and foremost, ahead of the infrastructure, was the investment in the human personality and intellect. Educating our people. I used to give him some quotations that he used in some of his speeches... 'After bread, education is the first need of the people.' He loved it!

"There was another one, a Chinese proverb, that he used a lot, which basically goes this way. 'If you're planning for a year, sow rice. If you're planning for a decade, plant trees. If you're planning for a lifetime, educate a child.' And he really believed in that. He believed in the tremendous resource of the human intellect – the spirit – I think, simply because

of the lesson of his own life. You know, reaching out for all those life experiences and drawing them to the center and then being able to relate from that inner core to the rest of the world.

Governor Combs' educational foundation was formed at Cumberland College. He was the seed corn, a child with a beautiful dream, from which would grow a bountiful harvest. Now he, like James Taylor II, has become a child on the winged horse of Heaven, surrounded by butterflies with a rainbow arching through the pale blue sky.

When the dome of Cumberland Lodge was dedicated in the summer of 1994, the words of Richard Bach were unveiled on a nearby plaque: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Master calls a butterfly."

Christmas at Cumberland College, then, is like a shining star for every school and every home in the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

Merry Christmas, everybody! ■

The author, a retired network news correspondent, is professor of journalism at the University of Kentucky.

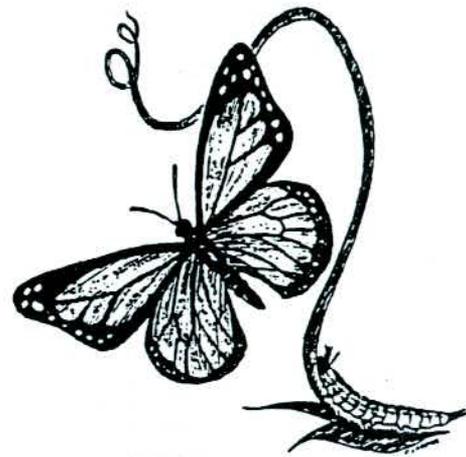


Illustration by Jackie Larkins



SHADOWS

Alone though I appear

They are still beside me.

Memories possess their faces -

they will forever guide me.

And as I fall they kiss me -

and I know they will not be forgotten

For they lift me with their wings -

before I hit the bottom.

It is then that I realize -

I will never walk alone as long as their love nurtures

in my heart and kindness finds a home.

Written by Elaine McPherson, wife of Drew Smith's friend Joe McPherson on May 1, 1999



**Let me wrestle with memories
Rooted deep within my being
That I have cast away, away
After the War of Fight and Fleeing**

**How I remember the young struggles
The jealousy and competition
When whole galaxies we juggled
And life was more than repetition**

**He was my friend in golden fields
Who left before the rain
Tempered me and now he shields
Arrows of this world's pain**

**His memory is a warm confusion
Defining all I am and am to be
His rebirth was a conclusion
Of this child's way to see**

**And now he grows within me
Demanding room he spreads my wings
Brotherly, he bends my knee
So I can listen as Jeremiah sings.**

**Written on July 23, 1997, the fifth anniversary of the death of Jeremiah and Drew
Smith by Jeremiah's close friend Chris Lauer.**

We have no promise in this life
That secures us a safe journey
He said he would be with us
From now until eternity

This faith does sustain us
We live by it day to day
As for hope of a tomorrow
He said, "I am with you all the way"

So we give birth to our children
With love, hope, and a great plan
That they will grow and develop
Into a kind woman or a happy man

In nurturing these precious angels
In the rules for a good life
We also work long hours and study
How to raise them with less strife

They experience chicken pox and measles
Those mumps were no fun
But we grew closer and closer
While nursing illness from dark to sun

Oh, we look at them so often
As we think to ourselves
How did I ever deserve this child
Seems a fantasy just like - little elves

But sometimes these things will happen
We cannot, but do try, to understand
To lose the precious jewels
Is like taking a drummer from a band

How we then come to realize
That our life must go on and on
That He sent us all for a reason
We must reach out and sing our song

There are many who need to hear it
Their life here is incomplete
Unless we are there and willing
With our own words and suns to our beat

There is no place to stop it
Our march must go on
Thank God those jewels will be waiting
When we sing our final song

You must show strength to Jordan
Whose love for them was shared
He also lost abundantly
He needs to know someone cares

His life must go on normal
Or as a teenage life should be
With that glow he always carries
He'll soothe your pain, wait and see

Yes, I know, I have children
And, yes, I'm also aware
That no one can take their places
Not anyone can fill their chair

But all of you can pull together
In hidden discreet form
And can fill your longing
For those guys who have gone on

You can help those who are struggling
Who try to reach a higher goal
By teaching them the values
You taught those darling souls

Now the fact that your children will be there
When you someday arrive
Should always make you celebrate
When reminded of those precious eyes.

By Joyce Porter Hammers, close friend, artist and poet from Morgantown, KY after the deaths of Drew and Jeremiah Smith.



Prayer of Blessing

Lord, catch me off guard today.

Surprise me with some moment of beauty or pain

So that at least for the moment I may be started into seeing that

You are here in all your splendor,

Always and everywhere,

Barely hidden,

Beneath,

Beyond,

Within this life I breathe.

By Frederick Buechner



A Pair of Shoes

I am wearing a pair of shoes.

They are ugly shoes.

Uncomfortable shoes.

I hate my shoes.

Each day I wear them, and each day I wish I had another pair.

Some days my shoes hurt so bad that I do not think I can take another step.

Yet, I continue to wear them.

I get funny looks wearing these shoes.

They are looks of sympathy.

I can tell in other's eyes that they are glad they are my shoes and not theirs.

They never talk about my shoes.

To learn how awful my shoes are might make them uncomfortable.

To truly understand these shoes you must walk in them.

But, once you put them on, you can never take them off.

I now realize that I am not the only one who wears these shoes.

There are many pairs in this world.

Some people are like me and ache daily as they try and walk in them.

Some have learned how to walk in them so they don't hurt quite as much.

Some have worn the shoes so long that days will go by before they think about how much they hurt.

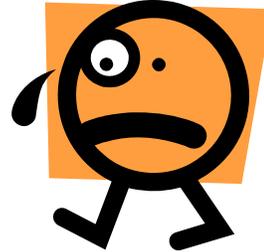
No one deserves to wear these shoes.

Yet, because of these shoes I am a stronger person.

These shoes have given me the strength to face anything.

They have made me who I am.

I will forever walk in the shoes of a person who has lost a child.



Grief is an emotion, not a disease.

There is no time table for recovery.

But there is also no getting around the pain.

Each of us has to experience the pain in order to recover from it.

Our hopes and dreams may no longer be possible.

We may feel hopeless and want to run away.

It takes time and effort to regain the ability to function.

We must express our feelings and be patient with ourselves.

Grief is a process.

Recovery is a decision.

Readjustment does not come overnight.

But each of us can resolve to survive - one moment at a time.

AFTER A WHILE

After a while you learn
the subtle difference between
holding a hand and chaining a soul
and you learn that love doesn't mean leaning
and company doesn't always mean security.

And you begin to learn
that kisses aren't contracts
and presents aren't promises
and you begin to accept your defeats
with your head up and your eyes ahead
with the grace of a woman
not the grief of a child
and you learn
to build all your roads on today
because tomorrow's ground is
too uncertain for plans
and futures have a way of falling down in mid-flight.

After a while you learn
that even sunshine burns
if you get too much
so you plant your own garden
and decorate your own soul
instead of waiting
for someone to bring you flowers.

And you learn
that you really can endure
that you really are strong
and you really do have worth
and you learn
and you learn
with every good-bye you learn.

Veronica A. Shoffstall

Never think that God's delays are God's denials.

Hold on; hold fast; hold out. Patience is genius.

--Comte de Buffon

I waited patiently for God to help me, then he listened,

and heard my cry...he lifted me...and set

my feet on a hard, firm path and steadied me...

He has given me a new song to sing...

Ps. 40:1-3 TLB





Their souls shall be as a watered garden;
and they shall not sorrow any more at all
...for I will turn their mourning into joy,
and will comfort them,
and make them rejoice from their sorrow.

—Jeremiah 31:12-13

When I Must Leave You

When I must leave you for a little while
Please do not grieve and shed wild tears
And hug your sorrow to you through the years.
But start out bravely with a gallant smile;
And for my sake and in my name
Live on and do all things the same.
Feed not your loneliness on empty days,
But fill each waking hour in useful ways.
Reach out your hand in comfort and in cheer
And I in turn will comfort you
And hold you near;
And never, never be afraid to die,
For I am waiting for you in the sky!





EULOGY OF GREGORY MICHAEL FOTIA

November 10, 1988 -- October 13, 2000

October 16, 2000

People often wonder what the meaning of their lives are and ask why things happen as they do. My wife Tina and I had the privilege and honor to be Gregory's godparents. The role of a godparent is to guide your godchild, through example, to become children of God.

I learned early in Greg's life that the relationship was to be a role reversal. Through the years, I came to know by being with Greg, his parents, Frank and Rose, and his brother Frankie, that it was Greg who would be the teacher -- and the lesson would be to teach and show all those whose lives he touched the real meaning of life and purpose.

Many people have the ability to express themselves and communicate with each other through words, thoughts and expression. Greg could not do any of these things yet everyone understood Greg. Greater still, watching Greg with his family, he was able to convey to each of us the most important message in one's life.

Greg became the instrument through which God spoke to all of us whose lives he touched. That message God sent to us through Greg was how to give and receive unconditional love to one another.

Those of us blessed to be part of Greg's life were witness to this special love as part of Greg's daily life. Each of us who met Greg participated in this unconditional love.

Each of us here witness to the tireless devotion, care, love and support by his mother, father, brother, the Molinaro and Fotia families in their care of Greg, was witness to true unconditional love daily.

Greg is the instrument God sent to remind us that faith and love are the most important part of our lives.

Greg is the instrument through which Frank and Rose, having seen and living life with a physically challenged child, were inspired to give Greg and those children like him the opportunity to live the best lives they could through the creation of the Children's Relief Fund.

Greg is the instrument through which we saw his caregivers, teachers, doctors and health care providers give unconditional love and support to Greg and his family in their daily care of him.

While just one of these examples of unconditional love would be enough for one lifetime, we thank God we had the opportunity to call Greg ours for the short time he stayed here with us.

As hard and difficult as the past several days and the future will be without Greg in our midst physically, he remains and lives forever inside each of us. Every one of us owes it to each other to tell one another of the ways our lives were blessed by Greg.

In closing, we owe it to Greg to follow his example and show our unconditional love to him. This love, as difficult as it is, is the gift to Greg, to let him go, to return home to God.

But don't think for a moment that Greg will not be here among us. He will be the same special angel and messenger from God for all of us, looking after us from his playground in heaven. All we need to do is listen - Greg will be speaking to us in the way he always could - through God.

I have been asked to read the following poem by Greg's family. This poem also speaks to unconditional love and the ability to love someone enough to let go.

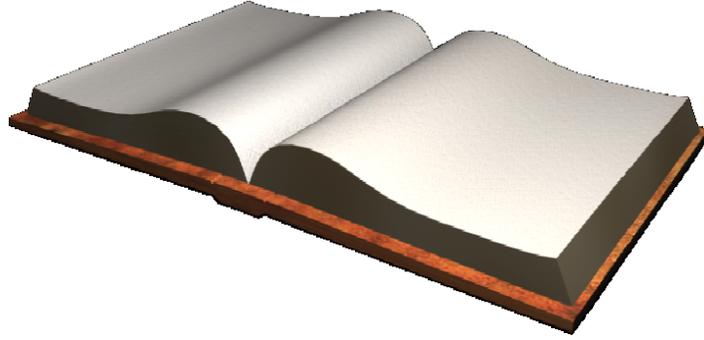
In tears we saw you sinking,
And watched you fade away.
Our hearts were almost broken
We wanted you to stay.

But when we saw you sleeping
So peaceful and free from pain
How could we wish you back
With us to suffer pain again.

It broke our hearts to lose you
But you did not go alone
For part of us went with you
The day God took you home.

To Greg, from your family and friends, thank you. We love you and miss you, but know you are in a place where there is no more pain and suffering. God Bless You.

Gregory was the eleven-year-old son of Frank and Rose Fotia from Hilton Head Island, S.C.



THE BOOK OF WISDOM

Chapter 3, Verses 1 through 8

**But the sons of the just are in the hand of God,
And no torment shall touch them.**

**They seemed, in the view of the foolish, to be dead;
And their passing away was thought an affliction
And their going forth from us, utter destruction.
But they are at peace.**

**For if before men, indeed, they be punished,
Yet is their hope full of immortality;
Chastised a little, they shall be greatly blessed,
Because God tried them
And found them worthy of Himself.**

**As gold in the furnace, He proved them,
And as sacrificial offerings, He took them to Himself.
In the time of their visitation they shall shine,
And shall dart about as sparks through stubble;
They shall judge nations and rule over peoples,
And the Lord shall be their King forever.**



Do not look forward to
What might happen
Tomorrow...

The same everlasting Father...

Who cares for you today...

Will take care of you...

Tomorrow and every day...

Either He will shield you from
Suffering or He will give you
Unfailing strength to bear it.

Be at peace then and put
Aside all anxious thoughts and
Imaginations.

--St. Francis De Sales



ONLY A LITTLE BROOK

A few weeks ago, a dear little girl in Bath, Maine, was so ill that she felt she could no longer live in her poor, suffering body. At first she was sad at the thought. It did seem to her such a long, strange, dark way, from the warm room where she was with her friends, to the heaven where Christ is, and where those who are good and pure in this life shall find a home much better than any on this earth!

But soon this little girl began to think, and to feel that God must be just as near to her in the hour of death, and in the room where she lay, as he had been in the hour of her birth; that, as she owed her life in this world to him, she must owe her life in the next to him too; that so he must be just as near to her on the earth as in heaven; and that his arms would be round her soul, and save it from harm when it left the dead body, no matter where she might be.

As these thoughts came to her mind, a sweet smile stole over her face. No more did she feel afraid. She felt as if God's angels were quite near, to help and cheer her, and show her the way. She grew calm and happy. What at first had seemed to her a long, dark road, now seemed short and bright and very near. And at last she cried out, "*Oh, it is only a little brook!*" and so passed on to the heavenly shore.

But what did she mean by "*only a little brook?*" She meant that the way from our own world to the world where the soul goes when the body dies is not far; that, when we are good, God is as near to us in the world where we now are as he will be in the next; and that to pass from this life to the next is just like crossing a little brook, so shallow that children can wade across it, or sail their tiny boats on it.

Oh! how much do those men lose who do not believe fully in that better life after this, and who do not act as if they believed it! Let us but mind the words of Christ, be pure and good, and show love to God and man in our acts here; and then, like the little girl in Bath, Maine, we need not be afraid to have our bodies die; for there is no more cause for fear than in crossing a brook from one bank to another. Let us think of this when we say our little hymn,

"Now I lay me down to sleep,
I pray the Lord my soul to keep:
If I should die before I wake,
I pray the Lord my soul to take."

Anna Livingston

Elaine Craven, mother of Maureen Craven who died in Memphis, TN, on 11-5-89, found this story in an antique book.

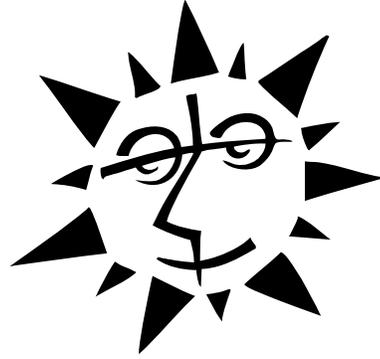
Hope Tiding Because

Because somebody cared today
I knew God's love was strong;
I found new hope to bear my cross
And courage for my song.
My neighbor's heart conveyed the love
I needed for my pain;
And happily I felt the faith
To dream and smile again.

Inez Franck

In loving memory of
Cary Combs
11/05/66 - 10/14/08
(pictured with son Gage)





FOREVER

Your smile will forever light up our hearts and our minds

Your beauty onto our souls will forever warmly shine

Your friendship and your love will forever inspire

Those you touched to be ever kinder, to aim even higher

We will be forever blessed for having known you Maureen

For yours was as special a soul as this world has ever seen

And although this is a sad, sad November

With love in our hearts you will be forever remembered.

Written in memory of Maureen Craven who died 11/5/89 in Memphis, TN



September

The crisp, cool, inviting days
of September
have lost their appeal.
Attacks on our way of life
thousands killed
questions unanswered
a state of shock
as planes plummet from
the bright blue September skies
ending our comfortable
easy lives
as Americans.
And yet, despite the loss of thousands
my thoughts return
to the loss
of one
so full of life
who also left us
in
September.

Shanan Mills

9-23-01

Written in memory of Jon Clark, Bowling Green, KY



I'm past the denial, I accept that you are gone,
I understand that my only choice is simply to go on.

I've met other parents who share my ordeal.
Most have assured me that with time I will heal.

I've read all the books, and gone to the meetings,
I've received many cards, words of hope and warm greetings.

I am taking care of my physical and mental health,
I am not worried with my personal wealth.

I have worn your clothes and slept in your bed,
I visit your grave where so many have tread.
I've bought angels, cards, and beautiful flowers,
I even go there when it's wet from rain showers.

I've saved the many mementos of your life,
Reminders of good times, even times full of strife.
I've framed many photos, your smile is everywhere,
I talk to you often as though you were here.

I shared your dreams and I shared your goals,
I felt we were joined, even deep in our souls.
I try not to dwell on all that you've missed,
But think of the happy days when we were so blessed.

I talk to God, I kneel and I pray,
I ask Him to help make this pain go away.
My days are so empty, so dark are my nights,
I ask God to hold me until there is light.

Our bond was unique, our love was so strong,
Your dying so young was unfair, it was wrong.
I am still your mother, and you are my son,
Though Death has separated us, it has not won.

I know that you live in the palm of God's hand,
In the place where angels take care of His land.
Watch over and guide me while I am still here,
Til it's my time to join you, my heart holds you near.



CHAPTER II

A chapter of my life I thought I would never have to write; life without my beloved son, Joshua. I have to admit I was mad at Bob (our counselor) when he suggested we could be complete again. I have not wanted to think of being complete again, but I realize it's time to pick up the pieces and "move on."

Where do I start? Well, I think in knowing that Joshua is happy in heaven and that he and Jesus want us to be happy again. I will miss Josh for the rest of my life and not a day will go by that I don't, but it's time to let go of the pain and move forward - he wants that for us.

I want only happiness and joy for Lindsey's (our daughter) life - she deserves that. I also want to find happiness within myself and with my husband again. When I think of what Josh gave me, I think of love - a tremendous gift that I will always hold close to my heart.

I hope to laugh again and really mean it, to cry less and live again and enjoy it. I feel time will help with all of these things, but I also feel I have to want this and I do - I'm ready.

Jesus did not promise us an easy life, but He promised to be there and He has. I have walked this with Him every step of the way. He gave me a true gift in a little boy named Joshua who has taught me more about love than anybody I have ever known. Nobody has ever loved me the way Josh did and I'm eternally grateful to have known this kind of love because some people never do.

I do believe Lindsey loves me in this way too, but there is nothing like the love between a mother and son - it's amazing. I'm glad you gave me this gift pea pod.

I can hear you gently saying, "It's time to move on Mum and it's okay - that's my wish for you and I will always be with you, Mum." I will Josh - always with you in my heart - always. I love you!!

Mum

Written by Carol Plaisted from York, Maine, for her son Joshua Scott Plaisted who went home to God on 3/27/00 at 2 years, 8 months and 2 days old.



Father to Father

**Father to Father in common bereaved
Father to Father I share your grief
Father to Father I share your pain
Father to Father to love is gain
Father to Father both full of love
Father to Father with sons up above
Father to Father some problems we lick
Father to Father some things just can't fix
Father to Father just merely a man
Father to Father God has his plan
Father to Father death's sting will bother
Father to Father just look to the Father
Father to Father have faith and then
Father to Father we'll see them again.**

In Memory of Shaka & Jamon Franklin

In Honor of Les Franklin

By Gene Logan, father of Brandon Logan from Memphis, TN



"How are you?"

"Better, " I say.

better at hiding my pain,
better at pretending our lives
 have returned to normal,
better at shedding my tears
 when only God can see.

Grief crystals
 sharp and hard
pain made manifest
 cutting, hurting.

Only tears dissolve
 that cutting edge,
refining the crystals
 through which life is viewed
So differently.

Poetry written by Donna Herndon
since the death of her son Roger Herndon on August 2, 1991.

You ask me how I'm doing

 You want to see me smile.

You want to think the grief that
 only lingered for a while.

And so I play the game with you.

 I smile and say "Just fine."

But those who've trod this road before
 know the pain that still is mine.

How could this happen?

 How can this be?

How could my son
 be taken from me?

When will the hot tears
 that wash o'er my soul
 yield to sweet memories?

Will I ever be whole?



Tears are often the telescope through
which men see into heaven.

...weeping may remain for a night, but
rejoicing comes in the morning.

Ps. 30:5 NIV

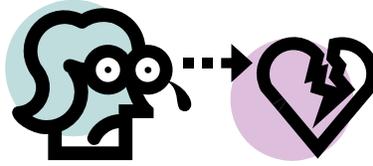
To Those I Love
and
Those Who Love Me

When I am gone, release me, let me go
I have so many things to see and do.
You mustn't tie yourself to me with tears
Be happy that we had some years.
I gave you my love, You can only guess
How much you gave to me in happiness.

I thank you for the love you each have shown,
But now it's time I traveled alone.
So grieve a while for me if grieve you must;
Then let your grief be comforted by trust.
It's only for a while that we must part.
So keep the memories within your heart.

I won't be far away, for life goes on
So if you need me call and I will come
Though you can't see or touch me, I'll be near
And if you listen with your heart, you'll hear
All of my love around you soft and dear.
And then when you must come this way alone
I'll greet you with a smile and say,
"Welcome Home."



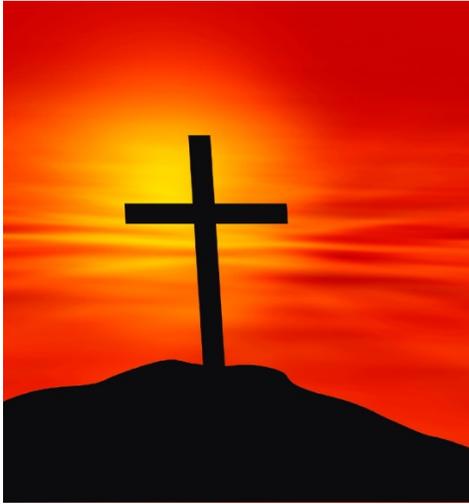


Tears are the Proof of Life

"How long will the pain last?" a brokenhearted mourner asked me. "All the rest of your life," I had to answer truthfully. We never quite forget. No matter how many years, we remember. The loss of a loved one is like a major operation, part of us is removed and we have a scar for the rest of our lives. This does not mean the pain continues at the same intensity. There is a short while at first when we hardly believed it; it is rather like we have cut our hand, we see the blood flowing, but the pain has not set in yet. So when we are bereaved there is a short while before the pain hits us. But when it does it is massive in its affect. Grief is shattering.

Then the wound begins to heal. It is like going through a dark tunnel. Occasionally we glimpse as bit of light up ahead, then lose sight of it awhile, then see it again and one day merge into the light, we are able to laugh, to care, to live. The wound is healed so to speak, the stitches are taken out, and we are whole again; but not quite. The scar is still there and the scar tissue too. As the tears go by, we manage. There are things to do, people to care for, tasks that call for our full attention. But the pain is still there, not far below the surface. We see a face that looks familiar, hear a voice that echoes, see a photo in someone's album, see a landscape that once we saw together, and it is as though the knife were in the wound again.

But not so painfully, and mixed with joy too. Because remembering a happy time is not all sorrow; it brings back happiness with it. How long will the pain last? All the rest of your life. But the thing to remember is that not only the pain will last, but the blessed memories as well. Tears are the proof of life. The more love, the more tears. If this be true, then how could we ask that the pain cease altogether. For then the memory of love would go with it. The pain of grief is the price we pay for love.



**Sorrow and her grim family of sighs may drop by for a visit,
but they won't stay long when they realize that faith got there first
-- and doesn't plan to leave.**

**Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.
--- Psalm 30:5 KJV**

**Do not cheat thy heart and tell her,
"Grief will pass away;
Hope for fairer times in the future,
and forget today."**

**Tell her, if you will, that sorrow
need not come in vain;
Tell her that the lessons taught her
far outweighs the pain.**

-- Adelaide Ann Proctor



Our little time of suffering is not worthy of our first night's welcome home to Heaven.
---Samuel Rutherford

Those we love are with the Lord, and the Lord has promised to be with us. If they are with Him and He is with us; they cannot be far away.
--Peter Marshal

I used to ask God to help me. Then I asked if I might help him. I ended up by asking God to do his work through me.
--Hudson Taylor

In acceptance there is peace.

I believe in the sun even when it's not shining.
I believe in love, even when I'm alone.
I believe in God, even when he is silent.
Trust God in the dark till the light returns.
--AW Tozer

Life is like a game of tennis; the player who serves well seldom loses.

It is not how troubled the sea is that determines the course of your life; it is who the Pilot is.

The Lord will either calm your storm or allow it to rage while He calms you.

Since the Lord is directing our steps; why try to understand everything that happens along the way?
Prov. 20:24 TLB

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and fear not, on your own understanding.
Prov. 3:5 NIV



Together We'll Walk the Stepping Stones

Come, take my hand, the road is long.
We must travel by stepping stones.
No, you're not alone, I'll go with you.
I know the road well, I've been there.
Don't fear the darkness, I'll be there with you.
We must take one step at a time,
But remember, we may have to stop awhile.
It is a long way to the other side
And there may be obstacles.

We have many stones to cross, some are bigger than others,
Shock, denial and anger to start.
Then comes guilt, despair and loneliness.
It's a hard road to travel, but it must be done.
It's the only way to reach the other side.

Come, slip your hand in mine.
What? Oh, yes, it's strong.
I've held so many hands like yours.
Yes, mine was one time small and weak like yours.
Once, you see, I had to take someone's hand
in order to take the first step.
Oops! You've stumbled; go ahead and cry.
Don't be ashamed; I understand.
Let's wait here awhile and get your breath.
When you're stronger, we'll go on, one step at a time.
There's no need to hurry.
Say, it's nice to hear you laugh.
Yes, I agree, the memories you shared are good.
Look, we're halfway there now; I can see the other side.
It looks so warm and sunny.
Oh, have you noticed, we're nearing the last stone
and you're standing alone?
We've reached the other side.

But wait, look back, someone is standing there.
They are alone and want to cross the stepping stones.
I'd better go, they need my help.
What? Are you sure?
Why, yes, go ahead, I'll wait, you know the way,
you've been there.
Yes, I agree, it's your turn, my friend -
To help someone else cross the stepping stones.

Written by Barb Williams, TCF, Ft. Wayne, IN



Do not stand by my grave and weep,

I am not there. I do not sleep

I am a thousand winds that blow

I am a diamond glint on snow

I am the sunlight on ripened grain

I am the gentle Autumn rain.

When you awake in the morning hush

I am the swift uplifting rush

Of quiet birds in circling flight

I am the soft starshine at night.

Do not stand by my grave and cry,

I am not there...I did not die.

Anonymous



A BROKEN VASE

Cathie McCormick

I have a priceless vase. An unexpected storm blows it over and it is shattered into many pieces. At first, I try to put it together myself. However, I find myself so upset that I ask some friends to help. They seem to be in a hurry to get the job done so I will be happy again. It does not seem to matter if the pieces fit together perfectly. We find some quick drying glue to put the vase together. When the vase is finished, it in no way resembles the original. It is not pleasing to look at; nor can it be used at all. One day, a very slight breeze blows the vase over. It breaks and shatters into many pieces once again.

This time, I realized a special person, an expert in vases, must be sought. I search for the person who originally made the vase. He begins lovingly picking up each piece and patiently sorting them on the table. He carefully examines each piece individually. Slowly and precisely, he glues the first two pieces together. These are set aside to dry completely before the next piece is added. This process continues for over three years until finally, the entire vase is back together.

Much to my surprise, I recognize the vase as the one I owned, yet it is actually a beautiful, unique, new creation. It is a little bigger and stronger, now. I find that it serves a different purpose in my home, as well as being the perfect accent to brighten up a dull room.

I am the broken vase. I was shattered when my son, Mark, died. In the beginning I tried to put the pieces of my life back together the way it was before the tragedy. I soon realized my fragile state and sought the help of many people around me, who loved me and wanted to see me happy again. They listened and did their best to care for me. They were a tremendous help as I worked through much of the hurt and pain for two years.

On the second anniversary of Mark's death, God showed me that I needed to stop seeking an outward solution to an inward problem. I should not be disappointed in people for only He, the one who created me, is able to make something beautiful of my life. Only He can heal the hurt. With LOVE as the glue, God has been putting the pieces of ME together.

At this time, I feel as if that glue is still wet. I must continue to wait on God, for His perfect PLAN in His perfect time.



A BOY AND HIS DOG, BACK TOGETHER AGAIN

They loved each other, the boy and the dog. Maybe because they were so much alike. The boy - Christopher - was a strapping teenager, big and strong and smiling and loving. "Young Samson," his grandfather called him.

The dog - Bogart - was a 130-pound pup, huge and playful and protective and loving. "The bear," a neighbor called him.

The dog would look for the boy each night. If the boy was in bed, the dog would bound up and join him. If the boy wasn't home, the dog would sleep in the kitchen or living room to await him. On those nights, the boy sometimes would grab a pillow and sleep on the floor with the dog.

The big, cheerful boy was everybody's best friend.

The big powerful pup was the boy's best friend. They loved each other, the boy and the dog.

The boy died first.

He got sick one night and died the next. It was as simple as that. He was 17 years old. One day he was hale and hearty, laughing and smiling, working his summer job on a farm. The next he was dead. Juvenile diabetes struck out of nowhere.

His mother and father, his brother and sister, his grandmothers and grandfathers were inconsolable. And, 19 months later, they still are.

So, too, was the dog.

He quit waiting by the kitchen door. He was lost and sad. The other dog, a hound puppy, couldn't cheer him up. The other boy, a sweet 14 year old, was too devastated to try.

But life, of sorts, went on. The parents, battered and shattered found what solace there was in friends and books. The brother kept busy with school. Even the dog grew to understand. In time, he became playful again, took up with the goofy young hound and taught him how to graze the kitchen and humble the cats and lie in wait for the mailman.

But he never went in the boy's room.

And then the dog died.

The brother, now 16 and grown up, found the dog in the snow in the back yard. The dog, like the boy, had simply died without warning. Like the boy, he was big and strong and vigorous one moment; like the boy, he was dead the next. Like the boy, he was still young. The boy had been 17 when he died; the dog was 6.

The mother couldn't bear it. Still ripped by the open wounds of the boy's death, she huddled over the dog, sobbing. She was sobbing, not for the dog, of course, but for the boy and the lost link to him. The brother put his coat around her, tried to coax her in from the freezing cold.

"Don't you understand?" he told her. "It's all right. Christopher needed Bogie. He came to get him because he was lonely."

He was right, of course.

Or at least the mother and the father like to look at it that way.

And already the mother and the father are talking about getting a new pup come spring.

For you can always get a new dog - and get over the death of an old one.

But you can never get a new son - or get over the death of a loved one.

Dogs are supposed to die.

Sons aren't.

By Michael Gartner in his editorial from USA TODAY, February 13, 1996.
(Copied from Bereaved Parents of the USA newsletter)

I Wondered

by Mary E. Cummings

There were so many things I feared,
the wrath of God, an angel's tear.
But all misgivings seemed so small
when destiny made its strange call.
I wondered if He was above—
He took a child I dearly loved!
My life seemed like a mockery
of deeds done so unselfishly.
My heart told me I could not live,
this gift to Him, I could not give.
I felt my life had been a lie,
became a truth, then went to die.
He made me question what life meant.
But when my tears were all but spent,
my oldest climbed upon my knee.
I heard her eyes, "Remember me?"
And then I knew, this was His way
of helping me live another day.



Often, people inquire whether I ever ask myself, "Why me?" I never do. If I ask, "Why me?" as I am assaulted by heart disease and AIDS, I must also ask, "Why me?" about my blessings. The morning after I won Wimbledon I should have asked, "Why me?" and doubted that I deserved the victory. I also do not waste time pleading with God to make me well. I believe that prayer is not to be invoked to ask God for things for oneself or even for others. Rather, prayer is a medium through which I ask God to show me God's will, and to give me strength to carry out that will.

Arthur Ashe - 1993



AM I MAKING PROGRESS?
I USED TO CRY ALL THE TIME.
THEN, ONLY SOME OF THE TIME.
THEN, JUST ONCE IN AWHILE
NOW JUST OCCASIONALLY - ON THE
INSIDE.

By Darcie D. Sims: From FOOTSTEPS THROUGH
THE VALLEY.



THE
COMPASSIONATE
FRIENDS
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

The Compassionate Friends Credo

We need not walk alone.

We are the Compassionate Friends.

We reach out to each other with love, with understanding and with hope.
Our children have died at all ages and from many different causes, but our love for our children unites us.

Your pain becomes my pain just as your hope becomes my hope.
We come together from all walks of life, from many different circumstances.

We are a unique family because we represent many races and creeds.

We are young, and we are old.

Some of us are far along in our grief, but others still feel a grief so fresh
And so intensely painful that we feel helpless and see no hope.

Some of us have found our faith to be a source of strength;

Some of us are struggling to find answers.

Some of us are angry, filled with guilt or in deep depression;

Others radiate an inner peace.

But whatever pain we bring to this gathering of The Compassionate Friends,
It is pain we will share just as we share with each other our love for our children.

We are all seeking and struggling to build a future for ourselves,

But we are committed to building that future together

As we reach out to each other in love

And share the pain as well as the joy,

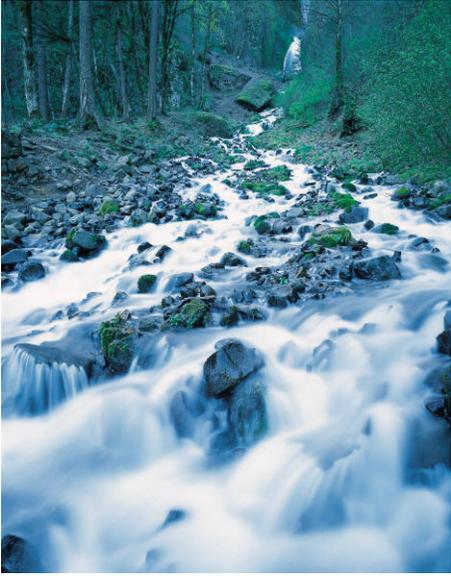
Share the anger as well as the peace

Share the faith as well as the doubts

And help each other to grieve as well as to grow.

We need not walk alone.

We are The Compassionate Friends.



Grief is Like a River

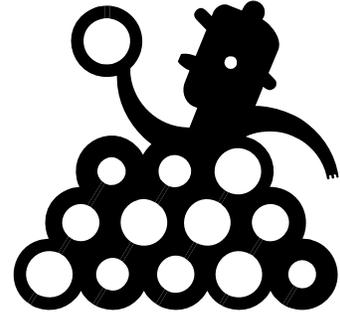
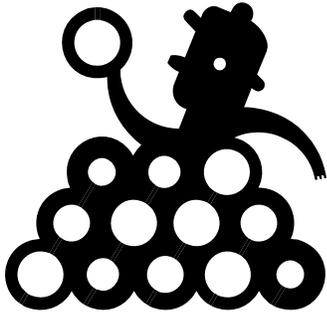
**My grief is like a river
I have to let it flow
But I myself determine
Just where the banks will go.**

**Some days the current takes me
In waves of guilt and pain
But there are always quiet pools
Where I can rest again.**

**I crash on rocks of anger
My faith seems faint indeed.
But there are other swimmers
Who know just what I need.**

**There are loving hands to hold me
When waters are too swift,
And someone kind to listen
When I just seem to drift.**

**Grief's river is a process
Of relinquishing the past.
By swimming in Hope's channels
I'll reach the shore at last.**



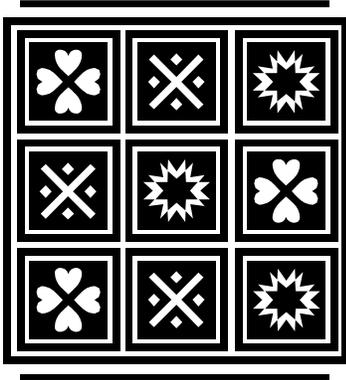
SNOWBALLS

Like most parents,
I suppose,
I worried.
From time to time
there were
stark moments of
panic.

If you were late from school
there was no rest
until I saw you
out in front,
throwing snowballs
with your friends,
reveling in the sound of
cold crusty snow making
explosions
on the sidewalk.

Now there will be no rest,
For the cold and crusty news
of your voluntary,
forever lateness
is exploding
just below the surface
of my heart.

By Gail Kittleson



MAGGIE'S QUILT

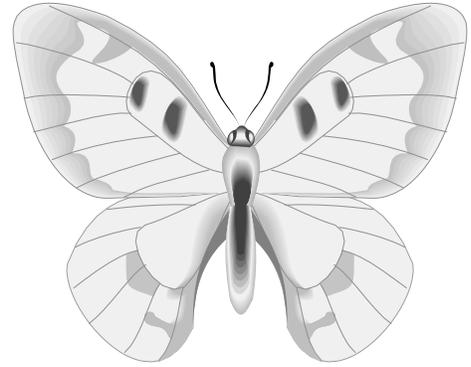
**Three small quilts my hands have fashioned
Each one made in love and hope.
Waiting to be touched by tiny fingers,
Yearning to be worn by gentle use.**

**The first one used as veil and tablecloth
by a little girl almost six.
Spread with dishes it's frayed edges
surround a tea party on a winter day.**

**The second a saddleblanket for the
rockinghorse of a cowboy who is two.
Many adventures has this small quilt seen.
Dragged from one end of the house to another.
It serves as a tent should the need arrive.**

**And the third for a tiny girl who stepped
onto the quilt of my life for only a moment.
For a child whose touch was felt
only from within,
but whose feet will dance always
upon the quilt of my heart.**

By Melissa Carey



I'M FREE

**Don't grieve for me, for now I'm free,
I'm following the path God laid for me.
I took His hand when I heard Him call,
I turned my back and left it all.
I could not stay another day,
To laugh, to love, to work or play.
Tasks left undone must stay that way,
I found that peace at the close of day.**

**If my parting has left a void,
Then fill it with remembered joy,
A friendship shared, a laugh, a kiss,
Ah yes, these things I too will miss.
Be not burdened with times of sorrow,
I wish you the sunshine of tomorrow.
My life's been full, I've savored much,
Good friends, good times, a loved one's touch.**

**Perhaps my time seemed all too brief,
Don't lengthen it now with undue grief.
Lift up your heart and share with me,
God wanted me now: He set me free.**



LETTING GO

To "Let go" does not mean to stop caring; it means I can't do it for someone else.

To "Let go" is not to cut myself off, it's the realization I can't control another.

To "Let go" is not to enable, but to allow learning from natural consequences.

To "Let go" is to admit powerlessness, which means the outcome is not in my hands.

To "Let go" is not to try to change or blame another. It's to make the most out of myself.

To "Let go" is not to care for, but to care about.

To "Let go" is not to fix, but to be supportive.

To "Let go" is not to judge, but to allow another to be a human being.

To "Let go" is not to be in the middle arranging all the outcomes, but to allow others to affect their own destinies.

To "Let go" is not to be protective. It's to permit another to face reality.

To "Let go" is not to deny, but to accept.

To "Let go" is not to nag, scold or argue, but instead to search out my own shortcomings and correct them.

To "Let go" is not to adjust everything to my desires, but to take each day as it comes, and cherish myself in it.

To "Let go" is not to regret the past, but to grow and live for the future.

To "Let go" is to fear less and love more.

"No Time To Waste"

1 out of 1, that's the ratio of how many of us are eventually going to die, now if you're anything like me you may have realized that those are pretty good numbers. That is the reason why when I hear or see people fighting and squabbling over small things I have to ask myself, "Is it really that serious?"

My philosophy on life is fairly simple and can be summed up by two quotes: "Aim for the moon, if you miss, you'll land among the stars," and "Look on the brighter side of things, it's easier to see." Basically, just try to accomplish as much as possible, and have fun doing it. I mean, if life isn't lived to the fullest then what is the point? Now I'm not a Gandhi wanna-be or anything like that, but if you're too busy being worried about what's going on around you, you just might miss what's going on in front of you.

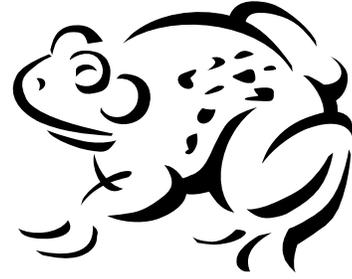
Much too often I see people who have made themselves fit into society's image of what they should be; not that it is always a bad thing, but it makes you wonder if "that person" hadn't been pushed down "that path" which one they would have taken. It's crazy to think about it.

A lot of my friends and peers often complain about the bad around them as well; they are so busy complaining about the bad that they wouldn't see the good if it hit them with an iron bat. I tell them all the time that they are missing the fruits because they can't allow themselves to see past the darkness to the light, but most of the time they just laugh it off and say I'm weird—maybe I am.

So, in ending, all I can say is that if every minute of life is not lived to the fullest then it's just a life of half victories and wasted moments, and I don't think we have any time to waste or anything to lose. I mean, none of us are going to make it out alive anyways. That's just me though, who am I to say how your life should be lived? I still live at home with my mom and watch cartoons.

Written by
Royce Robinson
October 24, 2005

Royce (17) was murdered on November 8, 2005 in Louisville, Kentucky



Twin Love Frogs

David and Reid Cooper are the twin sons of Diane and Mike Cooper from Chattanooga, Tennessee. The boys were students at The McCallie School where our sons Drew, Jeremiah, Jordan and Fong also attended. On February 14, 2007, David Cooper collapsed during crew practice and passed over at the age of seventeen.

Diane Cooper sent me an e-mail shortly after David's death. Many of our friends on the McCallie campus had encouraged Diane to contact me because they knew of my work with bereaved parents. Diane and I bonded instantly on our first phone call. Her pain was palpable. Her words could have come from my lips fifteen years earlier when my sons died. Could I help her? I prayed for wisdom. I listened. I learned about the other Cooper children; sons Chase and Reid, and daughter Brett. I came to know and love both Diane and Mike even though we had never met.

On May 31, 2007, we had a private screening of our documentary, "Space Between Breaths," in Lexington, Kentucky. Even though they were only three months into their grief, Diane, Mike and Reid Cooper decided to drive to Lexington for the screening and to attend J.I.M.'s (Joining In Memory) Conference to be held the day following the screening. Diane told me months later that none of them wanted to come but felt like it might help them at the point they were in their grief. I distinctly remember Diane saying she thought they all might "run screaming" from the theatre if the film was too painful for them to watch.

Well, the Coopers did not leave the theatre that night. They sat among eight hundred other people including other bereaved parents until the words of Cindy Bullens' song, "Better Than I've Ever Been," faded with the last of the credits. They sat as eleven of the twelve families interviewed for the film were brought up on stage to receive their "Oscars," a surprise love gift from Dinah and Jim Taylor from Williamsburg, Kentucky. I will never forget the three of them standing together saying David's name during the candle light service the following day at the conference.

Reid Cooper has lost his other half, the person he has been with since conception. How would he move forward with his young life without his twin? Our son Jordan was eleven when his two older brothers were killed. He too suffered a

great loss. Like Jordan, Reid had to face a family with important pieces missing. These bereaved siblings had to learn to deal with parents who were grieving. They had to try to find a new “normal.”

In the months since the documentary screening, Diane Cooper and I have stayed in close contact. I am in awe of this woman. She has chosen to confront her loss in a positive manner. She is vocal with what she needs. She is grieving but still reaching out to other bereaved families in the Chattanooga area.

Mike and Diane Cooper asked us to have a screening of our documentary in Chattanooga at The McCallie School in conjunction with a time of remembrance for their son David on the first anniversary of his angel day, February 14, 2008. The Cooper family had donated a magnificent sculpture to The McCallie School Memorial Walk that was being dedicated on February 14th. The dedication was a moving tribute to David Cooper and was attended by many family and friends as well as the entire faculty and student body of The McCallie School.

The Twin Love Frogs made their way to the Cooper family the night of February 14th. Diane and Mike hosted a Reception and Concert by Cindy Bullens the night of the Memorial Walk Dedication for family and friends. Luther and I were honored to be invited. We had never met Brett, the six year old daughter of the Coopers. I had gone to one of our drugstores the day before our trip to Chattanooga to pick out a present for Brett. WebKinz are the rage in our part of the country. My grandchildren, Andy and Ashley love them, so I figured that would be the perfect choice for Brett. Well, there were so many different ones...dogs, cats, horses...then one called a Love Frog seemed to belong to Brett. The Love Frog had red hearts and David Cooper had always worn red clothes (Reid had worn blue) so that represented David to me.

On the night of February 14th, we first met Brett Cooper. What must she have been thinking with her home full of family and friends and some people she didn't even know? There were over fifty incredible photos of either the twins or David displayed alongside a wall of remembrance. As I handed Brett the small bag with the Love Frog, she shyly said “Thank you,” and moved behind her mother. I caught sight of Brett about an hour later and she had a Love Frog in each hand! Diane came over to us and said another friend had brought Brett the exact same WebKinz...now she had Twin Love Frogs!

Only two people brought presents to Brett on the night of David's Remembrance. I am not bragging but just honored to have brought one of two Love Frogs. Without knowing, the two of us had played a role in bringing “Twins” back to the Cooper family. I'm sure this was a message from their son David.



The Twelve Freedoms of Healing in Grief

- 1. You have the freedom to realize your grief is unique.**
- 2. You have the freedom to talk about your grief.**
- 3. You have the freedom to expect to feel a multitude of emotions.**
- 4. You have the freedom to allow for numbness.**
- 5. You have the freedom to be tolerant of your physical and emotional limits.**
- 6. You have the freedom to experience grief attacks or memory embraces.**
- 7. You have the freedom to develop a support system.**
- 8. You have the freedom to make use of ritual.**
- 9. You have the freedom to embrace your spirituality.**
- 10. You have the freedom to allow a search for meaning.**
- 11. You have the freedom to treasure your memories.**
- 12. You have the freedom to move toward your grief and heal.**

Alan Wolfeldt, PhD.



Have you had a kindness shown?

Pass it on;

'Twas not given for thee alone,

Pass it on;

Let it travel down the years,

Let it wipe another's tears,

'Till in heaven the deed appears -

Pass it on.

---Henry Burton



You can't light a candle

To show others the way,

Without feeling the warmth

Of that bright little ray;

And you can't give a rose all

Fragrance with dew,

Without some of its sweetness

Remaining with you.

God's Bucket

If this world
Was not held in God's bucket

How could an ocean stand upside down
On its head and never lose a drop?

If your life was not contained in God's cup

How could you be so brave and laugh,
Dance in the face of death?

There is a private chamber in the soul
That knows a great secret

Of which no tongue can speak

Your existence, O love my dear
Has been sealed and marked

"Too sacred," "too sacred" by the Beloved -
To ever end!

Indeed God
Has written a thousand promises
All over your heart

That say,
Life, life, life
Is far too sacred to
Ever end.

- Hafiz (Sufi poet)



Butterfly

Just when you think
There are no more tears left
To cry
Another wave
Of remembering
This actually happened
He is really gone
And, everything says...NO!

Relentless, it seems
The stream of thoughts turn again
The shock wave hits
In the glimpse of a photograph
Or, a memory bubbles to the surface
Of the mind's tides
And, crashes hard against the walls
Of this broken heart
Making the desperate sound...NO!

Just can't believe...
How this could have...
Why didn't I..
What are we going to...
How do you go on?

I don't know
But, maybe this...

Maybe somewhere in time, beyond time
There will be something else to replace the NO
To soften the blows
Gently sew the heart with silken strings
And, still the minds waters
To whisper softly

Softly
So, we can hear
Miss you, love you, always with you
And the spirit shifts
The eyes blink open
A butterfly takes flight
And, changes the no to something else
Maybe not an affirmation, not a YES
Maybe not goodbye

Perhaps this...
Just a wordless sigh.....

Of a LOVE that never dies.

By Karin Bookbinder - in memory of her
nephew Adam Lewkowitz



Dearest Mommy,

**When you wonder the meaning
of life and love
Know that I am with you
Close your eyes and feel me kissing you
in the gentle breeze across your cheek**

**When you begin to doubt that you shall ever see me again
Quiet your mind and hear me
I am the whisper of the heavens
Speaking of your love**

**When you lose your identity
When you question who you are
where you are going
Open your heart and see me
I am the twinkle in the stars
smiling down upon you
Lighting the path for your journey**

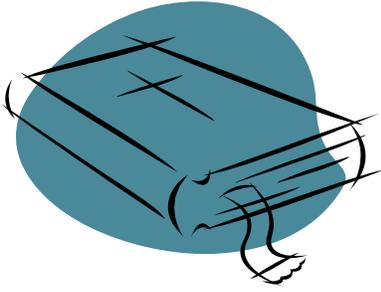
**When you awaken each morning
Not remembering your dreams
But feeling content and serene
Know that I was with you
Filling your night with thoughts of me**

**When you linger in the remnant pain
Wholeness seeming so unfamiliar
Think of me
Know that I am with you
Touching you thru the shared tears of a gentle friend
Easing the pain**

**As the sunrise illuminates the desert sky
In that breathtaking brilliance, awaken your spirit
Think of our time together, all too brief, but ever brilliant
When you were certain of us, together
When you were certain of your destiny**

**Know that God created that moment in time,
Just for us
I am with you always.**

**Love you always,
Your child**



The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness,
but is forbearing toward you,
not wishing that any should perish.

---II Peter 3:9 RSV

God has not promised us a quiet journey, only a safe arrival.

I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God
so that you may know that you have eternal life.

--I John 5:13 NIV

I prayed for this child,
and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.
So now I give him to the Lord.
For his whole life will be given over to the Lord...

--I Samuel 1:27-28 NIV

When you doubt the winds a'blowing,
Flash of lightning, glistening rain,
Sun or starlit heavens above you
On the land or bounding main,
When you doubt the sleep of loved ones.



Just as there comes a warm sunbeam into every cottage window, so comes a love - born of God's care for every separate need.

--Nathaniel Hawthorne

The very hairs of your head are numbered.

--Matt. 10:30 NIV

Doubt says, "You fool, you're stupid to believe in a God who put you through this." By faith, keep remembering that God cannot lie.

--From Stress Fractures by Charles Swindoll

Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies. But my salvation will last forever, my righteousness will never fail.

--Isiah 51:6 NIV

You need not cry very loud; He is nearer to us than we think.

--Brother Lawrence

The good man does not escape all troubles - he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one.

--Ps. 34:19 TLB

If you fear, cast all your cares on God; that anchor holds.

--Alfred Lord Tennyson



When tomorrow starts without me and I'm not there to see,
If the sun should rise and find your eyes all filled with tears for me.
I wish so much you wouldn't cry the way you did today,
While thinking of the many things we didn't get to say.
I know how much you love me, as much as I love you.
And each time you think of me, I know you'll miss me too.
But when tomorrow starts without me, please try to understand
That an angel came and called my name and took me by the hand
And said my place was ready in heaven far above,
And that I'd have to leave behind all those I dearly love.
But as I turned and walked away, a tear fell from my eye.
For all my life, I'd always thought I didn't want to die;
I had so much to live for and so much yet to do.
It seemed almost impossible that I was leaving you.
I thought of all the yesterdays, the good times and the bad.
I thought of all the love we shared and all the fun we had.
If I could relive yesterday, I thought, just for awhile,
I'd say goodbye and kiss you and maybe make you smile.
But then I fully realized that this could never be.
For emptiness and memories would take the place of me.
And when I thought of worldly things that I'd miss come tomorrow,
I thought of you, and when I did, my heart filled with sorrow.
But when I walked through heaven's gates, I felt so much at home,
When God looked down and smiled at me, from His great golden throne.
He said "This is eternity and all I've promised you.
Today your life on earth is past but here it starts anew.



MISS ME - BUT LET ME GO

When I come to the end of the road

And the sun has set for me,

I want no rites in a gloom filled room,

Why cry for a soul set free?

Miss me a little, but not too long,

And not with your head bowed low

Remember the love that we all shared,

Miss me - but let me go.

For this is a journey that we all must take,

And each must go alone.

It's all a part of the Master's plan,

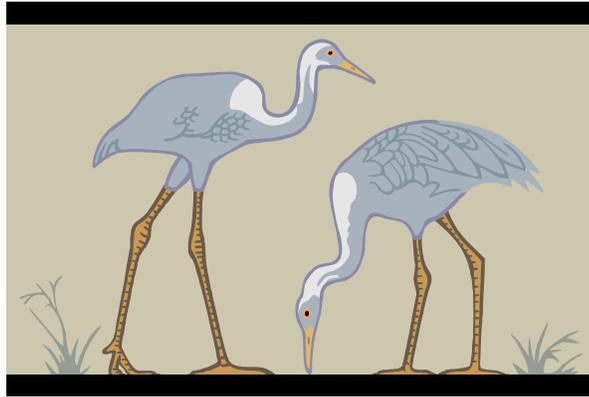
A step on the road to home.

So when you are lonely and sick of heart,

Go to the friends we know

And bury your sorrows in doing good deeds.

Miss me - but let me go.



ALL WILL BE RIGHT

**Tempted and tried, encumbered with care,
Under the yoke that is heavy to bear,
Never a moment yield to despair,
God rules the world, and all will be right.**

**Broken with sorrow though you may be,
Think not the Lord is unmindful of thee,
With clearer eyes some day you shall see,
God rules the world, and all will be right.**

**Strength may forsake you, foes may alarm,
Fear not, the Father will shield you from harm,
Trust in His might, and lean on His arm
God rules the world, and all will be right.**

--Charles H. Gabriel



Safely Home

**I am home in Heaven, dear ones;
Oh, so happy and so bright!
There is perfect joy and beauty
In this everlasting light.**

**All the pain and grief is over,
Every restless tossing passed;
I am now at peace forever,
Safely home in Heaven at last.**

**Did you wonder I so calmly
Trode the valley of the shade?
Oh! but Jesus' love illuminated
Every dark and fearful glade.**

**And He came Himself to meet me
In that way so hard to tread;
And with Jesus' arm to lean on,
Could I have one doubt or dread?**

**Then you must not grieve so sorely,
For I love you dearly still:
Try to look beyond earth's shadows,
Pray to trust our Father's Will.**

**There is work still waiting for you,
So you must not idly stand;
Do it now, while life remaineth --
You shall rest in Jesus' land.**

**When that work is all completed,
He will gently call you Home;
Oh, the rapture of that meeting,
Oh, the joy to see you come!**



When I am dead, come to me at my grave,

and the more often the better...

As you spoke to me as I was alive, do so now.

For I am living, and I shall be forever.

--St. Serafim of Sarov

Earth has no sorrow that Heaven cannot heal.

--Sir Thomas Moore

Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in Heaven.

--Matthew 5:12 NIV

A thing of beauty is a joy forever:

Its loveliness increases; it will never

Pass into nothingness; but still will keep

A bower quiet for us, and a sleep

Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing...

An endless fountain of immortal drink,

Pouring unto us from the Heaven's drink.

--John Keats



FAREWELL, "GENTLE GIANT"

Des Moines, Iowa--Bear with me this week, if you will, for a personal column. It's about my son Christopher. He turned 17 last November. He died on Thursday. He was a healthy, robust boy on Tuesday. He got sick on Wednesday. And he died on Thursday.

You would have like him.

Everyone did.

He was a gentle giant, everyone's best friend, and the world's leading expert. On everything. He was always cheerful. He was, says the foreman at the farm where he worked this summer, simply "magical."

He was adopted. I say this with relish and love because adoption usually is mentioned only in stories about bad kids. In newspaper stories, serial murderers are adopted. Noble Prize winners aren't. It's sort of a newspaper's code for saying, "Don't blame the parents. It's not their fault he killed the neighbors." But in this case, it's not my fault he was such a great kid.

We looked not alike at all, and he thought that was funny. I'm five-foot-eight and weigh about 160. He was close to six-four, I imagine, and he weighed around 300. He looked like a cement block with a grin. Once, a year or so ago, he introduced me to a friend. "This is my dad," he said proudly. The friend looked at me, looked at Chris, and looked confused. "You should see my mother," Chris said with a straight face.

I mentioned him in a column Nov. 29 - that was his 17th birthday. I wrote about the death of Finnegan, our old floppy-eared hound, and I told how when Christopher was 6 he and I had taken a trip. I asked him about our two dogs, Finnegan and a clipped-eared Bouvier named

Mandy. "Who do you like best," I asked. "Finnegan or Mandy?" "Finnegan," he quickly replied, "because his ears are so big you can wipe your tears on them."

He read the column that evening. "Did you get paid for writing that?" he asked. Yes, I said. I did. "How much?" he asked. I told him. "You know," he said, "that column wouldn't have been anything without that quote from me. I think I should get half."

That's the kind of kid he was. He always had an angle.

He was loving.

He loved everyone, especially his grandparents, but even his mom and dad. "I love you, Dad." he'd say without embarrassment. He knew that was unusual. The summer before last, he and my wife and I played golf one Saturday --he could hit a golf ball a mile, though you never knew whether it would be a mile east or a mile west --and he asked what we were doing for dinner later. "Mom and I are going out," I said. "Do you want to go with us?" "Nah," he said. "I think I'll do something with Joey." I pushed him to join us. Finally he said, "Look Dad, you don't understand. At my age, you're not even supposed to like your parents."

He was funny.

"Dad," he said a couple of months ago. "I know what I'd like for my next birthday --a handicap parking sticker. You know, there are a lot more places than there are people to use them." I explained that it was unlikely they'd give a robust kid a handicap parking sticker. So Christopher, who didn't much care for studying, changed his tack: "You know, if I had one I could leave for everywhere I go 10 minutes later--and I could use that time for studying."

As a parent, you live in fear your child will die in a car wreck, and in the year and a half of driving Christopher did manage to wreck all four of our family cars. He hit a tree the day he got his license. ("It wasn't my fault, Dad." "Well, Christopher," I said, "it was yours or the tree's." He knew that, he said, and then he argued, almost persuasively, how the tree was to blame.). And last spring he backed one of my cars into another of my cars, which must be a record of sorts. He announced his other accident to me over the phone by beginning, "Dad, you know those air bags stink when they go off."

But it was a sudden, initial attack of juvenile diabetes that killed him, that killed him despite medical heroics and fervid prayers. It is awful and horrible and sad, and no words can comfort his four grandparents, his brother and sister, his friends or his parents.

Yet his friend, Tim Russert of NBC called Friday, devastated as we all are, and said the only thing that has helped.

"If God had come to you 17 years ago and said, 'I'll make you a bargain. I'll give you a beautiful, wonderful, happy and healthy kid for 17 years, and then I'll take him away.'" Tim said, "You would have made that deal in a second."

And that was the deal.

We just didn't know the terms.

By Michael Gartner, a former editor of the *Courier-Journal*.

My Spiritual Crisis

Becky Greer

When I lost my two and one-half year old son, Stephen, to leukemia on November 17, 1979, I was completely devastated. My whole world was shattered, and I knew of no other place to turn to but God. I remember experiencing the unconditional love of many friends and family, and, therefore, I began to feel closer to God than I ever had felt. Losing Stephen was the worst thing that had ever happened to me and I felt that nothing any worse could ever happen to me again. So, I trusted God to get me through this terrible, terrible time.

My son, John Michael (who we call Buzzy), was seven years old at the time of his brother's death. He became my reason for living. I knew that I had to go on for him. My children meant everything to me. They gave my life purpose and meaning. When I was a child, my dream was to become a mother. I have always loved children. I have always wanted to have several children, and I wanted lots and lots of grandchildren. I can remember a time before I became a mother when I saw a movie in which a mother's son died and I felt that that had to be the worst thing that could ever happen to someone. How could that mother go on? I knew that if that ever happened to me the I would not be able to go on.

Buzzy was born on January 14, 1972, and I became a mother at the age of twenty. My dream was fulfilled, and I loved being a mother. Five years later on March 27, 1977, Stephen was born. Another son for me, a brother for Buzzy. We were now a family of four. Little did I know that in less than three years what had happened to the woman in the movie would happen to me. Stephen died, and I was able to go on. I had to go on for my other son, Buzzy.

On November 29, 1980, a little more than a year after Stephen died, my son Todd was born. What joy! God gave me another son to love and enjoy. Life would go on. Life was good again. Again, I had two sons to love and to receive love from.

God had shown me through losing Stephen what really was important in life. I chose to live my life accordingly. I treasured my children and my time with them. I raised my family with Christian values and even led classes at my church which taught parenting tools to young parents. I wanted everyone to know how important and special their children should be to them. I wanted people to realize what precious gifts their children are. I felt that I had learned a lesson that many people don't learn until it is too late, and I wanted to share that important lesson. I valued my children and the time I was able to spend with them. My purpose in life was to make their lives happy and healthy and safe.

Four years later on August 7, 1984, my beautiful daughter, Kami, was born. More joy! Finally, after three boys, a precious little girl to love. And, oh, how she was loved, and, oh, how she loved. She loved people and all God's creatures. Kami was filled with so much love, and she received so much love in return.

My oldest son, Buzzy, became drawn into something he couldn't seem to escape from no matter how hard he tried. He became involved with drugs and the dark world of the drug culture. He was a very sensitive and loving person who made some very wrong choices which led to his destruction and the destruction of my entire beautiful family.

On January 16, 1995, Buzzy "snapped" and stood up at the dinner table and started shooting a gun that he had hidden in his pocket. When the gun was finally empty, all three of my remaining children were dead, and my husband, Gam, was seriously injured. Miraculously, no bullet struck me.

For days and weeks after this terrible tragedy, I was "in a fog" and I was busy taking care of my injured and totally distraught husband. I did not think about God, and I tried very hard not to think about what had happened.

As time passed, Gam got better and didn't seem to need all my "nurturing". That left me with more time to deal with what had happened, but I didn't want to deal with what had happened. But, sooner or later, we all must deal with what happens to us in our lives.

I began to question God. How could you let this happen? You know what is in my heart, you know I loved you and tried to live my life for you. What about all the evil people in the world? What about the drug dealers? They still have their children. **HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN?**

So, I became angry with God...very angry. I got so angry with God that I even questioned his existence. I did not experience this when Stephen died. I felt God engulf me with His love and trusted Him to help me get through that terrible time. Was that not for real? Did I just talk myself into believing God was there so I could continue to go on? I must have. God was nowhere to be found now. I could not find God. Either I lost God or God never existed in the first place.

These are the thoughts and questions that came pouring out to me in what I call "my dark time". I could find no reason or purpose for living. My children were my purpose for living and they had been taken from me. How could I ever find meaning and purpose again? How could I go on living when "all is lost". If what I found meaning in was gone, how could I go on and why would I choose to go on?

I did not want to see or talk with anyone during the dark time partly because I knew that no one had answers to my questions and partly because I did not want anyone to know that I even had these questions and that I felt this way. Just because I knew there wasn't a God, I didn't want to take other people's hope from them. Let them keep kidding themselves. They are better off.

I eventually did share my feelings with my husband, a close friend, my counselor, and finally my pastor. They were all concerned, I think, that I might end my life. No one had answers for me. I knew no one would have answers for me. What I have come to realize and feel that I must share is that we all have to find our own answers to those questions. When I began to talk about the dark feelings (getting the feelings out) was when I began down the road toward healing. I have

learned that the thing we most don't want to talk about is the thing we need to talk about the most.

Through the love and persistence of fellow strugglers and friends I was able to see a tiny pinhole of light. I use the word persistence because my friends and strugglers, as well as God, never gave up on me. They were always there, it was me who was not letting them in. Once I let in that tiny pinhole of light into my dark place, I began to see hope again. Slowly, at first, but as I let the light (love) in, the pinhole got bigger and bigger. I have found God again (He never left me), and the God that I am coming to know now is truly bigger and better than the God I knew before. I know that my children are still with me (just as God is) in spirit and that someday I will be with them in heaven.

Though life is still a struggle and dark times do creep back in, I feel I have found meaning and purpose in my life again. My purpose is to honor God. I am to "press on", even in my trials and struggles for the glory and honor of God. That was my purpose even when I had my children. I just didn't know it then.

To my fellow strugglers, I encourage you to find a reason "to keep turning the pages" to see what is still out there for you. During my darkest time, my reason to "keep turning the pages" was to help my husband pick out a monument for our children. I felt he needed me for that and it was a final gift I could give my children. We now have the task completed and because I kept turning the pages, I have found my real reason to keep pressing on. I hope that you will search for your answers and that you will find meaning and purpose in your life.

It was through the love and care of others that I was able to see "God's light" again. We must all reach out in love to each other so that others can know that He is there - even in the darkest of times.

I am aware that there will be times that I am not able to reach out to others and, hopefully, during those times, someone will reach out to me. We don't know what each new day will hold for us. If we will risk reaching out to one another so that we can help each other out of the "dark places" we will find healing for ourselves. I know this to be true.

Becky Greer's Speech

J.I.M.'s Picnic

June 10, 2000

When Dinah first asked me several weeks ago to speak today my immediate response was NO WAY. Impossible! Can't you find someone else? But, anyone who knows Dinah knows she can be very insistent and persistent. But even as I was trying to tell Dinah no, I knew in my heart that I could not tell her no and I could not tell all of you no. I knew in my heart that it was time for me to at least try to give back a small part of what has been given to me. Had Dinah and Rosemary not been so persistent in reaching out to me while I was in my dark time, I would probably not be standing here before you today or standing anywhere else. Because when I was in my dark time, I did not want to live. Without my children I could not find any meaning and purpose for my life. Nothing mattered to me anymore, nothing made sense any more and I did not want to go on living in a world that I felt I had nothing to offer. I also felt that the world had nothing to offer me. My children were my life and they were gone. Nothing else mattered. Dinah sent her newsletter to me for over a year before I ever even looked at one and Rosemary called for weeks before I would even take her call. Thankfully, neither of them gave up on me. So with the help of God and fellow strugglers who reached out to me, I was able to find my way out of the dark time.

After talking with some of you yesterday, I was reminded once again that you and I are alike. Our stories are all different, yet they are the same. We all know the devastating pain of losing a precious child. We are all on a journey, and each of us are at different stages along the way. Each of us has to make our own personal journey, yet we need each other. Through my own journey with grief, I have found it helpful to hear other people's stories about how they have found their way through the trials of life. It is my hope that some of you will find at least a small level of healing in hearing my story. Four years ago, I came to my first J.I.M.'s picnic. It was very hard to come, and it is still hard for me to come. I especially want to affirm those of you who are here for the first time because I know it takes a lot of energy and courage to be here. In 1996, Elaine Stillwell was the speaker and I remember being in absolute awe that she could be standing up there in front of a group of grieving parents sharing her story. Some of you may be wondering how it is that I can be up here speaking to you today. Please know that it is by God's strength and not my own. Elaine shared her story about losing her daughter Peggy and son Denis in the same car accident. I was amazed that she could laugh and joke and share the happy wonderful memories she had of her children with us and also how she was making it through her struggle with grief. In telling her story, Elaine was helping us, but I realize now that she was also helping herself. As she was speaking, I remember thinking what a wonderful thing she is doing by sharing what she learned through the years about grief. I remember thinking I would love to be able to help other people someday, but I can't even help myself, so how in the world could I help somebody else? One thing in particular stands out in my mind from Elaine's visit that had a tremendous impact on me. She told me she was thinking about writing a book called "10 Reasons to get up in the Morning". I thought Ha! , she has come up with 10 reasons to help her get up in the morning, that doesn't mean they will work for me. So I said to her, name me just one. Because I am struggling to find a reason to live, let alone get out of bed in the morning. She immediately responded, I get up in the morning so that my children's lives won't be erased. She

said if I stay in bed all day with the covers over my head people will forget all about me and they will for sure forget about my children. It was as if a bell went off in my head! I was at such a place in my grief that I truly thought no one would ever be able to give me a good reason to go on. When Stephen died, Buzzy became my reason to go on, but when I lost the other three children, I just could not find a reason to go on. But here I was, it made perfect sense to me. People want to forget about our children who have died because it is too painful for them to think about. But if people see me, they will be reminded of my children whether they want to be or not. I can help make sure that Buzzy, Stephen, Todd and Kami are not forgotten. I didn't have to hear any of Elaine's other 9 reasons, because that was good enough for me. I knew that I didn't want my children's lives erased. I wanted people to remember my children and be reminded that their lives did make a difference during the short time they were with us. So, I get out of bed. I have to admit there are many, many times that I go out when I would rather not. It would be so much easier to stay in bed. Gam would be the first to tell you that I don't get out of bed every day. I still have many no-so-good days when I don't want to see or talk with anyone. But I have learned that it is a choice. I can choose to be miserable and wallow in my pain or I can choose to be thankful for the time I had with my precious children. To have never known them and loved them would have been a much bigger loss. So even though it is a great burden to bear, I would never trade the short time I had with them for a life with no sorrow. People feel sad for me when they hear I have lost 4 children, and it is a very sad story. But don't forget to be happy for me too. Be happy that I was blessed with giving birth to them, nurturing them, knowing them, loving them, and receiving their love. I am truly grateful for the time I had with them. Five and ½ years later, I have bad days, but I also have good days. I even have days with laughter, joy, and excitement. And I hope that makes my children proud. I know that if it were them who had been left behind instead of me, I would certainly want them to have happy, full, meaningful lives. I have wished many times that Gam and I would have died with them. It would have been so much easier. But, I have had to face the reality that my children are gone and I am still here and I have chosen to live my life in such a way that I hope will honor my children and my God. Since hearing Elaine's story and many other people's stories, I have gradually made my way back into life and back into the world. It is not the same life, but it is life, not just an existence. There came a time when I had to decide if I was going to stay in this world. I was not then nor am I now interested in just existing. I decided if I was going to stay on this earth, I was going to live, not just exist. I made the decision to live in order to honor my children and my God. I know that when people see me they wonder how I am able to survive. It is my prayer that they will recognize that I survive by God's strength and not my own. I believe that each of us can honor our children with our life and our living. That is why I am here today to share my story with you. It is my hope that you will hear something in it that will help you along your journey.

As a little girl my dream was to become a mother, then a grandmother and then a great-grandmother. That is what I wanted to do with my life. I got married at a young age and started my family. I was fulfilling my childhood dream.

October 17, 1979 started out as an ordinary day. Our son Stephen had a routine check up at the doctor and we found out that he had leukemia. We as grieving parents know as well as anyone that no one knows what each new day will bring. Stephen died in my arms exactly one month after he had been diagnosed. I did not think I could survive such pain. But, I had to go on for my other son Buzzy who was 7 years old at the time. Buzzy needed me. I felt that losing Stephen was the worse thing that could ever happen to me and I trusted God to get me through that terrible, terrible time. Buzzy became my reason for living. I knew I had to go on for him.

We made it through that terrible time and soon our son Todd and daughter Kami joined our family. Our lives would never be the same without Stephen, but we were able to pick up the shattered pieces and go on to try to live a life that we hoped was pleasing to God. Buzzy, of course, always knew and remembered little Stephen and even though Todd and Kami never got to meet him, they always knew that they had a big brother who was in heaven. As most mothers do, I loved my children and did everything I knew to do to make their lives happy, healthy and safe. However, life continues to teach me how powerless any of us really are.

When Buzzy went away to school he became drawn into something he couldn't seem to escape no matter how hard he tried. He became involved with drugs and the dark world of the drug culture. As so often happens, Buzzy became a prisoner of the drugs and the evil people who take advantage of young people by selling them drugs and then using them to further their evil purposes. It is very important to me that people know that Buzzy was a very sensitive, loving, sweet, and good person who made some very wrong choices which led to his destruction and the destruction of my entire beautiful family.

January 16, 1995 also started out as another ordinary day. There was no school that day because it was Martin Luther King Day. I took Kami, who was 10 years old to her ballet and tap class and she was so happy after class that she sang all the way home. Gam took Todd, who was 14 years old to basketball practice. Todd was also happy and excited on the way home because he had had his best practice ever. I guess ever shot he put up went in that day. Buzzy, who had just turned 23 two days earlier had gone over to visit a friend. That evening we all came together at the dinner table and were sharing what a good day we had had when the phone rang. It was for Buzzy. When he put the phone down, he stood up and pulled out a gun that he had hidden in his pocket and started shooting. When the gum was empty, Todd, Kami and Buzzy were dead. My husband Gam had been shot three times. Once again, our world was shattered...

We later found out that the phone call was from Buzzy's girlfriend who had called to tell him she was seeing someone else. I believe that he just "snapped" upon hearing this and started shooting. It turned out that the friend Buzzy had gone to visit that afternoon had sold him a gun.

I was in a "fog" for weeks and months afterwards. I stayed busy taking care of Gam's injuries and worked very hard at trying to put out of my mind what had happened. We all also know that is impossible. As time passed, Gam's injuries got better and he didn't seem to need all my nurturing. But nurturing was my job! I am a mother! My children were gone, Gam was well, now what am I supposed to do? I had too much time to deal with what had happened and I didn't want to deal with what had happened. The reality of it all was just too painful. So many times we try to run from the pain of reality, but I could find no place to run, no place to hide. I had to face the reality of what had happened. As we all know, sooner or later we must look at the reality of what has happened to us in our lives. We must experience the pain in order to recover from it. I have learned that facing what we would rather avoid can be an enlarging and empowering decision and there is a strength to be gained in going where we do not wish to go. Especially if we are to go forward.

I began to question God. How could you let this happen? Are you not the same God who comforted me and helped me make it through when Stephen died? Are you not the same God I trusted to get me through that terrible time? WHERE ARE YOU GOD? HOW COULD YOU LET THIS HAPPEN? This is not fair! What about all the evil people in the world? What about

all the drug dealers? What about all the people who don't even care about their children? They still have their children! WHY, GOD WHY????!!

I became very angry with God... I got so angry with God that I even questioned his existence. I call this time of questions, anger, lostness, and loneliness my "dark time". I was in a deep dark hole that I could not find my way out of. I could not even find a reason to come out of it. I wanted to die. I wanted to be with my children. My thoughts were, no one can help me, no one knows my pain. I am lost, I am sinking and it doesn't matter. Nothing matters...Nothing. I did not want to see or talk with anyone during this time. Partly because I knew that no one had any answers for me and partly because I didn't want anyone to know that I was having such terrible dark thoughts. I wanted to end my life. My children were my reason for living and they were gone. What kept me hanging on was that I had one last thing to do for my children and that was to see that they had a proper monument that would honor their lives. It happened that during that "waiting time" for the monument to be built, I began to see a tiny pinhole of light that continues to get bigger and bigger even today. So by the time the monument was erected, I was no longer in the dark place and had found a reason to live again. I want to encourage any of you who may be in that dark place to try to find a reason to hang on for just another day, and then another until your tiny pinhole of light comes through.

It was through the love and persistence of fellow strugglers and friends that I was able to find light in my darkness. I use the word persistence because my friends and fellow strugglers, as well as God, never gave up on me. They were always there for me, it was me who was not letting them in. It is important that we reach out to others, but it is equally important that we be willing to let others reach out to us. Once I let that tiny pinhole of light into my dark place, I began to see hope again. Slowly, at first, but as I let the light (which is Love) in, the pinhole gets bigger each day. I have found God again. The truth is He never left me, it was me who left Him. Though life is still a struggle and dark times can still creep in, I have found meaning and purpose in my life again. My true purpose is to honor God no matter what circumstances this life may bring. And I can honor the lives of my children by living life in a way that would make them proud.

Each one of us has to make our own personal journey, yet we can learn so much from each other. We have to learn that everybody grieves differently. Gam and I both lost the same children, but he did not lose what I lost and I did not lose what he lost. I think it's very important for us to understand this. We each must make our own way in our own time. I have learned that it is not true that nothing matters as I believed in my dark time. LOVE MATTERS...the love that we have for our children and the love that they had for us MATTERS. It is the love we have shared that lives on. Death ends a life, but not a relationship. The love we have for each other as we comfort and support each other MATTERS. It was through the love and care of others that I was able to see "God's light" again. We must all reach out to one another so that others can know that Hope is there – even in the darkest of times. If we will risk reaching out to someone else, we will find healing for ourselves.

I'd like to share a poem that sums up what I have been trying to say. It was written by a woman named Elizabeth Freeze. The title is:

THE BELLS TOLL GRIEF AND SORROW

Within my heart toll the bells of grief and sorrow

As I go about picking up the pieces of my life.

For I must continue with life and not allow myself

To stay beside the grave of my child too long.

There cannot be anything gained at the grave;

Instead, I must allow the Lord to take my hand

And help me look above my pain.

There I see a world filled with hurting people

To whom I can give comfort and support

As they make their painful journey.

I can learn from my tragedy, and in turn

Help my fellow wounded travelers on this road of life.

It is as I give a helping hand

And share the knowledge learned from my own sorrow

That a harvest of blessings and treasures will become

A part of my vault of spiritual wealth.

I saw a movie a few weeks ago that closed with the line, "We will see them again, but not today". That is what I believe. We will see our children again, but not today. Today we must try to help each other find our way on this difficult journey each of us has been given to travel. I am very thankful to all of you who have helped me to make it this far on my journey and I wish you peace as you continue on yours.



I WONDER

**May I tell a stranger about my loss?
Will they turn away,
or change the subject if I do?
But can I tell a life-long friend,
or will he say, "Enough," or
not a thing at all.
(MY LIFE-LONG FRIEND?)
I wonder.**

**Must I say I'm feeling fine,
my world is bright and gay,
when I am tortured inwardly
with scorching, searing pain?
Must I smile politely when
they say I am doing fine,
and then reward them
with a crooked smile?
I wonder.**

**Or should I lash out thunderously,
and rant, and shout, and rave,
"My child is DEAD, don't you understand?
Please don't give me all your platitudes,
your sick, time-worn cliches!
Just listen to me, hear me, let me talk."
Will they?
I wonder.**

**Or am I just angry?
I wonder.**

Dave Ziv, TCF Bucksmont Chapter, Warrington, PA



PRAYER

The Serenity Prayer

God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
The courage to change the things I can,
And the wisdom to know the difference.

--Reinhold Niebuhr

For Hurtful People

Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do, Assholes, Amen.

Prayer for a Good Day

Every now and then, without warning, each of us has a good day;
Please, Lord, it's my turn today, isn't it?

Maybe tomorrow?

next Tuesday or Wednesday?

...half a day Thursday?

(8:30 to 9:15 Friday morning?)

Prayer for Forgiveness

Dear God, I have sinned against heaven and against You. I am no longer worthy to be called your child.

"My child, I know...but my Son is forever worthy to be called your Savior."

Tell Us Who Loves Us

Lord, may those who love us, love us. And those who don't love us, may God turn their hearts. And if He doesn't turn their hearts, may He turn their ankles, so we will know them by their limping.

REFLECTIONS OF A STEPPARENT

I watched my mate go through pure hell.
and I felt helpless, useless, and sometimes...invisible.

Other times - I stood strong while
Bearing the brunt of my love's anger
That lashed out at the world -
As an angry God would open the heavens
With roaring thunder and lightning.

I was accused of not understanding
And surely...I could not.

I felt the heavy pain for my stepchild.
The one I took as my own.
I grieved for the good times we had together,
The tugs at my heart that always
Pierced through any resentments.

The guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders
For the times we didn't communicate
And I wondered if...
I could have made it better.

At the funeral home, I felt even a pang of...
Yes...jealousy
Toward the natural parent of my beloved stepchild,
Knowing that he and my mate shared
A private room from the past
That I could never...ever...enter.

Life must go on...this day-to-day existence.
But things are different now.

I offer my support
As I see eyes staring off into
A distant land.
I hold a hand
And kiss away the teardrops.

With an added sorrow, I wonder
If my love will return to me or
Stay in that far off land...forever.
For deep in my heart I know that
This tragedy will bring us closer together
Or tear us completely apart.

AUTHOR UNKNOWN (Copied from Bereaved Parents of the USA newsletter)



GRANDFATHER'S POEM

Once I saw a grown man cry.

"Now there goes a man with feeling," said I.

**He was strong, able, quite well built, with muscles, gray hair
and charm to the hilt.**

I moved toward him slowly and said, "What's wrong?"

The look he gave me was tear-filled and long.

"I cry for a child. My grandchild has died."

So I sat beside him and two grown men cried.

**Author Unknown (Copied from Bereaved Parents of the USA
newsletter)**



To Answer Love With Life

Life was at morning and a young boy
Breathlessly ran in the brilliance of dawn's promise
But dark clouds drank the brilliance of sunrise.
A rush of cold wind chased away the early warmth.
And the child was no more.

Alone the footsteps of that child had formed the features
Of his father's world.
His voice was the music that gave life the dance.
The expectancy of his eyes, the catalyst of his dreams,
Gave to the father life's greatest meaning.
He was the one child, the only son there would ever be.
His light was gone, leaving a man a legacy of darkness.

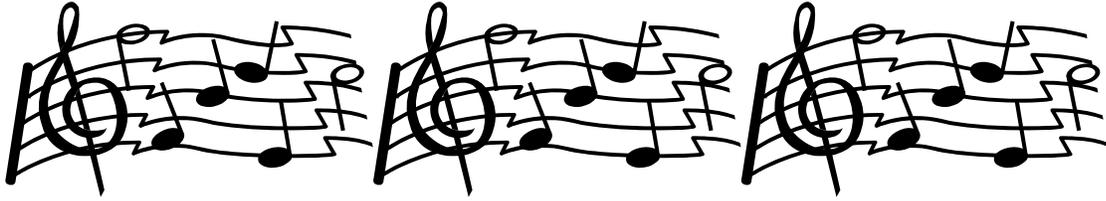
So the father turned from living, embarking upon
A sunless inward journey, a twisting voyage
Across a soul lost sea of bitter pain.
After many months he found the heart of his being,
Kindled still by stubborn embers,
The residue of the glow that once had been.
There in the lingering warmth of a thousand yesterdays,
He sought refuge, a moment of rest.

The fires of life renewed; understanding waxed within him.
Though to him his only child would never return,
He remained a father, *continuing* beyond
An abrupt turn in his own life's seeking.
His eyes remembered brightness, his hearing could recall sounds
His arms remembered holding, his lips held still a goodnight kiss.
His hands remembered touching, his lap the lightness of his son.
More than all this, he touched again the dreams
And knew himself their bearer.

He returned to living, to those who loved him.
Finding himself much as before, but tempered,
Reforged in his long road back to life.
For all he had been given, for the richness of a timeless beauty.
He resolved to strive for worthiness, to answer love with life.

I know, for I am that man.
The boy is Olin, our only child.
He is alive, in me, through me, and somewhere beyond me.
In a place or form I do not now recognize, but someday will.
When at last that moment comes and we have met once more.

By Don Hackett from *NOW CHILDLESS*



OLDER GRIEF

It's about sudden tears swept in by a strand of music.

It's about haunting echoes of pain on anniversaries.

It's about feeling his presence for an instant one day while dusting the room,

It's about early pictures that invite me to hold him in my arms again.

It's about memories blown on wisps of wood smoke and sea scents.

Older grief is about aching in gentler ways, rarer longing, less engulfing fire.

Older grief is about searing pain wrought into tenderness

Anonymous

WHAT IS NORMAL NOW?

NORMAL is trying to decide what to take to the cemetery for Christmas, birthdays, Valentine's day, and Easter.

NORMAL is feeling like you know how to act and are more comfortable with a funeral than a wedding or a birthday party. Yet, feeling a stab of pain in your heart when you smell the flowers, see the casket, and all the crying people.

NORMAL is feeling like you can't sit another minute without screaming because you just don't like to sit through church anymore. And yet at the same time feeling like you have more faith in God than you ever had before.

NORMAL is having tears waiting behind every smile when you realize someone important is missing from all of the important events in your family's life.

NORMAL is not sleeping very well because a thousand "what ifs" go through your head constantly.

NORMAL is having the TV on the minute you walk into the house to have some "noise" because the silence is deafening.

NORMAL is telling the story of your child's death as if it were an everyday common event and then gasping in horror at how awful it sounds. And yet realizing it has become a part of normal conversation.

NORMAL is each year coming up with the difficult task of how to honor your child's memory and their birthday and surviving those days. And trying to find a balloon or flag that fits the occasion, "Happy Birthday?" Not really!

NORMAL is a new friendship with another bereaved parent and meeting over coffee and talking and crying together over your children. And worrying together over the surviving children.

NORMAL is being too tired to care if you paid the bills, cleaned the house, did the laundry or if there is any food in the house.

NORMAL is wondering this time whether you are going to say you have 2 or 3 children because you will never see this person again, and is it worth explaining that one of them has passed away. And yet, when you say 2 children to avoid the problem you feel horrible as if you have betrayed your child.

NORMAL is hiding all the things that have become "normal" for you to feel, so that everyone around you will think you are "NORMAL."

By Vicki Windham, NE Platte Chapter TCF

Holidays And Hope

By Sandra L. Graves, Ph.D. ATR

Reprinted with permission from "In Accord," Fall, 1986.

For additional information on 11 Holiday Help seminars presented by ACCORD, Inc. during the holiday season, call ACCORD at 1-800-346-3087.

Here comes Santa Claus! Is your response more like "Ho, Ho," or "Bah, Humbug?" Probably neither phrase really completely describes how you may be feeling as the holiday season approaches. We often mask our true feelings by trying to be extra jolly (the Ho, Ho Syndrome) or by acting quite negative (Bah, Humbug).

If you are somewhere in between, partially dreading Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah or the New Year; partially looking forward to the support of family around you; partially scared about the whole thing, you are not alone. For the bereaved, the holidays bring their own special set of stressors.

Let's see if we can outline them and make some suggestions on what we have found to be helpful in coping with the season ahead.

What Are You Afraid Of?

Anticipation of the holidays is almost always worse than the actual day itself. It is more than likely your anticipation has led to fear about facing the tasks, as well as the emotions, each duty tends to bring with it. The holidays have a way of reminding us of our grief and actually intensifying it.

Why? Holidays are the way society punctuates time. They are the "time-outs" for celebrating life, both day-to-day life and spiritual life. When day-to-day living is dif-

ficult, as it is in grief, the idea of an added burden can be overwhelming. If your spiritual life also has been challenged, you may be confronted with questions about your convictions or beliefs.

What Can You Do?

We suggest that you take a deep breath, then sit down and write about what you fear. Are you dreading the holiday without your loved one? Do you think you might "lose it" in front of people (by crying and feeling out of control)? Are you afraid people will not mention your loved one and pretend that person didn't exist?

Are you afraid people will talk about your loved one too much and not allow any celebration? Are you afraid of having to pretend you are enjoying yourself when you may actually be miserable? Are you afraid of the anger you may feel toward others who can enjoy the holidays because they have not lost someone dear to them? Do you feel resentful and then guilty because of your resentment?

Do you feel all of this, and is it overwhelming you? Be as honest with yourself as you can. No one is going to see what you have written or know what you are thinking, unless you choose to share it.

You may be surprised to find many feelings and thoughts you have had privately, or not so privately, are listed above. They are very common to people in grief. When you write them down, you are clarifying feelings to yourself; and if you feel like sharing, you may find others with similar feelings. Then you won't feel quite so alone and you might find help in solving some of the problems surrounding

Holidays
and Hope . . .

What are you
afraid of?

What can
you do?

Do you feel
pressured?

What will you
do about
traditions?

the holidays through the suggestions of others as to how they are coping.

It is also true that when you can express your feelings, you gain more control over them. When you can clarify your feelings, they seem less overwhelming; and when you can separate them, they appear much more manageable.

Do You Feel Pressured?

People who love each other try to help make hurts go away. One way they do this during the holiday season is to invite you *everywhere*.

There isn't a party in the city that doesn't want you on the guest list. There isn't a relative who hasn't invited you to dinner (especially if you are widowed).

Or, the other extreme may be true, depending on your friends and community. They tell each other you need the privacy of your grief and not to *bother* you. So, not only are you trying to cope with your feelings about the holidays, you are trying to cope with your friends and relatives during the holidays. What can you do?

When you are invited to a private gathering, ask permission to be *tentative*. Tell your friends, colleagues or relatives that you are mourning now and some days feel better than others. You would enjoy attending, but do not know how you will be feeling that day. Most people understand this and they are usually very flexible.

If you feel like the social wallflower of the week, however, you may need to reach out a bit and let people know you are available. As for dinners with relatives, you have several choices: 1) Go to all of them and eat several times on Thanksgiving, Chanukah or Christmas and New Year's Day; 2) Go to none because you don't want to insult anyone; 3) Do what is best for you. But how do you know what is best for you?

You can check yourself out with a type of grief "exam." It is simple and doesn't take much time. Think of an event which happened fairly recently then write down the event and its date. Next to the event, write your thoughts and feelings during the experience. Next to your thoughts and feelings, write how you coped.

Now you can make some guesses about how you may act and react. When you don't surprise yourself, you feel more in control. Remember, handle one pressure at a time, just as you handle one day at a time.

What Will You Do About Traditions?

One of the things we humans tend to do is go to extremes. After the death of a loved one, it takes quite awhile before we can remember or express the things that were not so perfect about the person who died. It is very natural after the death of someone we love to "enshrine" them for awhile and make them the all-good, most wonderful person you ever knew.

We often do the same things around the holidays. Thanksgiving becomes the perfect meal on a table set with perfection with perfect people eating perfectly. Christmas or Chanukah glow with candles and goodwill. Santa is always on time and always brings the right gifts.

Holiday dinners are as jolly as they are delicious.

These fairy-tale fantasies are reinforced throughout our lives by stories, television and drama; and that's really OK. It is wonderful to have our fantasies and hopes; they make us feel good. But we also need to be realistic.

As we remember, with good humor of course, the underdone or overdone turkey, the stuffing with too many oysters or chestnuts, the gravy stains on the tablecloth, the mountains of dishes very few people would help with, the wrapping paper all over the floor, the exhaustion at the end of the day and all the bills that had to be paid later, we can balance our expectations with glee tempered by reality. Therefore: 1) Decide how you want *your* Thanksgiving, Christmas, Chanukah or New Year celebration to be; 2) Set limits on how much of your normal routine you can realistically handle this year; 3) Try to add one new tradition in memory of your loved one.

Our wish for you in the days ahead is to remember that anguish is not forever, that joy is possible (even in grief), that time is your friend and your best companion is yourself. ☺

Example of "grief" exam

<i>Date</i>	<i>Event</i>	<i>Thoughts & Feelings</i>	<i>How Did I Cope?</i>
<i>November 9, 1990</i>	<i>Grocery Shopping</i>	<i>Remembered he really liked apple struesel. Pain in my stomach. Hard to say, "Hello" to my neighbor and smile.</i>	<i>Made a grocery list before I went so I wouldn't feel lost if I was forgetful. Wanted to cry, but waited till I was in the car. Didn't feel like talking to neighbor, but was cordial—told her I would call later. Told my son how I felt while shopping. We cried together, then put the groceries away.</i>

Coping With Holidays and Special Days

Holidays and special days present challenges even when our lives are running smoothly. These days bring us together to celebrate traditions or honor an individual and the absence of a loved one is deeply felt. Often we aren't just dealing with one day to get through, but a whole season and all the anticipation that goes with it. Other difficult days include birthdays, anniversaries, reunions and graduations. We do have some control over what happens on these days, if we choose to take it. Let's look at the four "C's" of coping with the holidays and special days.

- **Communicate Your Needs:** Communicate your needs and concerns clearly to those around you. Families that sit down together and discuss the holiday ahead of time do much better and avoid some of the fatigue, resentment and disappointment that can surface. What does each family member need to make it a special day? What can comfortably be put on hold? What changes will make things more bearable? Can the responsibility for the holiday be shared among several family members?
- **Change Your Routines:** A few families stick exactly to traditions, but most families find it helpful to make minor, or very major changes. Having a meal at a different location or different time of day can help. Going out to eat can ease some stress. Opening gifts at a different time or location might work. Families who find worship routines too full of memories have attended a different service with a friend or neighbor. If you find yourself dreading a certain part of the holiday rituals, use your creativity to find an alternative. Sometimes, we worry that if we change or drop a tradition, we will lose it forever. It might help to be clear that we are just putting that particular piece of the holiday on hold until some time has helped with the healing.
- **Cut Back on Your Activities:** Grief is physically and mentally fatiguing. You may also be experiencing some disorientation or lack of motivation and disorganization. Streamlining commitments during holidays is an important self care activity. You probably won't lose friends if you skip cards or send them more selectively the first year. Gift certificates, catalogs and checks can help you avoid distressing shopping trips. Limiting the time you spend at family and social gatherings can conserve precious energy. While it's important to touch base with family members and special friends, setting realistic limits is essential. If you find yourself involved in an activity that just doesn't feel good, give yourself permission to withdraw.
- **Celebrate the Memory of Your Loved One:** The word celebrate can also mean "to honor." Many families chose to set aside a special time or create a special way in which to honor the memory of those who are no longer there to share the special day. Some make a gift or a donation in their loved one's name. Others light a candle or put out a picture or photo album. A time to share favorite stories or memories can be valuable. Everyone will be thinking of the person who is gone anyway, and having a constructive way to acknowledge the loss together is helpful. Each family member's presence becomes especially important after there has been a loss. You may not feel like the best of company, but your loved ones still need some time with you on special days. And remember that it's all right to have some good times. Laughter and enjoyment are still important parts of living.

This handout was developed by Kansas City Hospice, underwritten by Prime Health Foundation.



May You Always Have an Angel by Your Side

May you always have an angel by your side
Watching out for you in all the things you do
Reminding you to keep believing in brighter days
Finding ways for your wishes and dreams to come true
Giving you hope that is as certain as the sun
Giving you the strength of serenity as your guide
May you always have love and comfort and courage
And may you always have an angel by your side
Someone there to catch you if you fall
Encouraging your dreams
Inspiring your happiness
Holding your hand and helping you through it all
In all of our days, our lives are always changing
Tears come along as well as smiles
Along the road you travel,
May the miles be a thousand times more lovely than lonely
May they give you gifts that never, ever end:
Someone wonderful to love and a dear friend in whom you can confide
May you have rainbows after every storm
May you have hopes to keep you warm
And may you always have an angel by your side

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by Scott Mastley

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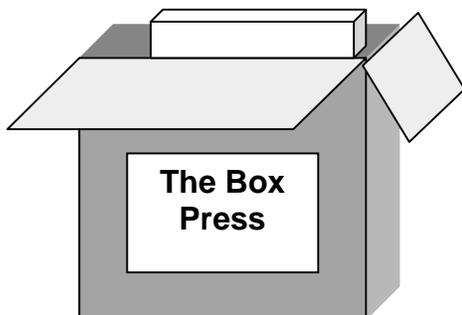
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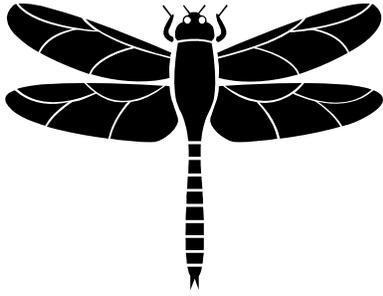


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The Dragonfly

(Is Your Child Like the Dragonfly?)

Once, in a little pond, in the muddy water under the lily pads, there lived a little water beetle in a community of water beetles. They lived a simple and comfortable life in the pond with few disturbances and interruptions.

Once in a while, sadness would come to the community when one of their fellow beetles would climb the stem of a lily pad and would never be seen again. They knew when this happened, their friend was dead, gone forever.

Then, one day, one little water beetle felt an irresistible urge to climb up that stem. However, he has determined that he would not leave forever. He would come back and tell his friends what he had found at the top.

When he reached the top and climbed out of the water onto the surface of the lily pad, he was so tired, and the sun felt so warm, that he decided he must take a nap. As he slept, his body changed and when he woke up, he had turned into a beautiful blue-tailed dragonfly with broad wings and a slender body designed for flying. So, fly he did! And, as he soared he saw the beauty of a whole new world and a far superior way of life to what he had never known existed.

Then he remembered his beetle friends and how they were thinking by now he was dead. He wanted to go back to tell them, and explain to them that he was now more alive than he had been before. His life had been fulfilled rather than ended.

But, his new body would not go down into the water. He could not get back to tell his friends the good news. Then he understood that their time would come, when they too would know what he now knew. So, he raised his wings and flew off into his joyous new life!

Author Unknown



Separation From Those We Love

By Dietrich Bonhoeffer

First: nothing can make up for the absence of someone whom we love, and it would be wrong to try to find a substitute; we must simply hold out and see it through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, for the gap, as long as it remains unfilled, preserves the bonds between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; he doesn't fill it, but on the contrary, he keeps it empty and so helps us to keep alive our former communion with each other, even at the cost of pain.

Secondly: the dearer and richer our memories, the more difficult the separation. But gratitude changes the pangs of memory into a tranquil joy. The beauties of the past are borne, not as a thorn in the flesh, but as a precious gift in themselves. We must take care not to wallow in our memories or hand ourselves over to them, just as we do not gaze all the time at a valuable present, but only at special times, and apart from these keep it simply as a hidden treasure that is ours for certain. In this way the past gives us lasting joy and strength.

Thirdly: times of separation are not a total loss or unprofitable for our companionship, or at any rate they need not be so. In spite of all the difficulties that they bring, they can be the means of strengthening fellowship quite remarkably.

Fourthly: I've learnt here especially that the *facts* can always be mastered, and that difficulties are magnified out of all proportion simply by fear and anxiety. From the moment we wake until we fall asleep we must commend other people wholly and unreservedly to God and leave them in his hands, and transform our anxiety for them into prayers on their behalf:

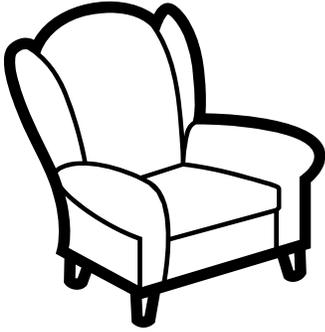
With sorrow and with grief...
God will not be distracted.



The Cross by the Side of the Road

We all seem the same, yet we're not at all;
Some stand so straight, some are ready to fall.
It's always the same when you pass us by,
You wonder what happened, you let out a sigh.
Ambitious dreams lost, families now broken,
Hearts torn apart and words left unspoken.
Laughter and joy removed from tomorrow,
You let your mind roam and feel such sorrow.
There was a time, before our arrival,
When life was naive, laughed at survival.
Life was savored and lived, carefree and pure,
Life was youthful and strong, life was so sure.
So abruptly those times came to a halt
And nothing was altered by finding fault.
We are the same in the reason we're here;
Yet, so different in the name that we bear.
We each stand here representatively;
Not for an end, but for a history.
A history, a life ---with so much untold,
A history, a life---that will never unfold.
A history, a life---worth much more than gold.
All seen in the cross by the side of the road.

Ruth Nichols *iMOM* (in memory of Matt)



THE EMPTY CHAIR

This year when Christmas boughs are draped,
And cards around the doorway taped,
And cookies baked, and green wreaths hung,
And carols in the crisp night sung;
This Christmas cannot be as fair
In homes where there's an empty chair.

Dear God in heaven, bless with peace
Those whose Christmas joy has ceased,
For those who grieve cannot bear
The stillness of that empty chair.

Instill in them a second sight
To see in death a lasting light
Which reassures that those who've died
Now kneel before the manger side
To celebrate the blessed birth
More grandly than we can on earth.

And may those visions of your care
Bring hope enough to fill that chair
So Christmas carols may be sung
And Christmas bells may still be rung
And Christmas peace replace all fears
And Christmas joy be felt through tears.

New Year's brings memories of son

1992 was a devastating year for my husband and me. Our 15-year-old son (actually, my step-son), Todd, was killed in an automobile accident in May. The rest of the year has simply been a matter of survival for us — of leaning heavily on the Lord, each other, and our closest friends for love and support and the willingness to go on with our lives.



On New Year's Eve we attended a party at our church in Lexington that was one step in enabling us to go ahead into a new year with hope and

expectation for the future.

I am 40 years old and I have been to a few parties in my life, and this was the best I have ever experienced. It was what a New Year's celebration should be like: warm, friendly, and loving people together in praise and celebration of who the Lord is and how He sustains us with His mercy and kindness — the Lord himself is the cause of the celebration; it's catalyst is the old year going out and the new year coming in.

I, for one, was glad to see 1992 end. Yet, as people of God, we have every reason to look forward to a new year, to anticipate what wondrous works He is readying even now to make manifest.

The party reflected that kind of hope and joy. All of the festive decorations were included: the balloons, party hats, party favors, and noisemakers, with candlelight and the glistening ball at the top, spinning its reflections of light all around the room. The music provided was

nothing short of splendid — each of the performers added something unique and special to the evening. However, I must say I particularly enjoyed our own homefolks: Al Peers revealed his own personal anointing of God with song that were marvelously touched with both wisdom and wit and, as usual, Stella brought the house down with her own "Blood-Bought Church" (the music to which apparently just miraculously appeared at the time it was needed).

There is just one more thing that has to be told about this very special New Year's party. It is the sweetest and loveliest illustration of how "The Lord is near to the broken-hearted," just as His Word says.

Todd's favorite song — the song that they heard the last time they were together, he made his Dad listen to twice in a row, just to make sure he heard all of the words — a song which affirms life even in the midst of hardship — a song by Garth Brooks called "The River" was sung at this party.

You can believe what you like, but I know that the Lord did that for me and my husband. It was just as if Todd was speaking to us. When I heard the first notes of the music, I turned to him and said "Dave, that's Today!" I will never forget it as long as I live.

Todd helped us celebrate this New Year's just as he had done all of his life. The last time we were with him for New Year's, we were with him at the church at Lexington New Year's Party. After we had communion and the party was all over and we were heading home, I asked Todd what he thought. His response was a single word, "Awesome."

Although children can sometimes be known for overstating things, that is precisely what I thought of this year's party. It was awesome. And I don't know how anyone could improve on bringing in the New Year than with an awesome party in the Lord.

(Griffin works as an executive assistant at a law firm in Stanton.)



Gather the Flowers

By Nita Smith

Gather flowers while you may,
And hold them close to heart.
Tend and love them every day,
For they will soon depart.

We have but a little while,
And soon the blooms will fade.
Long before we want them to,
Their leaves will go to shade.

Oh, we shall not be ready,
And we will weep in vain.
There's no way to call them back.
There's only deepest pain.

We shall mourn a little while,
But we remember long.
Until some day recalling
Will be a soothing song.

No longer feeling painful,
We'll remember all good.
We can laugh and be happy,
Feel glad the way we should.

We'll never be glad they're gone.

Be grateful they were ours.
And some day we shall join them
In refreshing showers.

Never will the blossoms fade,
Nor leaves return to sod.
We will all forever bloom
In the garden of God.



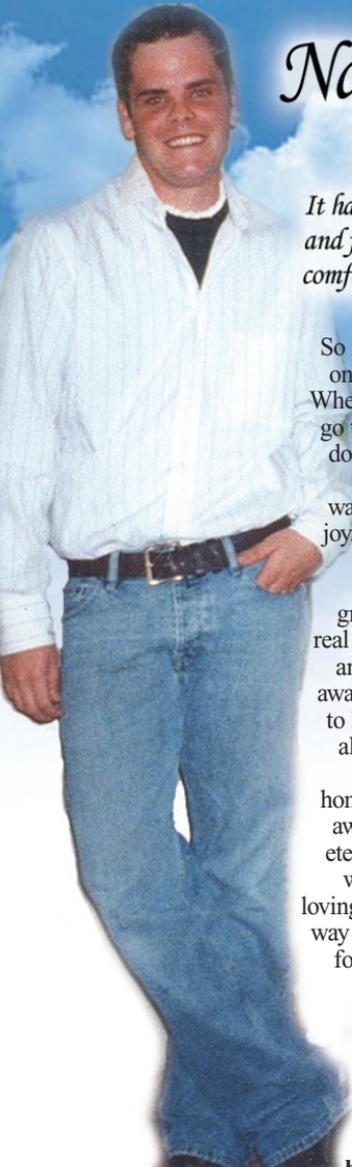
Don't think of him as gone away --
his journey's just begun;
life holds so many facets --
this earth is only one.
Just think of him as resting
from the sorrows and the tears
in a place of warmth and comfort
where there are no days and years.
Think how he must be wishing
that we could know, today,
how nothing but our sadness
can really pass away.
And think of him as living
in the hearts of those he touched ...
for nothing loved is ever lost --
and he was loved so much.



MY LORD GOD, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you, And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing, I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

THOMAS MERTON

—Thoughts in Solitude



Nathan Anthony Royalty

April 12, 1984 - January 31, 2007

It has been three years since the loss of our beloved son, brother, and friend, Nathan. In his memory we know he would want to comfort all who have lost their precious children and loved ones.

This is what he would like us to remember...

So many people imagine that death cruelly separates us from our loved ones. Even pious people are led to believe this great and sad mistake. When our loved ones die, they do not leave us. They remain. They do not go to some dark and distant place. They simply begin their eternity. We do not see them because we are still in the darkness of the world. But their spiritual eyes, filled with the light of heaven, are always watching us as they wait for the day when we shall share their perfect joy. We are all born for heaven and one by one we end this life of tears to begin our life in endless happiness.

I have often reflected upon this beautiful truth and found it the greatest and surest comfort in time of mourning. A firm faith in the real and continual presence of our loved ones has brought the conviction and consolation that death has not destroyed them, nor carried them away. Rather it has given them life! A life with power to know fully and to love perfectly. With this new life and new power our loved ones are always present to us, knowing and loving us more than ever before.

The tears that dampen our eyes in times of mourning are tears of homesickness, tears of longing for our loved ones. But it is we who are away from home, not they. Death has been for them a doorway to an eternal home. And only because this heavenly home is invisible to our worldly eyes, we cannot see them so near us. Yet, they are with us, lovingly and tenderly waiting for the day when we, too, will enter the doorway of our eternal home. No, death is not a separation. It is a preparation for eternal union with those we love, in the peace and joy of heaven.

Always remember this as you continue your journey.

Your loved one is walking with you. NATHAN

*In memory of our Nathan
"Gift from God"*

**Janette Smith, mother; Nick Cipparone, step-dad;
brother Derek and all of his many friends whose lives he touched.**



IF YOU COULD SEE WHERE I HAVE GONE

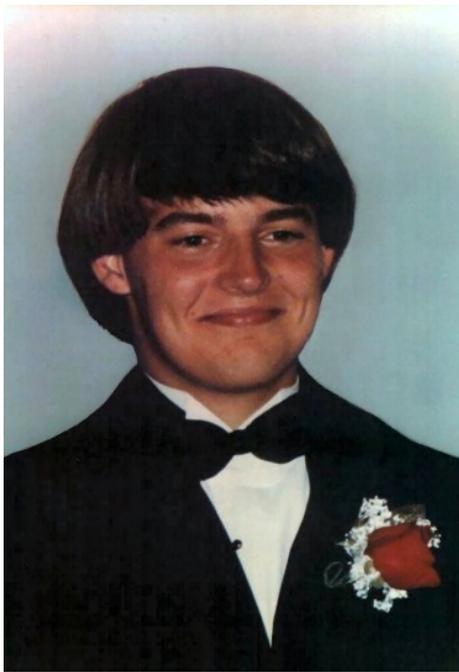
**If you could see where I have gone, the beauty of this place,
And how it feels to know you're home, to see the Savior's face.
To wake in peace and know no fear, just joy beyond compare,
While still on earth, you miss me yet, you wouldn't want me there.
If you could see where I have gone.**

**If you could see where I have gone. had made the trip with me,
You'd know I didn't go alone, the Savior came with me.
When I awoke, He was by my side, and reached out His hand,
Said "Hurry child, you're coming home, to a grand and glorious land.
Don't worry over those you love, for I'm not just with you,
And don't you know, with you, at home, they'll long to be here too."**

**If you could see where I have gone, and see what I've been shown,
You'd never know another tear, or ever feel alone.
You'd marvel at the care of God, His hand on every life,
And realize He really cares, and bears with us each strife.
And that he weeps when one is lost, His heart is filled with pain,
But oh! the joy when one comes home, a child at home again.**

**If you could see where I have gone, could stay awhile with me,
Could share the things that God has made, to grace eternity.
But no, you could never leave, once heavens joy you'd known,
You couldn't bear to walk earth's paths, once heaven was your home.**

**If you could see where I have gone, you'd know we'll meet someday,
And though I'm parted from you now, that I am just away.
So, thank you family, thank you friends, for living for the Lord,
For teaching me to love Him, to trust Him and His word.
And now, that I'm at home with Him, secure in every way,
I'm waiting here at heaven's door, to greet you some sweet day.**



The Memory Lives On

By Joy C. Tirey

The passing of lives and friendships can be a struggle that no one ever seems to get over. I suppose after quite a long time there is a need to go with what happens and take one day at a time. I don't think that I could grasp the thought of someone my age dying. It doesn't seem right. At least I can say that, others don't have the choice.

It was early one morning in July. The phone rang and my dad answered it in the other room. I couldn't hear what he was saying except a muffled, "I'll tell her, she'll be fine., don't worry." As I heard my dad hang up the phone, I began to get this terrible feeling in my stomach. I turned around to see my dad standing in the doorway of my room, his face was as pale as a ghost. As he sat down on my bed I could sense that something was not right. I can't even remember seeing my dad, the masculine person that he is, looking so scared. I remember him saying, "Joy, if there was ever a time in my life that I didn't feel that I could tell you something, it would be right now." I replied, "Dad you know that you can tell me." Dad said, "There was something bad happened this morning. Two of your friends were in a car accident and things aren't good." I looked at him and said, "Dad, please tell me who it is. Are they going to be alright?" Dad looked down at the floor and said, "No, sweetheart, they aren't; it was Jeremiah and Drew Smith and they were both killed." I replied, "What do you mean, Dad what happened?" I began to sob. Dad consoled me and began telling me what had happened. He said, "Their car left the road on the way back from a concert in Ohio early this morning. Drew fell asleep at the wheel and the car flipped over. Neither of them were wearing seat belts so they were thrown from the car." At that moment I didn't know exactly

how to react except frightened. I couldn't understand why God felt that he needed to take two innocent teenagers from the lives of so many loving people.

I remember laying on my bed that night staring at the ceiling above me. Each thought that ran through my mind was of Jeremiah and Drew. I wondered, what I could of done. Could I have saved their lives by protecting them or was this what was supposed to happen? I couldn't even imagine what their parents were thinking, what was going through their minds? I wanted to help them get through it but I didn't know if I could.

I sit and think of all the things that their fellow classmates remembered about them. There were so many times that we sat around together and all we did was talk and share precious memories of Jeremiah and Drew. Some remembered their dark brown hair and brown eyes while others remembered both of their energetic personalities. They were both really mischievous. Some people even mentioned their impersonations, they always watched movies and picked some actor to imitate. I remember how I admired Drew's integrity and his personality. He was always willing to help anyone in need and make them feel so loved in the process. I never will forget his long inspirational talks that he was always happy to give out. I also mentioned that Jeremiah was a person that could always say something funny just to make me laugh when I was down. He was the one that made the best impersonations. The one that I remember most was Freddie Kruger, he would dress up in this outfit and hide in the closet at their house and scare all of us. I couldn't believe that out of two hundred or so people that knew the two of them each had something different to remember them by. I guess that goes to show their popularity and the effect that they had on people.

The funeral lasted about two hours. It was an Episcopalian service so there were several rituals performed during the service so it seemed the longer it took, the tougher it became. I remember my mom squeezing my hand like a gift of strength to make it through the remainder of the service. Then the funeral procession traveled an hour to the graveside. I couldn't go because I felt that I had enough grief for one day.

Three years have passed now. Another era has moved by. Jeremiah's class graduated this year, my graduating class. It seems like things get better every day, but I still catch myself wondering what the exact reason was for them deciding to take that journey home that morning. There will always be that piece of emptiness that can never be repaired from the loss of two very important people.

I guess that I came to realize the importance of a friendship when I lost the two of them. I also realized that there are thousands of automobile fatalities each year and most are the cause of not wearing a seat belt. I keep thinking, what if they were wearing their seat belts, would they be here today or would the same thing happened. I guess that is one of God's great secrets and no one else will ever know. I still may want answers but I have to learn to accept the situation and go on with my life, that's what they would want. It is one thing to have lost them but it is great to have the knowledge of two majestic angels looking over my shoulder.



Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow

There are only two days in every week that we should not worry about. Two days that should be kept free from fear and apprehension.

One is YESTERDAY, with its mistakes and cares, its faults and blunders, its aches and pains. Yesterday has passed, forever beyond our control.

All the money in the world cannot bring back yesterday. We cannot undo a single act we performed. Nor can we erase a single word we've said. Yesterday is gone!

The other day we shouldn't worry about is TOMORROW with its impossible adversaries, its burden, its hopeful promise and poor performance. Tomorrow is beyond our control. Tomorrow's sun will rise either in splendor or behind a bank of clouds - but it will rise. And until it does, we have no stake in tomorrow, for it is yet unborn.

That leaves only one day - TODAY. Any person can fight the battles of just one day. It is only when we add the burdens of yesterday and tomorrow that we break down.

It is not the experience of today that drives people mad - it is the remorse for something that happened yesterday, and the dread of what tomorrow may bring. Let us therefore, live one day at a time.

Drew Jeremiah Jim Buzzy Stephen Todd
Kami Cary John Kristin Heather Will
Hannah David

MENTION MY CHILD'S NAME

The mention of my child's name

May bring tears to my eyes

But it never fails to bring

Music to my ears.

If you really are my friend,

Let me hear the beautiful music

Of her name.

It soothes my broken heart

And sings to my soul.

Author unknown

Shaka Jamon Paul Peggy Denis Michael
Ryan Christopher Andrew Matthew Jon
Natalie Daniel



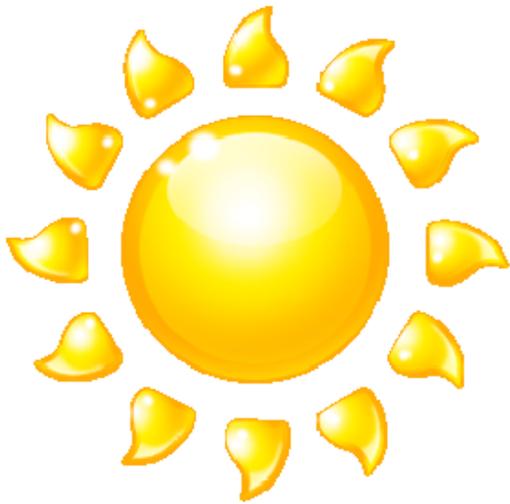
And now I am contented that my life it was worthwhile
knowing as I passed along the way, I made somebody smile.
So if you meet somebody who is down and feeling low,
just lend a hand to pick him up as on your way you go.

When you are walking down the street, and you've got me on your mind,
I'm walking in your footsteps, only half a step behind.
And when you feel the gentle breeze, or the wind upon your face,
that's me giving you a great big hug or just a soft embrace.
And when it's time for you to go from that body to be free,
remember you are not going...you are coming here to me.
And I will always love you from that land way up above.

Will be in touch again soon.

P.S. God sends His Love.

--Author unknown



Shall I Compare Thee

Sonnet XVIII

**Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?
Thou art more lovely and more temperate:
Rough winds do shake the darling buds of May,
And summer's lease hath all too short a date:
Sometime too hot the eye of heaven shines,
And often is his gold complexion dimmed:
And every fair from fair sometime declines.
By chance, or nature's changing course, untrimmed.
But thy eternal summer shall not fade
Nor lose possession of that fair thou owest:
Nor shall Death brag thou wanderest in his shade,
When in eternal lines to time thou growest:--
So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.**

Shakespeare



NIGHT

My bedside clock shows the time.

It is 3:16 a.m. – in another desperate night.

I stare into the darkness.

Tears roll off the sides of my eyes into my ears – out onto my pillow silently.

My husband moves.

I know he isn't sleep.

His breathing isn't regular.

He stirs and I know he is remembering.

He moves out of the bed into the kitchen,

The lights out there snap on,

I hear crockery noises

As he makes himself tea...

And then there is silence.

Should I go out to see how he is or stay quietly in my bed – letting him time alone?

His days are so full at work,

He has no place to be himself but alone at 3:30 in the morning,.

Oh God, WHEN are we going to be released from this desperate longing and grief
for our little boy – our only son?

How long does it last?

How long does it take?

So many months have gone by,

And we are not feeling any better – but WORSE!

Help me, God – I just can't handle it alone!

He stumbles back into bed,

Cold and spent.

We lie apart – both wide awake

Desperate for rest – relief.

He moves and I turn toward him.

Suddenly reaching for his hand.

He turns to me and holds me closely,

No words are needed...

We are together.

We feel so much for each other.

We KNOW!

No one else in the world can share my grief with him.

Thank you, God, that we still have each other.

But I am still alone.

Margaret Harmer

Melbourne, Australia



The Broken Chain

We little knew that morning
that God was going to call your name.

In life we love you dearly,
in death we do the same.

It broke our hearts to lose you;
you did not go alone,

for part of us went with you,
the day God called you home.

You left us peaceful memories;
your love is still our guide.

And though we cannot see you,
you are always at our side.

Our family chain is broken,
and nothing seems the same;
but as God calls us one by one,
THE CHAIN will link again.



My First Christmas in Heaven

**I see the countless Christmas trees
around the world below,
shining like heavenly stars reflecting on the snow.
The sight is so spectacular,
please wipe away the tears, for I am spending
Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.
Many Christmas hymns come rising from the earth,
but they never equal the melodies
heavens choir gives birth.
I have no words to tell you the joy their voices bring,
for it is beyond description to hear the angels sing.
You miss me, I see the pain within your heart
though I am far away, we really aren't apart.
Be happy for me dear ones, you know I hold you near
and be glad I'm spending
Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.
I give you each the memory of my eternal love,
love more precious than gold,
always important in the stories Jesus told.
Please love and serve others
as my Father said to do.
For I cannot count the blessings of love he has for you.
So have a Merry Christmas,
wipe away that tear.
Remember I am spending
Christmas with Jesus Christ this year.
Until then.....**



Prayer for the Loss of a Loved One

Dear God,

Experiencing the loss of a loved one is so shattering. It's so difficult to greet each day when my loss has left me empty and numb. Help me fill that void with the focus of the wonderful memories we shared. Allow me to feel the comfort and gentle encouragement of your angels whispering that my loved one is safe and happy with you. Please nourish me with your love and give me the strength and will to carry on.

Amen



**For the moon never beams, without bringing me dreams
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And the stars never rise, but I feel the bright eyes
Of the beautiful Annabel Lee;
And so, all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
Of my darling -- my darling-- my life and my bride,
In the sepulcher there by the sea,
In her tomb by the sounding sea.**

Last stanza of Annabel Lee by Edgar Allen Poe

JONATHAN WESLEY CLARK

7-2-82 - 9-23-00

Linda & Bobby Clark

**1805 Rollingwood Way
Bowling Green, KY 42103**

On July 2, 1982 at 5:57 AM, a nurse shouted, "It's a boy!" It was the most joyful day of my life. After years of infertility, my dream had come true. I was a Mom! This beautiful brown-eyed boy captured my heart and I would never be the same.

On September 22, 2000 at 3:23 AM, the phone rang and a nurse said to me, "Your son has been critically injured and transported to the University of Louisville Hospital. You must go there as soon as possible". When I asked, "Is he alive?" the nurse answered, "Barely." It was the beginning of the longest and worse day of my life. After a nightmarish two-hour drive, we visited our son in the large trauma unit. As a nurse, I could see that my son's life was almost over when I look at his eyes. Approximately thirty minutes after arriving, the physicians tell us, "Your son is brain dead, we are so sorry, there is nothing we can do." It was as if my heart broke at that moment and I knew I would never be whole or complete again. I could not comprehend how my heart was still beating. It made no sense to me that I was still alive when my precious, beautiful, only child was officially declared dead on September 23, 2000 at 4:15 AM.

The name Jonathan means, "God's Gracious Gift" and we acknowledged this promise from the moment of his birth. We never took our life together for granted. We played together, worshiped together and traveled together. We snow skied in West Virginia, rode the trolley cars in San Francisco, swam the beaches of Florida, and hiked the mountains of North Carolina. We cruised the Caribbean and snorkeled in the Grand Caymans. At an early age Jon acquired a love for travel and viewed each day as a great adventure. He loved legos, super heroes, WW wrestling, music, hiking, camping, rollerblading, riding his bike, being in the presence of the great outdoors and hanging out with his friends. Our home was the Kool-Aid house with kids playing basketball, street hockey, jumping on the trampoline or hanging out in the garage. There was no sweeter sound than the laughter of a group of kids in our home.

In the summer of 1999 Jon was able to tour Europe with a group from school. He saw the lights of Paris, the mountains of Switzerland and was disturbed by the history of Germany. He returned home with a pierced ear and a multitude of photos and memories. I realized that the child I sent on this trip had returned as a young man with confidence and maturity. After his high school graduation in May of 2000, Jon was able to take the South Pacific tour with his classmates. He danced in Hawaii, rappelled in New Zealand and fell in love with the koala bears of Australia. And again he returned home with a pierced ear! In just a few weeks of that same summer he would pack for college and leave our home. We were just beginning to adjust to letting him go when we had to say good-bye and plan his funeral.

Somehow amidst the numbness and confusion of planning my son's funeral I had the idea of placing blank memory books on the table of photos. I requested that people write any memories they had of Jon in these books. How grateful I am to have the precious words of his friends. A few of the entries are as follows: "He had a gentle touch and delightful presence" "I remember the way he laughed more than anything else" "His laugh was contagious and his smile bright and shining. It was though Jon knew he needed to pack as many experiences as possible in his brief time with us" "Because of the time our families spent at the beach, the ocean will always remind me of Jon. He was not content to lie on the beach, but always on a boogie board, roller blades or a bike. He would usually catch the biggest wave and the cutest girl. Wherever Jon went, his friends surrounded him.

If a measure of a man's life is his friends, then Jon had life fuller than the years he lived", "Jon made us feel special. He always had a happy and energetic atmosphere about him everywhere he went." "Everyone loved him, even in foreign lands." "I know Jon is looking down at us and smiling as he always does." "It was impossible to walk away from a conversation with Jon without a smile on your face." "He was a bright light in everyone's life. He just had an aura about him. Whenever I saw him out somewhere it would put me in a good mood. I thank God that I was blessed to be his friend. He was love, he was joy, and I am proud to call him my friend." "We know you are in heaven Jon, and we also know that you taught us how to live." "Jon was always the happiest person I knew. Every morning in class if I was upset, he would always make me forget about my problems." "Clark taught me more about myself and life than anyone or anything could." "Jon had a way of making you feel special." "Our memories span years, countries, and celebrations. Your son was the ultimate symbol and spirit of the true meaning of a valued life. Living each day to the fullest and having enough life to share it with everyone. Thanks for giving us Jon"

Jon embraced life and even in death he gave the gift of life to seven lucky people. It was important to us that the doctors were aware of our son's wish to be an organ donor. It was a simple conversation on the day he obtained his driver's license when he expressed this desire. It was right that this beautiful life live on. Organ donation was also a way of making something good out of something so very bad. We have been blessed by knowing Jerry, our son's heart recipient and his family. He proudly wears a button picture of Jon when he does volunteer work for organ donation, and when I first felt his heartbeat and saw his smile I knew my child would never be forgotten.

I grieve for my son every single day. I want to be with him. When I discovered I had breast cancer several months after Jon died I thought, YES, this is my chance to be with my son! But as I pondered my treatment options I felt the spirit of my son saying, "Live life Mom!" Each time I feel this despair or when I no longer want to get out of bed or live I hear the voice of my son saying, "Get up Mom, live your life for me. Live the life I would have lived," and I realize that I am the only voice for this precious young man. So as long as I have breath I will tell his story. There is a saying that goes, "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous." I know that God has his arms wrapped me and his miracles are around me if I remain still, recognize and appreciate them. I know that my son is in God's presence. Jon continues to give us reminders that he is with us in spirit almost every single day. The butterfly and our pennies from heaven continue to grant us the strength and courage to make it through another day. My husband and I like to think that Jon is watching us from heaven and our wish is to make him as proud of us as we were of him. We were so proud to have been your parents Jon, even if it was only for eighteen years. We love you and KNOW we will see you again! PEACE ... Love MOM



A Christmas Letter

Dedicated to Jonathan Wesley Clark (July 2, 1982- September 23, 2000)

Dear Family and Friends:

We have only written one Christmas letter. It was 1994 and was titled "The Year of Journeys". How sweet and innocent life was then! We have struggled over a way to say thank you to our family and friends and somehow answer the question we hear frequently "How are you doing?" We feel the need to try to give you some insight into the most difficult "journey" we have taken so far - - the journey through our grief since the death of our son, Jon, on September 23, 2000. So this Christmas letter of 2000 is a feeble attempt to accomplish these things.

Jon was a true gift from God. He gave us joy and defined who we were. He embraced life, loved his family and friends and will always be remembered for his goodness, his gentleness, his ability to make you feel better, his compassion for others and his "signature smile". We are grateful and proud to have been his parents. Life without Jon is a "daily journey". Sometimes our grief overwhelms us and we continue to work our way through each moment of every day. Sometimes we struggle to get out of bed, put on the "false face" and attempt to go about the business of living. Other days we need to shut the door, take the phone off the hook and withdraw from the hectic pace of life. We sometimes simply need to be alone...sometimes alone from each other. Some days we are able to function quite normally and wonder how we accomplish this!

We have read everything Barnes and Noble placed on the shelves about grief, death, and surviving the loss of a child. In our heads we understand the stages of grieving, yet in our hearts we know that we are on a roller coaster and travel back and forth through each stage. But several things we know to be true:

We are different people. We are no longer afraid. We have been to hell and survived so far. (Even when we wished we had not!) We will never "get over" the death of Jon. We have altered our values, attitudes, perceptions, relationships, and beliefs. We will never look at life through the same lens again. We have had to change to integrate this loss into our lives. The pain is always there. We will always be bereaved parents. Everything is charged with the potential of being a reminder. There is no forgetting. Our perception of life and death is different. "Things" are not important to us and we find that materialism and superficiality in others makes us annoyed. Sometimes we are impatient with people who complain about trivial matters. We simply walk away when people complain about their kids. We are more honest. We are wiser. We did not want to survive; to get wiser or stronger; there is simply no choice; black or white, we live through this or die.

We rail and scream and die a thousand deaths each day, with each reminder, with every picture or song, or holiday. We crawl through each day and toss sleepless through each night. Yet, we have come to feel that there are simply no obstacles that we cannot overcome.

Many of you have asked, "What can we do for you?" Honestly we wish there were something. We only know that we need to remember Jon. We need to talk about Jon. We love to hear from people who share how Jon touched their lives and how they have changed since his death. We have been blessed by giving his "things" away. We have been blessed and comforted by strangers who shared their pain after the death of their children. We smile when his friends leave messages on our answering machine like; "I went by and saw Jon today and just wanted you to know that I was thinking of you both." We have been blessed by a poster collage of pictures of Jon that his friend made and a paper a friend wrote on "how Jon influenced my life". We laugh and cry when we hear stories about Jon that we did not know. We have found comfort in the cards, letters, poems, and books that people have sent us. We have friends who send us a card every few weeks just to say they are praying and thinking of us. We are overwhelmed by the generous response to his scholarship fund. We look forward to the memorial service at the high school when the tree is planted in memory of Jon. We also look forward to meeting the seven individuals who benefited from Jon's "Gift of Life". We thank each of you for your thoughts and prayers. We do know that God has his arms around us and will help us survive the loss of our precious Jon.

We feel the need to share one story. "The butterfly story": Sometime during the first week of October Bobby had set up Jon's computer in the study, but had not yet turned it on. When he re-entered the study after eating supper he saw a beautiful Monarch butterfly on the keyboard of Jon's computer. He carefully lifted the butterfly into his hands and carried it outside and placed it on the wicker table. That night I slept outside, on the porch. I was unable to find comfort anywhere. It was a night when I was most despondent. When I awoke early that morning, the butterfly was still there, with its wings folded. It was so still it looked dead. After about an hour of watching the butterfly we noticed it began to move very slowly and began to open and close its wings. It appeared to be struggling and fighting for life. Finally it gained strength and flew away into the sunshine. Later, two beautiful Monarch butterflies appeared. They flew very close and circled all around us. We felt the presence of Jon and knew that God had not forgotten us. We have had several incidents of encounters with butterflies since this and each have given us comfort. So, the butterfly has become Jon's symbol.

It is interesting that death of the human body has been compared to the identical process of what happens when the butterfly emerges from its cocoon. Butterflies are also the symbols of the Compassionate Friends organization and have special significance for many parents who have suffered the loss of children.

We do feel the need to follow our own instincts and try to determine what is right for us at any given moment. Please accept our decisions regardless of whether you agree with us. Respect that there are no "right or wrongs" to the grief process and no "rules" for grieving. Please forgive us if we hurt your

feelings. Keep in touch, call, write or visit on special occasions. We only know that we are alive and must be a living memorial to Jon by being the best we can be, by enjoying life, and by making a difference.

Jon's senior quote, Class of 2000, Bowling Green High School:

"Don't go through life with your eyes shut; experience everything to the fullest."

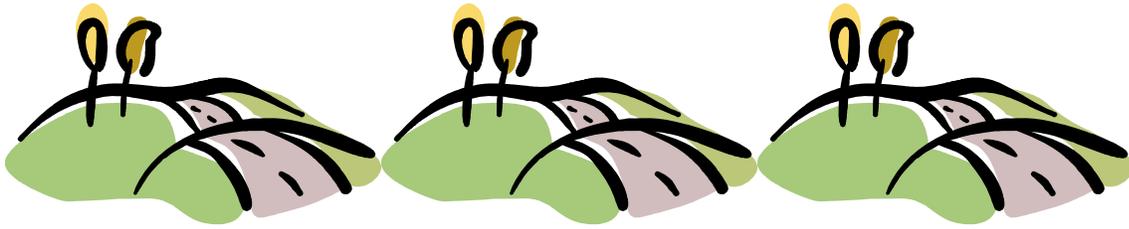
With love.....Linda and Bobby Clark



A Psalm of Life

Tell me not, in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream:
For the soul is dead that slumbers:
And things are not what they seem.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow



Hitchhiker Finds Self, Son at Keepers Rally

Several men were driving across New Mexico on their way to a huge Promise Keepers rally in Dallas, when they spied a rather forlorn hitchhiker on the side of the highway. As they passed, one of the men suggested they give the man a ride, since they could easily overpower him if he turned out to be a "hombre." So, the driver doubled back to pick the man up. It was soon evident from the man's ill-kept clothes that he was hardly a bandit but, instead, simply a man down on his luck who was trying to get back to his home in Alabama.

As the men drove down the road, the hitchhiker's story came out, that long ago the man had abandoned his wife and children and struck out West on his own, only to wind up a failure after many long years. Now the prodigal was going back home, back to his family to see if they'd take him in.

The men in the car were moved by the sad tale, offered him encouragement and told him of Promise Keepers, an organization of men who gathered together to worship with one another. But the hitchhiker was unimpressed, saying he's just appreciate the ride to Dallas.

As the miles fell away, again the men tried, telling their passenger that "the Lord doesn't make any junk" and that they would all be thrilled if they could just stop long enough to buy the hitchhiker some clean clothes, and let him join them in the huge Cowboy Stadium. On and on they went until the hitchhiker offered a solution, "You say there will be a lot of people there? Reckon anybody will be there from Alabama?" The men, gleeful over the suggestion, said that, yes, surely there would be, and that if the hitchhiker would accompany them, they would help him search for a ride on to Alabama.

The car finally reached Dallas and all the men, even the hitchhiker, were swept up in the moment as the huge crowd began to move toward the stadium. One of the men, true to his word, began to shout to those nearby, "Anybody here from Alabama?" "Is there anybody who'd mind giving a guy a ride back home to Alabama?"

On and on he shouted, and from the crowd came a young man saying that, yes, he was from Alabama and would be glad to have a rider. So the young man and the hitchhiker were introduced - and the boy turned out to be the hitchhiker's son.

By Roy Exum, Chattanooga Times-Chattanooga free Press Staff Writer

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A Russian Christmas Story

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, and the fire and police departments and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. They relate the following story in their own words.

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room at the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project.

As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no momma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did."

But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift.

So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?"

And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him...for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon him, someone who would stay with him --- for always.

I've learned that it's not what you have in your life, but who you have in your life that counts.

God Bless and Angels Keep,

Bobbie & Bill & Lori



Lament of a Stepparent

My name is Anita Lockhart, and I would like to tell you a story about my angels. Let me start at the beginning; my husband Robert and I were married on August 15, 1998. On that day we not only united the two of us, but our children as well. I brought in three beautiful daughters and Robert brought in two handsome sons.

I fell in love with my stepsons the moment that I met them. I had always wanted to have little boys and finally God had given them to me. Now don't get me wrong, they drove me crazy at times, but that is what little boys are supposed to do!! All in all we were a very happy family of seven for two years.

Then on September 15, 1999 our lives were changed forever. Our little boys were in a fatal car accident. In one day, in hours, we lost both of them. I can still remember every event of that terrible day as if it were just yesterday. I was at work when Robert called me and told me that I needed to get home right away because there had been an accident with Marsha and the boys. Marsha is the biological mother of Joseph and Brandon. I immediately left the office and went home. When I got there Robert was on the phone with the hospital and the only thing they would tell us was to get there right away. You see, Joseph and Brandon lived with their mom and her fiancé, Mar, in a city that is approximately 40 minutes from us.

Robert hung up the phone, I made some arrangements for my youngest daughter, and we were on our way to the hospital. I remember praying the whole way there. "Please let everyone be okay." Deep in my heart I knew that we were not going to get good news once we arrived. You might call it a mother's instinct, but I knew that it was terrible. We finally got to the hospital, a drive that seemed to take forever that afternoon, and were immediately taken to a back room with the Family Advocate counselor and two highway patrolmen. That made my heart sink even lower. I knew that my instinct had been correct. Once we were seated, we were told that one of our children was already gone. They never

mentioned which one, but both Robert and I knew that it was Brandon, the younger one. Robert just started crying and I went into shock. I remember just sitting there holding onto Robert telling him it was going to be okay.

When we were able to compose ourselves, we asked about Joseph, the older one and were told that he was holding his own at that time. The highway patrol officers left, the Family Advocate counselor called our pastor and we made phone calls to family members that were waiting to know something. It felt like we sat in that room for an eternity when Judy, the maternal grandmother, came in. The tears started all over again. After about 15 or 20 minutes, we went in to see Marsha. She grabbed Robert and me and told us that she was sorry for killing Brandon. Now most people would expect us to be angry with her since she was the one driving the car, but we were not angry then and we are not angry now. We told her that it was not her fault and that we would all get through this somehow, and that we would do it together.

While we were talking with Marsha, the doctors rushed Joseph down the hall into emergency surgery. They tried to keep us out of the hallway so that we wouldn't see him in this condition, but I told them to get out of my way, that was my son!! Feeling completely helpless, we all decided to go outside for some fresh air. Our pastor finally got to the hospital and took everyone into the waiting area for a moment of prayer. We were all holding onto faith that night, it was all we had. The doctors came out and said that Joseph was out of surgery and on his way to the local children's hospital. We all had the chance to see him for a few brief seconds as they wheeled him out the door.

By this time, we were hopeful that Joseph was going to be okay. They said that they were able to stop the internal bleeding and were transporting him to a hospital that was better equipped. We left about 5 minutes after Joseph did and arrived at the children's hospital 10 minutes after he did. When we got there we were told that he had been taken back into surgery because his vital signs had dropped again indicating more bleeding. Once the doctor's were able to come and speak to us, we were not given much hope, Approximately 20 minutes after our first report, they came back out and told us his heart had stopped but they were able to bring him back, barely. That is when we had to make the most difficult decision that any parent will have to make. Did we want them to keep bringing him back if his heart stopped again? Any parent's first response is, "Of course!!" but let me tell you what we were told. The doctor said that even if they could fix all of the internal bleeding, that our former healthy, active 12 year old was brain dead and would never function on his own again. We, Robert, Marsha, Mark and myself then decided that we could not be selfish and keep him here in that kind of condition. At 2 am on September 16, 1999, Joseph went to meet his little brother in heaven.

Now the two little boys that I had loved as much as my own daughters were gone, forever. However, some very amazing things have come from this tragedy. There has been a new friendship formed between Robert, Marsha, Mark and myself. Many people look at us in awe and wonder how we can be so close. Most divorced couples and new

spouses don't get along under the best of circumstances let alone one like ours. We, Robert and I, hold no blame towards Marsha or any hatred. I spend countless hours on the phone with her, as does Robert. As a stepparent, I need to realize that the biological parents of these children need to grieve together. That is something that is very essential to the healing process.

I would like to tell all stepparents that are in this situation that you need to let the biological parents grieve together and not get upset over the time spent together. Some may say that since we are just stepparents that we could not possibly feel the hurt that the biological parents are feeling. I am here to tell you that that is true. We could never experience the depth of that pain of losing our own blood unless it is our own blood. But, we can hurt very deeply, just the same. I feel like a part of me is gone because I loved Joseph and Brandon with all of my heart and soul. They were my boys, just as much as Kristen, Shawna and Olivia are my girls. It takes special people to be stepparents, and therefore, the pain at a tragedy like this will run very deep and will last for an eternity.

I often find myself feeling guilty that Robert has to live with my daughters knowing that his boys are gone forever. He seems to think that I am crazy for feeling this way, but it is normal. I pray every night that he will never become hateful toward my girls because they are still here. These are just a few of the feelings that I as a stepparent have to deal with every day. I also am constantly asked, "How is Robert?" I get very upset that no one asks how I am. People just seem to assume that he is hurting so much more than me because they were his kids. My whole life has changed also due to this tragedy. I will never be the same again.

I suppose that if I could offer any advice, it would be this; don't tell yourself that your pain isn't real because it is. It is very real and very deep. Make sure that you let your spouse and his or her ex know that you will not stand in the way of their grieving together which is very essential for the healing process. Try to form some sort of friendship amongst you; it will make the bad days much easier to deal with. I believe that the friendship, the bond between the four of us is an honor and a testament to the love that each one of us has for Joseph and Brandon. They would expect Robert to take care of their mommy and so do I. Share stories with each other about the different things that would happen when the child (ren) were with you. Share pictures. Marsha and I are going to put all of our pictures together, make copies for each other and create memory books of the boys. We are going to do this together, just the two moms. Losing your children is a terrible tragedy and the pain is so deep. I find that by getting along with each other we are able to cope better. We have our own support group within each other.

I thank you for reading my story and hearing my perspective on this as a stepparent. I hope I was able to help in some small way. My love, thoughts and prayers are with each one of you as you make this journey through the healing process.

---Anita Lockhart



New Year's Hope

Am I Making Progress?

With the New Year, bereaved persons hope that their fragile, hurting hearts will release more and more of the pain, feel stronger, and experience some joy as they continue their journey through the Valley of the Shadow. Needing to heal and go forward with our lives, we struggle to get our lives in order. At this time of the year, we search in our hearts and ask ourselves very timidly, "Am I making progress?"

Each January since I lost my two oldest children, 19 year old Peggy and 21 year old Denis, in the same automobile accident, I check to see if I am going forward in my grief. It only takes a few minutes to assess the status of your grief journey and it helps you to get on the right "mind" track for the new year. Do yourself a favor and see if you have any areas of the heart that needs nurturing. The following "check" list will help you set some goals for your heart to feel better.

Allow Yourself

- Time to cry
- Space to think
- To remember your loved one
- Realistic goals
- To do whatever gives you a moment's peace
- To be imperfect
- To accept offers of help
- To pamper yourself

Force Yourself

- To do old routines
- To listen to your spouse and children
- To do an activity that you used to do

Convince Yourself

- That each person grieves differently
- That you will get better

Let Yourself

- Off the hook
- Laugh
- Feel anger
- Tell God how you honestly feel
- Treasure a special friend
- Remember happy memories
- Select what you can handle
- "Wear out" feelings of anger, guilt and depression

Teach Yourself

- To take care of yourself
- To learn everything about the grief process
- To set goals
- To turn to life
- To ignore hurtful comments of others

Talk to Yourself

- About anything
- About how your loved one would like you to handle things
- Have a dialogue with your loved one

Forgive Yourself

(We become different people with different needs)

- Through meditation
- Through reading
- Through singing
- Through writing
- Through talking
- Through new friends
- Through new hobbies

Indulge Yourself

- Shop
- Nap
- Walk
- Daydream
- Say, "I deserve that!"
- Set aside special time for yourself
- Don't rush or overwhelm yourself with activities

Express Yourself

- Tell the story of your loved one
- Tell the world how you feel
- Tell your spouse how you really feel
- Try new activities
- Find new ways to "reinvest" that special love you shared with your loved one

Forget Yourself

- Seek out other bereaved persons
- Talk to them
- Share what you've learned - what's given you moments of peace. You'll find "Helping is healing."

Give Yourself

- No deadlines
- Choose to rebuild your life in a meaningful way
- Keep memories of your loved one alive
- Make your loved one proud of you

Get busy taking care of yourself and may your efforts bring peace and joy to your heart.

By Elaine Stillwell



Without You

Without you, the ground thaws
the rain falls
the grass grows
Without you, the seeds root
the flowers bloom
the children play
the stars gleam
the poets dream
the eagles fly.....Without you.

The Earth turns
The sun burns
but I die.....Without you.

Without you, the breeze warms
the girl smiles
the cloud moves.

Without you, the tides change
the boys run
the oceans crash
the crowds roar
the days soar
the babies cry.....Without you.

The moon glows
The river flows
but I die.....Without you.

The world revives
Colors renew
but I know who
only blue
lonely blue
within me blue.....Without you.

Without you, the hand gropes
the ear hears
the pulse beats

Without you, the eyes gaze
the legs walk
the lungs breathe
the mind turns
the heart yearns
the tears dry.....Without you.

Life goes on...but I'm gone
Cause I die.....Without you.



I'll Lend You a Little Time

**a child of mine, He said.
For you to love while he lives,
and mourn when he is dead.
It may be six or seven years,
or twenty- two or three,
But will you, till I call him back,
take care of him for me?
He'll bring his charms to gladden you,
and shall his stay be brief,
You'll have his lovely memories
as solace for your grief.
I cannot promise he will stay,
since all from earth return.
But there are lessons taught down there
I want this child to learn.
I've looked the wide world over
in my search for teachers true.
And from the throngs that crowd life's lanes,
I have selected you.
Now will you give him all your love,
nor think the labor vain,
Nor hate me when I come to call,
or take him back again?
I fancied that I heard them say,
Dear Lord, Thy will be done.
For all the joy Thy child shall bring,
the risk of grief we'll run.
We'll shelter him with tenderness,
we'll love him while we may;
And for the happiness we've known,
will ever grateful stay.
But shall the angels call for him
much sooner than we planned,
We'll brave the bitter grief that comes.
And try to understand.**



Memory Making

Awakening each morn, I will usually say:

"I have to do this or that on this day."

Perhaps it would be much better for me to ask:

"What new memories will I make with each task?"

For when I am gone, when I'm here no more,

All that is left is what's gone on before.

A new day is God's gift to us of his trust.

I can spend it on happiness or making a fuss.

Will I make my choices in too much haste,

Will I choose wisely or opportunities waste?

Will I reach out, or will I withdraw?

Will I say, "I love you.", or nothing at all.

Now I will choose much more carefully,

Between what is important, and what's vanity.

With new understanding of life, time, and need,

It's myself I'm creating with each passing deed.

For those who remain, they strongly will lean

On the gift of memories and what they can glean.

Whose comfort is greater, a mother grieving her newborn son,

Or the mother who just lost her teenage one?

My understanding says the latter, because she can cling

To the memory of his laughter, it makes her heart sing.

She can rejoice in the words, "He was such a neat boy,"

To all those who knew him he brought such joy!

For surely the lesson here to be heeded,

Is one for my life that is greatly needed.

Each day is meant for special attention

To be given to loving and outward reflection.

Memory making must be the goal of the living

For it is the gift that keeps on giving.

Written by Linda Bodine and dedicated to her precious nephew, Clark, whose special life "made many memories" which brought comfort through laughter and tears to those who greatly miss him.



Perfect Peace

**Although at times it seems too much,
The trials we have to bear;
If we but keep our eyes on Him,
We'll find Him always there.**

**For comfort comes in knowing,
That our Lord is always near;
To guide us and protect us,
And to dry our every tear.**

**So when you are discouraged.
And feel quite all alone;
Just look upon the Savior.
And the love He has always shown.**

**Draw near to Him in prayer this day,
And you will find release;
For stillness of the heart will come,
Through Jesus Christ, God's perfect peace.**

--Rachel Lorene Fields



In the presence of trouble,
some people grow wings;
others buy crutches.

But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will
soar on wings like eagles. they will run and not grow weary, they will
walk and not be faint.

Is. 40:31 NIV



Sometimes I fear the waves will sweep over me, Lord.

Thank you for the assurance that You are in control.

I put my trust in You.

Thou dost rule the swelling of the sea; when its waves rise, thou does
still them.

Ps. 89.9 NASB



Little Angels

When God calls little children
to dwell with Him above.
We mortals sometimes question
the wisdom of his love.
For no heartache compares with
the death of one small child,
Who does so much to make our world
seem wonderful and mild.
Perhaps God tires of calling
the aged, to His fold,
So he picks a rosebud
before it can grow old.
God knows how much we need them
and so he takes but few,
to make the land of Heaven
more beautiful to view.
Believing this is difficult
still somehow we must try,
The saddest word mankind knows
will always be "good-bye".
So when a child departs
we, who are left behind,
must realize God loves children,
Angels are hard to find.



"On either hand we behold a birth, of which, as of the moon, we see but half. To this region where he goes, the man enters newly born. We forget that it is a birth and call it death. The body he leaves behind is but the placenta by which he drew his nourishment from his mother Earth. And as the childhood is watched on earth with anxious expectancy, so the couch of the dying, as we call it, may be surrounded by the birthwatchers of the other world, waiting like anxious servants to open the door to which this world is but the windblown porch."

-- from The Musician's Quest by George McDonald



Who Are We to Judge

A little child who has never drawn his first breath-
A child who lives a day, a month, maybe a year-
A child who finishes school-
perhaps marries and then dies ...
Who is to compare which parents suffer the greatest heartbreak?
What about the mother whose breasts are full of milk
But has no little angel to feed.
What about the dreams that new parents had for their baby-
The empty nursery, a constant reminder.
An older child who leaves behind
a room full of trophies,
treasures and mementos-
A knife in the heart reminder.
What about the children who grew up
and had everything to live for...
They come from every walk of life.
They have babies of their own,
which will never get to see their mommy or daddy...
All of their goals and dreams gone.
My heart breaks for young parents
who never had the chance
to see their dreams materialize.
Their children never quite learned to walk nor talk,
start school or go out on their first date.
There is no such thing as one loss
being greater than another.
We are all equally devastated...
and therefore, we are forever bonded to one another,
in a very special way...
that no one else can truly understand.



To My Dearest Family

**Some things I'd like to say but, first of all,
to let you know that I arrived okay.
I'm writing this from Heaven where I dwell with God above,
where there are no more tears or sadness.**

There is just eternal love.

**Please do not be unhappy just because I'm out of sight.
Remember that I'm with you every morning, noon, and night.
That day I had to leave you, when my life on Earth was through,
God picked me up and hugged me and He said, "I welcome you.**

It's good to have you back again.

You were missed while you were gone.

As for your dearest family, they'll be here later on.

I need you here so badly, as part of My big plan.

There's so much that we have to do to help our mortal man".

Then God gave me a list of things He wished for me to do.

Foremost on that list of mine is to watch and care for you,

And I will be beside you, every day and week and year.

And when you're sad, I'm standing there to wipe away the tear.

And when you lie in bed at night, the days chores put to flight,

God and I are closest to you in the middle of the night.

**When you think of my life on Earth and all those loving years,
because you're only human, they are bound to bring you tears.**

But, do not be afraid to cry. It does relieve the pain.

Remember, there would be no flowers unless there was some rain.

I wish that I could tell you of all that God has planned,

but, if I were to tell you, you wouldn't understand.

But one thing is for certain, though my life on Earth is o're,

I am closer to you now than I ever was before.

And to my very many friends—trust God knows what is best.

I'm still not far from away from you.

I'm just beyond the crest.

**There are many rocky roads ahead of you and many hills to climb,
but together we can do it taking one day at a time.**

**It was always my philosophy, and I'd like it for you, too,
that as you give unto the World, so the World will give to you.**

If you can help somebody who is in sorrow or in pain,

then you can say to God at night, my day was not in vain.
And now I am contented that my life it was worthwhile,
knowing as I passed along the way, I made somebody smile.
So if you meet somebody who is down and feeling low,
just lend a hand to pick him up as on your way you go.
When you are walking down the street, and you've got me on your mind...
I'm walking in your footsteps, only half a step behind.
And when you feel the gentle breeze, or the wind upon your face,
that's me giving you a great big hug or just a soft embrace.
And when it's time for you to go from that body to be free,
remember you're not going...you are coming here to me.
And I will always love you from that land way up above.
Will be in touch again soon.
P.S. God sends His Love



Please See Me Through My Tears
Kelly Osmont

You asked, "How are you doing?"
As I told you, tears came to my eyes...
and you looked away and quickly began to talk again.
All the attention you had given me drained away.
"How am I doing? I do better when people listen,
though I may shed a tear or two.
This pain is indescribable.
If you've never known it you cannot fully understand.
Yet I need you.
When you look away, when I am ignored,
I am again alone with it.
Your attention means more than you can ever know.
Really, tears are not a bad sign, you know!
They're nature's way of helping me to heal...
They relieve some of the stress of sadness.
I know that you fear that asking how I'm doing brings me sadness...
but you're wrong.
The memory of my loved one's death will always be with me,
only a thought away.
My tears make my pain more visible to you,
but you did not give me the pain...
it was already there.
When I cry, could it be that you feel helpless,
not knowing what to do?
You are not helpless,
and you don't need to do a thing but be there.
When I feel your permission to allow my tears to flow,
you've helped me.
You need not speak.
Your silence as I cry is all I need.
Be patient...do not fear.
Listening with your heart to "how I am doing"
relieves the pain,
for when the tears can freely come and go,
I feel lighter.
Talking to you releases what I've been wanting to say aloud,
clearing space for a touch of joy in my life.
I'll cry for a minute or two...
and then I'll wipe my eyes,
and sometimes you'll even find I'm laughing later.
When I hold back the tears,
my throat grows tight, my chest aches, my stomach knots...
because I'm trying to protect you from my tears.
Then we both hurt...
me, because my pain is held inside,
a shield against our closeness...
and you, because suddenly we're distant.
So please, take my hand and see me through my tears...
then we can be close again.



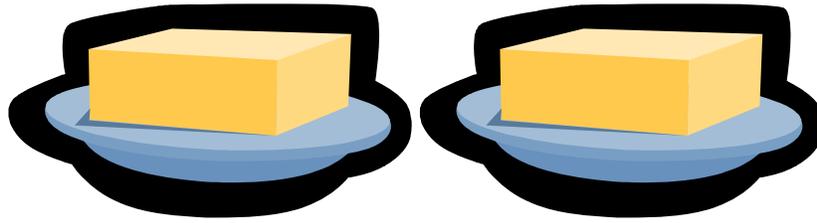
We're Alike You and I

We're alike, you and I. We've never met. Our faces would be those of strangers if we met. We would barely perceive the others presence if we passed on our walk through the mists. We're unknown to each other until the terrible words have been spoken: "My child died."

We're alike, you and I. We measure time in seconds and eternities. We try to go forward to yesterday. Tomorrows are for old people, and we are incomplete now. The tears after a time turn inward to become invisible to all save you and me. Our souls are rumpled from wrestling with demons and doubts and unanswerable prayers: "Give me back my child."

We're alike, you and I. The tears that run down your face are my tears and the wound in your soul is my pain too. We need time, but time is our enemy for it carries us farther and farther from our lost child. And we cry out: "Help me."

We're alike, you and I. And we need each other. Don't turn away, but give me your hand and for a time we can cease to become strangers and become what we truly are, a family closer than blood, united by a bond that was forced upon us—but a bond that can make us stronger, still wounded to be sure, but stronger for our sorrows are shared. "We need not walk alone."



The Widow's Chain and Butter

Ted Menten

One of the most devastating emotions after the death of a loved one is the feeling of isolation. The great loss of connection is very often coupled with a sense of being abandoned by the one most loved and trusted. In this widows' group, each member is in a different stage of grief, in their journey back to life. As a symbolic ceremony, they form a chain with those newly bereaved at the end of the chain. Using this chain, they start bringing each other forward with a symbolic tug. Motion is the only way out of grief. When people feel that they want to get back into life, this is a good way to get going. This process forges a strong chain of healing—link by link.

At the end of this group's meeting, they were asked to hold hands and do an exercise of remembrance, which lets them honor the one they love by saying one word that brings back a memory of that person. The memory word did not have to be explained to the group; it was like a secret code word that only they knew the real, true meaning of. The list of "magic" words; hamburgers, ocean, Rover, chocolate, Babe....essentially expressed the same thing - a remembrance that gives both pleasure and comfort, the comfort of release. It is always just one word that say it all. And that word always means exactly the same thing: "I love you and I miss you."

BUTTER

Rachel had been a widow less than a year. After a few months of devastating mourning - she seldom got out of bed before noon and almost never left the house - she came to our widow's group.

Reluctantly, she visited our Wednesday night group. Silently, she listened and observed without joining in. When we spoke our closing words of "remembrance", she remained outside the circle. She left abruptly, with a simple thank you to the group, and I thought that was the last we'd ever see her.

The following week Rachel appeared again as if nothing had happened. Once again she observed the group in silence, and once again she remained detached and aloof. At the end she thanked us and left. I wondered if she would return, and she did.

In time, she became part of the group. But when the chain was formed at the closing, she was always at the end - by her choice. Even after three months, she kept assigning herself the last link. Others who had joined the group after her were moving along. But Rachel insisted she was still at the end of the chain.

One Wednesday night, the subject was honoring and remembering how, after our loved one has died, we can remember and honor them with our life and our living. Susan had just begun to talk about some of her memories of her husband when Rachel suddenly stood up and started shouting.

"Stop it! Stop it!" she screamed at us. "Stop talking about remembering. I hate that!...What's the matter with you all? How can you talk about remembering? Where's your pain?" She stopped suddenly and faced me directly. "Don't you get it? I don't want memories - I want my husband!"

It was a truth we all knew and lived with, but seldom spoke of. It was the very core of our grief.

A memory is a poor substitute for the real thing. A memory can't hold you in its arms or fill you with pleasure, or laugh at your jokes or pitch a ball, or brag about your cooking and fight back unfairly, or surprise you on your birthday. In a world where the living are diamonds, memory is a paste imitation - a lackluster copy of the gleaming original.

No one wants a memory. We all want the real thing.

Rachel raged on for a few minutes more, and then faced with our stunned silence, she sat down, hands folded primly in her lap, and waited for us to respond. I wondered who would answer her, and hoped it wouldn't have to be me because I didn't believe I had the words. Thankfully, Barbara did.

"For weeks now Rachel, you've assigned yourself the last link in the chain and we let you. We let you because all of us have been there and don't really want to admit that we are moving along - making progress. Moving along seems like forgetting. Moving along seems like infidelity. Moving along says 'I have stopped caring and loving.' So we let you stay there for your own good and your own comfort."

"But tonight, dear friend, you have moved forward and you have brought us with you. You have said the words we all fear and hate and opened all the old wounds we thought were healing. Your rage gives meaning to your love and to ours."

She reached out her hand to Rachel. "Not one of us wants to settle for less than the real thing, but the real thing is gone. Margarine isn't the real thing. Butter is. But if there is no butter, then you make do with the next best thing.

"I don't want my life to be dry toast. I want it covered with rich golden butter. But my butter is gone, and all I have left is the memory of its richness, its pure golden quality, its sweet taste. The margarine of memory will never, ever, replace or even approximate the real thing. But, Rachel, it is far better than dry toast!

"Stewart is dead, Rachel, dead and buried and gone. Forever. Your butter is gone, just like mine is, and everyone else's in this room. All you have to do - all you can do now - is decide if you want the rest of your life to be dry toast."

In silence we all examined the loss of rich, golden butter in our lives and knew that it was the prospect of a life of dry toast that had brought us here together. There, in our group, we shared our recipes for a life, using margarine.

That night as we held hands and closed with our one word memory, I asked Rachel to start.

"Butter," she intoned

"Butter."

"Butter."

"Butter."

"Butter."

And I completed the circle, whispering, "Butter."



Princess Diana's Funeral Service

**If I should die and leave you here awhile,
Be not like others, sore undone, who keep
Long vigils by the silent dust, and weep
For my sake - turn again to life and smile,
Nerving thy heart and trembling hand to do
Something to comfort other hearts than thine.
Complete those dear unfinished tasks of mine
And I, perchance, may therein comfort you.**

- Read by Lady Sarah McCorquodale at the funeral of her sister

**Time is too slow for those who wait,
Too swift for those who fear,
Too long for those who grieve,
Too short for those who rejoice,
But for those who love, time is eternity.**

- Read by Lady Jane Fellowes at the funeral of her sister



The Value Of Time

Imagine there is a bank which credits your account each morning with \$84,600, carries over no balance from day to day, allows you to keep no cash balance, and every evening cancels whatever part of the amount you had failed to use during the day. What would you do? Draw out every cent and invest it wisely, of course!

Well, everyone has such a bank. Its name is TIME. Every morning, it credits you with exactly 84,600 seconds. Every night, it writes off, as lost, whatever of this you have failed to invest to good purpose. It carries over no balance. It allows no overdraft.

Each day it opens a new account for you. Each night it burns the records of the day. If you fail to use the day's deposits, the loss is yours.

There is no going back. There is no drawing against tomorrow. You just live in the present on today's deposits. Invest it wisely, so as to get out of it the utmost in health, happiness and success!

But beware—the clock is running. Start making the most of today now....

To realize the value of ONE YEAR ask a student who has failed his final exam.

To realize the value of ONE MONTH ask a mother who has given birth to a premature baby.

To realize the value of ONE WEEK ask an editor of a weekly publication.

To realize the value of ONE DAY ask a daily wage laborer who has ten kids to feed.

To realize the value of ONE HOUR ask the long distance lovers who are waiting to be reunited.

To realize the value of ONE MINUTE ask a person who has missed their plane, train or bus.

To realize the value of ONE SECOND ask a person who has survived an accident.

To realize the value of ONE MILLI-SECOND ask the person who has won a silver medal in the Olympics.

Treasure every moment you have! And treasure it more because you have shared it with someone special...special enough to have your time...and remember, time waits for no one...

Prayer is the Language of the Heart

If you're headed in the wrong direction, God allows U-turns.

For every 60 seconds of anger, you lose one minute of happiness.

Kindness: a language the deaf can hear, the blind can see, and the mute can speak.

When you see someone without a smile, give him one of yours.

I do not think happiness is too hard to find –it is how you treasure what you get hold of that counts.

What holds you together is far greater than what can tear you apart.

My grandfather once told me that there were two kinds of people: those who do the work and those who take the credit. He told me to be in the first group where there was much less competition.

Respect costs nothing.

Life is like a soap opera. God is the head writer; your story line keeps changing; it's a daily event; and there are Friday cliffhangers.

Don't marry the person you think you can live with. Marry the one you cannot live without.

I complained I had no shoes 'til I met a man who had no feet.

When one door of happiness closes, another opens; but often we look back at the closed door so that we do not see the one which had been opened for us.

The days are very long, but the years are very short.

Sorrow looks back, worry looks around, faith looks up.

Answer just what the heart prompts you. The heart is wiser than the intellect.

Fortune truly helps those who are of good judgment.

Speak only well of people, and you need never whisper.

Time is precious, but truth is more precious than time.

Pray for what you want, but work for the things you need.

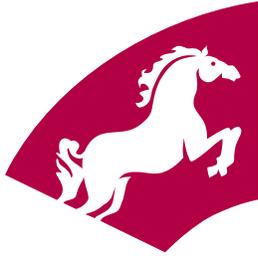
Wise men learn more from fools, than fools from wise men.

Get your mind set; confidence will lead you on.

It is better to share happiness than keep it to yourself.

Be direct; usually one can accomplish more that way.

Prayer is the language of the heart.



Judgment

There was an old man in a village, very poor, but even kings were envious of him because he had a beautiful white horse. Kings offered fabulous prices for the horse, but the old man would say, "This horse is not a horse to me but a person. And how can you sell a person, a friend?" The man never sold the horse.

One morning he found that the horse was not in the stable. The whole town gathered and they said, "You foolish old man! We knew that someday the horse would be stolen. It would have been better to sell it. What a mistake."

The old man said, "Don't go so far as to say that. Simply say that the horse is not in the stable. This is the fact. Everything else is a judgment. Whether it is a misfortune or a blessing I don't know, because this is only a fragment. Who knows what is going to follow it?"

People laughed at the old man. They had always known that he was crazy. But after fifteen days, suddenly one night the horse returned. It had not been stolen, he had escaped into the wild. And not only that, but returned with a dozen wild horses with him.

Again the people gathered and they said, "Old man, you were right. It was not a misfortune, it has indeed proved to be a blessing." The old man said, "Again you are going too far. Just say that the horse is back...who knows whether it is a blessing or not? It is only a fragment. You read one word in a sentence, how can you judge the whole book?"

This time the people could not say much, but inside they knew that he was wrong. Twelve beautiful horses had come...

The old man had an only son who started to train the wild horses. He later fell from a horse and his legs were broken. The people gathered and again they judged. They said, "Again you proved right: It was a misfortune. Your only son has lost the use of his legs." The old man said, "You are obsessed with judgment. Don't go that far say only that my son has broken his legs. Nobody knows whether this is a misfortune or a blessing. Life comes in fragments and more is never shown you."

It happened a few weeks later the country went to war, and all the young men of the town were forcibly taken for the military. Only the old man's son was left, because he was crippled. The whole town was crying and weeping. It was a losing fight and they knew most of the young people would not come back. They came to the old man and they said, "You were right, your son's injury has proved a blessing. Maybe your son is crippled, but he is still here and our sons are gone forever."

The old man said again, "You go on and on judging. Nobody knows! Look at this, your sons have been forced to enter into the army and mine has not been forced. But, only GOD, the total, knows whether it is a blessing or a misfortune."

Judge ye not, otherwise you will never become one with the total. With the fragments you will be obsessed, with small things you will jump to conclusions. Once you judge you have stopped growing. Judgment causes a stale state of mind. And mind always wants judgment, because to stop the process is always hazardous and uncomfortable.

In fact, the journey never ends. One path ends, another begins; a door closes, another opens. You reach a peak; a higher peak is always there. It is an endless journey. Only those who are so courageous that they never bother about the goal but are content just with the moment and grow into it, only those are able to walk with the total.



The Son

Years ago, there was a very wealthy man who, with his devoted son shared a passion for art collecting. Together they traveled around the world, adding only the finest art treasures to their collection. Priceless works by Picasso, Van Gogh, Monet and many others adorned the walls of the family estate.

The widowed elder man looked on with satisfaction, as his only son became an experienced art collector. The son's trained eye and business mind caused his father to beam with pride as they dealt with art collectors around the world.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man went to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His beloved son was missing in action.

The art collector anxiously awaited more news, fearing he would never see his son again. Within days, his fears were confirmed. The man's son had died while rushing a fellow soldier to a medic.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season - a season that he and his son had so looked forward to - would visit the house no longer. On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the man. The art work on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door, he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hand. He introduced himself to the man by saying, "I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to give you." As the two began to talk, the soldier told of how the man's son had told everyone of his father's love of fine art. "I'm an artist," said the soldier, "and I want to give you this."

As the old man unwrapped the package, the paper gave way to reveal the portrait of the man's son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man's face in striking detail. Overcome with emotion, the man thanked the soldier, promising to hang the picture above the fireplace.

A few hours later, after the soldier had departed, the old man went about his task. True to his word, the painting went above the fireplace, pushing aside thousands of dollars of paintings. Afterward the man sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given. During the days and weeks that followed, the man realized that even though his son was no longer with him, the boy's life would live on because of those he had touched. He would soon learn that his son had rescued dozens of wounded soldiers before a bullet stilled his caring heart. As the stories of his son's gallantry continued to reach him, fatherly pride and satisfaction began to ease the grief. The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, eclipsing any interest in the pieces for which museums around the world clamored. He told his neighbors it was the greatest gift he had ever received.

The following spring, the old man became ill and passed away. The world was in anticipation. With the collector's passing, and his only son dead, those paintings would be sold at an auction. According to his will, they would be sold on Christmas Day, the day he had received his greatest gift. The day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered to buy some of the world's most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled this day; greatness would be achieved. Many would claim, "I have the greatest collection".

The auction began with a painting that was not on any museum's list. It was the painting of the man's son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid. The room was silent. "Who will open the bidding with \$10?" he asked. Minutes passed. No one spoke. From the back of the room came, "Who cares about that painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's forget it and go on to the good stuff." More voices echoed in agreement. "No, we have to sell this one first," replied the auctioneer. "Who will take the son?"

Finally, a friend of the old man spoke. "Will you take ten dollars for the painting? That's all I have. I knew the boy, so I'd like to have it." "I have ten dollars. Will anyone go higher?" called the auctioneer. After more silence, the auctioneer said, "Going once, going twice, gone." The gavel fell. Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, "Now we can get on with it and we can bid on these treasures!"

The auctioneer looked at the audience and announced the auction was over. Stunned disbelief quieted the room. Someone spoke up and asked, "What do you mean it's over? We didn't come here for a picture of some old guy's son. What about all of these paintings? There are millions of dollars of art here! I demand that you explain what's going on here!" The auctioneer replied, "It's very simple. According to the will of the father, whoever takes the son...gets it all."

Puts things into perspective, doesn't it? Just as those art collectors discovered on that Christmas Day, the message is still the same - the love of a Father - a Father whose greatest joy was from his son who went away and gave his life rescuing others. And because of that Father's love...whoever takes the Son gets it all.

Romans 8:32 "He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him to us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?"

John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whosoever believeth in Him shall not perish, but shall have everlasting life."



Holy Sonnet 10

**Death, be not proud, though some have called thee
Mighty and dreadful, for thou art not so;
For those whom you think'st thou dost overthrow
Die not, poor Death, nor yet canst thou kill me.
From rest and sleep, which but thy pictures be.
Much pleasure, then from thee much more must flow,
And soonest our best men with thee do go.
Rest of their bones and souls' delivery.
Thou art slave to fate, chance, kings, and desperate men.
And dost with poison, war, and sickness dwell.
And poppy, or charms can make us sleep as well.
And better than thy stroke; why swell'st thou then?
One short sleep past, we wake eternally,
And death shall be no more; Death, thou shalt die.
---John Donne (1572-1631)**



A Prayer for the Children

**We pray for the Children
who sneak popsicles before supper,
who erase holes in math workbooks,
who can never find their shoes.**

**And we pray for those
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the street in a new pair of sneakers,
who never "counted potatoes,"
who are born in places where we wouldn't be caught dead,
who never go to the circus,
who live in an X-rated world.**

**We pray for the children
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money.**

**And we pray for those
who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
who watch their parents watch them die,
who can't find any bread to steal,
who don't have any rooms to clean up,
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
whose monsters are real.**

**We pray for children
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
who throw tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,
who like ghost stories, who shove dirty clothes under the bed,
who never rinse out the tub,
who get visits from the tooth fairy,
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,
who squirm in church and scream in the phone,
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.**

**And we pray for those
whose nightmares come in the daytime,
who will eat anything,
who have never seen a dentist,
who aren't spoiled by anybody,
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,
who live and move, but have no being.**

**We pray for children
who want to be carried and for those who must,
who we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance.
For those we smother...and for those who will grab the hand of anybody kind
enough to offer it.**



Children's Proverbs

A first grade teacher collected old, well-known proverbs. She gave each child in her class the first half of a proverb and had them come up with the rest. Out of the mouth of babes....

As You Shall Make Your Bed So Shall You.....Mess It Up.

Better Be Safe Than.....Punch A 5th Grader.

Strike While The.....Bug Is Close.

It's Always Darkest Before.....Daylight Savings Time.

Never Underestimate the Power of.....Termites.

Don't Bite The Hand That.....Looks Dirty.

A Miss Is As Good As A.....Mr.

You Can't Teach An Old Dog New.....Math.

If You Lie Down With The Dogs, You'll.....Stink In The Morning.

The Pen Is Mightier Than The.....Pigs.

An Idle Mind Is.....The Best Way To Relax.

Where There's Smoke, There's.....Pollution.

A Penny Saved is.....Not much.

Two's Company, Three's.....The Musketeers.

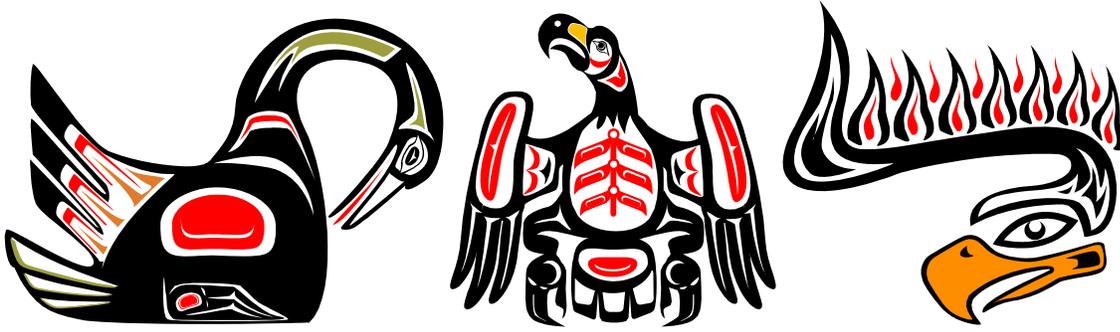
Don't Put Off Tomorrow What.....You Put On To Go To Bed.

Laugh And The Whole World Laughs With You, Cry And..... You Have To Blow Your Nose.

None Are So Blind As.....Helen Keller.

Children Should Be Seen And Not.....Spanked Or Grounded.

You Get Out Of Something What You..... See Pictured On The Box.



Oriah Mountain Dreamer

By Indian Elder

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living. I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting your heart's longing.

It doesn't interest me how old you are. I want to know if you will be looking like a fool for love, for your dreams, for the adventure of being alive.

It doesn't interest me what planets are squaring your moon. I want to know if you have touched the center of your sorrow, if you have been opened by life's betrayals or have become shriveled and closed from cause of further pain.

I want to know if you can sit with pain, mine or your own, without moving to hide it or fade it or fix it.

I want to know if you can be with joy, mine or your own, if you can dance with wildness and let the ecstasy fill you to the tips of your fingers and toes without cautioning us to be careful, be realistic, to remember the limitations of being human.

It doesn't interest me if the story you're telling me is true. I want to know if you can disappoint another to be true to yourself; if you can bear the accusation of betrayal and not betray your own soul. I want to know if you can be faithful and therefore be trustworthy.

I want to know if you can see beauty even when it is not pretty every day, and if you can source your life from God's presence. I want to know if you can live with failure, yours and mine, and still stand at the edge of a lake and shout to the silver of the full moon, "Yes!"

It doesn't interest me to know where you live or how much money you have. I want to know if you can get up after the night of grief and despair, weary and bruised to the bone, and do what needs to be done for the children.

It doesn't interest me who you are, how you came to be here. I want to know if you will stand in the center of the fire with me and not step back.

It doesn't interest me where or what or with whom you have studied. I want to know what sustains you from the inside when all else falls apart. I want to know if you can be alone with yourself, and if you truly like the company you keep in the empty moments.



Angel Passages

Welcome strangers, for by doing so you may unknowingly entertain angels.

--Hebrews 13:2

Angels must be felt with the heart.

--Helen Keller

Our character is what God and the angels know of us.

--Thomas Paine

In the presence of the angels I will sing your praise.

--Psalm 138:1

I dreamt I was flying through the clouds, not a worry or wonder or care, and there right below me, softly gliding along, was the angel who brought me there.

--Anonymous

Angels can fly because they take themselves lightly.

--Scottish Proverb

Spread the Gospel's joyful tidings, brought from angels from above, tell the world that God is gracious, and His very name is Love.

--D.B. Towner

And behold, there was a great earthquake: For the angel of the Lord descended from heaven, and came and rolled back the stone from the door and sat upon it.

--Matthew 28:2

Every visible thing in this world is put in charge of an angel.

--Saint Augustine

Oh, what may man within him hide, though angel on the outward side.

--Shakespeare

The angel that presided o'er my birth said, "Little creature, formed of joy and mirth, go, love without the help of any thing on earth."

--William Blake

Time is man's angel.

--Johann von Schiller

An angel stood and met my gaze, through the low doorway of my tent. The tent is struck the vision stays; I only know she came and went.

--James Russell Lowell

For every soul, there is a Guardian who is watching it.

---The Koran

And there appeared to him an angel from Heaven, strengthening him.

--Luke 22:43

I saw the angels with my bodily eyes as clearly as I see you. And when they departed, I used to weep and wish that they would take me with them.

--Saint Joan of Arc

All God's angels come to us disguised...

--James Russell Lowell

Unless you can love as the angels may...Oh never call it loving.

--Elizabeth Barrett Browning

In the hush of a room I've felt the soft flutter of angels' wings.

The briefest touch of angels is a sign of God's presence in life.

Silence is often the language of angels.

Blessed are those who have not seen, but have still believed.

In the stillness of the moment, an angel's voice resounds clearly in the wind.

Angels lift our hearts on wings of joy.

Angels surround us, many of them cleverly disguised as friends.

In the rustling green grass I heard the tender whispers of angels.

Fear no solitude, for there are angels in your midst.

Angels show us that beauty is found in everyday places, people, and things.

The sun warms the skin and angels warm the heart.

Laughter is the music of the angels.

When I look toward the sky I am greeted with the smile of an angel.

Angels join with us to serve others and do God's work.

All the darkness in the world cannot put out the light of an angel.

What more can be said than this—that in times of sorrow I have felt a hand on my heart.

The stepping stone from sorrow to joy is surely crossed with angels by our sides.

Discovering an angel means finding a friend.

A friend is an angel with wings in her heart.

May the kindness of angels fall all around you.

Angels help us keep the faith.

The sun warms the skin and angels warm the heart.

Making life as meaningful as possible is a lesson from angels.

Angels often shed new light on old dilemmas.

Angels guide us as we seek new perspectives.

The butterflies of slow, sweet summer days float happily among angels.

A gentle hand, a guiding touch barely felt—these are signs of an angel's presence.

Momma comes closer and touches the Wall, and I feel the soft and gentle touch I had not felt in so many years. Dad has crossed to this side of the Wall and through our touch, I try to convey to her that Dad is doing fine and is no longer suffering or feeling pain. I see my wife's courage building as she sees Momma touch the Wall and she approaches and lays her hand on my waiting hand. All the emotions, feelings and memories of three decades past flash between our touch and tell her it's alright. Carry on with your life and don't worry about me...I can see as I look into her eyes that she hears and understands me and a big burden has been lifted from her.

I watch as they lay flowers and other memories of my past. My lucky charm that was taken from me to her by my CO, a tattered and worn teddy bear that I can barely remember having as I grew up as a child, and several medals that I have earned and were presented to my wife. One of them is the Combat Infantry Badge that I am very proud of and I notice that my son is also wearing this medal. I had earned mine in the jungles of Vietnam, and he probably earned his in deserts of Iraq.

I can tell that they are preparing to leave and try to take mental pictures of them together because I don't know when I will see them again. I wouldn't blame them if they were not to return and can only thank them that I was not forgotten. My wife and my Momma near the Wall for one final touch and so many years of indecision, fear and sorrow are let go. As they turn to leave, I feel my tears that have not flowed for so many years form as dew drops on the other side of the Wall.

They move slowly away with only a glance over their shoulder. My son suddenly stops and slowly returns. He stands straight and proud in front of me and snaps a salute. Something makes him move to the Wall and he puts his hand upon the Wall and touches my tears that had formed on the face of the Wall. I can tell that he senses my presence there and the pride and the love that I have for him. He falls to his knees and the tears flow from his eyes and I try my best to reassure him that it's alright and the tears do not make him any less of a man. As he moves back wiping the tears from his eyes, he silently mouths, God bless you, Dad...God bless you, Son....WE WILL meet someday but in the meanwhile, go on your way....There is no hurry...There is no hurry at all.

As I see them walk off in the distance, I yell out to THEM and EVERYONE there today, as loud as I can....THANKS FOR REMEMBERING and as others on this side of the Wall join in, I notice that the U.S. flag that so proudly flies in front of us every day, is flapping and standing proudly straight out in the wind today...THANK YOU ALL FOR REMEMBERING.



A Sandpiper to Bring You Joy

by Ruth Peterson

She was six years old when I first met her on the beach near where I live. I drive to this beach, a distance of three or four miles, whenever the world begins to close in on me. She was building a sandcastle or something and looked up, her eyes as blue as the sea. "Hello," she said. I answered with a nod, not really in the mood to bother with a small child. "I'm building," she said. "I see that. What is it?" I asked, not caring. "Oh, I don't know, I just like the feel of sand." That sounds good, I thought, and slipped off my shoes. A sandpiper glided by. "That's a joy," the child said. "It's a what?" "It's a joy. My mama says sandpipers come to bring us joy." The bird went gliding down the beach. "Good-bye joy," I muttered to myself. "hello pain," and turned to walk on. I was depressed; my life seemed completely out of balance.

"What's your name?" She wouldn't give up. "Ruth," I answered. "I'm Ruth Peterson." "Mine's Wendy...I'm six." "Hi, Wendy." She giggled. "You're funny," she said. In spite of my gloom I laughed too and walked on. Her musical giggle followed me. "Come again, Mrs. P," she called. "We'll have another happy day."

The days and weeks that followed belong to others: a group of unruly Scouts, PTA meetings, and ailing mother. The sun was shining one morning as I took my hands out of the dishwasher. "I need a sandpiper," I said to myself, gathering up my coat. The ever-changing balm of the seashore awaited me. The breeze was chilly, but I strode along, trying to recapture the serenity I needed. I had forgotten the child and was startled when she appeared. "Hello, Mrs. P," she said. "Do you want to play?" "What did you have in mind?" I asked, with a twinge of annoyance. "I don't know, you say." "How about charades?" I asked sarcastically. The tinkling laughter burst forth again. "I don't know what that is." "Then let's just walk." Looking at her, I noticed the delicate fairness of her face. "Where do you live?" I asked. "Over there." She pointed toward a row of summer cottages. Strange, I thought, in winter. "Where do you go to school?" "I don't go to school. Mommy says we're on vacation." She chattered little girl talk as we strolled up the beach, but my mind was on other things. When I left for home, Wendy said it had been a happy day. Feeling surprisingly better, I smiled at her and agreed.

Three weeks later, I rushed to my beach in a state of near panic. I was in no mood to even greet Wendy. I thought I saw her mother on the porch and felt like demanding she keep her child at home. "Look, if you don't mind," I said crossly when Wendy caught up with me, "I'd rather be alone today." She seemed unusually pale and out of breath. "Why?" she asked. I turned to her and shouted, "Because my mother died!" and thought, my God, why was I saying this to a little child? "Oh," she said quietly, "then this is a bad day." "Yes," I said, "and yesterday and the day before and-oh, go away." "Did it hurt?" She inquired. "Did what hurt?" I was exasperated with her, with myself. "When she died?" "Of course it hurt!!!" I snapped, misunderstanding, wrapped up in myself. I strode off.

A month or so after that, when I next went to the beach, she wasn't there. Feeling guilty, ashamed and admitting to myself I missed her, I went up to the cottage after my walk and knocked at the door. A drawn looking young woman with honey-colored hair opened the door. "Hello," I said. "I'm Ruth Peterson. I missed your little girl today and wondered where she was." "Oh yes, Mrs. Peterson, please come in. Wendy spoke of you so much. I'm afraid I allowed her to bother you. If she was a nuisance, please, accept my apologies." "Not at all-she's a delightful child," I said, suddenly realizing that I meant it. "Where is she?" "Wendy died last week, Mrs. Peterson. She had leukemia. Maybe she didn't tell you."

Struck dumb, I groped for a chair. My breath caught. "She loved this beach; so when she asked to come, we couldn't say no. She seemed so much better here and had a lot of what she called happy days. But the last few weeks, she declined rapidly..." her voice faltered. "She left something for you...if only I can find it. Could you wait a moment while I look?" I nodded stupidly, my mind racing for something, anything, to say to this lovely young woman. She handed me a smeared envelope, with MRS. P. printed in bold, childish letters. Inside was a drawing in bright crayon hues - a yellow beach, a blue sea, and a brown bird. Underneath was carefully printed: A SANDPIPER TO BRING YOU JOY. Tears welled up in my eyes, and a

heart that had almost forgotten to love opened wide. I took Wendy's mother in my arms. "I'm so sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," I muttered over and over, and we wept together.

The precious little picture is framed now and hangs in my study. Six words – one for each year of her life – that speak to me of harmony, courage, undemanding love. A gift from a child with sea-blue eyes and hair the color of sand – who taught me the gift of love.



A True Story

by Lloyd Glenn

Throughout our lives we are blessed with spiritual experiences, some of which are very sacred and confidential, and others, although sacred, are meant to be shared.

Last summer my family had a spiritual experience that had a lasting and profound impact on us, one we feel must be shared. It's a message of love. It's a message of regaining perspective, restoring proper balance and renewing priorities. In humility, I pray that I might, in relating this story, give you a gift my little son, Brian gave our family one summer day last year.

On July 22nd I was in route to Washington, D.C. for a business trip. It was all so very ordinary, until we landed in Denver for a plane change. As I collected my belongings from the overhead bin, an announcement was made for Mr. Lloyd Glenn to see the United Customer Service representative immediately. I thought nothing of it until I reached the door to leave the plane and heard a gentleman asking every male if they were Mr. Glenn. At this point, I knew something was wrong and my heart sunk. When I got off the plane a solemn-faced young man came toward me and said, "Mr. Glenn, there is an emergency at your home. I do not know what the emergency is, or who is involved, but I will take you to the phone so you can call the hospital." My heart was now pounding, but the will to be calm took over.

Woodenly, I followed this stranger to the distant telephone where I called the number he gave me for the Mission Hospital. My call was put through to the trauma center where I learned that my three year old son had been trapped underneath the automatic garage door for several minutes, and that when my wife had found him he was dead. CPR had been performed by a neighbor, who is a doctor, and the paramedics had continued the treatment as Brian was transported to the hospital.

By the time of my call, Brian was revived and they believed he would live, but they did not know how much damage had been done to his brain, nor to his heart. They explained that the door had completely closed on his little sternum right over his heart. He had been severely crushed.

After speaking with the medical staff, my wife sounded worried but not hysterical, and I took comfort in her calmness. The return flight seemed to last forever, but finally I arrived at the hospital six hours after the garage door had come down. When I walked into the intensive care unit, nothing could have prepared me to see my little son lying so still on a great big bed with tubes and monitors everywhere. He was on a respirator. I glanced at my wife who stood and tried to give me a reassuring smile. It all seemed like a terrible dream. I was filled in with the details and given a guarded prognosis. Brian was going to live, and the preliminary tests indicated that his heart was ok – two miracles, in and of themselves. But only time would tell if his brain received any damage.

Throughout the seemingly endless hours, my wife was calm. She felt that Brian would eventually be all right. I hung on to her words and faith like a lifeline. All that night and the next day Brian remained unconscious. It seemed like forever since I had left for my business trip the day before. Finally at two o'clock that afternoon, our son regained consciousness and sat up uttering the most beautiful words I have ever heard spoken. He said, "Daddy hold me," and he reached for me with his little arms.

By the next day he was pronounced as having no neurological or physical deficits, and the story of his miraculous survival spread throughout the hospital. You cannot imagine our gratitude and joy. As we took Brian home we felt a unique reverence for the life and love of our Heavenly Father that comes to those who brush death so closely.

In the days that followed there was a special spirit about our home. Our two older children were much closer to their little brother. My wife and I were much closer to each other, and all of us were very close as a whole family. Life took on a less stressful pace. Perspective seemed to be more focused, and balance much easier to gain and maintain. We felt deeply blessed. Our gratitude was truly profound.

Almost a month later to the day of the accident, Brian awoke from his afternoon nap and said, "Mommy. I have something to tell you." At this time in his life, Brian usually spoke in small phrases, so the large sentence surprised my wife. She sat down with him on his bed and he began his sacred and remarkable story.

"Do you remember when I got stuck under the garage door? Well it was so heavy and it hurt really bad. I called to you, but you couldn't hear me. I started to cry, but then it hurt too bad. And then the "birdies" came." "The birdies?" my wife asked puzzled. "Yes," he replied. "The 'birdies' made a whooshing sound and flew into the garage. They took care of me." "They did?" "Yes," he said. "One of the birdies came and got you. She came to tell you I got stuck under the door."

A sweet reverent feeling filled the room. The spirit was so strong and yet lighter than air. My wife realized that a three year old had no concept of death and spirits, so he was referring to the beings who came to him from beyond as "birdies" because they were up in the air like birds that fly.

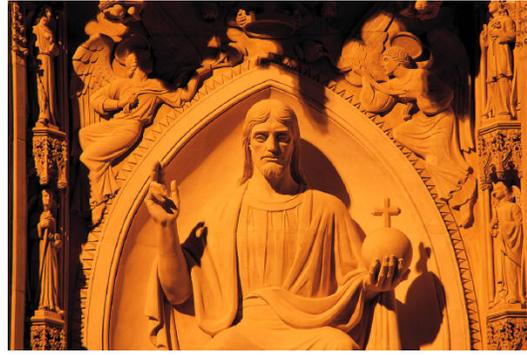
"What did the birdies look like?" she asked. Brian answered, "They were so beautiful. They were dressed in white all white. Some of them had green and white. But some of them had on just white." "Did they say anything?" "Yes," he answered. "They told me the baby would be alright." "The baby?" my wife asked confused. And Brian answered. "The baby laying on the garage floor." He went on, "You came out and opened the garage door and ran to the baby. You told the baby to stay and not leave."

My wife nearly collapsed upon hearing this, for she had indeed gone and knelt beside Brian's body and seeing his crushed chest and unrecognizable features, knowing he was already dead, she looked up around her and whispered, "Don't leave us Brian, please stay if you can." As she listened to Brian telling her the words she had spoken, she realized that the spirit had left his body and was looking down from above on this little lifeless form. "Then what happened?" she asked. "We went on a trip," he said, "far, far away.." He grew agitated trying to say the things he didn't seem to have the words for. My wife tried to calm and comfort him, and let him know it would be okay. He struggled with wanting to tell something that obviously was very important to him, but finding the words was difficult. "We flew so fast up in the air. They're so pretty Mommy," he added. "And there is lots and lots of 'birdies' ." My wife was stunned. Into her mind the sweet comforting spirit enveloped her more soundly, but with an urgency she had never before known. Brian went on to tell her that the "birdies" had told him that he had to come back and tell everyone about the "birdies". He said they brought him back to the house and that a big fire truck, and an ambulance were there. A man was bringing the baby out on a white bed and he tried to tell the man the baby would be okay, but the man couldn't hear him. He said, "birdies told him he had to go with the ambulance, but they would be near him." He said they were so pretty and so peaceful, and he didn't want to come back. And then the bright light came. He said that the light was so bright and so warm, and he loved the bright light so much. Someone was in the bright light and put their arms around him, and told him, "I love you but you have to go back. You have to play baseball, and tell everyone about the birdies." Then the person in the

bright light kissed him and waved bye-bye. Then whoosh, the big sound came and they went into the clouds.

The story went on for an hour. He taught us that "birdies" were always with us, but we don't see them because we look with our eyes and we don't hear them because we listen with our ears. But they are always there, you can only see them in here (he put his hand over his heart). They whisper the things to help us do what is right because they love us so much. Brian continued, stating, "I have a plan, Mommy. You have a plan. Daddy has a plan. Everyone has a plan. We must all live our plan and keep our promises. The "birdies" help us to do that cause they love us so much."

In the weeks that followed, he often came to us and told all, or part of it again and again. Always the story remained the same. The details were never changed or out of order. A few times he added further bits of information and clarified the message he had already delivered. It never ceases to amaze us how he could tell such detail and speak beyond his ability when he spoke of his "birdies". Everywhere he went, he told strangers about the "birdies". Surprisingly, no one ever looked at him strangely when he did this. Rather, they always got a softened look on their faces and smiled. Needless to say, we have not been the same ever since that day, and I pray we never will be.



When Someone Takes His Own Life

by Norman Vincent Peale

In many ways, this seems the most tragic form of death. Certainly it can entail more shock and grief for those who are left behind than any other. And often the stigma of suicide is what rests most heavily on those left behind.

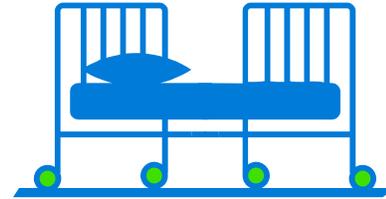
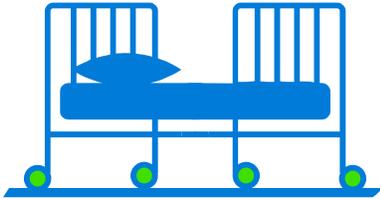
And my heart goes out to those who are left behind, because I know that they suffer terribly. Children in particular are left under a cloud of differentness all the more terrifying because it can never be fully explained or lifted. The immediate family of the victim is left wide open to tidal waves of guilt: "What did I fail to do that I should have done. What did I do that was wrong?" To such grieving persons I can only say, "Lift up your heads and your hearts. Surely you did your best. And surely the loved one who is gone did his best, for as long as he could. Remember, now, that his battles and torments are over. Do not judge him, and do not presume to fathom the mind of God where this one of His children is concerned."

A few years ago, when a young man died by his own hand, a service for him was conducted by his pastor, the Rev. Weston Stevens. What he said that day expresses far more eloquently than I can, the message that I'm trying to convey. Here are some of his words: "Our friend died on his own battlefield. He was killed in action fighting a civil war. He fought against adversaries that were as real to him as his casket is real to us. They were powerful adversaries."

"They took toll of his energies and endurance. They exhausted the last vestiges of his courage and his strength. At last these adversaries overwhelmed him. And it appeared that he had lost the war. But did he? I see a host of victories that he has won!"

"For one thing, he has won our admiration, because even if he lost the war, we give him credit for his bravery on the battlefield. And we give him credit for the courage and pride and hope that he used his weapons as long as he could. We shall remember not his death, but his daily victories gained through his kindnesses and thoughtfulness, through his love for family and friends, for animals and books and music, for all things beautiful, lovely and honorable. We shall remember not his last day of defeat, but we shall remember the many days that he was victorious over overwhelming odds. WE shall remember not the years we thought he had left, but the intensity with which he lived the years that he had. Only God knows what this child of His suffered in the silent skirmishes that took place in his soul. But our consolation is that God does know, and understands."

Reprinted from the Special Suicide Newsletter, Marin County and San Francisco, CA Chapters,
Summer 2001



Two men, both seriously ill, occupied the same hospital room, One man was allowed to sit up in his bed for an hour each afternoon to help drain the fluid from his lungs. His bed was next to the room's only window.

The other man had to spend all his time flat on his back. The men talked for hours on end. They spoke of their wives and families, their homes, their jobs, their involvement in the military service, where they had been on vacation.

Every afternoon when the man in the bed by the window could sit up, he would pass the time by describing to his roommate all the things he could see outside the window. The man in the other bed began to love for those one hour periods where his world would be broadened and enlivened by all the activity and color of the world outside.

The window overlooked a park with a lovely lake. Ducks and swans played on the water while children sailed their model boats. Young lovers walked arm in arm amidst flowers of every color and a fine view of the city skyline could be seen in the distance. As the man by the window described all this in exquisite detail, the man on the other side of the room would close his eyes and imagine the picturesque scene.

One warm afternoon the man by the window described a parade passing by. Although the other man couldn't hear the band, he could see it. In his mind's eye as the gentleman by the window portrayed it with descriptive words.

Days and weeks passed. One morning, the day nurse arrived to bring water for their baths only to find the lifeless body of the man by the window, who had died peacefully in his sleep. She was saddened and called the hospital attendants to take the body away.

As soon as it seemed appropriate, the other man asked if he could be moved next to the window. The nurse was happy to make the switch, and after making sure he was comfortable, she left him alone. Slowly, painfully, he propped himself up on one elbow to take his first look at the real world outside. He strained to slowly turn to look out the window beside the bed...It faced a blank wall.

The man asked the nurse what could have compelled his deceased roommate who had described such wonderful things outside this window. The nurse responded that the man was blind and could not even see the wall. She said, "Perhaps he just wanted to encourage you."

Epilogue: There is tremendous happiness in making others happy, despite our own situations. Shared grief is half the sorrow, but happiness when shared, is doubled.



Forever

It doesn't bring her back.
Nothing.

I miss you more than you would have ever imagined.
I miss the laughter.
I miss the jokes.

 No one else understood the jokes.

 You did. That's all that mattered.

Now then, why can't I understand?
Come back.
Come back.

I need you.
How can the person who brought the most laughter and joy to my life not be here?
You were here just two months ago, and before you left I talked to you.

 Only six days prior.

What is it?
Why don't I understand?

The times you visit in my dreams are now what I look forward to the most.

 Those nights are the happiest.

 Now.

Not before.
Before, I knew you were here
 And I loved you.
I loved knowing I could call.
 Whenever I wanted.
Knew you were not far away.
And knew you were coming to see me in just a few days.
What happened?
Where are those days now?

Forever unfulfilled.
Forever in my memory.
Forever I will love you.

Forever I will miss you.
Forever.
Forever seems so far.
Forever I will pray to see you again.
Forever.
Forever will you think of me?
 Can you?
 I hope so.
I hope for forever to be quite fast.
 I don't think it will be.
I hope anyway.

Will you watch me?
Will you stay with me?
Will you visit me, or see me forever?
 Then why can't I see you?

Life is not fair.
 That's what they always say.
Then maybe...
Maybe that's why yours is over.
 Over so now you have fair times.
 You know fair and happiness now.
I hope.
 You do.
Don't you?
Or why else did you go?

Are you laughing now?
 I hope you are.
I heard laughter makes you live longer.
 But not for you.
You laughed everyday.
So where have you gone?
 Why?
But you laughed!

What.
What will make it ok?
I've been waiting to know.
I never will.
I miss you.
I need you.
I love you.
I will continue to hope.
 I will.

Forever.

Lovingly written on April 24, 2008 by Erin Harkness in memory of her cousin Kristin Harkness who passed on February 22, 2008.



“What is wrong?”

Pulling myself from the rail of the bridge, I turned around to face a man I would probably ignore under normal circumstances. Alone on a bench was a man with a backpack that looked to contain all of his worldly belongings. His clothes were faded and clearly had not been washed for a very long time. His face was like leather, creased by experience and pain.

I looked at the ground a moment and choked from the bottom of my stomach, trying to put suffering into words, “My very good friend passed away.” As I said this, my sight cleared for a moment as tears fell to the ground. He looked at me as if he had known what I would say.

It happened nearly two weeks prior but felt as if only two hours had passed. Everything up until that point had been normal. To me a setback had been failing a chemistry test. Suddenly and without warning, one of my closest friends had died. In an instant my life was drastically changed. Now I found myself on a walking bridge, laying myself bare to someone I would generally dismiss with “I haven’t got any change.”

He motioned me to sit down next to him. I obliged as he turned, looking off into the distance, seeming to recall a life that had not been easy. I felt lost and alone, but having thrown myself out into the open as I had done, I was not afraid sitting next to this stranger.

“This is tough. I know,” he said, as I nodded. “All of my family. Gone.” I could tell he didn’t want my pity nor was he trying to undermine my grief. He again looked off into the distance. His face remained unchanged as a tear rolled down his cheek.

People walking by were puzzled and perhaps even alarmed by the juxtaposition we created. It was easy to tell he was no father speaking to his son.

He turned to me. “My Grandmother,” following her name with the sign of the cross, “once told me ‘there is a time for everything. A time for happiness and a time for sadness.’”

We sat together in silence for a few moments. Noticing that my steady flow of tears hadn’t subsided, he added, “This is not Hollywood. You must go on. I know it hurts, and there will be a lot more shit, but you will have to go on.”

I knew I would never see this man again, yet as we sat there watching the river flow far below us I felt like I had known him for years. His voice was calm and reassuring. He didn’t know me and I was an absolute mess. Somehow his voice conveyed a feeling of confidence, a confidence in me.

Never before had I doubted the general goodness of mankind but it was humbling to see it now when I needed it most. Here was a man who, on most days, needed what I, a privileged doctor’s son, had to hand out. Yet it was he who was handing out sustenance to me.

At last he broke the silence, “Now I must go.” With a faint whisper I thanked him, still consumed with anguish. I watched him drift across the long bridge until he was out of sight. It would be some time before I realized it, but my life had yet again been changed, this time by a chance encounter with compassion.

Written by Adam Woeltz for the February 14, 2008 time for remembrance for his friend David Cooper



And if I Go

And if I go,
while you're still here ...
Know that I live on,
vibrating to a different measure –
behind a veil you cannot see through.
You will not see me,
so you must have faith.
I wait for the time when we can soar together again –
both aware of each other.
Until then, live your life to its fullest and when you need me,
Just whisper my name in your heart
... I will be there.



The Mask

I feel as if I am buried alive
Yet I smile and respond with “fine, thank you”
I have been appropriately conditioned,
like fine leather
That no one wants to hear the painful truth.

An essential part of me, a limb
A constituent of my earthly being
Has been violently amputated.
Yet I laugh at the mediocre conversations
A verbal splash in a shallow puddle
Pretending to be a player of the words
That have no meaning.

My heart has been ripped from my bosom
No benevolence granted
No explanations – No apologies
Only cataclysmic pain
Only agony
No anesthesia remains, just the bitter pain.
Yet I wear the mask
Day to Day.

Pretending I fit in
But really I’m a foreigner to this new land
An alien language they speak.
And as I attempt to translate the words
Still, they mean nothing to me.

Sequestered in the mask
They hear not the music I dance to
Nor the words I speak
Nor the pain I echo
Nor the native language of my eyes
They will never really know me,
Hiding behind the mask.

Joanne Cacciature
From the book “Dear Cheyenne”



Dreams

Hold fast to dreams
For if dreams die
Life is a broken-winged bird
That cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
For when dreams go
Life is a barren field
Frozen with snow.

Langston Hughes

In memory of
Joe Hunter
9/29/69 - 9/11/01

Let the Sun Shine In

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.
Rockville Centre, New York

Following the death of a loved one, we often find it very hard to notice the sunshine. We might not even want to see the sunshine! We might want to pull down the shades or close the blinds and just wrestle with our grief. In my case, it was the deaths of my two oldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, in the same automobile accident.

But as the seasons change, sometimes the emptiness in our hearts seeks some relief. As colorful flowers and brighter days appear in this new summertime season, maybe it's time to welcome the light with new routines and new resources to warm our hearts. Some might even say, "It's time to start my new life; the life without the physical presence of my loved one, but always with that special interior presence tucked deep within my heart and soul."

Be patient with yourself. Give yourself time to grieve. Don't be in a rush. Wallow in your grief. Feel every emotion. "Name it and claim it," as television's Dr. Phil advises us. Listen to your heart. Do what helps you, not what others think you should do. Feel the burdens of anger, guilt, loneliness, sadness, confusion slip away as you deal openly with each emotion. Go slowly. Find out what you can do and do it with all your heart.

Each day I did what I could—only a fraction of what I had accomplished before. I just didn't have the energy to deal with everything. I had to learn to pick and choose what would make up my day, doing those things that would give me a lift. Whenever I

got overtired, I was a puddle of tears, so I had to discover my limits. By going a step at a time, being patient, you can gradually let those rays of sunshine seep into your life, energizing you and highlighting the activities that can add radiance to your life. Be the keeper of the memories. If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing.

It could be as simple as what I did, giving angels to our friends and relatives with my children's names and dates inscribed on them. Or you might choose to write about your loved one in your own heartfelt words. You might like to share some of the coping strategies that have helped you to get up in the morning/mourning. Some find solace in funding scholarships, libraries, hospital equipment, music lessons, sports camp programs or whatever reminds them of their loved one. There is a joy in knowing that something positive comes from the death of your loved one, that someone's dreams are coming true, that someone is getting a chance that they never dreamed would happen—and all in your loved one's name.

Try journaling. Treat yourself to a special time each day to get in touch with your feelings. Try to find a time to just sit and relax and contemplate your journey. Jot down a few feelings in a notebook or journal. Scribble down what upsets you or what makes you feel a moment of joy. As the days, weeks, and months go by, you will get to know the "new" you by reading and rereading your intimate thoughts and noting your progress and your stumbling blocks. You might even discover a pattern of your highs and lows. You will have a better "map" of where you are headed and where you have been. You might even find more courage and a stronger heart.

Add structure to your day. Maybe you can establish a new routine that gives some zip to your day. It could be just a change of breakfast cereal or a walk around the block! Changing things just a little can be a big "pick-me-up." Keep track of the things that make you smile and make sure you include them in your "new" routine. With every little decision you make, you take back more control of your life and become stronger to face the "new" life that you are leading. Find something different that adds color and pizzazz to your day. Let your heart feel again, encouraged by those enticing rays of sunshine.

Try some new exercise. The "new" summer season invites us to swim, to hike, to walk the beach, to spend time in our gardens. It enables us to jog, bike ride, follow the nature trails or plant a garden. It certainly welcomes our participation and gets us moving into the rhythm of life again. It even offers us time to meditate as we pursue the exercise of our choice. Spending time in the fresh air, doing something healthy, relishing the sunshine, smelling the flowers, waving to people, can open new areas of healing for us, making us feel part of the universe again. Find what warms your heart and enjoy every minute of that magical sunshine that invites you to exercise or to simply relax and enjoy the healing and comfort of nature's bounty.

Explore new adventures. There's nothing like including something new in your routines to give your heart a lift. It could be having lunch with a friend, a trip to the library, trying a cozy restaurant, finding a vacation hideaway, joining an aerobic group, singing in a choir, attending a support group, playing the piano, taking computer lessons, doing crafts—all making new memories and adding pleasure to your day. A date on the calendar to do something special gives meaning to the day and makes the calendar move a little faster.

I always loved to read. After my children died, I found a new focus. I gobbled up grief support books as if I were starving for reassurance that I would survive. Reading every book that I could get my hands on and stalking the public library and book stores fed my courage to keep going and filled me with hope that I would make it into that glorious sunshine again. By trying new activities, a new me was always emerging. Through the ongoing process of renewal, I was alive with the newness of life, ready to let the sunshine in!

Saving memories might be the reason to start arranging those long overdue photo albums or making special little memory albums for family and friends. There will be lots

of tears, but there will be joy in sharing your loved one with others. You might even give your heart a boost by choosing special pictures and complimenting them with favorite music as you create a memorial video of your loved one, savoring all those precious memories. I chose favorite photos of Peggy and Denis and wrote my special memories about each of them for a family acknowledgment card. Whatever we design can be very therapeutic for us, even though we may not realize it at the time. Let the sunshine revitalize your memories and make them crystal clear for others to enjoy, always remembering your loved one.

Bask in the sunshine with loving friends. Along our grief journey we meet many new friends, people who are there when we need them, people who understand our grief, people who make no demands on us. They might replace some old friends or just be added to the bevy of supporters we rely on. Doing things together, having a cup of tea, visiting the cemetery, planning new rituals, sharing bad days, enjoying a laugh, getting a hug, finding a telephone buddy, all bring new energy into our lives. Finding those loving people is a sure way to bask in the sunshine of healing and renewal.

Let the warmth and beauty of this new season do wonders for your heart. Get busy and explore the miracles, power and sparkle of that summer sunshine in your life. Feel the heavenly glow when you let the sunshine in!

Try journaling



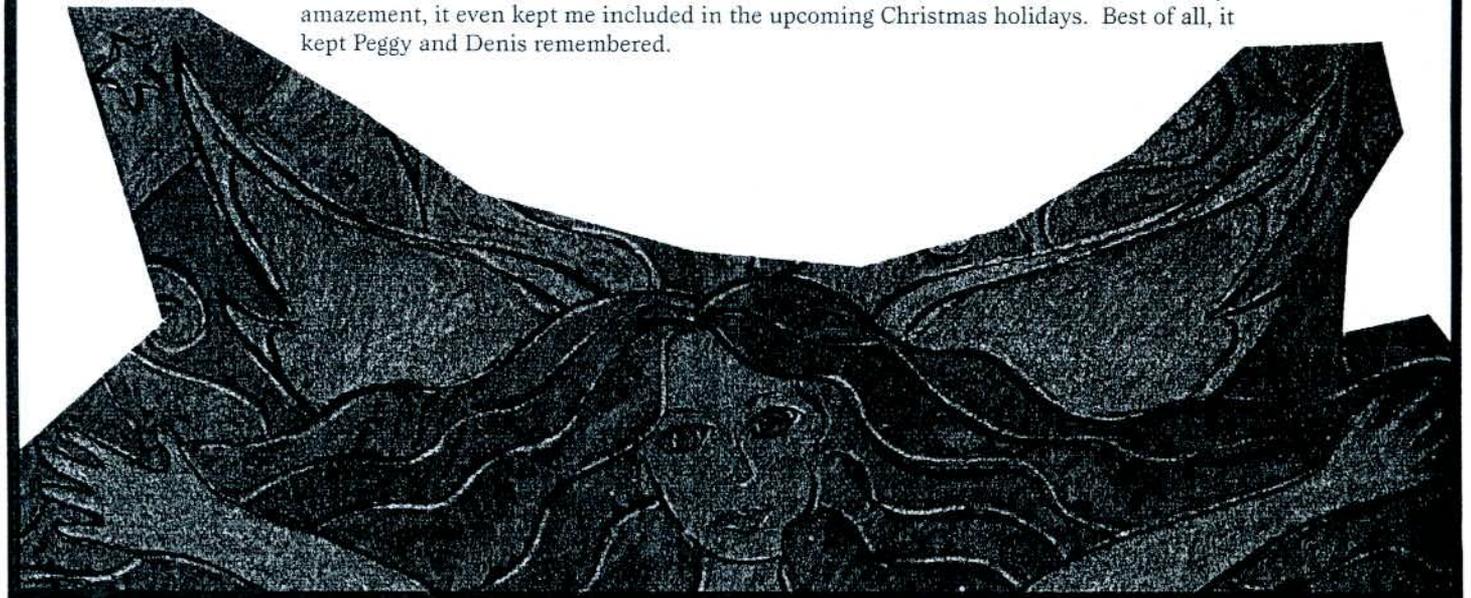
Touched by an Angel

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.
Rockville Centre, New York

After the deaths of my two oldest children, 21-year-old Denis and 19-year-old Peggy, in an August automobile accident, I didn't have the energy or desire to go shopping for the holidays. It was just too painful. I didn't want to see people, I didn't want to talk. I didn't want to stand in the middle of a store in a puddle of tears, surrounded by things that brought back haunting memories of the two children I had so recently buried.

But as the holidays approached, out of the blue, something very unexpected and wonderful happened. In a local card store, I spotted a darling little angel made of felt that seemed to call out to me, "Take me home!" Holding it in my hand, the tiny angel offered comfort to my anguished heart. On the spot, I decided to buy all of the six angels that were displayed, cleaning out the store's inventory. This decision started a whole new adventure for me and opened a welcome path to healing for my aching heart.

After that, no matter where I went, whenever I found an angel, I brought it home. I discovered all kinds of angels: delicate porcelain ones; darling ceramic boy and girl angel sets; cuddly, teddy-bear angels; cute doggie, kitty-cat and piggy angels; shiny silver angels; elegant stained-glass ones; colonial corn-husk ones; handmade crocheted angels and even some made of macaroni. It was the only shopping I could handle in those early months of grieving, and I did it passionately. Selecting the angels, buying them and carrying them home became a sacred mission for me that kept me alive. And to my amazement, it even kept me included in the upcoming Christmas holidays. Best of all, it kept Peggy and Denis remembered.



As I prepared my "first batch" of angels for Christmas presents that year, busily inscribing my children's names and dates on them, wrapping them ever so carefully, and figuring out to whom I wished to gift these precious ornaments, I was filled with a sense of peace and comfort.

When the angels were ready for flight, I lovingly sent them to dear relatives, special friends, college roommates, godparents and other bereaved parents. Don't ask where I got the energy to shop for them, wrap them, deliver them or cart them to the post office. My whole being was consumed with this task that would keep my children's memories alive. My house looked like an angel factory! God bless my dear husband. He just smiled, and he never said, "Enough already!" He was thrilled to see me sitting at the family room table so happily busy doing something that brought me peace and a smile. My heart sang as I prepared all my angels for flight to other homes.

Never did I realize what a joy it would be when we visited our relatives and friends and saw our precious "Peggy and Denis" angels adorning their Christmas trees and mantelpieces! In some homes, our angels are "taking over" their trees! As the years have gone by, each of those dear families annually unpacks our special angels, reminisces a little about our children, reliving happy memories of them and even saying a little prayer for them. Our hearts soar to know that Peggy and Denis will never be forgotten and will be shared with generations to come.

Whether I was painting angels, putting colored ribbons on them, inscribing them with my children's names, or making them myself as crafts, the process released that awful ache in my heart. Although some people thought I was a little wacky, the idea caught on quickly, and our closest friends looked forward to seeing what "next year's angel" would be like. As a special treat for us, our friends reciprocated by gifting us with the most charming and unique angels that they came across in their travels—angels that we never would have dreamed of owning.

Now, many years later, our Christmas tree truly makes everybody's heart skip a beat and makes Peggy's and Denis' presence such an integral part of this family occasion.

It's amazing what one little idea did for our hearts and for so many others who have lost loved ones. Just like the dear lady who calls me "her heart's best friend" and sends me a precious angel each Christmas to say "thank you" for helping her survive the loss of her son, many others have copied this idea and have also been rewarded with its therapeutic value. One widower whispered to me, "What a great idea. I'm going to run out and buy an angel for each of my children." All of a sudden, he had a spring in his step as he figured out a way to help ease the pain in his own broken heart and to keep his loving wife so beautifully remembered, especially by their grandchildren.

Even the families who suffered miscarriages, stillbirths and infant deaths found solace in preparing their favorite angels for distribution to special friends and relatives, to remember a baby that most of them never even had a chance to meet, but who would be a cherished part of the family fabric forever.

The good news is that as the years have gone by, angel collecting is no longer limited to Christmas! You can notice this phenomenon at our house. There is definitely a "heavenly" feeling as you enter our home. A magnificent stained-glass angel adorning our dining room window, a comfy angel quilt resting on our easy chair, heartwarming framed letters of our children's names, spelling "Peggy" and "Denis," each letter entwined with angel figures, music boxes and trinket boxes, platters, trivets, calendars, towels, night-lights adorned with angels, a basket of reading books about angels—all shout the loving presence of Peggy and Denis in our everyday life. We are surrounded with poignant reminders of our precious children that bring smiles to our faces and joy to our hearts.

When Peggy and Denis died in 1986, angels were hard to find. Now, they are everywhere. Do you think I may have started something?

To share the comforting feeling that angels brought into my life, and the joy that it gave me knowing Peggy and Denis would be remembered by those to whom I gifted with those angels, I wrote, *A Forever Angel*, a crafts book for children, published by Centering Corporation. It offers youngsters the magical healing of creating angels for different occasions, especially major holidays, in honor of their loved ones who died—grandma or grandpa, mom or dad, sister or brother, dear friend, or family pet—using the things they gave them or left behind. Making any of the craft ideas suggested in the book presents a chance for kids to be creative, inventive, wacky, loving and sentimental. It also offers children the opportunity to "open-up," to talk about their loved one and to share their memories in a very positive way. *A Forever Angel* is a wonderful lesson in caring and sharing, so special for young grieving hearts. A perfect gift, it is a paperback in a handy children's size, and is a great resource for classroom teachers, counselors and children's support groups, ages 8-16. After all, who can resist an angel?



Grief Digest 

PO Box 4600 Omaha, NE 68104
Phone: 402-553-1200

10/03

Touched by an Angel

Comfort for an anguished heart

After my two oldest children, 21 year old Denis and 19 year old Peggy died in an August automobile accident, I found it very hard to go shopping. Not having the energy or the desire, I found it too painful to go into a store.

Since my remaining child, Annie, was about to leave home for her freshman year at college, I had a few errands to run to get her packed up with everything she needed. So I pushed myself to go out for an hour each day to finish up her shopping list. I didn't want to see people, I didn't want to talk, I didn't want to stand in the middle of the store, in a puddle of tears surrounded by familiar things that brought back haunting memories of the two children I had just buried.

Then, out of the blue, something very unexpected and wonderful happened. In a local card store, I spotted a darling little felt angel that seemed to call out to me, "Take me home." Holding it in my hand, the tiny angel offered comfort to my anguished heart. On the spot, I decided to buy all six angels that were displayed, cleaning out the store's inventory.

This started a new adventure for me and a great healing began in my heart.

No matter where I went, whenever I found an angel, I brought it home, I discovered all kinds of angels: delicate porcelain ones, darling ceramic boy and girl angel sets, cuddly teddy bear angels, shiny silver angels and more. It was the only shopping I could handle in those early months of grieving. Selecting them, buying them, carrying them home, wrapping them ever so carefully, and mailing them to special people kept me alive.

I lovingly sent them to dear relatives, special friends, college roommates, godparents and other bereaved parents. The angels came in all materials: ceramic, wood, crystal, felt, silver, stained-glass, corn-husk, linen and even macaroni. I inscribed each angel with my

children's names and dates and prepared my "first batch" as Christmas presents that first year. Don't ask where I got the energy from to shop for them, to wrap them all, to label them correctly, and to cart them to the post office. My whole being was consumed with this task.

My house looked like an angel factory! God bless my dear husband. He just smiled and never said, "Enough already!" He was just thrilled to see me so happily busy doing something that brought me peace. My heart sang as I prepared all my angels for flight to other homes.

Later, when we visited our friends and relatives, it brought great joy to our hearts to see our precious "Peggy and Denis" angels adorning their Christmas trees or mantelpieces. As the years have gone by,

each of those dear families annually unpacks our special angels, reminisces a little about our children, reliving happy memories of them and even saying a little prayer for them. Our hearts soar to know that Peggy and Denis will never be forgotten and will be shared with generations to come.

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them with my children's names, or making them myself as crafts, the process released that awful ache in my heart. Although some people probably thought I was a little wacky, the idea caught on fast and our closest friends looked forward to seeing what "next year's angel" would be like. As a special treat for us, our friends reacted by gifting us with the most charming and unique angels that they came across in their travels — angels that we never would have dreamed of owning.

Now, ten years later, our Christmas tree truly makes everybody's heart skip a beat and makes Peggy's and Denis' presence such an integral part of this family occasion. It's amazing what one little idea did for our hearts and for so many others who lost a loved one. A dear lady who calls me "her heart's best friend" sends me a pre-

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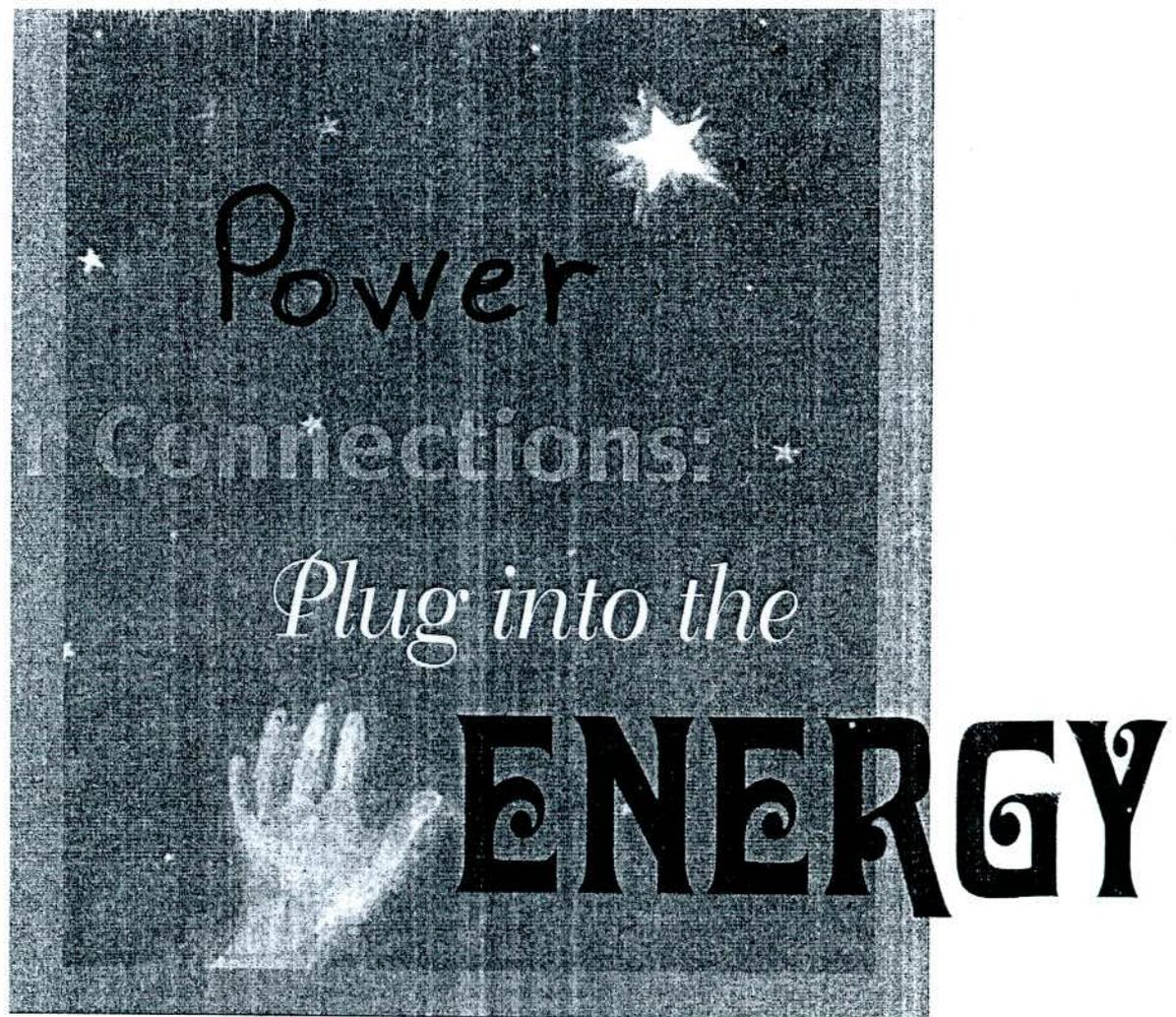
cious angel each Christmas to say "thank you" for helping her heart when she lost her son.

The good news is: as the years have gone by, angel collecting is no longer limited to Christmas! You can notice this phenomenon at our house. There is definitely a "heavenly" feeling as you enter our home. A magnificent stained-glass angel adorning our dining room window, a comfy angel quilt resting on our easy chair, the most heart-warming framed letters of our children's names, spelling Peggy and Denis, each letter entwined with angel figures; also, music boxes and trinket boxes, platters, trivets, calendars, towels, night-lights adorned with angels, a basket of reading books about angels — all shout the loving presence of Peggy and Denis in our hearts.

Ten years ago, angels were hard to find. Now, they are everywhere. Do you think I started something?

*-Elaine E. Stillwell
1996*

Elaine Edden Stillwell, M.S., is a former New York State Regional Coordinator and chapter leader of The Compassionate Friends of Rockville Center, Long Island. Determined to use her own tragic circumstances to benefit others in grief, she has worked with many bereaved parents teaching those to cope with loss with her unique gifts of caring and humor. Elaine is a charter member of Bereaved Parents of the USA and the recipient of the DeWitt Clinton Masonic Award for community service.



By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.
Rockville Centre, New York

Whenever I'm in a tough spot or feel overwhelmed, I say a quick prayer to my two eldest children, 21-year-old Denis and 19-year-old Peggy, who died in the same car accident in 1986. They never let me down; instant help is on the way. I feel their presence and their strength, and my heart feels a sense of peace as a burden is gently lifted off my shoulders.

It is amazing how our loved ones who have gone before us are always there to lend a hand. I think they like to be included in our daily plans, whether it's help matching socks, balancing the checkbook, beating traffic or deciding which outfit to wear. It helps our hearts, too, to know they are always a part of our lives, never to be forgotten, and they are within listening distance.

Whenever my family plans a big celebration, everybody gets a job to do—including Peggy and Denis. We put them in charge of the weather. They do such a wonderful job that we get many requests from our friends to put in a good word for them. Luncheons, dinner parties, picnics, sports events and reunions cannot take place without a word to Peggy and Denis. All get sunny skies and pleasant temperatures, but weddings are their specialty.

When my remaining child, Annie, got married, we never doubted that we would have a beautiful day. After all, Peggy and Denis were in charge of the weather! And the balmy October day turned out to be a gloriously sunny one with 75-degree temperatures. It felt good to hear our guests all mention Peggy's and Denis' names, including them in our special day. It felt good to know that Peggy and Denis were an integral part of the party, having done their job well. We felt their presence with every ray of sunshine.

Peggy's godmother hosted a large dinner party under a huge tent on the spacious grounds of her Michigan home. Because of conflicting schedules, she was forced to plan the fundraiser for the end of September, a risky adventure because of the cool nights that race in following Labor Day. What made things worse was that a rainy season preceded the party date, making the sprawling lawns almost like swamp land. Believe it or not, twenty-four hours before, a radiantly sunny day sopped up all the moisture and warmed the evening air, making it a very pleasant night for outdoor dining. As the guests marveled at the turn of events, many inquired how the hostess was brave enough to attempt an outside September dinner party. And she quickly retorted, "Peggy and Denis." She, too, got many requests after that for Peggy's and Denis' help. Do you know how good that makes her heart feel—and mine too?

Another powerful connection was felt at the October dedication ceremony for the new Memorial Garden of our Compassionate Friends chapter. A beautiful outdoor program was planned with a dinner to follow in our spacious meeting room at the local college. A hundred folding chairs were set up, a microphone was in place, guest speakers and vocalists were ready to perform, and five brass plaques with twenty-five children's names on each were waiting to be blessed. But a drizzly rain was threatening to cancel the long-awaited outdoor ceremony with its many details so carefully planned.

At the last possible minute when the president of the college left the decision up to us saying, "Will it be outdoors or indoors?" we knew we had to do something quickly. We all looked up to heaven and sent the same message, "Hey, kids, help!" Within minutes our heartfelt plea was answered! The rain stopped, maintenance men dried off the chairs, and a few rays of sunshine peeked through the clouds. As we took our seats and the program began, with the poignant ceremony in full swing, to our delight a glorious rainbow appeared! What a breathtaking sign that was from our children! We all had goose bumps. It was as if our children were saying, "We're here with you," and we felt their comforting presence. Not until we were safely inside our meeting room enjoying a festive dinner did the rain dare to resume—in torrents—another sign from our children who still possess a great sense of humor.

As I was writing my latest book, *The Death of a Child*, published by ACTA Publications, my heart spoke volumes to Peggy and Denis, sharing the dream come true for me of writing a special book for bereaved parents. I was truly "singing Peggy's and Denis' "song" for all to hear. Christmas week, when I was anxiously waiting to see the very first copy of my book "hot off the press," the culmination of an incredible grief journey and two years of writing, I hoped Santa would make sure to have it on his sleigh for me! I didn't even have to talk to Peggy and Denis about it; they already knew how much it meant to me. Lo and behold, two copies arrived on December 22nd! When I e-mailed my publisher to thank him, he e-mailed me back informing me that three boxes of the book would be sent to my office downtown, probably arriving after Christmas. I quickly responded, asking if it weren't too late could he please send the books to my home address instead. (I wanted the thrill of gifting my friends with my long-awaited book during the holidays, and I knew my office building would be closed for business until the following week.) My publisher returned my e-mail saying he was sorry but it was too late, the books had already been shipped. I rationalized my feelings by telling myself that I had waited this long, I could wait a few more days.

So when the doorbell rang on Christmas Eve and the UPS man huffed and puffed carrying three heavy boxes of books for me, I said to my husband, "How did Peggy and Denis make sure these books got here to our home?" Amazingly, the label had my office name, but with my home street address. Oh, that Peggy and Denis—what a great Christmas present they delivered on Christmas Eve! You can't get much better than that! Upon informing my publisher of the good news, he replied: "Those are two busy people." Even he senses the powerful energy connection I count on!

Praying, or you might call it just talking to my children, helps me a lot. And we all know talking is healing. Sharing happy thoughts with them doubles my joy and explaining concerns with them seems to make everything so much easier to manage. You know how we all need good listeners. Our loved ones who have gone before us are there and waiting with "listening ears" for us. We can talk to them anywhere, on the grocery line, in the bumper-to-bumper traffic, at the drive-in bank, in the department store, at the airline terminal, in the quiet of home, or even as we walk or jog around the block. Just keep that two-way conversation going and feel the infused energy that fills your heart and soul on your grief journey.

I feel very close to Peggy and Denis when I talk to them in church, especially when I attend mass and especially when I am Lector or Eucharistic Minister at the mass. A spiritual bonding takes place there, making the "Communion of Saints" come to life for me, a real tonic for my soul, meshing every fiber of my heart with my children. There is definitely a reaching out from above that engulfs my whole being. It gives me joy and strength to keep going and the lightness of heart to enjoy the day-to-day events that fill my life. In a nutshell, plugging into their energy in a variety of ways restores my soul and gives me back life, enabling me to carry out my dreams for a meaningful existence, step-by-step.

Driving the car offers me another great opportunity to converse with Peggy and Denis. I don't worry what the other drivers think when they see me crying or catch me smiling with that big silly grin on my face. This is quality time with my kids. They even outdo themselves finding parking spaces for me! Making the connection with them keeps them involved in my everyday activities. Try including your loved one in your daily routine. It gives special meaning to everything you do. Making their favorite recipes, listening to the music they loved, visiting places you enjoyed together, watching sports that claimed their passion—all are powerful connections with our loved ones. Feeling close to them in many different ways helps keep their memories very much alive and removes the fear that we will begin to forget their unique qualities.

Whenever I'm upset or worried about something or have a tough decision to make, I ask Peggy and Denis to guide me. Maybe it's just the idea of turning over my cares to another, but I feel a definite relief every time I plug into their loving energy. I shared this thought with a friend whose elderly mother was in a fragile, agitated state in the hospital, weakened by her restless condition. The daughter eagerly summoned Peggy's and Denis' aid for a restful night for her mom. It worked! All of a sudden, the mother quieted down and refueled her strength from the serenity that had gently enveloped her. Denis and Peggy came lovingly to the rescue sharing their sense of peace!

It helps our hearts to honor that special eternal love connection. Feeling the embrace of that never-ending love, we are filled with peace and are blessed with a sense of renewed energy. We feel like we are working in tandem with the person we miss so much—and that is a very positive feeling.

So plug into that dynamic, uplifting source of love and be encouraged to try new ways to include your loved ones in your daily life. I'm still working on the Lottery, Mega Millions and Powerball. Are you listening, Peggy and Denis?

4/04



WHAT HELPS THE *Most*

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.,
Rockville Centre, New York

Since there is no magic wand to wave or fairy dust to sprinkle over us to take the pain away when we are grieving, it's nice to know there are some things that might lighten the burden of sorrow as we struggle to cope and survive. I wish someone had whispered these ideas in my ear or left a note in my mailbox when I was so raw with pain following the deaths of my two eldest children, 21-year-old Denis and 19-year-old Peggy, in the same car accident. Peggy died instantly, and Denis died four days later, the day after we buried Peggy. We planned and lived through two funerals in one week. Let me share some of the things I later discovered that help my bereaved heart the most:



Helpful

- Funeral Service
- Loving Support
- Talking, Praying, Screaming
- Books
- Space
- Journaling
- Anger
- Exercise
- Permission to Be Crazy
- Music
- Crying
- Hugs

Funeral Service. Planning the funeral ritual, choosing readings and music that echoed my children's personalities, deciding what symbols from their lives could be brought as gifts to the altar, honoring special people in their lives to include in the ceremony and writing moving eulogies to tell the world how much I loved these children not only became special gifts of love to Peggy and Denis, but also brought a sense of peace to my heart.

Loving Support. Being surrounded with caring friends and family who did not put us on a timetable, who let us grieve in our own way, as long as we wanted, helped us a lot. We might not have had the exact people we were counting on for support, but some dear friends stuck with us and some new faces appeared. We might be rewriting our address book, but we were surrounded with loving people who walked the walk with us. We were not alone.

Talking, Praying, Screaming. According to the experts, telling our story is the best medicine for us. Telling it over and over again drives home the point that while our loved ones are no longer with us physically, they are part of our hearts forever. Praying is simply talking to God, telling Him what is in our hearts or on our minds. Screaming, whether in the privacy of the car, in the safety of the shower or in the refuge of a deserted beach, is talking on different level, and it can empty the raw sadness that fills our being. Venting our feelings is healthier than stuffing them down inside to erupt later.

Books. Reading saved my sanity, and it was my lifeline. I learned wisdom from those who had walked the grief journey before me as I memorized whole passages and wrote down favorite sayings. Anything that spoke to my heart I grabbed and held tightly, just as if it were a life preserver saving me from drowning in my sorrow. Section 155.937 in the public library became my special haven, ministering to my broken heart, offering me all those grief support books on the shelves.

Space. Finding time and a special spot to just sit and think, ponder, meditate, take deep breaths, practice deep sighs or just plain cry helped my heart deal with my pain. Every day when I came home from work I sat in my recliner (which I fondly referred to as “my thinking chair”) and let the tears fall like a broken faucet as I read inspiring passages from a favorite book, looked at treasured pictures, pondered dear memories, and created an experience of sacredness in my day and in my life. It was my special time for me and my sorrow.

Journaling. Keeping track of feelings, the ups and down of the grief journey, is the best way to understand yourself and how you are managing your grief. Writing a few sentences or paragraphs or just a few key words describing what you feel on a particular day can do wonders to unload negative feelings or to simply record the joys that surprise you on the journey. Rereading what we have written can lead us to know what gives us strength and what knocks us down. Journaling is like a roadmap pointing us in the right direction to healing. And the good part is we don’t even have to stop to ask directions, they’re right in our own journal.

Anger. It is not fun to feel angry, but it is a part of grief and it does tell us we are alive. It even catapults us into action. The good news is that many of us channel our anger into a positive voice in memory of our loved one, becoming active in groups and causes like MADD, Cancer Care, The Compassionate Friends, Make a Wish, Breast Cancer Walk, Ronald McDonald House—all making the world a better place. We just have to find the right channel for our anger, always done in memory of our loved one.

Exercise. Discovering the wonders of karate, power walking, swimming, tennis, jogging, golfing, racquetball, aerobics, or simply walking the family dog might provide time for us to develop new ways to get rid of the pent-up rage that can consume us. Others find the tortures of the treadmill, Stairmaster, or abs machines do the job even better. Find what it is that works for you and give yourself that needed release from all those ravaging emotions that overwhelm you.

Permission to Be Crazy. Whatever it is that helps your heart and doesn’t hurt somebody else, do it! Any relief that we can find is welcome. It could be decorating our house with rainbow towels, rugs, curtains and throws, sending heavenward a batch of balloons with messages attached, talking our heart out to an empty chair, writing a letter to our missing loved one or writing a letter from them to us, (saying all the things we never got a chance to or just reiterating all those things we love to say), including our loved one’s name on our Christmas cards, filling our home with angels, or simply giving our dog a birthday party. Anything that brings a moment of joy is most welcome.

Music. Finding lyrics or melodies that speak directly to our hearts can be very healing. Singing along with words that have special meaning to us allows us to say what’s in our heart, to empty out that awful sadness that overcomes us, and to make room for peace and serenity to flow in.

Crying. This is an unpopular part of grieving. We don’t really want to cry, and others don’t want to see us crying. But it is a necessary part of bereavement and one that actually helps us feel better. So get those tissues or large hankies out and be ready to let the tears flow, getting rid of all that anxiety and frustration that accompanies grief. Cry unashamedly and teach those around you that it’s okay. It’s nature’s way of helping us.

Continued on page 22

There are many more suggestions that can help grieving hearts. These are just a few of my favorites. I'm sure you can add some special ones of your own to the list.

Hugs. Feeling comforted and loved is important. It has been said that to survive, we need four hugs a day for survival, eight hugs a day for maintenance, and twelve hugs a day for growth. You don't have to say anything. Just feel the soothing message that is conveyed.

Healing Power of a Pet. I can't say enough about the unconditional love of a pet. Our dog, Mickey, a lab and German shepherd mix, got us out of bed each morning, walked us around the block, got us to open the refrigerator, snuggled with us on the couch, made us laugh with his antics, greeted us wildly at the door, never gave us any advice, and was always ready to play ball, steal an hors d'oeuvre, or go for a car ride. His gentle therapy nurtured us in our grief and taught us to enjoy the ordinary things in life.

Planting a Garden. It could be the idea of new beginnings or just the reward of keeping busy that makes planting a garden meaningful when our hearts are hurting. Enjoying the new sprouts—vegetables or flowers—sensing new life, feeling connected to a divine order, all can refill a spot in our fragile beings that needs careful attention.

Communication. Staying in tune with our family members, taking the time to discuss how we feel about things, what we can handle and what we dread helps to keep us on the same wavelength since none of us are mind readers. This does not mean we each automatically grieve the same way. It means we learn to respect each other's way of grieving and do our best to understand it.

Positive Thoughts. It's what you tell your head that can get you through some tough days. When I get up in the morning, if I tell myself I will never see my children again, my stomach does flip-flops and fills with butterflies. On the other hand if I tell myself I am one day closer to seeing them, my heart feels a wonderful sense of joy. So look for the half-filled glass rather than the half-empty glass. Put some dates on your calendar to give meaning to the day and find a way to reinvest your love—all positive choices. Dwell on your loved one's life not on the death and count the blessings that are yours instead of what's missing.

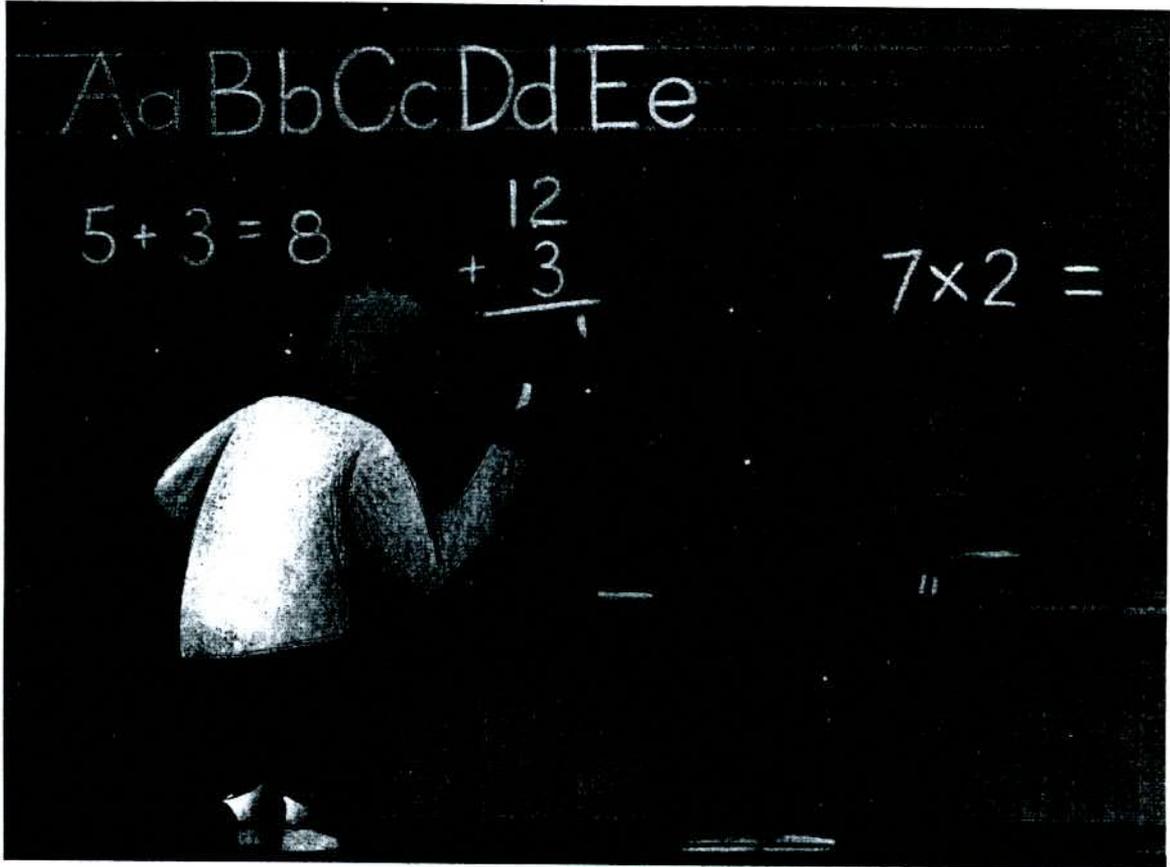
Hope. Hang on to your hope. Don't let minor setbacks rob you of that special quality that keeps you aiming at the future with the new beginnings it holds. Keep believing that you will make it, and forgive yourself if you stumble. Let your heart be open to the new opportunities that come your way. Just remember that endings always bring new beginnings, so look for them.

Religion. Our faith, spirituality, or belief in a higher being can be a catalyst in our healing. It can buoy us up when we are feeling down, alone or sad. It offers us a chance to talk one-to-one with God, to unburden our hearts, to meditate and to believe that our loved ones are secure in God's loving embrace. Our hearts know that God did not take our loved ones; instead our hearts rejoice in knowing that God received our loved ones.

There are many more suggestions that can help grieving hearts. These are just a few of my favorites. I'm sure you can add some special ones of your own to the list.

7/04

My Grief Report Card



Elaine E. Stillwell
Rockville Centre, NY

We might not be crazy about report cards, but sometimes, especially when we are grieving, it's nice to know how we are doing. Just like kids, you can fool yourself for a while, or simply deny any difficulties, but the report card spells out loud and clear exactly where you are and what you are doing—sometimes to our dismay and sometimes to our joy.

Looking at my grandson's kindergarten report card, I realized that newly bereaved folks are like the youngsters on their first steps of learning. We are "kindergarteners in grief" with the hopes of being promoted to better times. Just like them, we are eager to learn so we can have a meaningful and productive life.

Are you ready for the next level of healing or do you need more time for daily repetition of basic coping skills? Are you practicing those beginning strategies or do you need some special help to master them? Are you part of that fifteen percent that has given up, not willing to do the necessary grief work, or do you feel like you have made progress from that painful, excruciating initial grief, that separation anxiety that brings tears to kindergarteners? Can you begin to reach out to others as your grief becomes older and gentler? Can you recognize progress in the basics of reading, language, numbers, work habits, and physical, social and personal development as you work through the kindergarten of grief?

As the months went by, after my two oldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy died in the same automobile accident, I found it helpful to figure out where I stood in my grief work. Was I going backward or forward? Was I setting realistic goals for myself? Report cards are intended to celebrate our good efforts and to pinpoint areas that need more of our attention. How valuable that we can have our very own "grief report card" that will help us set some realistic goals for our heart to feel better!

Using this helpful check list, rate your grief work in the three handy categories, "Shows Strength," "Developing Normally," or "Experiencing Difficulty," to see what areas of your heart still need nurturing. Then get busy on the weak areas with a tutor friend, or through reading, writing or talking, or simply devoting more time to meditation, praying or pampering. Look forward to "moving up," being promoted or graduating from the beginning stages of grief, surrounded by your loving support circle who applaud your courage, determination and progress.

READING READINESS

Discover useful grief books to learn coping skills
Use the public library grief section
Know the children's department has a fine selection of picture and storybooks for grieving children
Subscribe to a helpful magazine, such as Grief Digest
Cut out favorite magazine and newspaper articles that help the heart
Share helpful information with other family members
Mail helpful articles to "non-bereaved" friends and relatives who don't seem to understand the pain of the grief process

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

Learn how to express needs
Tell the world how they really feel
Ask for help when needed
Talk to the absent loved one telling him/her how much you miss them, how sorry you are for opportunities missed, and how much you love them
Cry without apologizing
Laugh without feeling guilty
Learn comfortable answers to touch questions
Develop quick replies to insensitive remarks
Repeat favorite prayers that inspire courage and strength
Give anger a voice, finding an appropriate focus
Scream or cry in the shower or car
Repeat story again and again
Explain feelings to spouse, children, friends

NUMBER DEVELOPMENT

Count on loving friends for support
Add new, helpful friends to address book
Count blessings, what you have rather than what you are missing
Subtract folks who are too hard to deal with right now—not forever, just until you are strong enough to handle them again
Multiply the things done in memory of loved one: acts of kindness, scholarships, foundations, working for good causes
Halve the pain by sharing it with others
Remember countless precious memories
Collect numerous photographs of special times together
Select favorite possessions of a loved one
Double joy by sharing it with others
List motivators to get up each day, such as not wanting their memory erased, wanting them to be proud of you, and not wanting to waste that special love you have for them
Diminish sorrow by positive attitude

PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT

Get out of bed and out from under the covers daily
Dress in clothes that match
Realize energy level is low due to the trauma suffered
Exhibit stamina to get through day by setting realistic goals
Exercise regularly doing aerobics, jogging or simply walking the dog
Practice karate, finding comfort in the kicking and screaming
Work out in the gym, releasing anger and feelings of rage
Breathe big sighs, known as silent tears
Take time to relax
Set aside time to meditate or use guided imagery
Wear out guilt over time
Eat healthy foods
Avoid depending on alcohol or drugs

MUSIC APPRECIATION

Soothe soul with heartfelt melodies and lyrics
Find solace listening to special hymns
Release emotions through sing-alongs
Find comfort in joining the choir
Lift spirits while listening to loved one's favorite music
Express feelings while playing a musical instrument

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Make new friends who understand the pain of loss
Share loved one's story and listen to others' stories
Show self-confidence by doing as much as possible
Display self-control when hearing insensitive remarks or being told to "move on," or have closure"
Show initiative in thinking up helpful ways to deal with grief
Adjust to creating "new normal"
Determine to have a meaningful life again
Volunteer to try new hobbies, new interests
Respect other family members' ways of grieving
Discuss needs and feelings with family or best friend
Attend social gatherings when feeling up to it or wanting to share another's joy, such as engagements, weddings, christenings, graduations and birthdays
Decline social invitations that are too painful to attend or are too insignificant for the effort
Establish new daily routine that works
Begin new traditions for holidays, birthdays and anniversaries

PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT	
Write in notebook regularly, learning what helps and what hurts	
Tell story again and again until it becomes part of you	
Learn as much as possible about the grief process	
Set realistic goals	
Show pride in accomplishing a goal	
Try again if unable to reach a set goal	
Take good care of self	
Cry without apologizing	
Give anger a voice to make something better	
Find self through meditation	
Seek help if needed	
Forgive past mistakes	
Participate in the group	
Help others in the group	
Share what has been learned	
Give children permission to grieve by modeling your grief	
Respect spouse's way of grieving, even though not understanding it	
Make time to communicate with spouse despite differences of grieving	
Tell God exactly how you feel	
Include your loved one in all you do	
WORK HABITS	
Work on attention span and being less confused	
Complete activities that you choose to do	
Seek help when needed	
Try coping suggestions from others	
Choose carefully the activities to be done each day	
Observe how bereaved persons further along in their grief handle situations	
Value the goals met and the progress made	
Sort out loved one's possessions, deciding what to keep, what to gift others with, or what to dispose of	
Set no deadlines for grieving	
Give self permission to grieve	

Now you are ready to do some real homework, recognizing what your strengths are and ready to shape up the areas that need your immediate attention. Here's hoping you did well on your "Grief Report Card" and will be moving along to the next level of healing, so proud of your accomplishments and eager for the next life-giving lessons. Luckily, this is just the first marking period of the year, allowing you plenty of time to focus on difficult tasks so that you might advance in skills and confidence in this beginning class.

May you feel the encouragement of your hard work paying off as you create your new normal and move on, ready for the challenge of your next Grief Report Card. Are you ready to go to the head of the class?

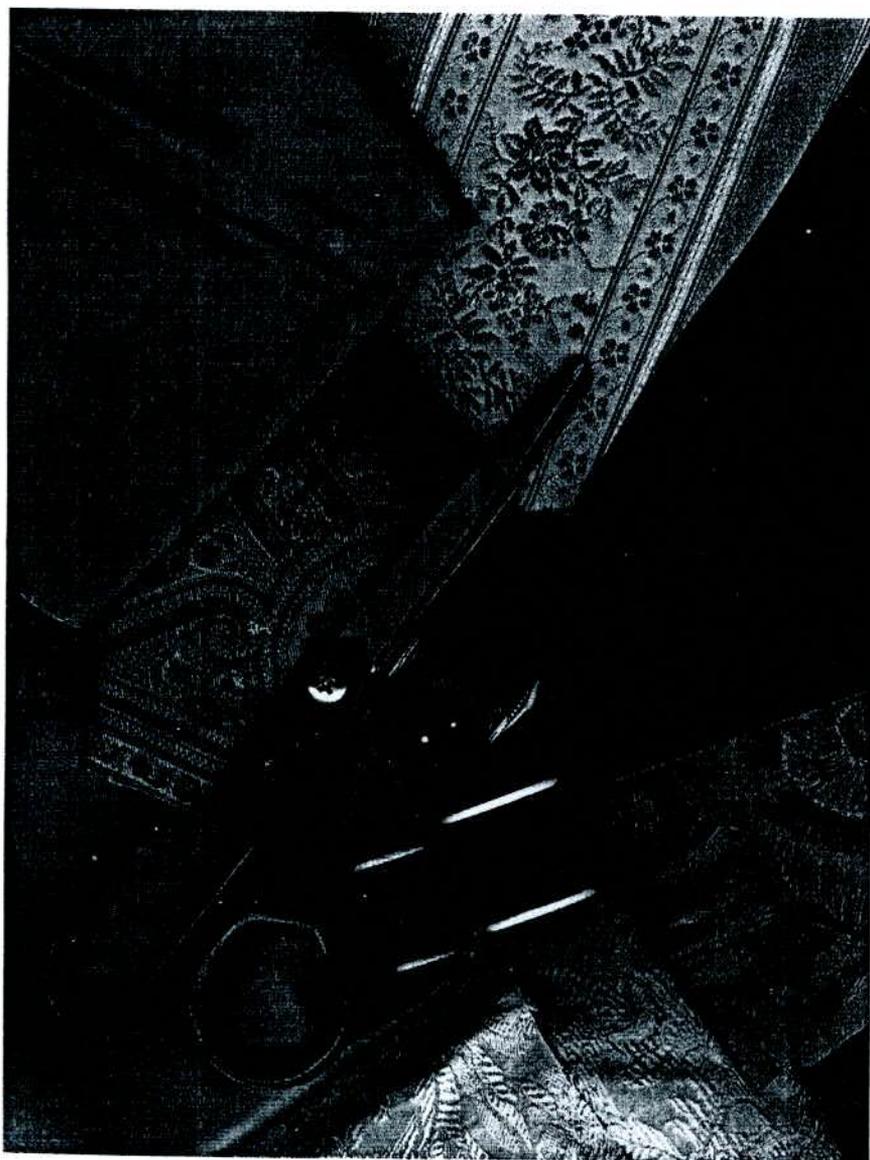
DATE	SCORE	My Grief Report Card
		READING READINESS
		LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT
		NUMBER DEVELOPMENT
		PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT
		MUSIC APPRECIATION
		SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
		PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
		WORK HABITS

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		MUSIC APPRECIATION
		SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
		PERSONAL DEVELOPMENT
		WORK HABITS

10/04

Cozy

MEMORIES



By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

How we all agonize about what to do with our loved one's clothing after he/she has died! We all seem to have different ways of handling the situation. And guess what? No one way is the perfect solution for everybody. We all grieve differently, and we all approach the difficult tasks of mourning in our own personal way. No one should tell us what to do. We have to do what our heart says, and each heart speaks its own message. I know this too well after losing my two oldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, in the same car accident.

A few years ago I had the pleasure of having dinner with a group of dear friends. Having met at a local support group after each of us losing a child, we could all laugh together, and we could all cry together. Our bonding was strong. We understood the tremendous void in each of our families.

The highlight of the evening was marked by our host appearing in the middle of the living room carrying a quilt in his arms. Holding it up for us all to see, we were overcome with envy. From the clothing he had saved when his twenty-two-year-old son had died seven years before, Jerry had made a **Love Quilt**. He had cut thirty twelve-inch squares, (10" X 10" when finished), from favorite garments to tell the story of Matthew's life.

Each ten-inch square shared a precious memory with us. We all sat there, dumbstruck, wondering why we, too, hadn't thought of this wonderful idea. Although we had all saved clothing mementos of our children, none of us had the assortment of clothes to work with that Jerry had. How we yearned to have the kind of memories Jerry had saved! And the funny thing was that Jerry had never planned this. The idea had taken root years after Matthew had died and luckily Jerry had the precious materials.



Jerry began with Matthew's old bedspread, used as a backing—a simple, boyish, bright-red quilted-type cotton cover. He cut twelve-inch square patches from each of the garments, lining each piece with a plain cotton fabric. Arranging them in five patches across, and six patches down, he used a sewing machine to create the quilting stitches across each piece and then trimmed the white quilt with a red, white and blue binding all around.

There were pieces from Matthew's favorite phys-ed tee shirts from school days emblazoned with school names, his cub scout shirt and the badges he earned, his pajama top buttoned down the middle with its sleeves folded neatly, potholders from his frog collection, his cowboy pants complete with fringe—reminders of his third birthday party, his precious DeMolay shirt proudly proclaiming hours of volunteer service work, his well-worn college and sports shirts he had worn while shouting for his teams, and his favorite jeans with stories of their own.

All the quilt pieces echoed Matthew's life story. But the crowning glory of the quilt was Matthew's chef's hat and shirt! How proud he was to be called chef at the Plaza Hotel in New York City, and how proud his dad was to include those patches in this handmade quilt. He even fashioned the four corners of the quilt using Matthew's chef's clothing and the toggles from the jacket.

Do you see what love can do to remember? Don't be afraid to try new ideas. Jerry never sewed a stitch in his life and look what he accomplished. We are all still green with envy. And even though we never met Matthew Good, son of Elaine and Jerry Good, (January 21, 1967–August 15, 1989), we feel we know him, thanks to the Love Quilt and a father's love.

Other grieving folks have the same desire to find a way to use some of the favorite clothes of their loved one as a way of connecting with them. They want to savor the memories associated with the clothing. They want to feel close to their loved one by wrapping themselves in the favorite clothes that evoke those memories. They want to be linked with their loved one, and using the clothes they wore seems to be a perfect answer to that need.

Many bereaved who have no skills with a needle and thread or sewing machine have been able to locate quilting groups in their locale or even miles away across the country that invite families to contact them, tell them about their loved one, and send favorite clothing for these volunteers to make a memory quilt. Many hours are spent via phone calls and e-mail messages filling in the life story of the special person to be remembered.

Enduring friendships have been made between these bereaved families and the quilters, as they spend months sharing memories to guide the design of the quilt. It is truly a labor of love. Members have dazzled our Compassionate Friends Chapter with the breathtaking quilts that have been lovingly created by this process. Favorite music, hobbies, sports, foods,

and pictures echo from the fabric of the quilt. You simply feel the presence of the person being remembered in such a heartfelt way.

Families find displaying or using the finished quilt in their living room or family room is a welcoming way to invite comments and stories of their loved one. People can't help but remark about favorite clothing pieces they recognize or fill in with a particular story attached to something highlighted in the quilt. Grown-ups and children alike love to wrap themselves up in the coziness and warmth of the quilt. It just feels so good and makes them feel so close to their loved ones. They discover you can hug it, you can cry in it, you can slumber in it. You can just feel the serenity in it as you soak up all the memories as you bask in the spiritual presence of your loved one.

Some of us who have only a few articles of clothing left from our loved one (not the rich array that Jerry had), have discovered a unique way to create a Memory Quilt for ourselves. We can use any material or combination of materials we choose, maybe a fabric which shouts a favorite color, a hobby like football, ballet, fishing or music, a subject like computers, books, cooking—whatever it is that talks to our heart about our loved one who died.

After cutting out the number of squares that we need, we are faced with the hard work of looking through our collection of photographs and choosing which ones we would like to use for each quilt square that we have prepared. The pictures can be arranged chronologically, by special occasions or just as a mosaic of favorites. At a local printing shop or store that imprints slogans and names on tee shirts for birthdays and special events, our favorite pictures can be stamped on the patches for our quilt. Then they can be sewn in place by hand or machine and completed with a backing fabric of our choice. Our quilts, rich in creativity and imagination, add a healing magic for our hearts, but more importantly provide a lifelong way of remembering that special person we miss so much. What a welcome addition our quilt is to any room in our home!

In case your energy level is so low or your heart is so overwhelmed by your loss that you couldn't even consider designing a Memory Quilt, but you feel it is something that would bring you comfort, there are catalog companies that offer to create a quilt or throw for you. All you have to do is send them what they require—perhaps a picture, name, dates or favorite saying (sometimes they have a standard saying) to be inscribed on the fabric and they do the rest. You, too, can feel the healing power of "cozy memories."

There is no age limit—all ages enjoy being wrapped in memories. Small children, teenagers, siblings, spouses, parents and grandparents—each can bask in the warmth and coziness of remembrance. What are you waiting for?



elainestillwell@worldnet.att

What Will I Do *With All This Stuff?*



Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

When a loved one dies and we are surrounded with all their possessions, every little thing that is left behind talks to us with a memory. Looking at all the things, touching them, remembering so many occasions, can bring a flood of tears. These are not just five-tissue days, they are tissue-box days when we have to wade through all “the stuff” and be knee deep in all the memories. This is hard work especially when we are in “survival mode” barely able to do anything more than survive.

After my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, died in the same automobile accident, I was faced with that age-old question, “What do I do with all this stuff?” Of course, I had advice from many folks who had never experienced the death of someone close to them. I followed my heart as many of us do, for there are no set rules. We do what helps our heart and hurts the least. And since we are all different, as are our circumstances, we find a variety of ways to handle the situation.

The bedrooms seem to be first place many of us face in looking over “the stuff.” Some of us just close the door on “that room,” leaving it exactly as it is—not wanting to move a thing. Some of us leave the door open and occasionally peek in or sneak in to just lie on the bed and soak up all the memories and feel their presence. Others transform the room into a sanctuary—a place to relax, pursue a hobby, write letters, meditate, iron, wrap packages, read, journal, exercise, sew, listen to music, use the computer, fill with pictures or simply light a candle. We can be like Frank Sinatra and do it “our way.”

Some redo the room entirely and move another family member into it, answering someone’s prayer for a room of their own or making room for Grandma. Some make it into a guest room, a TV room, a sewing room, or even set up their exercise equipment in there. Those sharing a room with the loved one who died are divided, some leave the room just as it is, others choose to remove the extra twin bed, bunk bed, or larger size bed. Some add a nice easy chair in the extra space or enlarge their desk area to include a computer, while others welcome a new stereo or TV unit. Some want to make the space feel “new” and others want to soak up the memories of the old space. Do you see how different we are? We do what makes our hearts feel good.

When we get more strength to deal with what’s left behind, we find we have to do this job in small segments of time. Even though well meaning relatives and friends may offer to do the job for us, we need to make the decisions about what to keep and what to give away. And believe it or not, making these decisions helps us to become stronger and to take back control of our lives. Don’t let anyone rush you; take your time. Remember the cardinal rule: “When in doubt, don’t throw out.” Be prepared to shed lots of tears and to feel exhausted. This is hard work, not back-breaking work but heart-breaking work, and you don’t have to do it until you are ready. And the time varies for each of us! Don’t measure yourself by what other people do. You will find the time that is just right for you.

Some people jump right in and tidy up everything and feel that helps them “move on” in their grief. Others have no desire to look at anything that will stir up a memory because it is too painful for them right then. And that is all right. The day will come when they are ready to deal with “the stuff.”

Going through all their favorite possessions—clothes they loved, books they treasured, jewelry that marked special occasions, sports paraphernalia they relished, letters they wrote—all take their toll on our emotions and physical strength. We feel drained and washed out, almost like we were run over by a truck as all the memories hit us head on. We are in the process of taking all those sacred memories and tucking them into our hearts forever—as they become a very special part of us, but this does not happen overnight.

Many of us want to share some of “the stuff” with close friends and relatives so they will have something special to help them remember our loved ones. We don’t want our loved one’s memory to be erased, and this is a great way to make sure they are remembered in a loving way. Our relatives and friends can be very touched when we “gift” them with a special treasured item. It makes our hearts feel lighter to know that these items will be used and loved rather than just sitting collecting dust.

When we start sorting through all the possessions, we need to make a few piles: one for “keepers,” one for special folks, one for our favorite charity and one for the dumpster. In the beginning, the box of “keepers” might be quite large. We don’t want to part with that favorite sweater, jacket, fishing hat, shabby bathrobe, pretty party dress, prized diploma, book, trophy, cards, letters, CD collection, awards or piles of photographs. As time goes on, we are able to part with a few more things that don’t seem as important any more. (Nineteen years later I was able to throw out Denis’ lifeguard sweatpants!)

As some of the items in the “memory box” are eliminated, we eventually get the box down to a much smaller size, which we will probably take to the grave with us. There are special linking objects that we will never part with, and that’s okay. They make us smile and they give us that warm fuzzy feeling of remembering happy times.

Sifting through the letters and cards and handmade items of our loved ones is a heartrending task. The tears just flow as we read each line and remember each occasion. I still have the Mother’s Day cards spanning the years, the loving birthday cards, the letters from college, the handmade Christmas ornaments and projects from 4H, but the tears they bring are happy tears now. So be good to yourself and take your time soaking up all those memories.

One widow took five years to take her husband’s golf clubs out of the trunk of her car. It was a comfort to her to tote those clubs around, knowing how much her spouse had loved them. It made her smile every time she looked in the trunk. We all find something that makes our loved one feel closer to us as we wear it, use it or display it. Just wearing the personal items we choose to keep makes our hearts lighter and brings our loved ones closer to us. I surround myself with their Hummel figurines that marked milestone events in their lives. Although you might be urged to get rid of a lot of things, and are even pestered by some folks who want certain items, think carefully before you make any final decisions. As you get a little stronger and more able to deal with all “the stuff,” it can warm your heart to know that someone special is receiving a memento that they will always cherish.

I can still remember finding the young teenager, the son of a co-worker, who dreamed of having a ten-speed bike and surprising him with Denis’ bike which was his pride and joy. Just the look on the boy’s face made my day! Delivering my son’s precious record collection to an aspiring musician—one of my former students—brought joy to my heart. I don’t think I was ever going to listen to The Grateful Dead, or others of the same genre, but finding someone who was a fan and appreciated those records made me feel good for passing on that joy that was part of my son’s life. I could still envision my son singing, “The Devil Goes Down to Georgia” by Charlie Daniels every morning as he was getting dressed for school. Now someone else would be singing with Charlie!

I had a lump in my throat watching my young nephews walk away with the soccer and lacrosse equipment that Denis prized so highly, but it was good to know there would be other enthusiastic athletes like Denis! I returned the gold necklace he had loved to his girlfriend so she could remember the joy it brought Denis, but I kept his gold Blessed Mother medal and chain that I had given him for his First Holy Communion. Just take your time finding the right item for the right person!

I asked Peggy’s college roommates to choose something from her wardrobe to remember her by and to keep all the pots and pans and household items that she had contributed to the house they rented on campus. And to her sister, Annie, I presented Grandma’s diamond ring which had been designated for Peggy when Grandma had died years before. Each item meant something special to the person who received it.

There is a lot of work involved in sorting through “the stuff” and it takes time and energy and thoughtful decisions. As I disposed of some of my children’s personal possessions, I felt like I was “erasing” all traces of them, and that thought motivated me to make sure that my husband and I, our remaining daughter and dear relatives and friends each had something meaningful to keep alive the memories of Denis and Peggy. After all, “If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing.” And what better way to be reminded of them than sharing something that they loved—sharing their “stuff.”



Singing Their Song

Elaine E. Stillwell, Rockville Centre, NY

After my two eldest children, 21-year-old Denis and 19-year-old Peggy, were killed in an automobile accident, I didn't have a clue how I could keep their memories alive. As I was sorting through their possessions and personal effects quite soon after their deaths, I realized that I did not want them forgotten from people's memories.

While I was throwing away their student I.D. cards, drivers' licenses, library cards, social security cards, credit cards, and the like, I had the terrible gut feeling that I was erasing them from the world, and that was certainly the last thing I wanted to do. My heart wanted everyone to remember them forever. But the nagging question in my heart was, "How?" It was not something I knew how to do right away or even had the energy to put a plan in place. I believe the inspiration came not from my head, but from my heart, that sacred center where divine guidance is always available. As time passed, I just seemed to "blend into" the melody that was right for me.

Adagio slowly.

One day I ran across a poignant saying by an anonymous author, which spoke to my heart, "If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing." A light bulb seemed to click on in my head as I realized it was up to me to "sing my children's song." I was the keeper of the memories. All of a sudden I discovered that without any planning, training, or organized strategy, I had been doing just that ever since Peggy and Denis died. Call it basic instinct or a "mother's heart," but I had been "sharing my children with the world" (as I call it) in simple, loving ways. Maybe you will recognize some that you are doing or perhaps you might discover some special new ways to keep your loved one's memory from being erased.

A tempo in normal time

Talk About Them. I was good at this. No matter where I was, grocery checkout, bank queue, library desk, waiting room, or with dear friends or complete strangers, I told the world about my children. I didn't even know at the time that "talking" was an important first step in healing. I emptied my heart and soul to both the patient, listening ears and the uncomfortable non-welcoming ears around me. It was gentle, healing therapy. I was on fire, passionately spreading the word about Peggy and Denis. If people looked weirdly at me, I didn't even notice. I was the "self-appointed" messenger and I was doing my job with gusto. Saying their names felt good as I kept telling my sacred story. I was beginning to hum the melody.

Dolce gently, sweetly

Share Linking Objects. Gifting friends and relatives with something special that belonged to my children was another way of helping people remember Peggy and Denis. They were both college students at the time of their deaths, and I made sure that their roommates and friends received some-

thing that Peggy and Denis had treasured. Whether it was a favorite sweater, book, record, outfit, poster, piece of sports equipment, jewelry, trophy, stuffed animal or picture. It was the same with relatives as I sent boxes of lacrosse and football gear to younger cousins, specific pieces of jewelry and the pick of their clothing and youthful treasures to others. Of course, my husband and I and our remaining child, Annie, had first choice, carefully choosing items that would keep us close to Peggy and Denis forever, like their school rings, favorite books and pictures, diplomas, yearbooks, Denis' swimming medals, lifeguard hat and whistle, guitar, and backgammon set, and Peggy's big ear rings, sorority sweatshirt, 4H projects, and flute. How could we part with Denis' Ziggy doll imprinted with the phrase, "I is a brain"?

As we gifted friends with other items Peggy and Denis owned, like a brand new 10-speed bicycle to a young fellow who was in need of one, a set of classic story books (Denis' First Communion present) to a lovely family with three young children who would enjoy them, and Denis' prized record collection to a former student of mine, an aspiring rock musician, we knew our children would be remembered. Although it hurt to part with their favorite possessions, it gave our hearts a lift to know that every time these articles were used, Peggy and Denis would be remembered. The lyrics were getting catchy in my song.

Pianissimo softly, quietly

Write About Them. I can remember writing my heart out with the tears streaming down my face at three o'clock in the morning, preparing eulogies for each of their funerals, which were four days apart. Although I was exhausted, overwhelmed and in shock, I needed to tell the world how much I loved each of these precious children, so I wrote the eulogies that I shared at their funerals. Where do we get the strength to do such things? I don't know. All I know is that I needed to tell everyone how much these children meant to me. I kept repeating the refrain, "I love Peggy and Denis."

Legato in smooth, even style

Six weeks later I sat and composed an acknowledgement card, thanking all the people who came to the wakes and funerals or who had sent food, flowers, mass cards or had done errands for us. I spent hours designing the card and had it printed in our local printing shop. Folded like a birthday card, the front cover had the "thank you" with a picture of "the inseparable duo," Peggy and Denis, as little children, and the inside of the card contained recent pictures of Peggy and Denis with musings of each—Peggy on the left side and Denis on the right side. On the back of the card was the information about the Scholarship Fund that had been set up in their memory at the University of Dayton. It was very comforting to know that all the people who reached out to console us now had a lasting memento of Peggy and Denis. Here I was "singing their song" with a backup chorus, making sure they were not erased from memory.

Portamento *Da* a smooth, uninterrupted glide in passing from one tone to another

Little did I know that my writing would be one of the main ways that people would remember my children. Whenever I discovered something that helped my heart, I wrote about it—basically to share what I had learned with others who were trying to have a meaningful life again. Many of my articles were published in various magazines across the country. All of a sudden I was invited to write a monthly column for the bereaved in a now-defunct national magazine. After that, I enjoyed writing a couple of crafts books for grieving children, *Sweet Memories* and *A Forever Angel*. These books could help youngsters “open up” to their parents and talk about the loved one who had died as they made special projects to remember that person. Then the children could gift others with the things they made to remember their special person. Continuing my writing adventure, I wrote a number of pamphlets, of which *Stepping Stones for the Bereaved* and *Healing After Your Child’s Death* were the most popular. Just sharing these ideas again and again made people feel they actually knew Peggy and Denis. Do you know what that did for my heart? My children would not be erased. My singing was gliding smoothly from one song to the next.

Crescendo *Da* gradually increasing in volume

Another thrill for me “singing my children’s song” came about when I was invited to be a columnist for *Grief Digest* when it made its debut in 2003. I was now writing with all the wonderful grief experts, Darcie Sims, Earl Grollman, Alan Wolfelt, Doug Manning and Andrea Gambill, who had given me the gift of hope on my grief journey! I was deeply honored and overjoyed to join the ranks of these nationally known bereavement writers who helped me create my “new normal.” I had to pinch myself to make sure I wasn’t dreaming. As my singing got louder, I just threw my hands up in the air and exclaimed, “Lord, what’s next?”

Allegro *Da* in rapid tempo

Quick as a wink, a dream came true for me! ACTA Publications in Chicago invited me to offer an outline and first chapter for a book to be entitled, *The Death of a Child*. My heart was overjoyed to be considered for such a grand project and one so dear to my heart. How great to have another opportunity to “sing Peggy’s and Denis’ song,” but this happened a few weeks after 9/11, and I was so busy helping the World Trade Center families here on Long Island (20 miles from NYC) that I couldn’t imagine finding time to write a book. I explained my predicament to the publisher and he solved the problem instantly. He said he would call me back in three months. True to his word, he called me back in January, and the rest is history. My outline and first chapter were accepted, a contract was signed, and I began writing my heart out “singing my children’s song.” If you can believe, the first copy of *The Death of a Child*, hot off the press, was delivered to my doorstep on Christmas Eve 2003, the most exciting, joyful Christmas present I ever received. I felt the heavenly choir singing Peggy’s and Denis’ song with me.

Allegretto *Da* in quick tempo, but slower than allegro

Educate the World About Grief. I didn’t realize how much my talking and writing, “sharing my children with the world,” helped so many grieving families and those folks who were trying to understand the pain and struggles of losing a loved one. This led to speaking engagements, radio and TV appearances, participation in seminars, conferences, videos and documentaries to help the bereaved. You see the more we “sing our loved one’s song,” the more we educate the world

about loss and the more we help eradicate the myths that grieving folks have to endure from the civilians (the people who have never experienced grief). We give ourselves permission to grieve, and we teach the world what helps bereaved persons. Once we learn what we need, then it is up to us to educate others, but this takes time. You can’t do it until you learn the ups and downs of grief and then find the strength to explain it to others. As your singing speeds up, you might be invited to be Keynote Speaker, as I was, at various bereavement conferences across the country!

Fortissimo *Da* very loudly

Find Your Voice. Let’s face it, we all sing differently: soft, loud, with perfect pitch or off-key, as baritone, tenor, alto or soprano. We might be soloist, part of a quartet or choir member. Maybe we just enjoy whistling or humming along with the music.

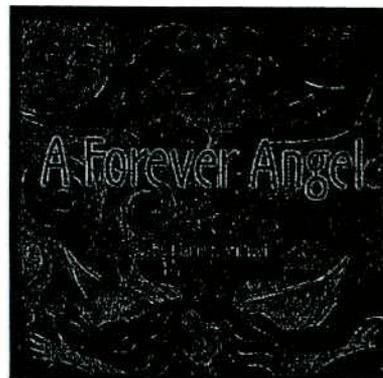
“If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing.” We have to find that special way that will allow us to sing our loved one’s song loud and clear. It could be by volunteering at our neighborhood school, delivering meals on wheels, sponsoring a canine pet, taking the handicapped on a day’s outing, working to improve the environment, teaching flower arranging at the old folks home, sponsoring scholarships for college, camp, music, art education, dance or sports clinics; funding special hospital equipment or library book collections, or being a hospital or nursing home volunteer.

We all answer a special need from the sacred center of our heart that connects us with our loved one. We might wish to establish a charitable foundation which services many requests for help, to fund equipment for local sports teams, to sponsor special concerts, speakers or lecture series in our community, to participate in youth, scouting, senior citizen or religious education programs. We might devote our time to working with a bereavement support group, give our energies to further the work of Cancer Care, Heart Fund, MADD, Organ Donation, Suicide Prevention, Make a Wish Foundation, or local Hot Line; or we might wish to work ardently for improving “killer roads,” a faulty court system, or melanoma awareness.

Knowing you are doing something to keep your loved one’s memory alive keeps you passionately busy, allows you to tell your sacred story, adds joy to your heart, brings an array of beautiful, loving people into your life, and rewards you with a meaningful life again. Your loud voice will echo in many hearts making sure your loved one is never erased from memory.

Vivace in lively manner

So practice those scales, rehearse those notes, and get busy singing your loved one’s song! It’s never too late to lead the chorus.



Cover from *A Forever Angel*, by Elaine Stillwell



Peggy O'Connor
8/23/66 – 8/2/86



Denis O'Connor
2/4/65 – 8/6/86

Twenty Years of Grief Gifts: *What's Next, Lord?*

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

Never did I dream of the journey I would travel following the tragic, sudden deaths of my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy in the same car accident in August 1986! They died four days apart, and we had two separate funerals in one week. That was twenty years ago, which still seems like yesterday to my heart.

Over the years so many unexpected things have happened to me. Things I never planned, but that have shaped and enriched my "new" life in so many aspects that I call them "grief gifts." Who would ever think that there could be such a thing, much less be able to discover them?

ROUTINE WAS A BLESSING

In those early days of grief I operated on remote control, grateful for my job as a third-grade teacher. It gave me motive to get up in the morning, structure to my never-ending day, and loving children and colleagues to keep me nurtured, busy and needed. I put one foot in front of the other each day and tried so hard to make sure Peggy and Denis would be proud of me for wanting and trying to have a meaningful life again.

BOOKS PLANTED A SEED

As months went by, I was bolstered by the books I read, as I eagerly looked for answers to my pain. Learning that others had survived the deaths of their children gave me inspiration and encouragement for the journey out of the Valley of the Shadow, as they called it. When every book I read mentioned the value of The Compassionate Friends, a national organization for bereaved parents, I was anxious to find such a group near my home, but there was none. So I asked my husband Joe if together we could start a local group in our hometown. Leaning on each other, we founded The Compassionate Friends of Rockville Centre in 1987 and had our first meeting on Oct. 9th, which happened to be the feast day of St. Denis. Do you think that was a sign? I did!

WE WERE NO LONGER ALONE

Now I know what you are thinking, how could a newly bereaved parent lead a bereavement group? And you are right. It was the blind leading the blind. Joe and I had as much to learn as every person who came through the door. So what did we do? We ordered a stack of audio tapes from the TCF National Office dealing with a variety of topics, i.e. Anger, Guilt, Communicating with Your Spouse, Dealing with Holidays, Anniversaries and Birthdays, Suicide, etc. and played them on a boom box as we all listened intently to the message. Then, using my teaching skills, I led a discussion on the topic of the evening. We all learned how to survive together. Lifelong friendships were made.

All thirty-six seats in the college classroom were filled at that first meeting, and we moved on to bigger spaces each month until two years later when the college built a beautiful new Multi-Purpose Room that became our official home and safe haven. Seventeen more years have passed and we are still there, averaging between fifty-five and sixty bereaved parents at a meeting. Of course, I no longer need the audio-tapes; I know the material by heart, and through my heart I share my heart with our members each month as I lead the discussion topic.

"SHARING PEGGY AND DENIS WITH THE WORLD"

I have always enjoyed writing and always seemed to end up the Newsletter Editor for whatever group I joined! After reading so many articles and books, listening to tapes and attending grief seminars and conferences, I began to write about what I had learned on this grief journey. I called it "sharing Peggy and Denis with the world."

It was like second nature to simply share what I had learned—what helps, what hurts, and ways to cope and survive. It's a life-giving ministry, giving people back their lives when they thought they were over. That began a new phase of my life. My articles were published in national magazines and I was invited to write a column in a monthly magazine, "In the Light" (which is now defunct). My message reached many families, touched many hearts and was very cathartic for me. I was giving myself a "gift" and didn't even know it!

MORE WAYS TO "SHARE PEGGY AND DENIS WITH THE WORLD"

My years of speech and debate in high school and college and three decades of teaching prepared me for sharing my story with a variety of audiences who practically memorized what I told them. We bonded. They knew I had been there and that I understood their pain—that it was not just book learning that I espoused. I was invited to speak at college courses, churches, seminars, conferences and also as part of some of the George Anderson Programs where I spoke before he appeared to do his readings. I joked to myself saying I was "the warm-up" speaker for George Anderson, but the audiences were very receptive to my message and that is how my video tapes "Helping Your Heart Through Grief, Volumes I and II" were born. In addition to regular sales, my good friend, Rosemary Smith (another bereaved parent I met along the journey when she lost her two eldest sons in a similar car accident), shipped them all over the U.S. to newly bereaved parents, including those families who lost a child in Iraq.

REALIZING A DREAM

In 1995, I retired from teaching school and planned to write some children's books, featuring my dog, Mickey, whom everybody knew and loved—especially the many classes I had taught over the years. I signed up for some courses to brush up my writing and publishing skills, but these classes were interrupted when I was unexpectedly invited to be the first Bereavement Coordinator for the Diocese of Rockville Centre, NY, in recognition of my bereavement work and academic credentials.

Though I wasn't looking for a job, I didn't even have to go home and discuss the offer with my husband. I answered "yes" on the spot because I didn't want another person to feel the pain that I had endured in not being embraced by my parish clergy following the deaths of my children (the #2 complaint of all the bereaved of all faiths). This was a dream come true, a passionate mission for me. So, I resumed my teaching career with a new "class"—bereaved families and those ministering to them. I provided training and enrichment for bereavement ministers in 134 parishes, worked closely with hospitals and counseling agencies, organized bereavement conferences and answered the inquiries of the bereaved and those trying to help them.

SHINING LIKE A BEACON

When families constantly asked how they could get their young children or teens to "open up" and express their feelings following the death of someone close to them, grandparent, parent, sibling, friend or pet, that inspired me to write two crafts books for grieving children, *Sweet Memories* and, *A Forever Angel*. Making things (many times under the guidance of a parent) in memory of their loved ones that they could give to others to remember their special person often broke the wall of silence and caused children to talk about the person who had died. Another gift was discovered.

In 1999, I became a Board Member of the National Catholic Ministry to the Bereaved (NCMB) with headquarters in Cleveland. I met leaders in the bereavement field from all over the United States, networked with many bereaved persons, and chaired the 2000 NCMB National Bereavement Conference. I wrote a little meditation booklet for that conference, which was later published by Liguori as *Stepping Stones for the Bereaved*, and has since been offered in Spanish, too. Each milestone brought new friends and heartfelt experiences into my life.

REACHING OUT TO WTC FAMILIES

Following the September 11, 2001, attack on the World Trade Center, (only twenty miles away from my home), my office was overwhelmed with families to help. I opened up a Distribution Center for the \$150,000 worth of grief resources (books, CDs, teddy bears) that Centering Corporation of Omaha, Nebraska, sent to me to distribute all over Long Island to the many families and parishes who were affected by this tragedy.

Four weeks later, I received a call from ACTA Publications in Chicago asking if I would be interested in writing a book to be titled, *The Death of a Child* (they already had published books for loss of husband, wife and parent). Who could resist such a great opportunity? But I was swamped trying to meet the needs of over 500 WTC families. How could I find time to write a book too?

Understanding the situation, the publisher asked if he could call me back in three months, and to my delight he did. I was thrilled, especially when my outline and first chapter were accepted and we signed a contract for another "dream come true." Another gift. The first copy "hot off the press" appeared on my doorstep on Christmas Eve 2003, the best Christmas present I could have imagined!

JOINING THE RANKS

Gifts were multiplying. Early in 2003, while I was all excited about my impending book, I was invited to become a contributing columnist for the brand new *Grief Digest* magazine, to be published and launched by Centering Corporation. My head was spinning! I was invited to join all those authors whose work I had been reading for seventeen years, the people who kept me alive, who gave me motivation, who filled me with ideas on how to survive. I was so honored to join the ranks of Eloise Cole, Earl Grollman, Doug Manning, Darcie Sims and Alan Wolfelt. I had to pinch myself. I thought I had died and gone to Heaven!

CELEBRATING THE GIFTS

So why I am I telling you my life story? To show you all the gifts that have brightened and enhanced my life since the deaths of my Peggy and Denis—gifts I never expected. The comfort and rewards of reaching out to others have made me feel needed, loved, appreciated and very much alive. And all the speaking stipends, writing stipends and book and video royalties go directly to the "Peggy and Denis" Scholarship established at the University of Dayton (Ohio), making other young people's dreams come true while keeping Peggy's and Denis' memories alive.

On August 5, we will celebrate their lives with a giant fund-raiser for their scholarship, surrounded by family and old and new friends. How wonderful it is to know that even though Peggy and Denis have been dead for twenty years, they still make a difference in the world. That is music for this mother's heart. And not even guessing what future "grief gifts" will enrich my life, each day I simply look up to Heaven and say, "Okay, Lord, what's next?"

So, make sure to keep your heart open, ready to receive those surprising "grief gifts" that can pop up at any time unannounced adding peace and joy to your life, a smile to your face and a bounce to your step. Then, you, too, can say, "Okay, Lord, what's next?"

In memory of my children on the occasion of their 20th anniversaries:
Margaret Mary (Peggy) O'Connor
August 23, 1966 - August 2, 1986
and Denis Edward O'Connor, III
February 4, 1965 - August 6, 1986.

8/06

Grief is Such an Education!



By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY
elainestillwell@worldnet.att.net

Little did I know when my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, were killed in the same car accident how I would cope and survive after such a double tragedy. Would it be possible to have a meaningful life again? Could my husband and I and our remaining daughter bounce back and be a functioning family again? Could our tiny family group of three find happiness somewhere or would there always be this excruciating pain? Would we ever smile again? Could we fit back into the world again?

As a bereaved mother, I remembered the joy of giving birth to Denis, a beautiful ten pound, one ounce son; my first child, first grandchild on both sides of the family and named after both father and grandfather. An easy baby to take care of, he brought such delight to our parents, siblings and to my husband and me. When Peggy was born eighteen months later, I didn't think we could have a better baby, but she brought a bubbling personality and a special glow to our family, even when she taught Denis how to climb out of his crib. We were blessed with these two cheerful, healthy, loving children. I can remember that ecstatic joy as if it were yesterday. Who could look at them and ever imagine that they both would die so young, only juniors in college?

I kept thinking of all the things we had done together, all the school projects, trips to the library, music lessons, sports teams, vacations and holiday celebrations. I felt cheated and robbed. I never got to see what they would do with all the knowledge and life experiences they had accumulated in their short lives. I missed their companionship, their day-to-day chatter, their adult conversations, and their fun-loving personalities. The house became eerily quiet, the phone not ringing off the hook, no laughter or teasing, no begging for something they wanted, no playing loud music, two empty seats at the table. There would be no college graduations, graduate school plans, engagements, weddings or grandchildren from Peggy and Denis. That was a lot to absorb!

Where does one begin? How do I put my life back together again? What will motivate me to get up in the morning? How will I go on living when every fiber of my body rejects the idea? How will I deal with the excruciating pain, the kind that goes right down to your toes and feels like a vise is squeezing your heart? I felt like every breath of energy had been sucked out of me. The tears flowed like a river with no end. Their faces haunted me continually, whether it was in the middle of the night, at dawn's first light, or all during the endless day.

In those early days of grief all I wanted to know was how do I survive? To learn, I ran to the public library and haunted bookstores searching their shelves for words that would soothe my pain. I read every line of heartfelt prose and poetry written by all those bereaved persons before me. Story after story touched my heart and gave me guidelines for surviving, wisdom beyond my years. Reading was my first step to recovery in those dark beginning days, pulling me out of the depths of despair and filling me with positive thoughts to get through the painful moment. From all those books, crammed with those inspiring words, I discovered how to make it through the next five minutes, an hour, and eventually a whole day.

There is so much to learn. I was a beginner, in pre-kindergarten for the bereaved. I had no idea there were so many lessons for the grieving. How grateful I was that some folks took the time to write down what they learned and passed it on to me through the books they wrote. How lucky I was to discover that section of the library where these life-giving books were just waiting for me.

I discovered that books make a wonderful gift to ourselves, to someone we know who is hurting or to those who wish to help or understand grieving hearts. We can invite books to talk to us when we want their company and we can close their covers when we don't. They don't put us on timetables and they make no demands. They can bring much comfort and an occasional smile. Trying their suggestions, especially ones we never dreamed of, saving good ideas for use on tough days and getting our feelings validated are giant beginning steps in our healing. Books last long after the flowers have withered, the sympathy cards have been packed away, and the trays of food have been eaten. They can bring a moment's peace to an aching heart, can reach out and embrace a lonely soul, and can inspire music in a sorrowful spirit.

I learned to tell my friends and my family what I needed to survive because they didn't automatically know. I learned to do what gave me peace of mind, not what

others told me to do (especially those who had never lost a loved one). I learned to find activities that I could handle and to surround myself with the people who made me feel comfortable. I learned that we sadly lose some old friends, but happily find some new ones who let us grieve our own way. I discovered that we do many things differently, making new memories and traditions. I learned to thank God for the good days and to ask for help on the rough ones. I learned to keep communication lines open with my spouse and to respect his different way of grieving, avoiding the pains of loneliness and isolation. I learned that children grieve differently, too.

I learned to count my blessings and to think positive thoughts. I learned that it's all right to be angry with God; that He is always there to listen to how we really feel. He walks with us and sometimes even carries us. I learned that He did not *take* my children, but *lovingly* received them. I discovered that I would become a new person, never to be the same again, weaving a new family tapestry. I learned it was a real soul-searching time as I questioned everything I valued. I found that my priorities would be different, some things becoming much more important and others so trivial to be forgotten or ignored.

I found that memories of my children would bring joy to my heart, enriching my life and empowering me to do things in their honor, keeping their memories very much alive. I learned that even though Peggy and Denis died, the relationship lives on because love never dies.

Reading kept my sanity and inspired me to try things which had helped others. I was grateful for anything that eased my pain or made my heart feel a moment of joy. Trial and error was the only way I found what worked for me. Whatever helped, whether it was walking the dog, listening to comforting music or having tea with a friend, I'd write it down on a list to remember to do on a tough day. When you're grieving, it takes ten times the amount of energy to get through a day. so I learned quickly to carefully pick and choose the things I could handle on a daily basis.

So you see, there is much to learn when we are grieving. I lovingly refer to it as "Grief 101," the required beginner course for all of us bereaved to learn the basics. As the years go by, we might find different needs, feelings, circumstances and relationships to address. Then we are definitely ready for the graduate level course "Grief 301." We really never stop learning! And the secret to feeling better and "going to the head of the class" is to share what we have learned with others, reaching out to the newly bereaved and all those who wish to understand our pain. Happy studies!

4/07

What a Bereavement Conference Can do for You

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.

A new world opened to me when I attended my first bereavement conference following the deaths of my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, who died four days apart after the same automobile accident. I was eager to find anything that might ease my aching heart and give me motivation to go on with my life. Little did I know how much one bereavement conference could teach me about grief, fill me with positive ideas to try and offer me a sense of peace, a ray of hope and spiritual nourishment for my weary soul.

In case you are not aware of the benefits of a special conference designed for the bereaved, let me share with you what a great opportunity awaits you.

Choice of Workshops

You can choose workshops that are meaningful to you. You can learn about the grief process, finding hope, learning how to deal with the pain, spiritual nurturing, helping spouses or children with their grief, dealing with suicide, understanding the power of forgiveness, savoring memories, building rituals, etc. There are workshops not only for the newly bereaved, but also for those who are further along in their grief. Many of the workshops' messages also help those persons who minister to the bereaved, such as counselors, facilitators, nurses, policemen, teachers, clergy, ministry of consolation, funeral home personnel and also our family and friends who want to understand our pain. There is something for each of us to learn: the bereaved, their caregivers and those who don't know what to say or do for the bereaved.

Outstanding Presenters:

Some of the keynote speakers and workshop presenters are leaders in the bereavement field with top-notch credentials and years of service helping the bereaved. Some are the bereaved with years of learning to share their wisdom and knowledge with us. The workshops allow time in their presentations for us to ask questions, and we learn even more from the heartfelt questions and thoughtful answers.

A Safe Place:

These conference are a special time when we can talk freely about our loved ones and ask questions about those things that are bothering us. It's a time when we can leave behind other concerns and just focus on the person we miss, surrounded by people who understand our pain. It lifts a load off our shoulders when we find out that others have the same questions we have or feel the same way about things that are burdening us. We feel stronger knowing we are not alone in our grief or in our reactions. As we open ourselves to suggestions how to cope and survive, we feel more in control of our lives and better able to face the future.

Education:

We learn the truth about loss, ridding ourselves of some of the old-fashioned myths that people unload on us, like we should hurry to "get on with our life," that we shouldn't cry, that there is only one way to grieve, that "closure" exists, that bereaved parents have a high divorce rate, that there is a definite time schedule for the bereaved. We become informed grievers and are guided to set realistic goals, to learn that grief has its roller-coaster days, that anger is part of grief, that we must give ourselves "permission to grieve," that we take all the time that we need, and that our mantra should be "do those things that make your heart feel good."

Conference Bookstore:

Everyone likes to take home a souvenir and what better than a special book that talks to our hearts. The inviting conference bookstore offers us a chance to find just the right book from a wide array of favorite titles supplied from the leading grief resource publishers. The books we choose can extend the lessons when we go home. They can lift our spirits and fill us with knowledge about the grieving process. They can offer hope and bring us comfort long after the conference is over.

Information Tables:

Fliers, catalogs, newsletters and booklets are available announcing support groups, special programs and resources designed for the bereaved. These programs open new doors for us to enhance our grief education and to help us make new friendships with people who share a common loss. Each can add a bright new facet to our healing.

Spiritual Nourishment:

Some of the workshops focus on helping us feel God's presence in our lives through the powers of prayer, meditation, music and nature. Others offer spiritual direction guiding us over the stepping stones of anger, guilt and forgiveness while tenderly nurturing our weary souls. The messages offer us another dimension to soothe our heartache and mend our brokenness.

Registration:

Do yourself a favor and register for the next bereavement conference (local or national) so that your heart can enjoy the peace, hope and renewal of spirit that you will find there.

9/07



SECURITY CHECK: VACATION BAGGAGE

Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

Author of *The Death of a Child: Reflections for Grieving Parents*

Is the thought of a vacation too much for you to consider right now as you are grieving the loss of a loved one? Does it seem too much trouble to even think about choosing a vacation spot, deciding what to pack and doing all the things necessary to leave home for a week or two?

For me, after my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, were killed in a car accident, I didn't have the energy to even think of a vacation, much less go on one. I was content to stay in "my nest" as I called my home, relishing the nearness of everything that reminded me of my children. But others feel the change of scenery, getting away from the routine of daily life, leaving behind the things that scream vivid memories to them, trying a different pace, and having some time "away from it all" is what they need.

Then come the decisions. What do I bring, what will I need on this trip, and what will I definitely leave at home? Check the following list and choose what you think will make your vacation comfortable and a source of healing.

GUILT. This goes in the bottom of the suitcase—it's heavy. Stuff this inside a shoe and wear it out with time. You may need to walk with this a little longer, but you might decide along the way that you did the best you could do with what you had. Only you can decide when to discard it and feel the delight of a new outfit. It's like packing the wrong clothes and buying some new ones on your journey.

ANGER. As much as you would like to leave this at home, squeeze it into your bag. It's like a mirror; it confirms you are alive. It comes in many sizes and shapes and is used on many different occasions. You might decide parts are not worth carrying any longer. Use it sparingly as you venture to express your feelings. It's like perfume, use too much and no one will want to come near you.

THE "WHY" QUESTION. Don't bother to pack it. There are no answers. You would be wasting valuable space. Instead, bring "What's next, Lord?" and feel the comfort as new experiences lead you to some peaceful moments.

SADNESS. This, being so familiar to you, might be the first thing you put into your suitcase, but let it be like your umbrella, used only on stormy days. Share it with another and you will find that your grief has been halved. Put it away for the next rainy day and let the sunshine do its magic.

TEARS. These are essentials, like soap, that keep you feeling refreshed and renewed daily. Keep them readily available in your toiletry case or knapsack. They cleanse the spirit and release pain. They can be used in private or in public for many occasions. If handy, a spouse, friend or strong shoulder could be your "blotter."

HELPLESSNESS. These are outfits you thought would need, but rarely use. They just don't fit the climate of your destination. Just place them in the bottom of your suitcase and forget about them. They are good for protecting something fragile in your bag, like a framed photo you might like to bring along.

PATIENCE. Bring several packs of this. Learn to take your time and go at your own pace, using your timetable, not one designed by others. Take a day at a time so your traveling can be savored. It's like chewing gum: refreshing, comforting and relaxing. Stick with it and you can savor it's nourishing ingredients.

FORGIVENESS. This travels well, like a band-aid, much lighter than grudges. Pack as much as you can, some for yourself and some for others. Use it to layer the garments in your bag. It can prevent wrinkles, soothe spirits and make your burden lighter.

VULNERABILITY. This is very fragile. Slip it into your bag wrapped in a favorite memory, song, picture, poem or prayer, protecting it like bubble-wrap. Wear it until it's out of fashion and replace it with a stronger material like hope.

HUGS. Keep them handy in your purse or jacket pocket. Remember, it takes four hugs a day for survival, eight hugs a day for maintenance and twelve hugs a day for growth. They take up little space and are good for cushioning other things in your life. They are nonfattening, theft-proof, nontaxable and fully returnable.

"IF ONLYS." These might be too big to fit into your carry-on bag and they might set the alarm off at the airport checkpoint. Security might confiscate them since they only allow the three-ounce size. You will find that they are disposable and you will enjoy the resulting freedom as you shed them and choose the way to grieve that is best for you. They're like those awful shoes that give you painful blisters—get rid of them and seek something more comfortable.

HOPE. This does not take up much room. It is a healthy habit, like a vitamin, recommended to be used on a daily basis. It diminishes that tremendous void in your life and energizes you. It is elastic, expanding to make room for other good things you encounter on your journey.

POSITIVE ATTITUDE. This is better than a cell phone. Store it in a side pocket and use it when there are glitches in your travel plans or when black clouds hang over you. Lightweight, it is easy to carry and it tends to make all your outfits sparkle. Using it, you can reach out and touch someone.

MEMORIES. These resemble a light flowing garment that packs easily, allowing you to fill lots of empty spaces with happy moments that bring joy to your heart. Carry as many with you as you can fit into your bag and add some new ones as you travel. They are like comfy, bunny slippers. You wouldn't go anywhere without them, especially after a day of sightseeing, hiking or shopping.

COURAGE. Make sure you pack a good supply. Use it plentifully and get refills along the way. Keep it in a handy compartment, ready to use when needed and to share with others. It's like a refreshing bottle of water, reviving you when you feel exhausted or down. It might even feel like a glass of champagne as you toast yourself for doing new things.

PAMPERING. This is mandatory for your vacation. Now is the time to take good care of yourself, not out of selfishness, but out of wisdom. It's like a camera—focused on you, bringing smiles and building memories. Keep it on top, easy to reach and use, featuring the "new" you.

ROSE-COLORED GLASSES. These are a must when you are lost or feeling down, helping you to sort out hidden opportunities or find silver linings. They give you a change in perspective and add a rosy hue to even the toughest days. They enable you to see things differently and perhaps allow others to look at you differently. They don't take up much room and can add a whole new dimension to your view.

PRAYERS. Make room for some special words that open your heart to healing. Pack them in the outside zipper compartment, easy to get to when you need a lift. Prayers are simply talking, talking to God who is always there to listen and cry with you no matter where you are. Collect them like postcards ready to share their message with others or simply to "relive" the wonders of your vacation.

CALENDAR. Keep this handy to check daily. It doesn't have to be full but should have enough to keep you in a happy routine. Having something to look forward to gives your heart a boost. You will find that a date on your calendar gives meaning to your day. It's like a cup of tea, always invigorating and a real "pick-me-up."

SENSE OF HUMOR. Don't leave home without it. Stuff it in your bag and use it as much as possible. Don't be stingy. It lightens the load and makes the day brighter. It's like comfy underwear; it makes you feel good all over.

JOURNALING. Tuck a tiny notebook in your side pocket. Write about your grief journey, recording your ups and downs. It allows you to "pour out" your frustration, anger and sorrow and to "fill up" by counting your blessings. It's like wheels on your luggage, helping you to scoot along at an easy pace.

MEDITATION. This fits into those vacant spaces of your suitcase. Using it regularly on plane, bus, train, car or chaise lounge allows you to sort out your feelings, renew your strength and get in touch with your inner self. It permits you to dump useless items in your luggage and to acquire more comfortable ones. It is soothing to frayed spirits and gives direction to lost souls. It's like a top-notch Tourist Guide Book, pointing you to interesting places.

May you pack all the right things for your grieving heart, and may you learn the secrets of "lightweight" luggage.

7/08



Grief IS A LIFETIME PROCESS

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

Many people think that the lives of the bereaved go back to normal after a few weeks or months, and some newly bereaved are caught up in that same myth, too. They don't realize that grief is neither a short-term process nor a long-term process, but rather is a lifetime process. That is a hard fact to even contemplate as we start our grief journey. Everybody wants magic words, fairy dust or some instant potent to get through the agony of grief and return to what we knew as normal.

When my two eldest children, twenty-one-year old Denis and nineteen year-old Peggy, died from the same automobile accident four days apart, I had no idea how grief would change my life forever, but that is not the way grief works, which I was about to find out. As much as I fought for it to be, it was hard to grasp that I would never be the same person again. Further down the road, I would ask myself how I ever could have thought I would remain the same after such a heart-shattering loss.

People who tell us to "get over it" or ask "if we are over it yet," or insist that "we move on" have no clue what we are going through. Each day is a testing day, as we struggle to pick and choose what we think we can handle in our day. We hope to find those things that will give us a moment of peace, a way to ease our pain or an inkling of hope. As we discover the things that allow some joy into our lives, we make a "to do" list and keep repeating the things that help. We find new ways to get through a day, decision by decision, basically learning how to live again.

In those early days, reading helped me the most, finding out how others lived through the death of a loved one and found a meaningful life again. Their experiences gave me hope that I, too, would get myself out of the grief maze safely and triumphantly. Sharing what helped them survive gave me courage to think it was even a possibility. Trying some of the things they suggested for coping, such as talking, journaling, enjoying nature, walking, and joining a support group, kept me busy challenging the grief process. I also discovered that my dog Mickey (a black lab-mix) offered the most gentle, healing therapy with those big brown eyes and tender, loving ways. He prompted me to get up each day, take a walk, appreciate nature, and even snuggle together, as he offered me his listening presence as my constant companion. He was the best medicine for my weary heart.

Practically every grief book I read mentioned The Compassionate Friends, a national organization offering support and understanding for bereaved parents and siblings. When I found there was no chapter in our New York area, I asked my husband if he would like to help me start one in our hometown. Twenty-one years later, we are still welcoming bereaved parents and siblings to our separate monthly meetings. We thought we would have ten or fifteen bereaved parents attending each month, but we didn't realize how many bereaved parents were out there. Thirty-six showed up at our first meeting on October 9, 1987, and today we have sixty to seventy five at each meeting, even though there are now six other chapters within thirty miles. We have met wonderful people, made lifelong friends, and learned so much from each other. Being part of a support group opened new doors to us for coping and surviving. Our new acquaintances enriched our everyday experiences and inspired our progress forward. Reaching out to those struggling with the traumatic pains of early grief made us feel better. It's funny how it works, but forgetting about ourselves for a few minutes and helping somebody else actually eases our pain and allows some joy to penetrate our lives.

Since we all grieve differently, we have to find what works for each of us, individually. Some people are very private, simply working on their grief all by themselves or quietly with God's help. Others find causes in which to publicly invest their energy, memories or anger to make things better. Some write about their heartfelt discoveries in grief and others give lectures and workshops sharing what they have learned. Each follows his own heart.

Some have been lucky enough to have faithful family and friends who have never left their sides as they walked the walk. Many have been extra lucky to welcome new friends into their lives; friends who became constant companions on this difficult journey. We tend to search for those people with whom we feel comfortable and who do not burden us with demands or time schedules. We are grateful for the array of loving listeners in our lives, and we joyfully unite with people and places that give us meaning and purpose.

Some have found worthy causes for the love they wish to share in memory of their loved ones by volunteering, establishing a scholarship or foundation, donating equipment for hospitals, libraries, schools, etc., lecturing, writing, painting, composing music, to name a few activities. Over time we can often find a little niche that gives us comfort and helps somebody else while keeping our loved one's name out there never to be erased.

For some reason, sharing what I learned about coping and survival came easily to me. The words just flowed from my pen, emptying my heart of all the things that I want others to know, all the things I struggled with, all the new support that is available now but was not there years ago. As I maneuvered year by year through the never-ending grief process, I learned to attend bereavement conferences, to network with others, and to keep updated with the latest ideas and trends in the bereavement field through magazines like *Grief Digest*.

As the years go by, it's the rituals we develop that keep our loved ones close to us. I am surrounded with pictures of my

children. I do enjoy seeing their happy faces and remembering their smiles and twinkling eyes. Some folks put the pictures by the front or backdoor and always greet or kiss them upon entering or leaving. Whether it's lighting a candle to remember their presence, supporting a cause in their name, having special masses or prayers said for them, planting a tree or garden, beautifying an area in their memory, wearing a necklace or pendant with their picture, we find ways to keep our loved ones close to us as the years go by.

My children's pictures are the wallpaper on my computer screen, greeting me each morning as I boot up and each evening as I bid them goodnight. Every time I answer the telephone and help a newly bereaved person, I feel I am honoring my Peggy and Denis.

Years later, whether we're carrying the coffee pot to our support group meeting, welcoming the new members, manning the Lending Library, baking cookies, setting up chairs, or writing the newsletter, we continue the bond with our loved ones, no matter how many years it has been since they died. We work hard keeping their memories alive. "If their song is to continue, then we must do the singing." We are the "keepers" of the memories.

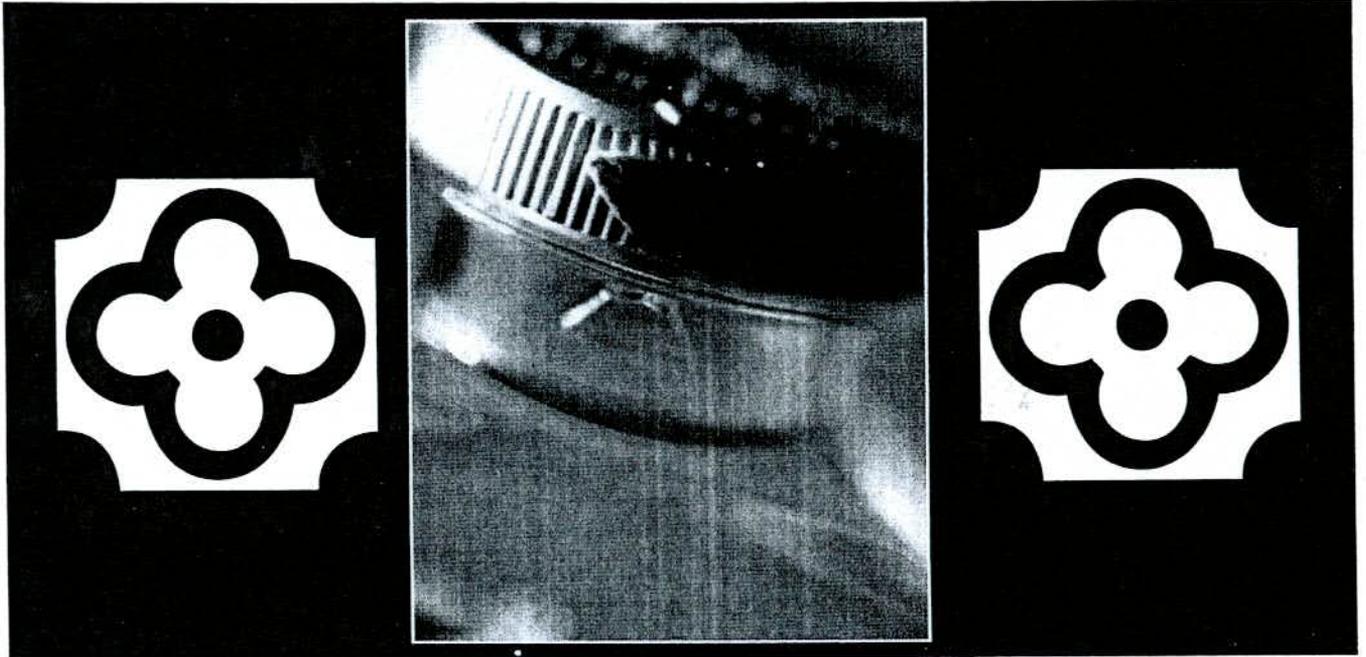
Even though my husband and I have managed to climb the grief mountain and get out of the "Valley of the Shadow," there are times or events that trigger overwhelming feelings and emotions, times when we just want that person to be with us, physically. When my remaining child, Annie, got married, how I wanted Peggy and Denis to appear in that wedding party. When my grandson was born, I wanted Peggy and Denis to be godparents. When we get together for family events, how I wish my grandson had aunts, uncles and cousins to be in his life. When I watch my close friends and relatives be surrounded with their many children, spouses and grandchildren, how my heart aches to have that festive family gathering, but it will never be with just the four of us. As my Denis' and Peggy's friends graduated, achieved careers, got married, had children, I missed having those celebratory events and watching them become beautiful adults, especially after all the hours I had invested in homework, term papers, music lessons, soccer games, swim meets, football games, scouting, CCD programs, and carpools. These are the "thorns" in lifetime grief. They pop out and prick us in the garden of life.

For those who have established scholarships or nurtured other programs in memory of our loved ones over the years, it makes our hearts sing when relatives and friends support those endeavors. But sometimes those same people feel that they gave once and that is enough. That can be another hurdle on the journey. They don't seem to understand how remembering our loved ones is music to our very soul.

As the years go by, a new me is constantly emerging, and each day is a new day of discovery. Along the way, I am discovering skills and strengths, pursuing dreams and desires, completing projects and goals, as I cherish the memories of my children, the strong bond I have nurtured with them, and the people I have helped in their name. That's what "older" grief is all about and it's part of the "lifetime" grief process—and God's plan (which He is going to explain to me some day).

4/09

"Over-the-Counter" Rx for Being a Survivor



By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY

Most of us don't want to be victims of grief forever. When my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old year old Peggy, were killed in a 1986 car accident, I had no idea how long the grief process would be part of my life. I gradually learned that it's not a short-term process, nor is it a long-term process, but rather a lifetime process. How we handle it, make the most of it, incorporate it into our lives, is what helps us put our best foot forward to be a triumphant survivor.

We need to find our own way to grieve, a way that is comfortable for us, not one that people demand of us or lace with guilt. Being comfortable in our own skin, trying to accept the reality of our loss, to experience the pain of grief, to adjust to life without our loved one, and to move on with life, is a big order. This takes time and involves making many choices, which can be exhausting. We are continually testing ourselves to see what works for us and what knocks us over. Each of us has very different needs so we don't follow a set pattern of grieving. Take your time to see what helps you get up in the morning. What motivation gives you a jump-start to your day?

I didn't want my children "erased" from people's memories (although in the beginning I had no clue how I was to accomplish that). I wanted my children to be proud of me as their mom, cheering for me as I faced each day trying to be a triumphant survivor, and I did not want to waste that special love I have for them (finding ways to share it with others would come later). Allow yourselves time each day to ponder what makes your heart beat. Carve out a few minutes of your daily schedule to face your grief. Say, "This is my special time with my loved one." I say, "This is my sacred time with Peggy and Denis." Those moments become something you look forward to because they are very comforting, healing and energizing as we tuck away those memories that will be part of our hearts forever.

Love never dies. Keep the communication lines open. Include your loved one in everything you do. It could just be talking to them, praying to them, writing to them, lighting a candle for them. Or it could be writing about them, wearing something that belonged to them like a sweater, hat or piece of jewelry. Or you might want to wear a "picture" pin or necklace. Lately, more and more grieving folks are marching to the tattoo parlor to get a favorite, meaningful symbol like a butterfly, heart, or phrase imprinted. I always put my children in charge of the weather for special events so they are part of our birthday parties, graduations and get-togethers. Many of my friends call for their help, which really makes my heart sing. When I'm stuck, I

implore Denis' and Peggy's aid for balancing the check book or finding the missing sock. Just a quick prayer to them and you feel their immediate presence, especially when you are hung up on a problem or stuck in traffic. They seem to bring a calmness, a peace, when all else seems overwhelming.

Finding ways to bring a moment of joy into our lives is another step forward. It could be singing in the choir, improving our computer skills, taking up photography, or maybe knitting, quilting, writing, gardening, going to the gym or something that distracts us and gives us a few minutes of peacefulness. Something that calms the beast of grief. (Ann Hood's novel, *The Knitting Circle*, poignantly shares knitting's soothing effects on a young bereaved mother and others in her knitting circle.) Or we could do something "crazy," as some non-bereaved folks might describe our actions. We bereaved are allowed to be crazy as long as we are not hurting anyone. When my family welcomed a brand new two-and-a-half year old Labrador retriever named Max, we sent out birth announcements to the amazement of our friends, welcoming our ninety-six-pound puppy. We got such a kick out of that gesture, sharing the happiness he brought to our home and how he rejuvenated our dear fourteen-year-old lab-mix, Mickey.

Any deed that causes a grin, lifts that sense of emptiness, or brings a warm-fuzzy feeling to our heart is worth doing. Whether it's keeping our loved one's voice on our answering machine, making postage stamps with their picture on it, signing their name under ours on cards, announcing their names on our license plates, pouring jelly beans or a beer on their grave, we lighten our grief by creating ways to remember them in an upbeat, meaningful fashion that makes us feel better.

Channel Anger. Anger is a part of grief, and yes, nice people do get angry. Instead of beating ourselves up for being angry about the death, or at those who were not there for us, or at those who might have been involved in the death, we can channel our anger by doing something positive in our loved one's memory. Anger tells us we are alive and it catapults us into action, like volunteering for our favorite cause (Breast Cancer, Heart Disease, Cystic Fibrosis, MADD, Organ Donation, etc.), improving something, such as equipment for hospitals, schools, or libraries, helping somebody's dreams come true by giving scholarships to schools, colleges, camps, sports and music activities, or by establishing a foundation that reaches out to the needy by providing meals, clothing, school supplies, funds for heating, house repair, medical procedures.

We might even reach out to the newly bereaved by offering our services in our churches, temples or support groups, where we discover the indescribable rewards of helping others and taking the focus away from our own grief. I have been a Chapter Leader of The Compassionate Friends (a support organization for bereaved parents and siblings) for eighteen years and Bereavement Coordinator for the Diocese of Rockville Centre for ten years (guiding the bereaved in 134 parishes by informing them of all available local programs and support groups for the bereaved and providing training for their facilitators). These two "life-giving" ministries have filled my life with loving people as we walk the grief journey

together, dividing our pain and doubling our joy. They begin to feel they know my Peggy and Denis. Do you know what that does for my heart?

Be Positive. It's what you tell your head. Each morning when I get up, if I say, "I'll never see my children again, my stomach does flip-flops and I feel devastated. But instead, if I say, "I'm one day closer to seeing Peggy and Denis," my heart sings. Stay in the present. Repeat the things that you know bring a glow to your day. It could be reading, golfing, walking on the beach, visiting a good friend, playing with a grandchild, listening to soothing music. Follow your heart. That's the rule of thumb. Don't do anything that gives you angina. Do what you can handle. Some of us might be letting the laundry pile up, forgetting about the cooking, not answering the telephone, or avoiding relatives, but we might be creating the most gorgeous garden or knitting hundreds of scarves or watching American Idol – anything that relieves our pain and gets us through another day is what we should be doing. There should be no guilt "following your heart."

Persevere. Continue to do something in spite of the difficulty. Hang on while riding the roller coaster of grief. You can yell and scream all you want as your grief hits all those curves and dips and bumps, but don't give up. Hang on to hope. Know that a bad day just means you can "start over" tomorrow. Have realistic goals that you can meet. Be fair to yourself. We all have bad days that blindside us, but they also enable us to feel the beauty of a good day, the love of a dear friend, the power of a gorgeous sunset, the peace of a robin's song, or the elegance of a bouquet of flowers. Let the sunshine in through those cracks in your aching heart and feel its warmth and comfort melt your winter grief. Listen to its tiny voice cheering you on as you put one foot in front of the other to survive. Treat yourself to a bouquet of colorful flowers, rewarding yourself for doing the hard work of grief. As one bereaved mother said, "Every week I used to bring a bouquet to my daughter's grave. Now, each week I buy myself a bouquet, put it on the kitchen table and feel all the blessings of my happy memories."

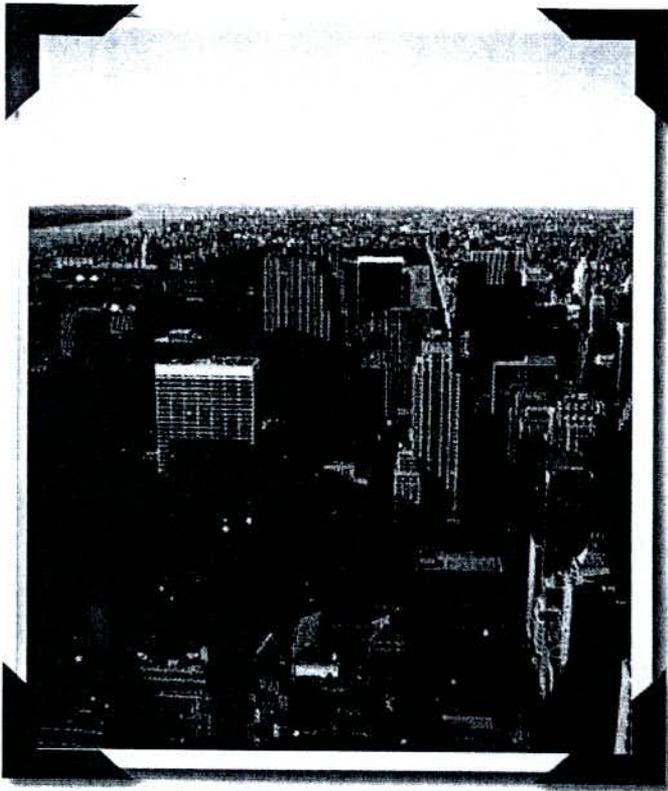
Search. Discover words, phrases, slogans, prayers or stories that help you reply to people's insensitive advice to "get over it" or to their numerous inquiries of "how are you feeling" (ditch the handy retort of "fine" and find one that really tells how you feel). It is our job to educate the "civilians" as we call the non-bereaved, but of course that is impossible to do as we are just starting out, learning all about grief ourselves. The right words will come in time as we grow with our grief. When I was in church at Easter time and the priest read the gospel words, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," I thought to myself, those are the perfect words for people who say insensitive things to us. So at our meeting, I told my support group, the next time someone says something to you that really hurts, just say this little prayer, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do, Assholes, Amen" and you will feel better right away. One lady asked, "Do I say it out loud?" I said, "NO!" Just the right words snap you out of feeling like the victim and put you in control.

No doctor needed. These are just a few "over the counter" prescriptions you can grab all by yourself to become a triumphant survivor. Hope they work for you!

7/09

Inspirations from New York City

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S., Rockville Centre, NY



Little did I realize that popular tourist attractions could offer inspiring messages to the bereaved until I began preparing a welcoming keynote speech for a national bereavement conference being held right here in New York City, twenty miles from where I live. As I gathered information about my favorite NYC places to visit, I was amazed at the wealth of hope and encouragement for the bereaved that is available right here in my own backyard.

Too bad I didn't know this in 1986 when I lost my two eldest children, twenty-one-year old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, in a car accident! But it's never too late to learn. Maybe you have some favorite places where you live that can speak to grieving hearts and offer motivation to choose life. Here are some of mine, straight from the Big Apple:

The Statue of Liberty. This symbol of new life to thousands of immigrants and exiles from all over the world challenges us to rebuild our lives, find our new normal in a new country (the bereaved) with a new language (grief). Just as the immigrants learned that life will never be the same again, we, too, discover

that with lots of hard work we can have a rich and meaningful life again. The Statue of Liberty can truly "light our way" from grief to healing.

Ellis Island. An historic building, vividly shouting the struggling immigrants' stories, moves us to tell our stories. I call it "sharing Peggy and Denis with the world." Experts tell us that telling the story over and over is the best thing we can do for our hearts, just as the immigrants told their stories over and over, never to be forgotten and to pass down to future generations. We must keep telling our loved one's story because "If their song is to continue, we must do the singing."

New York Public Library. One of the world's greatest research libraries, its broad-stone, front steps guarded by those famous twin, stone lions actually named Patience and Fortitude, reminds us to practice those virtues of patience and fortitude. It also encourages us to take the time to read the stories of those who walked before us, giving us all kinds of good ideas how to cope and survive. So become a lion and devour those stories of hope.

Empire State Building. This bold, daring, dominant skyscraper invites us to view life with the new perspective we have gained from our grief. We are encouraged to put on our new lenses (or our rose-colored glasses) to focus on our priorities, make each minute count, rid ourselves of unimportant things in our lives and see clearly the blessings we still have. Follow in the footsteps of King Kong and Fay Wray, Cary Grant and Deborah Kerr, and Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan and discover the magic of this extraordinary view.

World Trade Center. When these 110 story twin towers toppled to the ground following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attack, we were presented with a sacred space to reflect on our losses, to never forget and to design unique ways to keep our loved ones' memories alive. This is where we can be absolutely alone with our sorrow.

New York Botanical Garden. New York's oldest and largest public garden guides us to find comfort in nature, and to realize that a colorful spring always follows the bleakness of winter. The magnificent collection of rhododendrons, daffodils, azaleas, day lilies and chrysanthemums calls out to us that our hearts will bloom again, that there can be new beginnings.

Metropolitan Museum of Art. Discovering Egyptian artifacts or Roman armor, Chinese porcelain, or Renaissance or impressionist paintings opens doors for us to pursue new interests, to bring new joy to our lives, helping to fill that feeling of emptiness. We might begin quilting, playing the piano, twittering, pursuing photography, writing poetry, collecting angels, anything that will bring new life to our broken hearts.

Carnegie Hall. The world's most famous performance space, offering everything from grand classics to Liza Minnelli Live, touches our whole being with the comforting gift of music, whose melody or lyrics brighten our days. Playing those favorite songs on our ipods, walkmans or stereos can ease our pain and lift our spirits.

Grand Central Terminal. This symbol of power with its forty-eight pairs of railroad tracks and attendant platforms reminds us that we have many choices to make on our grief journey; that this is a testing time where we keep trying to find the right direction to go on with life. Choosing the right time, the right destination and the right companions on our journey is a big part of our grief work.

New York Stock Exchange. America's financial nerve center suggests the up-and-down roller coaster of emotions that we experience as we grieve with absolutely no help from a government stimulus package. We invest our hearts and souls and hang on for the long term, waiting patiently to earn our healing dividends.

The Cloisters. Medieval treasures set among tranquil gardens suggest taking time out to grieve in a favorite comfy spot, something we should do daily. We need to find a spot each day—a park bench, church pew, comfy recliner—or while we are walking the dog, where we can address our sorrow.

St. Patrick's Cathedral. One of the finest Gothic churches in the U.S. welcomes us to feel its serenity, renew our spirits, comfort our hearts, say a prayer, light a candle or feel God's presence. Emptying our pain, talking to God, feeling His loving arms around us, or sensing the presence of our loved ones fills us with restoring powers and hope.

Rockefeller Center. Famous for its immense Christmas tree, popular ice skating rink and holiday visitors encourages us to plan ahead and to figure out what we think we can handle for the holidays, maybe trying some new things or relying on favorite traditions.

Radio City Music Hall. Concerts, spectaculars, special events and the world famous Rockettes prompt us to put a date on our calendar giving us something to look forward to giving meaning to our day, whether it's a cup of coffee with a friend or a date for dinner at a favorite setting. Getting out of the house is a giant first step.

Bronx Zoo. The largest zoo/wildlife conservation park in the U.S. encourages us to enjoy the gentle therapy of a pet, its loving presence, its crazy antics and its abiding loyalty. A pet can get us out of bed, make us open the refrigerator, get us to walk around the block and cause us to smile and feel loved when we are broken-hearted and barely able to face each day.

Times Square. The capital of razzle-dazzle for more than one hundred years invites us to "choose life," to enjoy what there is to enjoy, to get out of the house, be with friends, have a "time-out" from our grief as we deal head-on with the grief process.

The Plaza. This opulent national historic landmark reminds us it's important to pamper ourselves, to give ourselves a treat, to say, "I deserve that." It's a reality message cautioning us that it's hard to help anyone else unless we are in good shape ourselves.

Yankee Stadium. Saying "goodbye" in 2008 to The House that Ruth Built, with all its memories, and saying "hello" to the brand new Yankee Stadium in 2009 helps us to create new memories for our new normal. We can add to those treasured old memories that will never be forgotten.

Central Park. A magnificent garden in the midst of concrete and steel canyons, a place to relax, listen to birds, climb rocks, enjoy concerts and Shakespeare, jog, bike, picnic and sun on the lawn urges us to find new routines or pleasures for the heart, mind and body. It's an invitation to join life, to feel the healing rays of sunshine or the romance of starry nights, the energy of outdoor exercise or the delight of nature's gorgeous flowers and acres of plush, green grass. It welcomes us with open arms with its "life-giving" message for all ages and lights our way through grief.

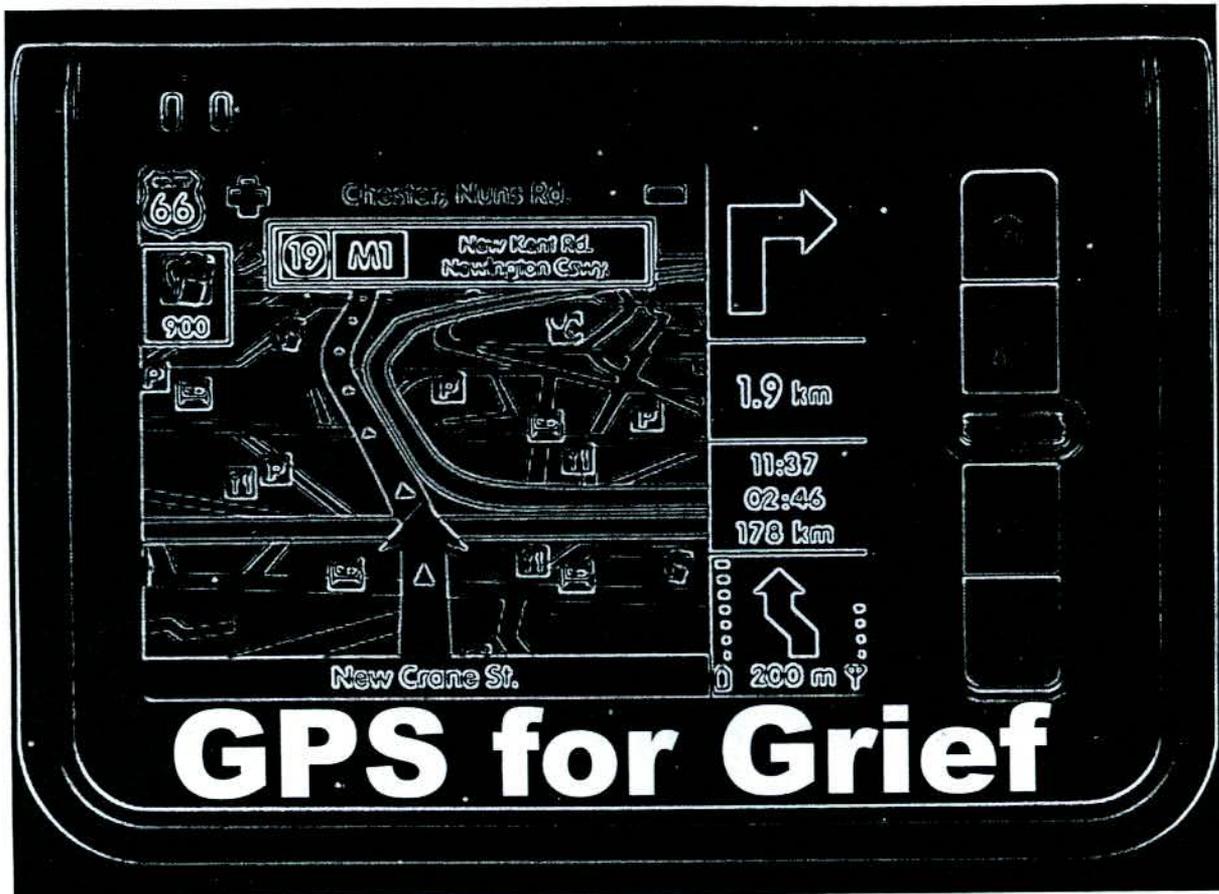
So get busy. Check out those local tourist attractions. Surprise yourself discovering the messages of hope and inspiration right in your own backyard.



Photos by Danielle Nolte, Centering Corporation, from the BP/USA conference in July.

10/09

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.



Everybody seems to be using a GPS (Global Positioning System) system in their cars these days to know where they are going and how to get where they want to be. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we bereaved could just plug in a gadget to know where we were going and how to get there?! How much trouble that would save us in our struggle to know what direction to take, what crossroads to choose, which route is the fastest, and how long it will take. That would make our grief journey much smoother and easier to handle. After my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, died in a car accident, I sure could have used some clear-cut directions on how to survive. Now, years later, I could invent my own G-GPS (Grief-Global Positioning System) for the bereaved that would include:

Exact Route.

This would be a major challenge for my GGPS, since experts tell us there is no "one way" to grieve, that we all grieve differently. But this new GGPS, with the touch of the thumb, would pick up our DNA and know instantly which way to send us, which fork in the road we should pursue, which rest stop we should choose, and which points of interest would ease our pain. It would guide us to the homes of loving relatives and friends, steer us away from those trying "to fix" our grief and direct us to places that would soothe our souls. In brilliant color, like the yellow brick road, it would light up the path to the nearest support group where we could find friendship, understanding and hope.

Alternate Route.

For born shoppers like me who like to look at everything before making a decision, my new GGPS would offer a few choices that I could try to find just the right one for me. Since we have little energy and little desire to do much, we could start by picking simple things we can do each day, hoping to find what eases our pain and what we can handle without being overwhelmed. This GGPS would keep track of the helpful choices we discover so we can repeat them over and over again when we are having a tough day. It is also comforting to know this new GGPS can detect our feelings, knowing whether it is an up or down day for us and can provide an alternate route for us to fit our moods. This is the genius of the system, understanding that grief is a roller coaster ride with lots of scary twists and turns and steep valleys. It generously supplies information to confront those alarming conditions by providing a safe, comforting path to match our frame of mind. It could point out special prayers that whisper to our hearts, comforting music that sings to our souls, a precious book that motivates our wills or a fragrant flower that lifts our spirits. It will direct us along the scenic route feeding our need for nature's beauty and renewal while shielding us from the bumper-to-bumper highways devoid of inspiration for our beleaguered spirits.

Wide Screen Map.

How helpful to get the big picture of grief, opening our eyes to the many facets involved in the Grief Process! For the newly bereaved, this feature alerts them to the tasks of grief that they must face and deal with in order to get to their destination of healing and having a meaningful life again. What a gift to be enlightened about the myriad of feelings we might encounter! It lifts a burden off our shoulders as we confront shock, disbelief, denial, bargaining, depression, guilt, anger and all the other feelings of grief, learning that they are part of the grief process. Our new GGPS shows us the lay of the land and what lies ahead for us to face, pointing out the grief work we must do to reach our destination.

Colored Map.

Our GGPS provides an explicit, vivid map for us to follow by feeding us with questions to write about, prompting us to keep a journal, jotting down our thoughts and feelings about the things that give us a boost and those that are devastating for us. Just looking over what we have written points us in the right direction showing us what to continue doing and what to avoid, which people to stay away from and which places or social situations are too painful for us right now. It also gives us a chance to say what we wanted to say but never did. It allows us to be the “keeper” of precious memories. Like a rainbow or a flash of lighting, our emotions paint a colorful map for us to follow.

Voice-Prompted Directions.

We get many of these from various sources, but our GGPS would allow only soothing words from those loving people who do not put us on a timetable or tell us what to do. It would sense and delete insensitive comments. That would probably be the best selling feature of this system. It would protect us from feeling the sting of those painful comments that might cause us to veer off the road of recovery into a ditch of depression. This GGPS would also enable us to hear that tiny voice from within that cheers us on to believe, “I think I can,” and guides us to choose life. The “step-by-step” directions are like a faithful lighthouse, illuminating our thoughts, sparking ideas and inspiring us to action one step at a time as we find our way through the maze of grief.

Predictive Text.

These words can steer us from problem areas. We can be more aware of the pitfalls that are out there; the potholes of grief that we want to avoid. We are advised to deal with our feelings rather than ignoring them or stuffing them down inside us to erupt later. We’re guided to wear out our guilt, to find the source of our anger, to reinvest our love and to rediscover our inner strength and innate center of peace. Paying attention to Predictive Text could make our journey shorter and more bearable.

Hands-Free.

This feature enables us to try many different ways to grieve, not being tied down to one method. We might want to smash

that tennis ball, whack that golf ball, walk the dog, run the marathon, hike the treadmill, stroll the beach, pray in church, howl at the moon, scream in the shower or cry in the car. We find what works for us, what gives us energy and the will to keep going. Today’s challenges will lead us to new meaning and purpose. We try to remain open and receptive to life’s lessons, gaining a new level of understanding and awareness as we explore new roads and highways through grief.

Radar Detectors.

How wonderful to be alerted that there is a nearby reason to slow down! This new GGPS would warn us about the people to keep at arms’ length until we are strong enough to deal with them, especially those urging us to “get over it.” It would caution us about the overuse of alcohol and drugs to ease our pain. It would steer us from social activities we are not ready for yet, and it would gladly inform us about new ways to make time to relax, meditate and pamper ourselves. This would be like having our own Guardian Angel watching over us twenty-four hours a day.

Touch-Screen Display.

This marvelous invention would keep us in touch with our feelings. With a touch of the finger, we would be reminded to appreciate each person who “walks with us,” to be in touch with God and all of God’s blessings in our lives and to reach out to other bereaved persons to share what we have learned. The touch-screen display feature would keep us keyed in to beauty as we can gaze with admiration at a sunrise, count the stars in the sky, feel the power of the ocean or the majesty of the mountains and be renewed with nature’s bounty. It sparks a sense of fresh energy and excitement within us.

POI (Points of Interest).

We don’t want to miss any place that might be a beacon of light and hope for us. This new GGPS would happily inform us of points of interest along the way that could offer a menu for healing. It would alert us to churches, libraries, museums, theatres, spas, gyms, boat rides, bike paths, support groups or any program that would stir us into action. It would invite us to step out of the house to reconnect with life.

Where Am I?

This marvelous feature helps us find the closest hospitals, police stations and fuel stations. Its ultra-thin stylish design fits in our pockets or purses to be taken with us to navigate on foot and find our way back to our vehicle while visiting parks, stadiums, theatres and malls. In our grief, we do tend to get confused and find it hard to concentrate or remember. How safe we feel when we have a Godsend like this. To know we will not be lost encourages us to try new things. We do not want to be sidetracked or delayed in our quest for peace and harmony in our lives. We know our lives have forever changed, that this is not a short-term process, or a long-time process, but rather a lifetime process. We learn to use whatever it takes to point us to true north, discovering a meaningful life again.

So, what do you think? Should I hurry and get a patent for my GGPS?

1/10

Grief Welcomes the Newspaper

By Elaine E. Stillwell, M.A., M.S.,
Rockville Centre, New York

As I was reading the local newspaper recently, I wondered how many of the paper's features reminded me of things I did or encountered on my own grief journey. When my two eldest children, twenty-one-year-old Denis and nineteen-year-old Peggy, were killed in the same car accident years ago, I never realized how much the newspaper could reinforce the grief process.

The Front Page

The tops in news makes the newspaper's front page, complete with pictures and headlines. When we are newly bereaved, our losses are "page one" news in our lives. Morning, noon and night all we see are the images of our loved ones who died. Those faces, like that front page photo, are enmeshed in our memories, haunting our daylight hours, accompanying us wherever we go, never leaving us. They are the first thing we see when we wake up in the morning and the last thing we remember as we fall asleep at night, painfully reminding us of our loss. Those beautiful faces of Denis and Peggy were as big as life to me as I awoke each morning and as I closed my eyes at night. Their presence never left me. That front page picture became part of me forever.

Reporting

The newspaper relates the details as it fills in the headlined story. Just like the reporters grabbing on to every new fact, we bereaved tell our stories. I talked to everyone; telling them about my children was my therapy. I call it "sharing Peggy and Denis with the world." Grief experts tell us that talking is the best medicine, and I overdosed on it. I still pity the person sitting in the window seat on the airplane as I chatted on about Peggy and Denis. Just like the newspaper story giving everyone the facts, we need to know all the details in order to process the information and make the death real for us. The more we know, the better we can address the myriad of haunting questions that assault our hearts and souls while we are trying to piece together the facts and make sense of the death. Telling our story again and again (as the papers do) keeps alive our loved one's memories and helps us deal with loss in a positive way.

Photography

Pictures are worth a million words and sometimes even a million dollars. Just ask the paparazzi or any newspaper editor. Photographs tell a story, too. Like the newspaper photos, favorite pictures of our loved ones can bring tears and smiles, a bittersweet feeling. How we want to remember every part of those precious faces, afraid that we might forget those twinkling eyes, those curly locks, that contagious smile, those delicious dimples or those infectious freckles. Whether we

display pictures at home, make a brag book to carry with us, or hang their picture next to the door to greet us upon leaving or arriving home, we find ways to keep those faces smiling at us. Some, like me, even use those pictures as "wallpaper" on their computer screens, because it's so easy to wish them good morning or good night each day. Pictures connect us to memories and that's important, because we are now "the keeper of the memories."

Sports Pages

These are the newspaper pages many folks turn to first as they enjoy their morning coffee. In fact, some family members fight over who gets them first. Sometimes we need time out from our grief. It could be time to exercise or simply walk or jog, or time to pursue a pastime like golf, tennis or karate. In today's world, the gym has answered many a grieving person's needs by providing a place to work off frustration or vent some pent-up anger. Activity sports like golf, tennis, bowling or racquetball invite us to get interested in something, make us feel alive again, and get us moving off the couch and out of the house. Spectator sports like baseball and football answer a need, too, offering us time to "run away" from our grief and grab a few minutes of sheer relaxation and/or time for energetically expressing our emotions as we watch our favorite teams. We are lucky that there is such a variety from which to choose. The sports pages offer us a comforting oasis from pain.

Hobbies Section

Some of us just need an outlet for creativity, something to take our minds off our haunting grief. That's when we can turn to the bridge or crossword pages or the columns about knitting, needlework, gardening, coin collecting, computer skills or house repairs. Newspapers offer us an array of subjects to fill lonely hours that might otherwise drag for us. They fill us with ideas for exciting interests to enrich our lives and ways to make some new memories and maybe even some new friendships along the way. These new or expanded interests help us to reduce the feeling of powerlessness by providing a sense of control through completing a task or just enjoying it. With each decision we make, we become stronger.

Comics

The newspapers offer cheap, happy therapy! Laughter is like premium gasoline. It helps take the “knock” out of living. We give ourselves time to cry, but we need to also give ourselves permission to laugh. It will not be showing dishonor to our loved ones. We can't turn back the clock, but we can wind it up again—with laughter. Newspapers treat us to a wide range of comic strips that can give us a chuckle, a time to lighten our spirits and even a time to bring back a special memory. Sometimes the comics just give us time to relax and remember funny things we did together. That could rescue us from the doldrums and provide a healthy sign that we will survive. Grateful for this gentle therapy, we might want to cut out some of our favorites and paste them in a special album that will make us smile each time we glance at it, or we might want to post them on the refrigerator door to make us laugh every time we walk by. Who could not grin from ear to ear when looking at the Lockhorns, Marmaduke or Dennis the Menace? Just remember, a smile is the light in the window of your face that tells people you're at home.

Advice Column

As we well know, not everybody is savvy about grief. How helpful it is to have a knowledgeable columnist who can explain so thoroughly what the bereaved need and how to can help them. Columnists can be our first teachers, pointing the way to find support groups and sharing ideas that will help us to cope and survive. The strategies they suggest might open doors for us to discover lifelines like The Compassionate Friends, American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, Parents of Murdered Children or local hospice programs. Books they recommend for the bereaved might even be the magic ingredient that gets us to understand the grief process and to get busy doing our grief work.

Travel

Inviting pictures with luring descriptions of exciting resorts, gorgeous landscapes, breathtaking views, quaint cities, relaxing beaches and cozy hideaways fill the newspapers' travel sections and offer us a chance to find just the right place to renew our spirits and “get away from it all.” Some families agonize about whether to go away for a vacation after losing a loved one, and some families can't get away fast enough, hoping they will leave their grief behind. We don't really get away from our grief; we simply get away from familiar surroundings filled with memories, life's daily pressures and people who put unnecessary demands on us. Getting away for awhile can be very healing and comforting.

Obituary Pages

Just as the newspapers' obituary pages sometimes tell life stories, we want to tell the world how special our loved ones were. We might want to write an informative article for the local newspaper or an article to be included in its obituary column informing others about our loved ones. We might choose to write a beautiful acknowledgement card with a picture and story of our loved ones, so their memories will

not be erased. Today, I still use the card I wrote about Peggy and Denis in 1986 to share memories with the new people I meet. Never did I think that the acknowledgement card that I so tenderly designed when they died would still be useful so many years later in sharing my favorite thoughts about them. The initial writing about our loved ones might even lead to journal writing, emptying our hearts onto paper, expressing what feels good and what hurts, what we're thinking and feeling, what we miss, giving us a great way to unburden our hearts on our grief journey.

Advertising

The newspapers are filled with a variety of ads trying to make our lives easier or more beautiful. That should be good news to those of us who are grieving and looking for anything that will minister to our broken hearts. Could it be a new restaurant or maybe rescuing a puppy from the animal shelter? Maybe it could be to join a local walkathon for a cause that is dear to our hearts. Maybe it is the ad for volunteers to serve in the local food pantry or to join the community choir? Perhaps it is an ad for a favorite food on sale or a new, inviting, super-comfy recliner, or a much-wanted, flat-screen TV? I smiled every time I got into my new car, thinking how much my son always had kidded me about my Plymouth Horizon, calling it a “piece of plastic.” Now, I know he is shouting, “Way to go, Mom,” as I drive my brand new Buick Park Avenue! When we are grieving, we might find that treating ourselves to something special can lift our spirits and bring some joy. We don't have to max out our credit cards as some do, but sometimes a special treat can bring a new dimension into our lives. Personally, I strongly recommend rescuing a puppy!

Whether it's Book Reviews, Letters to the Editor, the Op-Ed page, the Movie Schedule, Theatre Critic, Lottery Numbers or our favorite columnist, newspapers keep us updated and tuned-in to life and offer us many ways to brighten our days. It's something that requires “trial and error” as we discover the blend that refuels each of us on this grief journey.

As newspaper boys shouted in the old days, “Extra, extra, read all about it!” Happy reading!

