

WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

*For bereaved families and the people who care about them,
following the death of a child, sibling, or grandchild.*

Spring 2023



***The
Compassionate
Friends***
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

Hands

*Little handprints
in a frame,
Flashback of memories
days long gone,
yet still so fresh in my mind
as if only yesterday.*

*Tiny hand of my baby girl,
Fingers curled around my own,
Only a reflex to some,
But not in my mind,
For me only the purest
of loving connections.*

*Outstretched toddler hand
reaching out for mine.
trusting mother's protective grasp,
maneuvering the busy streets,
we skipped together,
hand-in-hand.*

*Slender-fingered teenage beauty,
polished nails, smooth scented hands.
Seeking independence,
Hands pushing me away,
Sensing somehow her reluctance,
Not really ready, not quite yet...*

*Hands of her adult years,
I thought would have held mine
as I navigated through the ageing years.
Hands to comfort and hold, but never to be,
I am left only with my memories,
and tiny handprints,
in a frame...*

- Cathy Seehuetter written in memory of her daughter Nina



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TCF Bereavement Support Comes in Many Different Ways

Readers of this magazine have different connections to The Compassionate Friends (TCF). Some are long-time members who have strong familiarity with TCF. Some are newly bereaved or are just learning about this wonderful and supportive organization. Others who receive *We Need Not Walk Alone* are people who want to support people in their lives who are bereaved.

The Compassionate Friends mission has remained the same over our five decades of supporting bereaved families in the U.S. TCF provides highly personal comfort, hope, and support to families experiencing the death of a son or daughter, sister or brother, grandson or granddaughter. We also help others better assist grieving families. How this mission is met has many components, some that may be familiar and some that may be new.

TCF supports bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents through a network of over 500 chapters across the country that meet in person. We have chapters in every state plus Puerto Rico and Washington, D.C. TCF also supports bereaved individuals through our main website that serves several hundreds of thousands of people each year with grief support articles, information on upcoming events, grief awareness and education, and ways to locate needed services. Over 40 private Facebook groups support specific types of losses and experiences. These closed groups, plus our Online Support Chat Groups, provide support from others who share similar experiences any time of the day or night when it's needed. Events such as our National Conferences, Walks to Remember, Worldwide Candle Lighting Programs, and Virtual Bereavement Support Programs are offered for engagement opportunities with others nationally throughout the year.

This breadth of resources allows bereaved individuals to access as many offerings, or as few, as is fitting. People can move between different methods that best support their grief for as long as they need or want to. *We Need Not Walk Alone* magazine is one of the most cherished of our resources for many who have known TCF over time. We hope that you enjoy this edition of our TCF magazine that helps connect, inspire, comfort, support, and offer hope no matter what stage you are in of your grief or of providing grief support to others.

Warmly,

Shari O'Loughlin, MBA, CPC
CEO
The Compassionate Friends

The Fight

You are no longer with me physically, now I can only hold you in my heart.
My last born, first gone.
How do I live?
I will not let addiction steal from me who you were.
I will remember the sweet gifts you left behind;
Your love, the fun times, and so much laughter.
I will remember;
My place in your heart.
I will remember;
How I have gotten through really hard things before.
I will remember;
Not to let death have the last word.
Gone but never forgotten.
I will always love you,
From Mom

- Donna Rhodes

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I am now a seasoned griever and Chapter Leader, but my most memorable experiences I took with me from the Conferences were in the first few years. My overwhelming grief was met with overwhelming support and love from other bereaved parents, chapter leaders, regional coordinators, conference presenters, as well as the national team. I knew then that I would not walk alone; I was with Compassionate Friends. In 12 years, I have never missed a conference, and I go there to give back.

Betty Valentine, Cara's Mom – New Castle, DE

Walking the Path of Grief

by Jean Robison



The greatest tragedy of my life happened two years ago when my son died by suicide at the age of 24. I suddenly find myself on a journey of grief with no compass and no guidelines. In the first year of grieving, I am a ping pong ball, whacked around every which way. When searing grief shows up— a song, a thought, passing the funeral home – it stops me in my tracks, grabs my heart, and makes my chest burn with the physical pain of losing him. I am so overcome with thoughts of missing him that I collapse on the ground in the middle of a road, clinging to my husband's ankle as I sob. We watch a stupid sci-fi movie about a character who dies a painful, fictional death, and I run screaming into the bedroom, burying my face in a pillow to shriek my rage about losing my past, my present, and my future in a moment.

I walk the path of grief that first year by being in shock. Two days after his funeral, I go back to work as a musical theater summer counselor at a camp, staring up at a surreal blue sky. Eight weeks later, I am back at work full time during the worst of COVID-19: hybrid teaching, everyone masked, Americans sick and dying. As an English teacher, I regularly

teach topics and themes of death, and I do so with a cool outward demeanor. Shock serves as a protective shield; it allows me to function outwardly day to day, while inwardly the grief builds up until it must be let it out, somehow.

At the same time, I come to learn there is no judgment when it comes to grieving. My mother has not cried since losing her first grandson, whom she adored. My husband tears up and has his own set of triggers, such as listening to the lyrics of a particular song, but he does not sob loudly like I do, although I can see that he suffers quietly. A lesson that settles in is that we all grieve differently, in our time and in our own way.

In the second year of my grieving, the shock wears off and is replaced with the harsh, cold truth. I react with wild emotional swings -- good day, bad day -- good week, bad week. I start out my morning feeling stable, and I am angry and exhausted at sundown. I am a pendulum, swinging to its farthest extreme, and then to the other way. I remind myself that my grief has no timeline, no rules, and no judgment, but I know that I need to think more about what is healing and

helpful for me. I start to listen and look around for more, and I am open to whatever comes through.

I have always known that the best place to feel and to heal is by taking walks, as my son always lets us know he is with us. He is a gorgeous red cardinal singing his glorious soundtrack on a branch above my head. He is a bold dragonfly that circles, passes close to my face, and lands on my hands, allowing me to stroke his wings. He is the young deer that lives around my home that locks eyes with me before running off into the woods, always with one last look over his shoulder before he disappears. On my worst days of just wanting to lie in bed, I force myself to go outside to see the sun, the clouds, the trees. When I am in nature, he is most clearly with me, and I am grateful for his presence and his playfulness as my feet connect to the earth and my head is tipped to the sky.

In dreams, I see him as my beautiful boy who looks into my eyes, talks to me without words, and hugs me. The dreams of visitations are filled with the presence of love and an absence of pain on his sweet, angelic face, sometimes as an adorable child, a bouncy pre-teen, or handsome young man. Although they are rare, I treasure each visitation dream as my greatest gifts, carefully recording them in my journal. I do not want to lose or forget these dreams, as they keep me going during my toughest times.

I increase self-care, self-love, and my understanding of what has happened to me, to him, and to our family. I read

books on grief, death, and spirituality. I purchase yoga props to inspire a restart of my home practice. I commit to and deepen my daily meditation practice. I make a career change from teaching to writing. I attend weekly virtual therapy sessions and make a commitment to travel to Kripalu, a beautiful retreat in Lenox, MA, where I take live yoga classes, participate in heart-opening, mind-expanding workshops, and meet other spiritual seekers.

Early on, we set up a cabinet in the family room to proudly display mementos and achievements to honor our son's life. Two years went by with our not making any kind of home improvements, as we were just getting by, surviving day to day. Now, we are in the creative process of renovating and redesigning spaces that need greater beauty, for our healing.

There is a lovely walking path created in honor of my son on the side of our house with flowering plants, bright, hand-painted stones, and a bench that faces the morning sun. I walk the path every day. I send love to all who are walking their own path of grief.

Jean and her husband Jim loved and continue to love their son Andrew dearly, who they lost to suicide at age 24 in 2020. They are also proud, loving parents to their adult daughter Michaela. Jean's first career centered around dance and theater, and she feels grateful for the opportunity to perform as a professional around the country. She also directed and choreographed many plays and musicals and taught yoga. Her second career was as an English teacher in middle and high school. Her greatest loves are her two children, husband, family, cats, nature, yoga, and meditation.

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I have gone to four conferences, arriving at the first one without knowing anyone. I found a gang, and we have gotten together at each subsequent conference, and often compare notes about meeting topics, etc. Don't be afraid to go alone; you will have a new gang before you go home!

Lindsay Bibler, Tracey & Alex's Mom – Cincinnati, OH



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About Your Room

by Elizabeth Brady

Your blue camo backpack hung on the back of your desk chair with your Pittsburgh Penguins baseball cap on top of it for eight years. It was as you left it on the last day of school before the Christmas holidays in 2012.

It was September 2020; I was in your room with a mug of dark roast and my phone. We had decided to replace the wall-to-wall carpeting upstairs. The installers were coming the next day and I was on deadline. Both Dad and Iz were out of town. The task of dismantling your room came to me. In truth, it was probably good to have an excuse to finally tackle it. The air in your room was a little stale.

Looking around the room, I smiled remembering the last time we spring cleaned your room together. Dad and Iz were at a retreat for the weekend, so we decided to clean out your drawers and rearrange the furniture. You had two large blue plastic bins of stuffed animals, so I suggested you sort them into two piles: one to give away and one to keep. I opened the window and screen above your desk and said, “Toss the ones you want to give away out the window.”

“Are you kiddin’ me?” you laughed and peered through the window at the porch below.

“Sure!” I smiled at your delight. “We can collect them off the porch later to give away.”

How you laughed. “This is totally awesome!” You said and lobbed a handful of beanie babies out the window.

Your desk was largely how you left it except for the absence of Fi-Fi’s cage. We had given your dwarf hamster to Mrs. W’s classroom a few months after you died. Fi-Fi had been lonely without your attention. She was surprisingly social and delighted the class until she died a few years later. Mrs. W read the students a book about dealing with the death of a pet and for some reason it sent me into a fit of giggles thinking of how you would have reacted to all the fuss. They buried Fi-Fi under the tree dedicated to you in front of the school.

Over the years your bed became a depository of gifts for you. There were several professional signed soccer jerseys. Iz bought you mini snow globes and left them on your nightstand. Dad continued to buy you key chains from his travels. I bought a stuffed animal for every event and holiday that reminded me of you: a monkey with a red kiss on the cheek, a little brown bear with blue slippers, and puppies of all colors and sizes. It was an impressive

mountain of animals! I sifted through the pile; I had the foresight to jot the date and event on each tag, to remind me of the occasion.

Your room remained a place where we came to remember you and leave mementoes we would have shared with you. But you were frozen in time in that room as an almost-nine-year-old boy.

I had been in many bereaved parent groups when the discussion of “stuff” came up. It can be the source of great tension between couples and families. Long before I met your dad his grandmother had tossed out all her husband’s personal belongings in the days after he died, essentially erasing him from the house. That complicated and impulsive decision on her part reverberated decades after his death.

I had given a few items away in the early months after your death, including a new wool navy blazer that you complained bitterly about wearing, “It’s itchy!” but you looked so handsome in it and received so many compliments, you began to enjoy dressing up. Both Q and C wore your blazer to their first communion services.

Many people advise not to rush, to try not to make big sweeping changes too soon. For me, this was good advice and thankfully both Dad and I agreed. But, after almost 8 years the room felt different to me. In the early days I would come and cry on your bed, I could still smell you in your pillow. The red pom-pom on the hat of your favorite plushy stuffed snowman stayed crunchy from when you had chewed on it. But now the stuff felt more inanimate, not as infused with you as it was when you infused it with joy and care.

I looked around the room again and decided to dismantle your bed first. I sat down on the floor with my coffee and phone and pulled two drawers full of jammies out from under your trundle bed. I emptied them onto the floor. I picked up each one and remembered you in them. I held them. I smelled them deeply to see if I could still smell you. I couldn’t. Your terry cloth robe with the teddy bear ears was your favorite. You were so huggable in it. My teddy bear. I tied the arms of the robe around my neck like a scarf.

I pulled out a small, stapled book made of construction paper that was stuck in the back of one drawer. It was an old class project. I felt like I had discovered a lost treasure! I marveled at each page, looking at your handwriting, hurried as always, and your drawings. At the top of each page

there was a prompt “My Favorite Toy” and “My Favorite Sport”. You had answered every question with either the word soccer or had drawn a soccer ball. At least you were consistent I said out loud and smiled. I felt you near and it warmed me. On the last page the entry was “My Favorite Things” and you drew another soccer ball and wrote Mom and Dad with a blue heart. This melted me. Tears streamed down my face. I miss you, Mack. I laid down on the pile of your jammies and hugged as many as could fit in my arms and cried until I fell asleep.

At some point my phone buzzed and woke me up. Dad Facetimed to check in and when I answered with my puffy eyes and your teddy bear robe tied around my neck, he was mildly amused and concerned.

“Oh boy,” he said.

“I’m okay,” I assured him. “Just feeling the feels.” It was getting dark, and I was on deadline. I brewed a fresh pot of decaf and gathered the boxes and green bags from the garage and headed back up.

After a slow start, I tore through the rest of your room like a tornado. I made three piles: save, give, throw away. In the pile to save: your soccer kits and gear. I also kept your Teddy Bear robe, slippers, and a pair of unopened Adidas socks. I still wear them when I run a 5k.

The biggest pile was to give away: Lots of games, lightly used clothes, stuffed animals were all boxed for donations. The whole furniture set and your bed we gave to a second cousin born several years after you died. His mom later sent us a video of him dancing around his new ‘big boy’ room. His excitement breathed new life into the old Ethan Allen set, that had also been your dad’s.

And the last pile to throw away: In your honor, I smiled as I opened the window and pulled up the screen to shove several large green plastic bags full of stuff through the window to thud on the porch below.

Elizabeth’s son Mack died suddenly on New Year’s Eve 2012. Elizabeth teaches at Penn State and her essays on learning to live with loss can be read on [Open to Hope](#), [Modern Loss](#), and [Mackbrady.com](#). She has participated on the panel “A Flower Picked Too Soon” at several national TCF conferences, including Houston in August 2022. Elizabeth served on the content advisory board for the Public Television documentary “Speaking Grief” that seeks to help us all get better at grief. ([speakinggrief.org](#))

Questions:

A Sibling's Struggle with Acceptance

by B.C. Goss



I never got to say goodbye. You were just gone. In an instant, with no warning. Or maybe there were warnings, but I just missed them. Was I too self-involved to notice? Did I not care enough? Why didn't I keep trying to call you back after our call dropped, would I have stopped you? Would I have been able to say something that would've pulled you back down from that ledge? I'd like to think so, but probably not.

What would I say to you now? I would tell you that I love you, that I admire you. You inspire me to be a better person, a better mom. I only ever wanted you to be happy. I'm sorry that I wasn't there for you even when you didn't want me to be. I should've showed up more. Why didn't I call you more? Or visit or make plans. I wish I could've spent more time with you. You were so funny and smart and silly and fun to be around. My kids adored you. I wish I told you more how much they loved you, how much you meant to them.

I wish I asked about your pain. I wish I knew how to ask about it. You deserved more. You deserved more love, more understanding, more help. You weren't broken, you were human. Your pain wasn't your fault. I wish I could've sat with you in your pain and held it with you not try and discredit it. I wish I would have been there with you even if it was uncomfortable. I wish I could've held your hand and cried with you. Your pain deserved space.

You mattered in this world, to so many people. Why didn't you know that? Why didn't they tell you? Why didn't you believe them if they did? I know you hated yourself, I think that makes me sadder than anything, that you felt so much anger toward yourself. You never deserved that. You made other people so happy. You were a light in this world, but you shone for everyone else but yourself.

These questions are why I have so much trouble accepting that I'll never talk to you again. I wish I could've loved you

through your darkest days. I didn't want to try and fix you, I just wanted you to feel seen. I see you now.

It's hard knowing that now I am older than you. I hate thinking about that. You are my older sister; you always will be. Even when I'm 80, I hope. Do you still see me? Are you there? Can you hear me? I don't feel you. I never have, not since you've been gone. Why should I expect to? Why should we still expect you to show up for us even after your death? Isn't it time for you to rest? You deserve to rest, you deserved to rest while you were still alive. You deserved peace and happiness, not pain and anger.

Maybe someday I will be able to accept that you are gone. That this isn't just a really long period of time that we haven't spoken. That's what it feels like most days. That maybe

someday I'll get to tell you all these things. Until then.

Briana Goss is the sister of Kasie Collins who was tragically lost to suicide in September of 2018.

Briana is now a Writing major at the University of Wisconsin Superior with a focus on creative

writing. This is the first time having her work published. Briana, her parents Ellen and Brian, and her brother have been advocates for mental health issues since Kasie's passing and will continue to do so to honor her life that was cut too short. The Kasie Care project was created by her mother, Ellen, and honor's Kasie's light by leaving carabiners around the country attached to a positive message from Kasie for people to find.

These questions are why I have so much trouble accepting that I'll never talk to you again.

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I would say that the greatest experience at a TCF Conference is meeting the amazing siblings that have become a second family to me. At my first National conference, the SIBS took me under their wings and made me feel like I could finally talk about my sister freely. They shared their grief journeys and listened to mine. I wasn't alone anymore!

Lisa Cohen, Shari's Sister - Hatboro, PA

Life's Sacred Moments

by Harriet Hodgson



After my physician husband completed his year-long tour of duty in Vietnam, the Air Force sent him to a base in Selma, Alabama. He was the commander of the base medical group. My husband and I, along with our two young daughters, lived in a converted barracks.

Each morning, dozens of maids walked from town (about four miles) to clean houses and apartments on base. After working all day, the maids walked four miles back to Selma. I couldn't believe it. I still can't believe these women walked eight or more miles to feed their families.

It was dark when I heard a voice in the distance. A woman was singing a famous African American spiritual, "My Lord What a Morning." Her rich contralto voice, a voice worthy of the Metropolitan Opera, rolled out over the lush green countryside. Each note seemed to hover in the air. As the woman neared the base, her voice became louder, and she improvised more on the melody.

Hearing the song made me feel like I was sharing a sacred moment. Decades have passed since I first heard her song, yet it is clear in my mind. Every time I hear "My Lord What a Morning" I get tears in my eyes. I can't sing the spiritual without crying. Though I was aware of life's sacred moments before, I became more aware of them after four family members died in 2007.

My father-in-law died of pneumonia on a Friday in February and my elder daughter, mother of my twin grandchildren, died the following Sunday. She died of the injuries she received in a car crash. Eight weeks later my brother and only sibling died of a heart attack. In the fall, the twins' father died of the injuries he received in another car crash.

Suddenly, my twin grandchildren were orphans, and we were GRGs, grandparents raising grandchildren. The twins moved in with us when they were 15 years old, and we became their legal guardians. Today, when I reflect on this time of life, I think we learned more from the twins than they learned from us.

Though your idea of sacred moments may differ from mine, these moments can be uplifting. The word "sacred" has many meanings and applies to beliefs, rituals, places, objects, art, music, nature, and experiences. Sacred moments—a pink and orange sunrise, eating with your family, the devotion of a dog, a baby's laughter—happen every day.

Due to the pain, confusion, and stress of grief, we may not be as aware of these moments as we could be. Thankfully, we can remedy this. We can expand our awareness of sacred

moments and live mindfully. Awareness of sacred moments is a form of self-care, something we all need.

In her book, *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*, author Therese A. Rando, PhD says we need to support and love ourselves to recover from loss. "Mourning may require self-supports different from the ones we are used to," she writes. We may need to be more active or quiet, think or talk more, or express feelings aloud or in a journal, according to Rando.

Poet John O'Donohue writes about sacred moments in his book, *To Bless the Space Between Us: A Book of Blessings*. In his blessing, titled "For Grief," he says grief makes life strange, kindles guilt, and can create a lack of trust. Yet when the tears finally stop, we have endured, and are able to see a new dawn.

Developing an awareness of sacred moments takes time and is worth our time. Sacred moments can create community. Sacred moments can be beautiful. Sacred moments can be learning times. Sacred moments give us hope. Sacred moments add richness to life. Most importantly, sacred moments lead to self-discovery.

When you are "in" the moment, you get to the bedrock of your identity. Every day contains sacred moments, some of them tiny, some of them momentous. What moments are sacred for you? Be aware of them, revel in them, and let them seep into your soul. You are alive. Another day has come and it's your personal miracle.

Your child would want you to be happy. Live each day to the fullest in honor of the child you loved—and continue to love—so much. Make each day of your amazing life count. Savor life's sacred moments and grow from them. You may even find yourself singing "My Lord, What a Morning."

Harriet Hodgson is acquainted with grief--too well acquainted. She is a bereaved mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, mother-in-law, and friend. A week after her daughter died, Hodgson sat down at the computer and described her grief in words. Writing helped her understand grief and her new mission in life, to write books that help people. Hodgson is a long-term member of The Compassionate Friends, and has spoken at national and regional conferences. A prolific writer, Hodgson is the author of 45 grief books, including 11 grief resources. Many of her books have received awards. She was Assistant Editor of the Open to Hope Foundation website.

What moments are sacred for you? Be aware of them, revel in them, and let them seep into your soul.

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

While great healing happened when hundreds of bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents all come in one room to listen, mend, and grow together, the experience of seeing the pictures and/or the names of all our children remembered with song and grief, joy and tears still stands to this day as an incredibly powerful moment for me. We all watch, look, and listen, and find strength in the unity of hope.

Fr. Al Johnson, Nicholas' Dad, North Barrington, IL



Building A Self-Care Toolkit

by Shari O'Loughlin

There are many misnomers about the idea of self-care including that it's an act of indulgence. Our quickest images are of visiting a spa or getting a massage. While there is nothing wrong with those activities, self-care entails much more. It is an important skill for managing grief.

Grief is often physical, emotional, spiritual, and psychological. It impacts all facets of our lives and affects each of these areas of our being. Self-care is an essential part of building coping skills in the immediate acute time following the death of our loved one, as well as over our lifespans when grief revisits us in different ways and with fluctuating intensities.

Self-care involves smaller, regular practices that affect each of our senses to shift the energy we're feeling in moments of sorrow. A personal self-care tool kit identifies small things you can turn to when the waves of pain hit. The more senses you can address, the more opportunities you possess to manage through those waves.

Here are some easy ways to tap into different senses and shift your energy around the pain of grief.

Taste

- herbal tea, coffee, chocolate, fresh fruit

Sound

- soothing music, grief songs, sounds in nature

Temperature

- warm bath or hot shower

Scent

- essential oils, bath or shower salts, flowers, scents in nature

Conversation

- phone call, in-person chat, Facetime with a friend or loved one

Reading

- books about grief, uplifting or inspirational material

Writing

- journaling or poetry

Touch

- hugs, bodywork, holding hands

Movement

- exercise, walking, yoga,

Growing things

- gardening, planting trees, growing flowers

Building or working with your hands

- woodworking, yard tending

Mind tasks

- crossword puzzles, search-a-words, puzzles

Gratitude practices

- Verbal, written, while walking or with yoga

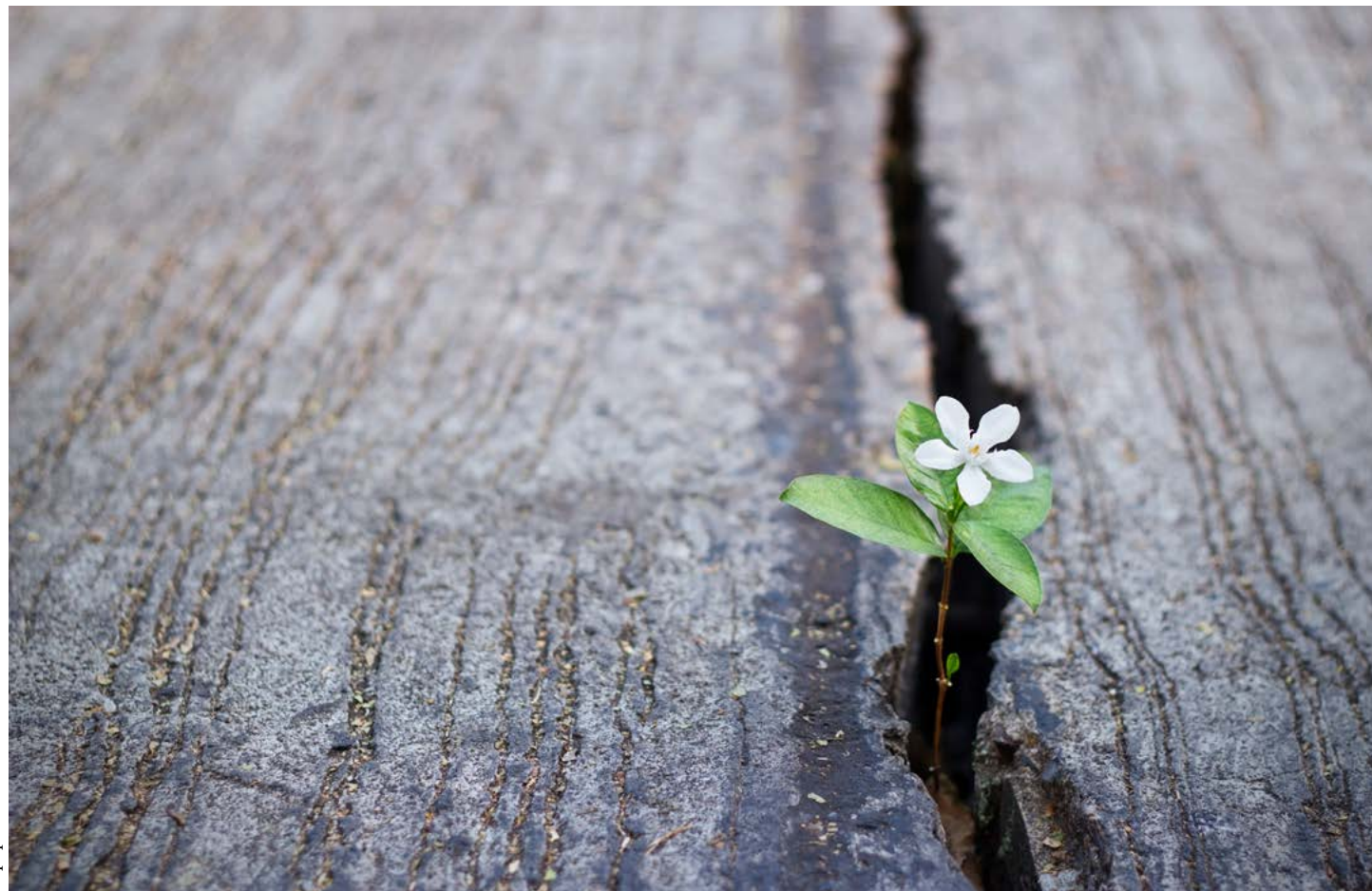
Each person's preferences will differ. The important thing is to identify which are for you. If you are more newly bereaved, have a list prepared and things on hand such as herbal tea, coffee, essential oils, bath salts, a yoga mat, or crossword puzzles. Keep a physical list of all options in your tool kit. When waves hit and you feel knocked over or immobilized, it can be hard to think clearly. With a list and items readily on hand, you can turn to some small measures of immediate support and relief.

*Shari O'Loughlin is chief executive officer for The Compassionate Friends. She formerly served as executive director for the Children's Grief Center of New Mexico. Prior to these positions, Shari served in executive and entrepreneurial roles for over 25 years in diverse business sectors. In 2012, Shari found her local TCF chapter in Albuquerque, NM, after the sudden death of her beloved 14-year-old son, Connor. She became involved with TCF and presented workshops at national conferences. Shari published the book, *Life from the Ashes; Finding Signs of Hope After Loss* and is a bereaved parent and a bereaved sibling from her youth. She has an MBA from The University of Chicago, is a certified leadership coach and business consultant, and is a writer and speaker on loss, grief, and growth. She has developed corporate programs for supporting grief in the workplace and stewarding clients through grief. Shari is a proud mom to her two loving young adult daughters.*

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I must say that I have had the privilege of many memorable experiences as an attendee at the TCF National Conferences. After having attended enriching workshops and speakers guiding us along our grief journey, heartfelt sharing sessions, and connecting with old and new friends centered around the love we have for our loved ones gone too soon, is the Saturday Night Candle Lighting. Together in this dimmed conference room full of candles, we remember with deep emotions and love, as we listened to "Tonight I Hold This Candle."

Lucy Suvalski, Max's Mom – Urbandale, IA



Parents Getting Hope Back

by Dr. Bob Baugher

You are reading this because someone you love died—your child, your sibling, or your grandchild. The word hope has gone out of your life. It matters not whether the death of your child, sibling, or grandchild was sudden or due to a chronic condition, the minute-by-minute absence of this precious person has left you dazed, shocked, confused and wondering how you can live another day.

As we know, one way of hope coming back into our life is for time to pass. However, when I asked TCF parents, grandparents and siblings what they did to put hope back into their lives, they said that, at first that they cared little about hope. Because they were in so much pain, all they could imagine was another day with more of the same. They told me that, later, they found hope by doing at least one of the following:

1. Find self-compassion

One mom stated, I came to the realization that few (or none) of my previous life experiences prepared me for this

and therefore I had to learn to be good to myself and forgive myself. In what ways are you being good to yourself? You know that your child, sibling, or grandchild would want you to take care of yourself.

2. Make a decision to go forward

Despite their pain and missing their loved one, many people stated that, at some point they made the decision to move forward with their life by bringing the memories with them. Several dads told me that they eventually came to realize that that they could not outrun their grief or fix it, but they had to fight just to live another day. One dad said: *I had to realize that I'm a new man because my son now lives inside of me.* A man whose sister died told me: *When I realized that I wasn't going to work through grief, I let it work through me; and I decided to have a new life and a new me.* Please understand that moving forward does not mean leaving your child, sibling or grandchild behind. You take this person with you as you live each moment, each day.

3. Attend a TCF meeting

Have you ever sat in a TCF group meeting? If so, do you remember the first time you walked in prior to the start of the meeting? Of course you do. What did you see? People chatting, some even laughing. For a moment you may have thought you were in the wrong place because—well, these folks couldn't be people who've experienced the death of a child. However, you soon found that, indeed, this was the right place. How did hope eventually emerge from the depths of your grief? It came in the form of a gift from the so-called “old timers,” such as Chapter Leaders, group facilitators and long-time attendees who seemed to have found hope. At first you may have mistakenly thought, “These people could not have loved their child or sibling as much as I did.” However, as you got to know these folks and learned their stories, you realized that, despite their tragedies, they could laugh again and even reach out to others with hope and caring.

4. Educate yourself

Time and again TCF people have told me that understanding the craziness of grief through books, articles (such as those in this magazine), online materials (see compassionatefriends.org), videos, and workshops helped them to eventually move through the dark tunnel of despair toward the light of hope.

5. Give to others

If the death of your loved one is recent, the thought of helping others at this point in your life may be a far-out notion. However, there are thousands of stories of people who, after a time, were able to reach out and offer a hand to those in need. There may come a time in your grief journey where you find that you may be ready to offer some of yourself. Those who have chosen to take this step report that the very act of giving helps them to begin a new journey—a journey of hope, of finding their way again, of getting in touch with who they are, or discovering a new part of them that feels

right. Perhaps you're not ready. But when you are, there will be people who will be so grateful that you have chosen to help. And you will be thankful that taking this step has brought hope to your own life.

6. Start paying attention to the blessings

The death of a child, grandchild or sibling can reaffirm the realization that life is so very precious and that there are many things to be thankful for.

7. Attend a national TCF Conference

Each year more than 1,000 people make the decision to register online, get into their car or on a plane, check into a hotel and attend a TCF conference. Have you ever attended? If not, then consider attending the next one from July 7-9, 2023 in Denver. As those of you who have attended a conference know, you walk into the hotel and see hundreds of people, each of whom has experienced the death of a child, grandchild, or sibling. The keynote speakers and workshop presenters provide amazing stories of hope—stories that lift the spirit and leave people with the clear message that, despite their feelings of loss and grief, they can find joy and meaning in life again. A TCF Conference is a place filled with caring people, lots to learn, hugs, and most importantly hope. However you manage it, find a way to get there. And, look for me in a workshop, walking down the hall, in the bookstore, or at the banquet. Come up and say, “Hi. I read your article on Hope and now I'm here,” and, if you want a hug, just ask.

Love,
Dr. Bob

Dr. Bob Baugher is a psychologist and certified death educator who teaches at Highline College in Des Moines, WA. He is the professional adviser for the South King County Chapter of TCF. Bob is the author of grief-related books and several articles on coping with bereavement. For the past 25 years, he has been invited to present workshops at most TCF national conferences.

The workshops were very helpful and the keynote speakers were inspiring. They left me with a feeling of hope! I am so looking forward to this year's conference. - TCF National Conference Attendee



Memoir Writing as My Grief Recovery

by Jeff Seitzer

Early in my tenure as a stay-at-home dad, I shared a lot of laughs with my mother-in-law Aleta about parenting. She suggested I keep a journal, so that I could publish some of the stories one day. When our son Ethan was still very young, however, I decided against it, because he did not like being the center of attention. As he put it: “Some people need to be the main character, but not me.”

Then, on a beautiful summer day, Ethan drowned while swimming with me in Lake Michigan. Everything happened so fast. It was all a blur, save for one moment. Sinking with him, certain we both were going to die, my last thought before blacking out was, “I won’t be able to tell his story.”

Convinced I survived to write about our time together, I faced a seemingly insurmountable obstacle at the outset. I had no memories of him whatsoever other than of drowning together. Soul-crushing images of struggling in the waves played through my mind on a continuous feedback loop. Nothing else about him could force its way into my consciousness.

When Ethan was born in fragile health and needed constant care, I gave up teaching to stay home with him fulltime. A self-involved academic with neurological problems of my own, I was in way over my head. He thrived nonetheless, and we had oodles and oodles of fun along the way. The experience forged a deep bond between us and made me a different person, more empathetic and nurturing.

Yet all I could remember about him was his nightmarish death? My 4,000 pages of notes about our time together seemed written by someone else, as though I was reading through a stranger’s diary. I was in my very own circle of hell.

Fortunately, the memories returned, and with them came an intuition that guided the process of writing the memoir and made it a deeply spiritual, transformative experience.

My wife Janet and I felt responsible for his death. One could say in our defense that we had unusually bad luck. Ethan and I were suddenly swept into an area of extreme turbulence. People nearby were unaffected. A few yards one direction or the other might have made all the difference.

Maybe so, but bad luck was only a contributing factor. The problem was we allowed him to swim under dangerous conditions without proper safety precautions. We, his parents, made bad decisions that day, and he paid the ultimate price for it. We only had ourselves to blame.

I was especially angry with myself. Not only was I unable to save him. I was also haunted by the thought that I might have sacrificed him to save myself. I have no recollection of that. All I remember is fighting the waves to keep him afloat and frantically trying to carry him to the surface. Nonetheless, this idea gnawed away at me. Life was a torment. My version of Poe’s telltale heart was pounding ever louder.

Then, I met the brave bystander, Al Keating, a bereaved parent himself, who almost drowned trying to save Ethan. He remembered much more about the drowning than I did. He said that he took Ethan from me and tried to swim to shore. Taking on water himself, he passed Ethan back to me, and all three of us went under. He had a surge of adrenalin and reached the surface. It took him several minutes to get back to shore. After coughing up water, he questioned other bystanders about us. They said we disappeared under water and never resurfaced. Al spotted me five minutes later and pulled me to safety. My hands and feet were blue from oxygen deprivation.

Al’s certitude that I did not give up on Ethan helped me begin to forgive myself for his loss. A crack appeared in the dam holding my memories at bay. It broke a few days later.

After Ethan died, I told Janet that taking care of Ethan changed my life, and that taking care of our daughter Penelope and her would save my life. So, I would do anything she asked. I was stunned when she wanted to say some prayers at the beach where Ethan drowned. I agreed, though I dreaded returning to where Ethan and I were separated from one another forever.

After a sleepless night at my little brother Chris’s house in Omaha, I stared at the ceiling and listened to birds chirping away on the windowsill. Knowing we had to leave soon for the long drive to Michigan, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. Suddenly, I was in our house in Chicago, where I found Ethan sleeping peacefully. Whatever it was, a dream or a vision, I believed that Ethan was telling me that he was okay and that he wasn’t angry with me. Precious memories of him and of our time together flooded back into me and soothed my aching heart.

I was still devastated. Ethan was no longer with me in his magnificent physical self. I would always miss his beautiful

face, sparkling eyes, his thick mane, and throaty laugh. He would never sit with me again on the couch, his head resting on my shoulder, as we read together. His death created a hole in my life that can never be filled.

I took some solace in knowing that we shared a profound spiritual connection. I was convinced that letting go of my anger about his death enabled me to sense this connection and that carrying Ethan’s loving spirit into the world would help me maintain it.

Though Ethan was forty-two years my junior, I often thought he was teaching me how to live more meaningfully by letting go of control. Time and again, I marveled at Ethan’s responses to trying circumstances. Never angry, bitter, or resentful, as I often was when things didn’t go my way, he lived fully in the moment, making each encounter with others a positive experience for everyone, even those who had been unkind to him.

When I pondered how to tell his story, this idea of Ethan as my life coach conjured in my mind’s eye a swirl of memorable moments with him. It was kind of like in a movie, where a character witnesses a funnel cloud with faces, voices, events appearing briefly before disappearing again. I had to slow everything down, immerse myself in the details, look for connections unnoticed before, and piece it all back together into a coherent narrative about our relationship and the challenges we faced. That would crystalize in my mind what Ethan taught me about life. Moreover, understanding his distinctive way of going through life and cataloguing how it manifested itself in a wide range of everyday situations would give me concrete ideas about how I could change my posture toward the world. He always turned a loving face to the world. Writing the memoir might help me do so as well.

If I succeeded, even if only part of the time, then his death would not be meaningless. I would have a renewed sense of purpose that enables me to face life without him, because we would still be together in spirit.

*Accounts of Jeff’s on-the-job training as a full time parent have appeared in the Omaha World-Herald, Hippocampus, Brevity, Adoptive Families Magazine, and elsewhere. An award-winning teacher, he is also the author of a number of books and articles on law and philosophy and a regular contributor to the CMTA Report. Born and raised in Omaha, Nebraska, he now lives with his family in Chicago, where he teaches at Roosevelt University. His memoir, **The Fun Master** was honored as a 2022 Best Book Awards Finalist in Creative Nonfiction from the American Book Fest. To learn more about Jeff’s life and work, visit jeffreysesitzer.com.*



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Grieving on the Job:

How to Navigate Work After the Death of a Child

by Margo Fowkes

Roger Harden was relaxing at home on a Friday evening when his phone rang. Seeing his son TJ's number on the screen, he answered, saying "Hey son, what's up?" After a long silence, an unfamiliar voice said, "Mr. Harden, this is Kevin, deputy coroner for Jersey County. There's been an accident."

TJ had been driving up a levee near work when his truck flipped. According to Kevin, TJ had died instantly.

After a brief conversation, Roger hung up the phone. His 30-year-old son was dead. Life as he knew it was over, but Roger had phone calls to make: to his ex-wife, TJ's mom; his younger son; his father; texts to send to his manager and a close friend at Delta Air Lines where he works; a funeral to plan.

Grief is an inescapable part of life. The death of a child or sibling is shattering, and when it happens, we bring our pain and sadness to work with us. Yet the vast majority of workplaces are ill-prepared to navigate the minefield of loss.

Very few managers receive training on how to support a grieving employee and many have little to no experience

dealing with significant losses of their own. Despite their best intentions, they may say and do the wrong thing. They may neglect to tell your coworkers your child has died. They may check in infrequently to see how you're handling the return to work and stop all together once you appear to be doing better.

Although virtually everyone who's grieving returns to work before they're ready, here are some ways to ease the transition and garner support from your boss and your team:

Begin with what you need.

- Think about the return. Do you want to start on Monday and work a full week? Or would you prefer to come back on Thursday or Friday? Would it help to stop by the office for a short visit first to get the initial conversations with your coworkers out of the way?
- If you have an in-person role, would you prefer to work from home for a while? If you work remotely, would you prefer to be in the office, either to be around your team or to have a refuge from your grief?

The death of a child or sibling is shattering, and when it happens, we bring our pain and sadness to work with us. Yet the vast majority of workplaces are ill-prepared to navigate the minefield of loss.

- Consider whether you want your colleagues to bring up your loss. Are there circumstances when you don't want people to approach you? Do you want your coworkers to send cards, offer to drop off a meal, leave flowers on your desk?
- Roger's boss told him to take all the time he needed, but two weeks after TJ's death, Roger realized he couldn't sit home alone any longer. When he returned to work, his manager asked, "What are you doing here?" Roger said, "I can't stay at home." His manager nodded and said, "Fair enough."

Reach out to your boss.

- Begin by confirming that everyone knows about your loss. Roger's bosses made sure his team and the others he worked with knew about TJ's death which eliminated his need to share the awful news. It also prevented awkward encounters with coworkers cheerfully asking where he'd gone during his time off.
- Discuss the timing and details of your return and request any accommodations you'll need for funeral arrangements, grief support, child care, etc.
- Let your boss know whether you want your colleagues to mention your loss at work and how you want them to acknowledge it, if at all.

Consider what you can and can't do.

- Your boss and your colleagues can't read your mind. Although they may offer to help, they won't know what you do and don't need. Think about the responsibilities of your position and what might feel hard or impossible right now. Could you talk to suppliers on the phone? Meet with customers? Deliver a presentation?
- Your brain may feel fuzzy, and focusing may be a challenge. Consider asking one of your colleagues to check your work for typos or mathematical errors before it's sent to a customer or another department.
- After returning to work, Roger felt as though he was going through the motions. "I'm the expert on electrical

discharge machines (EDM), and I can run the EDM blindfolded. So that's what I did. I took all the EDM projects, whether they were a high priority or not, and everyone was okay with that. I knew my brain wasn't working the way it should, but I also knew I needed to be at work and keep my brain functioning."

Ask your boss or a trusted colleague to serve as your point person.

- Even well-meaning coworkers will make mistakes. They'll bring up your loss or inquire about whether you're doing okay, even if you asked them not to. The person you least want to spend time with will keep cornering you in the breakroom or popping into your cubicle to invite you out for coffee. Colleagues won't understand why mentioning your loved one's name or asking how your kids are coping just before an all staff meeting or client presentation is the wrong time. A point person can redirect an overly eager coworker or gently educate your team on how and when to broach your loss.

Prepare to cry at work.

- Grief is unpredictable, and triggers are everywhere. Carry tissues at all times. If you don't have an office, find a safe space to retreat to if you need a few minutes alone. A private bathroom, a close friend's office, a rarely used conference room, a quiet spot outside.

Be honest with your colleagues.

- If you're struggling, ask for help. Your boss and your team can't support you if they don't know what you need. If you want a decrease in your workload or a different assignment, say so. If the holidays are triggering or the anniversary of your child's death is approaching, ask about taking time off.
- Roger connected early on with a coworker at Delta named Tim Moye who had also lost his son. Roger sent unfiltered emails to Tim asking questions like "Who

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cries in the blade tip grinding room? Or at Lowe's or Ollie's Bargain Outlet?" Tim responded by saying, "Congratulations. You're normal."

Know that your needs will change over time.

- Your grief will ebb and flow. The acute pain will ease, but you will still get blindsided by sadness. Keep your boss and point person updated on how you're doing, what you're finding challenging and where you need extra help or support. They won't know anything has changed if you don't tell them.

Give yourself grace.

- Weighed down with grief, you may snap at a coworker or burst into tears during a meeting. Months, even years, after your child or sibling dies, you may struggle to concentrate at times or feel stressed or anxious. Conversely, you may discover that work is a safe haven from your sadness. You'll find yourself joking with a

colleague or allowing a project to distract you from your loss. Remind yourself that you are doing the best you can.

Most of all, remember to breathe. "For me," Roger said, "for most machinists, we hate making mistakes. We hate getting things wrong. We hate missing details, and we hate scrapping parts. But if you can pause, take measured steps, do what you know how to do in the way you know how to do it, you can still get the job done."

Margo Fowkes is the president of OnTarget Consulting (ontargetconsulting.net) a firm specializing in helping organizations act strategically, improve performance, and achieve their business goals. Author of Leading Through Loss: How to Navigate Grief at Work, Margo also works with corporate and nonprofit leaders create a more compassionate culture by speaking openly about grief and loss in the workplace. After the death of her son Jimmy in 2014, Margo launched Salt Water (findyourharbor.com), a blog and online community that provides a safe harbor for those who have lost someone dear to them – a child, sibling, parent, grandchild, partner, close friend or pet.



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Will We Be Able to Laugh Again?

by Michael and Joan Kirchmer

My wife, Joan, and I lost our loving daughter, Jennifer, to cancer at age 33. Jen was happily fulfilling her life-long dream of being an Educator. And thanks to Jen's sister, Leigh, who delivered twins for Jen and her husband just 3 years earlier, Jen was also fulfilling her life-long dream of being a Mom.

Jennifer's passing evoked so many emotions, not the least of which were shock, disbelief, sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt, desperation, and hopelessness, just to name a few.

To lose a child rips out your soul...Why? Why? Why? While we were offered comforting words by many, no one could provide us an answer to this question. We remained entrenched in these emotions for months and months, while at the same time watching everyone else's lives quickly move on. Ours was not moving on.

We could not shake focusing on Jen's suffering and death. It was agonizing. How could everyone else simply go back to life as if nothing had happened? How could they laugh and have a good time while we couldn't? And when we did laugh, we often caught ourselves and questioned how we could be enjoying life when Jen no longer could.

But over time a transformation occurred. Whether through time, faith, family, and personal reflection, our focus on Jen's death was very, very slowly balanced out by a focus on the beautiful life that we experienced with Jen. Little by little we remembered good memories...her smile, her laugh, and the innocence of her childhood. We remembered Jen's sheer joy in holding her twins for the first time. We remembered her strength and her courage.

As we began to cherish these warm memories, the memories that Jen would want us to cherish, we remembered to laugh again. And yes, with a tinge of sadness. But the guilt is slowly fading, because the will to enjoy life is one of the legacies that Jen left us, a legacy for which we will be forever grateful.

Joan and Michael Kirchmer are the loving parents of Jennifer and Leigh, and the loving grandparents of Tyler, Cooper, and Erica. Jennifer, who passed at the age of 33, was a devoted Mother to her twins, and a devoted Teacher who touched everyone she knew through her strength, courage, love, and laughter. Soon to celebrate their 48th wedding anniversary, Joan and Mike are now retired and enjoy spending time with family and friends in their hometown of Vernon, NJ.

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I attended the TCF National Conference in person last year 2022, and the online conference via zoom during the Covid era in 2021. For me, the most memorable experience was the in-person candle lighting in 2022. I can say that there wasn't a dry eye at our dinner table -- and I suspect at many other tables either. I found it quite moving and comforting.

Frank Horowitz, Ian's Dad – Freeville, NY

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Joshua Tree

by Colin Campbell

My family loved taking trips to Joshua Tree, a sweet small town in the high desert of the Mojave, about two and a half hours east of Los Angeles. It's right next to the spectacular Joshua Tree National Park, with hundreds of miles of hiking trails and endless opportunities for scrambling up its beautiful rock formations. We went out there once or twice every year. In June of 2019 we decided on a whim to make the bold decision to purchase a small vacation home there. We fell in love with a rustic cottage nestled up close to the park with incredible views of the valley below and the rocks above. My seventeen-year-old daughter Ruby couldn't wait to paint those iconic vistas and my fourteen year old son Hart thrilled at the idea of inviting friends out for desert adventures. We made an offer on the house and it was accepted.

A week later we were driving back out to Joshua Tree because I had lined up meetings with contractors to see about building a pool and an extension on the house so that Ruby and Hart could have their own kids' bungalow. It was going to be the vacation home of our dreams. But then, only twenty-five minutes from our new home, our car was hit by

a drunk and high driver going forty miles above the freeway speed limit. We were t-boned at ninety miles an hour. My wife Gail and I sustained relatively minor injuries, but our two beautiful children, Ruby and Hart, were both killed.

The morning after the crash, I called the real estate agent and canceled the sale. Obviously. We assumed that we would never go back there again. How could we? It would be too painful. And yet buying that house was one of the last things we did as a family. Joshua Tree held countless wonderful memories for us. How could we turn our backs on it now, when we needed those sweet memories more than ever? Three days later, I called the agent back up and told him we wanted the house after all. We realized our vacation home could now become a grief retreat for us, another place where we could feel especially connected to Ruby and Hart.

The problem was, to get to the house, we had to drive right past the crash site. There was no other way to get there. We would have to brave all the terrible traumatic memories of that night if we hoped to get to our desert sanctuary. It felt like the perfect metaphor for the grieving process: if

we want to access all the sweet memories and feelings we shared with our loved one, we have to face the full pain of our loss.

As we moved through the first months of early grief, Gail and I were continually confronted by the pain of everything we had lost. Everywhere we looked, we were reminded of Ruby and Hart's agonizing absence. Every morning there was no one to greet and make breakfast for; every evening there was no one to kiss goodnight. Every spot in our house held their memories. So did every corner in the neighborhood.

All our favorite restaurants and parks and beaches were suddenly hard to visit. Even our friends and family reminded us of our kids. Everywhere we turned, we

were struck by the pain of our loss. A part of us wanted to retreat to our bed and shut the whole world out. A part of us wanted to die, rather than face the agony of our grief.

Our instincts tell us to run from pain. But what if, in the case of grief, our instincts are wrong? After all, the reason it hurts so badly is because we love them so much. The pain is from love. If we look at it that way, the pain can be understood not as a bad thing, but as a beautiful tribute. The love and the pain are now forever entwined. We can't have one without the other. If we run from the pain, we'll also be running from the love we shared. And what if, instead of simply enduring the pain of our loss, we actually seek it out? What if we lean into the pain, in order to bring ourselves closer to our loved ones?

The first time going back to Joshua Tree was terrifying. It took us two months to build up the courage. I had to ask my brother-in-law to drive. I was shaking, my whole body clenched, as he drove us. Gail warned us that at any moment she might need us to turn around and go back home. We drove in terrible silence. As we approached the site of the crash and prepared to pull to the side of the road, a large truck ahead of us suddenly hit its brakes and swerved to the right, almost cutting us off. John had to veer into the next lane just as traffic was whizzing past. His

knuckles were white as he clenched the steering wheel. His arms were sore for days afterward.

There was a small shrine by the side of the road, put up by a local teenager. It was a wooden cross painted light blue that said "Beautiful Angels 06-12-19." We got out and stared at it. It was beautiful and awful. A gesture of love on the side of a hot, grimy highway, traffic racing past in the blaring desert sun. Is this really where our kids died?

Once we finally made it to the house, we weren't exactly relieved. It was hard standing where, only a few months earlier, we had stood with Ruby and Hart, full of so much hope for the future. But then we went for a hike in the rocks above our property

and we felt the kid's presence. It was almost as if we could see them up ahead, scrambling over the boulders. They had never had the chance to climb these specific rocks, and yet it felt to me as though all four of us had been there before. Climbing over those rocks allowed us to connect with Ruby and Hart, if only for a few moments.

That first visit to the Joshua Tree house was hard. But we knew we had to get through that first time to slowly acclimate to the pain. Gail and I have since been back to the house in the desert many times. It did, indeed, become a sanctuary. It is a sacred place to us, where we feel extra connected to the kids. And every time we go, we drive past the crash site. I blow them kisses, and I ache for them, and sometimes I cry. But I am grateful that we were able to incorporate both the house and the site of the crash into the fabric of our lives. I am glad we ignored the impulse to never go back there again.

Colin Campbell is a writer and director for theater and film. He was nominated for an Academy Award for Seraglio, a short film he wrote and directed with his lovely and talented wife, Gail Lerner. He has taught Theater and/or Filmmaking at Chapman University, Loyola Marymount University, Cal Poly Pomona University, and to incarcerated youth through The Unusual Suspects. His one person show titled, Grief: A One Man S--tShow, premiered at the Hollywood Fringe Festival where it won a Best of Broadwater Award. He lives in Los Angeles and sometimes Joshua Tree.

The pain is from love. If we look at it that way, the pain can be understood not as a bad thing, but as a beautiful tribute. The love and the pain are now forever entwined.

The Wisdom of Darcie Sims

Spring Cleaning

We used to live in a townhouse, one of those inventions designed to minimize housekeeping chores, mortgage payments and a tendency to accumulate more things than one needs to cross the Sahara in summer. We moved there because I liked the idea of no yard work, and we would be unburdened by conversations of “It’s-Saturday-so-mow-the-lawn.” I hate housework (it hates me too!), and we wanted a less complex life.

Smaller places do have a certain appeal...especially during the “It’s Spring and that means let’s-get-organized-around-here-and-throw-out-all-YOUR-stuff” mood that tends to permeate the months of March and April.

When you only have one closet, cleaning it takes a minimum of time. Opening the door starts the process, and if you are clever, you will stand with an open trash bag as you pry open the door. Always do this at 2:00 a.m. when the other nearby occupants in your townhome are asleep, or during those few quiet moments of solitude you get after announcing that Dairy Queen is having a twenty-minute-only-special, and you have (thoughtfully) placed the keys in the car.

Designed by some psychologist in an effort to help patients rid their psyches of old memories, useless information and general “clutter,” spring cleaning has become an American phrase most often associated with grief. It is a painful process, this sifting and sorting of all the things that tell us (and the rest of the world) who we are or were.

There are as many ways to spring clean as there are homes and hearts and minds and spirits that need “adjusting” (a real psychological term thrown in just to remind you that I am a professional too!)

How many times have you been told “It’s time to move on,” or “It’s time to get back to normal,” or “You mean you



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haven’t gotten rid of that yet?” (That can refer to a multitude of things such as his favorite pipe, her bathrobe that the dog attacked during one of his “spells,” or an odd assortment of baseball cards, used gum wrappers and dirty socks that were secreted under the bed, left behind for you to find and cry over.

How come everybody else knows when it is time for me to spring clean! How come everybody else knows when it is time for me to open that closet and sort through all those memories, trying to decide which ones to keep and which ones to pass on to the Salvation Army? How come everybody else knows when it is time for me to get back to living?

I am spring cleaning. I am sifting through the “stuff” that made up my loved one’s life and I am learning to let go of a few things...slowly.

When we moved to a townhouse, we thought life wouldn’t be so complicated. I wouldn’t have to go out into the yard and remember how wonderful it was to enjoy the first spring flowers...with him. I don’t want to cut the grass, because we loved playing in it, tickling our bare toes and laughing our way through spring into summer. We moved to a townhouse so we couldn’t keep everything forever. It doesn’t stay around anyway, so why have storage space? Why have cupboards that no longer need to hold cereal that turns the milk blue, or closets that no longer need to hold baseball shoes, bats and crumpled homework pages? Why have room for memories?

WHY? Because, I can’t live without them! Spring is a time for spring cleaning, for sifting and sorting and re-reading and remembering. Spring is a time for things to go and things to stay. We just have to decide which ones do what. Spring is a time for renewal, when the earth begins to defrost after a harsh and bitter winter. It doesn’t matter when your loved one died; it does matter when you begin to let spring back into your life. It does matter when you open that closet and let the memories come out, along with the hurts and the hopes that you buried one day not so very long ago.

You never know what you are going to find when you start spring cleaning. You might discover treasures you had long forgotten, or the tax papers you needed, or the Easter egg no one found last year. You might find a few bits of joy lurking under the bed (we found dust bunnies). What fun to remember how that stuff got there or who might have been hiding under the bed when you were looking for volunteers for trash patrol!

Spring cleaning is a tradition that follows the footprints across your freshly waxed floor. I wish there were still footprints to clean up, but since there aren’t, I’ll just have

to spend a few extra moments with this box of treasures I found. No time like the present to inspect the “stuff” in search of a few “bits of joy.”

When we lived in a townhouse, we thought that maybe, in

a few years, we could stretch out into something a bit larger (and have a maid, too!). Maybe we would just start a little patch of grass out front, plant a seed or two in a clay pot on the patio, and live with what we have. Eventually, my house got larger, and my heart has grown, too!

No, nothing fits this year, just like nothing fit last year or the year before. But it’s getting better, improving either with age or experience or patience. Or maybe it is because it is simply becoming a thread in the continuing fabric of our lives. We will probably always be a bit unsettled, unnerved when the roll call finds a name missing or a chair empty. But, then why shouldn’t we be a little sad when a light goes out in our world?

So, this holiday season, gather in your blessings and count them ALL. Count the blessings of the people in your story and find the peace that comes with counting a holiday of joy remembered and love shared.

Peace to us all — wherever we may be.

The late Darcie Sims wrote hundreds of articles over the years on grief and loss which have been extremely popular and shared in hundreds of TCF publications. We Need Not Walk Alone is proud to honor her by featuring selections of her work in a column titled “The Wisdom of Darcie Sims.”

What has been your most memorable experience at a National Conference with The Compassionate Friends?

I was sitting near the front of the hall at our Atlanta conference in 2003 as 1,200 people held candles in honor of their children, grandchildren, and siblings. When all the candles were lit, a lone bagpipe began playing "Amazing Grace". I was overcome with emotion. The love in the room was palpable and nothing I had experienced since my daughter Ashley's death had moved me in such an impactful and profound way. That incredible night inspired me to write the song "Tonight I Hold This Candle," it is something I will never forget.

Alan Pedersen, Ashley's Dad - Ft. Collins, CO

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TCF Sibling Zoom Meetings

Grief Writing - Meets Mondays at 7:30 pm ET

Book Club - Meets last Monday of the month at 7:30 pm ET

Meeting with Jordon - Meets Tuesdays at 7:00 pm ET

Growing Up with Grief (death of a sibling when you were a child/teen, regardless of your age now) - Meets Tuesdays at 6:00 pm ET

Creative Expression - Meets Wednesdays at 7:30 pm ET

Meeting with Jason - Meets Thursdays at 6:30 pm ET

LGBTQ+ Sibs Meeting - Meets 1st and 3rd Thursdays at 9:30 pm ET

Twins Only - Meets Fridays at 9:00 pm ET

Sunday Connection - Meets Sundays at 4:00 pm ET

To sign up for TCF SIBS newsletter, visit siblingisland.com or scan the QR code.



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Connect with Other Bereaved Parents, Grandparents, and Siblings Every Day on TCF's Online Support Community

The Compassionate Friends offers "virtual chapters" through an Online Support Community (live chats). This program was established to encourage connecting and sharing among parents, grandparents, and siblings (over the age of 18) grieving the death of a child, grandchild or sibling. The rooms supply support, encouragement, and friendship. The friendly atmosphere encourages conversation among friends; friends who understand the emotions you're experiencing. There are general bereavement sessions as well as more specific sessions:

MONDAY

10 AM EST | 9 AM CST | 8 AM MST | 7 AM PST
(open depending on moderator availability)
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

10 PM EST | 9 PM CST | 8 PM MST | 7 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

TUESDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Loss to Substance Related Causes

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Bereaved Less than Three Years

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Bereaved More than Three Years

WEDNESDAY

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

THURSDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
No Surviving Children

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

FRIDAY

10 AM EST | 9 AM CST | 8 AM MST | 7 AM PST
(open depending on moderator availability)
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Pregnancy/Infant Loss

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

SATURDAY

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

SUNDAY

8 PM EST | 7 PM CST | 6 PM MST | 5 PM PST
Suicide Loss

9 PM EST | 8 PM CST | 7 PM MST | 6 PM PST
Parents/Grandparents/Siblings

Visit www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/online-support/ for more information and to register.

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The Compassionate Friends Private Facebook Groups

The Compassionate Friends offers a variety of private Facebook Groups. These pages were established to encourage connection and sharing among parents, grandparents, and siblings grieving the death of a child, grandchild or sibling.

TCF – Loss of a Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofachild

TCF – Loss of a Stepchild

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofstepchild

TCF – Loss of a Grandchild

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofgrandchild

TCF – SIBS (for bereaved siblings)

facebook.com/groups/tcfsibs

TCF – Bereaved LGBTQ Parents With Loss of a Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflgbtqlossofachild

TCF – Multiple Losses

facebook.com/groups/tcfmultiplelosses

TCF – Men in Grief

facebook.com/groups/tcfmeningrief

TCF – Daughterless Mothers

facebook.com/groups/tcfdaughterlessmothers

TCF – Grandparents Raising Their Grandchildren

facebook.com/groups/tcfgrandparentsraisinggc

TCF – Sudden Death

facebook.com/groups/tcfsuddendeadth

TCF - Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosrsc

TCF - Sibling Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcfsiblinglossosrsc

TCF - Loss to Suicide

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosuiicide

TCF - Loss to Homicide

facebook.com/groups/tcflossotomicide

TCF - Loss to Domestic Violence

facebook.com/groups/lossdomesticviolence

TCF – Loss of a Child With Special Needs

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchildwithspecialneeds

TCF – Loss to Long-Term Illness

facebook.com/groups/tcflosstolongtermillness

TCF – Loss to Mental Illness

facebook.com/groups/tcflosstomentalillness

TCF – Loss to a Drunk/Impaired Driver

facebook.com/groups/tcfdrunkimpaireddriver

TCF – Loss of a Medically Complex Child

facebook.com/groups/lossofamedicallycomplexchild

TCF - Loss to COVID-19 or Other Infectious Diseases

facebook.com/groups/tcflossocovid19

TCF – Loss to Cancer

facebook.com/groups/tcflossocancer

TCF – Loss to Miscarriage or Stillbirth

facebook.com/groups/tcflossomiscariagestillbirth

TCF – Miscarriage, Stillbirth, Loss of an Infant Grandchild

facebook.com/groups/miscariagestillbirthinfantgrandchild

TCF - Infant and Toddler Loss

facebook.com/groups/tcfinfantandtoddlerloss

TCF - Loss of a Child 4 - 12 Years Old

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchild4to12

TCF – Loss of a Child 13-19 Years Old

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofchild13to19

TCF – Loss of an Adult Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofanadultchild

TCF – Loss of Your Only Child/All Your Children

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofonlychildallchildren

TCF - Loss of an LGBTQ+ Child

facebook.com/groups/tcflossofanlgbtqchild

TCF – Grieving the Loss of a Child as a Single Parent

facebook.com/groups/lossofachildasasingleparent

TCF – Bereaved Parents With Grandchild Visitation Issues

facebook.com/groups/tcfgrandchildvisitation

TCF – Inclusion and Diversity

facebook.com/groups/tcfinclusionanddiversity

TCF – Grieving with Faith and Hope

facebook.com/groups/grievingwithfaithandhope

TCF – Secular Support

facebook.com/groups/tcfsecularsupport

TCF – Finding Hope for Parents Through TCF SIBS

facebook.com/groups/tcfindinghopeforparents

TCF – Reading Your Way Through Grief

facebook.com/groups/tcfreadingthroughgrief

TCF – Crafty Corner

facebook.com/groups/tcfcraftycorner

The Compassionate Friends Chapter Leadership (for anyone currently serving on a Chapter steering committee)

www.facebook.com/groups/tcfchapterleadership/

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WE NEED NOT WALK ALONE

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TCF 46TH NATIONAL CONFERENCE 2023
■ DENVER, CO ■

The Compassionate Friends 46th National Conference will be held in Denver, CO, July 7-9, 2023! We invite you to join us for an informative and supportive weekend. It is a place where hope grows and friendships are made with others who truly understand.

Conference offerings include:

- *Over 100 workshop choices* • *Keynote presentations* • *Healing Haven*
- *Crafty Corner* • *Silent Auction and Raffle* • *Sharing Sessions*
- *Musical performances and sessions*
- *Candle Lighting Program* • *And more!*

Main speakers include Sadria Strong, Donna Goodrich, Nathan Peterson, Lauren Robinson, and the Sibling Sunday Panel.

TCF's national conference focuses on support for bereaved parents, siblings, and grandparents while also offering overall grief support and resources. It is appropriate if you are grieving a loss or want to learn how to better support others who are bereaved.

Thanks to our event sponsors



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