We Need Not Walk Alone

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

Winter 2025

The Compassionate Friends
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

Voices

Voice of Grief: *I don't know how I can live each day?*
Voice of Compassion: *But your child would not want you to fade away.*

Voice of Grief: *I struggle now to get out of bed.*
Voice of Compassion: *Think pleasant memories in your head.*

Voice of Grief: *An anger grows inside of me.*
Voice of Compassion: *You will learn how to set it free.*

Voice of Grief: *I don't know how I'll be the same.*
Voice of Compassion: *You won't, but be not ashamed.*

Voice of Grief: *Some friends I've dropped along the way.*
Voice of Compassion: *That's okay, others here are to stay.*

Voice of Grief: *My bitterness just seems to grow.*
Voice of Compassion: *The healing process will be slow.*

Voice of Grief: *Where can I turn, what should I do?*
Voice of Compassion: *As time goes by, ideas come to you.*

Voice of Grief: *I want people to know my child did exist.*
Voice of Compassion: *Do things in their memory, perhaps make a list.*

Voice of Grief: *I realize this journey will never end.*
Voice of Compassion: *Ride through the journey and slowly mend.*

Voice of Grief: *My tears come on both day and night.*
Voice of Compassion: *Crying is natural, don't try to fight.*

Voice of Grief: *Will I ever find peace, I wonder how.*
Voice of Compassion: *Some day in the future, perhaps not now.*

Voice of Grief: *I found some people just like me.*
Voice of Compassion: *Stay with these people, they'll help you, you'll see.*

Voice of Grief: *Thank you Compassion for letting me talk.*
Voice of Compassion: *I'm here with you always as we take this walk.*

- Susan Humphreys, Scott's Mom

Susan Humphreys, mother to Brad and Scott. Scott passed from E. Coli Bacteria in 2015. He was 41, autistic and mentally challenged. She has been on Brandywine Hundred Chapter Wilmington, Delaware core team over seven years. She helps bereaved parents answering calls to the chapter, sending birthday and anniversary cards to members and chapter functions. In memory of her son, she self-published a children's book, ***Scottie My Very Special Brother****.*

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A Gift of Perspective

The use of lights during winter festivals is a tradition that spans many cultures and religions. Fire, candles, and in more modern times, strings of light have been used during this darkest time of the year as a symbol of hope. These celebrations turned a dark, cold season into one of the most beloved times of the year for many people. Yet, in the shadow of profound loss, the lights and cheerful celebrations of the season often highlight the devastation and pain of grief, leaving many of us feeling alone though we may be surrounded by family and friends.

A wise friend once told me, "Be patient with yourself during the holidays because grief will have its portion." At the time, this statement offended me and seemed to only emphasize the sense of helplessness that is often a part of grieving. In time, I learned what my friend really meant - that I could not control my grief but that I could control how I would treat myself in the midst of that experience. Although being patient was not easy, it was a hard-fought, minute-to-minute choice that was now a possibility for me. My friend was giving me a gift, something I could strive for, something I may even be able to control.

Viktor Frankl, the 20th century psychiatrist and neurologist, was the only survivor in his family of the Nazi death camps in World War II. Yet, living with his grief over the deaths of his entire family, Dr. Frankl wrote, "Between stimulus and response, there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." Frankl went on to explain that he was determined to hold on to what he called the last of human freedoms, the attitude he chose to take in the midst of unbearable suffering.

Although it may feel as though no one else understands, there are many who have come before us and many who walk alongside us even now. At times, their words bring comfort and other times, when our grief is most intense, it can be hard to receive their words at all. Wherever you may be in your grief and whatever you may be experiencing this holiday season, we want you to know that you are not alone.

In this issue of *We Need Not Walk Alone*, you will find helpful articles from others, just like Dr. Frankl, living with profound grief during the holiday season. As you read these articles of fellow "grievers" consider your own personal journey and take heart that there are others who understand how challenging this time of year can be. In this winter issue, may you find validation in your grief, encouragement for today and the days to come, and the ability to consider the perspectives of others who walk with you.

Andy McNiel
CEO
The Compassionate Friends

I Grieve

I woke
I grieve

my morning is off and running
I spoke
I grieve

So much work, the rush, the bustle
I sigh
I grieve

I am having a fine day
I lie
I grieve

Outside the sun is shining
I breathe
I grieve

In my car, the traffic is heavy
I have a heavy heart
I grieve

the the work at work, the work at home
phone calls, emails, mountains of
paperwork, laundry, dusting, feeding,
cleaning, bills, I did so much

I did so little
I grieve

the dishes are done
the setting sun
a pool of tv shows await
I drown in them
I grieve

I have no memory of what I accomplished today
I grieve

I am torn between the desire to join you and the need to stay
I grieve

I remember you from birth, all the past to the day that was the last
I grieve

time goes by, minutes, seconds
both fast and slow
I grow tired
I grieve

I miss the tiny crinkles around your eyes as you smile
I miss tousling your hair
I miss holding your little child hand
I miss hugging you
I miss the feel of your check on my lips
I miss hearing you sing
I miss all of you
this second
every second forever

inside, the sun stopped shining
I breathe
I grieve

- Debra Rock, Drew's Mom

Debra is the mother of two sons, Travis who lives in Pennsylvania, and Andrew (Drew) Chatham Eisiminger who passed away on December 23, 2019 at the age of 23. Debra lives with her husband, Ken, part time in Naples, FL and part time in Versailles, KY. She loves to spend time visiting the children and grandchildren of her blended family. She has written a children's picture book in dedication to Drew. The book is now being illustrated for publication. Debra has been writing grief poems for the past five years and plans to publish the collection as a helpful tool for the grieving.

It's Not Wallowing

The Truth About Grieving a Child

by Melissa Caffrey, Colten's Mom

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There are so many misconceptions about grief, particularly when it comes to losing a child. These misunderstandings don't just perpetuate unhelpful narratives—they can also make healing so much more complicated for bereaved parents.

I'll never forget the first time my husband, Jeff, and I sought out therapy after Colten's accident. It had been just four weeks since we lost him, and we were ready to explore outside support. As counselors ourselves, we understood the importance of finding someone to simply hold space for us—someone who could guide us gently through the raw, uncharted territory of grief. What we encountered instead was a series of catastrophic failures from a well-meaning mental health professional who, unfortunately, didn't truly understand the nature of what we were experiencing.

One of the most painful moments came when we were told, with alarming bluntness, that at some point we would need to "stop wallowing." Wallowing? That word felt like a slap in the face. Nothing could have been further from the truth. Jeff and I weren't wallowing. We were grieving the most profound loss imaginable, and we had made deliberate choices to focus on our healing.

We had both taken intentional time off from work—not only because our profession as counselors demanded a level of presence and care we simply couldn't provide at the time, but also because we needed space to process and begin navigating our loss. We chose to spend those first two months in our home, surrounded by our adult children, creating a safe space to grieve, remember, and adjust before we reentered the outside world. It wasn't about shutting ourselves away from reality; it was about deciding how we would adjust to our new reality on our own terms, before allowing the world to impose its expectations on us.

During that time, we surrounded ourselves with everything that reminded us of Colten. His belongings became precious artifacts of his life—symbols of the memories we were desperate to preserve. It was bittersweet, of course. There were moments of uncontrollable sadness, moments when the pain felt so physical it nearly brought me to my knees. I wore my Fitbit during those early weeks, and I noticed that my resting heart rate was elevated by an average of 10 points, even when I wasn't moving. Grief wasn't just emotional—it was an all-consuming physical experience and force.

And yet, amidst the devastation, there were also moments of joy and laughter. They were fleeting and muted, like echoes of something we used to know, but they were there. They were glimmers of hope—small reminders that, someday, life might be more than just surviving. We shared stories about Colten, laughed at memories that made us smile, and found comfort in being together as a family. We talked about how to honor his memory and carry him forward with us in a way that felt meaningful and intentional.

Those months were anything but wallowing. They were a time to begin carving out a new normal—to grieve deeply, yes, but also to start envisioning a life where we could carry Colten with us in our hearts. Grief isn't something you "get over." It's something you learn to carry. And taking that time together as a family was one of the best things we could have done for our healing.

The time you take to feel it is not weakness—it's courage.

The truth is, grief is exhausting. It's physical, emotional, and relentless. People who haven't experienced grief to that level often don't understand just how much energy it takes simply to exist in the wake of such a loss. But it's not wallowing. It's survival. It's love. It's the necessary process of finding a way forward while holding onto the person you've lost.

As a Licensed Professional Counselor, I now recognize how common it is for well-meaning people, even professionals, to mislabel grief as wallowing. But grief is a full-body experience. It impacts our thoughts, our nervous system, our relationships, and our sense of self. It deserves compassion, patience, and gentleness—not judgment.

This experience taught me something profound: that grief is a deeply personal journey, and no one has the right to judge how someone else walks it. Taking time to grieve, to feel, to remember—it's not just important; it's essential. And for our family, it was the first step toward healing, no matter how exhausting or painful it was.

If you've ever been told that your grief looks like wallowing, please hear this: your grief is valid. Your love is valid. The time you take to feel it is not weakness—it's courage. And giving yourself that space may be one of the most loving choices you can make for yourself, your family, and for the child you will always carry in your heart.

Melissa Caffrey is a Licensed Professional Counselor and bereaved parent who carries the memory of her sweet Colten, forever 6, in all she does. She shares her journey of grief and hope through writing, travel, and community projects like "Colten's Tokens." Melissa's heart is for walking alongside other grieving families, offering comfort, connection, and the reminder that our children's lives—messy, beautiful, and real—continue to shape us forever.

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

I took a walk in the woods before attending the fourth Thanksgiving dinner without my only son Jimmy. I told him that we are ok, just missing him in human form. He knows he'll never be far from our hearts. Love never dies.

- Jennifer Murray McCarthy, Jimmy's Mom

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What I've Learned From Grief

by Rachel Abugov, Kevin's Mom

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Back when the dinosaurs roamed the plains, I took a course in Developmental Psychology. We learned that each stage of life had certain tasks that had to be accomplished as part of human growth. Seniors were tasked with accepting and learning to live with loss. What the…? To my mid-thirties self, this was the worst. I couldn't imagine what that would even feel like.

Now I know, unfortunately through lived experience. I am in the early stages of navigating the loss of my son in January of this year and ten weeks later, the loss of my only brother. I had learned how to deal with my parents passing away years before, because it was the Natural Order of Things. But I used to joke with my son about becoming a crotchety old lady that he would have to put up with. He responded by buying me a t-shirt with a picture Sophia from the Golden Girls and sending me memes of the "Where's the beef?" lady.

Then came cancer, a Trojan horse attacking my son from the inside. I learned about chemotherapy and its side effects, both common and rare. I became adept at searching for clinical trials, and on that final day when the ER doctor stated bluntly, "He's not going to make it. He's dying," I learned how to break news to the extended family, and worst of all, how to tell my daughter-in-law, at home with my sleeping grandson, that she was hours away from becoming a widow.

I never learned to come to terms with cancer. I fervently prayed that my son would be cured and discharged from the overcast realm of treatment into the brilliant sunshine. The sun continues to shine, but my son is not around to enjoy it. It is no coincidence that the day my son learned that his time on Earth was limited was also the day we had a major solar eclipse. We never got to use the special sunglasses we'd bought, but we didn't need them. Our entire world went pitch-dark and stayed that way.

There were moments of joy, such as when my son played his last two gigs with his punk band, and when my grandson celebrated his first birthday. Two weeks before Kevin died, he, his wife and I went out for lunch to one of our favorite Vietnamese restaurants. Over pho, we talked about how we wanted to see the new Superman movie, and which shows were worth binge-watching. It was just like old times, if you ignored the fact that we'd chosen this restaurant because it was wheelchair-accessible and that Kevin was eating lightly because chemo had affected his digestion. We masked our feelings, smiled and pretended that everything was cool. We also talked about the next time we'd get together, and where we'd go for lunch. There was no next time, but you probably guessed that.

I'm trying to come to terms with the loss of both my son and my brother. I've been working the whole grief thing with various groups, both in-person and online as well as with cherished family members. My new contacts through my local Compassionate Friends group have been lifesavers, even if we only see each other for an hour-and-a-half every month. They are true foxhole buddies who really "get" what I'm going through.

Along the way, I also acquired a new BFF, Grief. Maybe she's not a bestie in the classic sense of the word, but she shadows me like my cat does whenever I go near the cabinet where I keep the treats. Grief looks like an old lady, the kind who overcompensates for lost youth by wearing purple cat-eye glasses and lots of leopard prints. She wants to be easily recognized. Not all my emotions are that considerate, and on the advice of my bereavement counselor, I'm working on labelling them, but that's another story.

Grief tries to comfort me as I melt down in the potato chip aisle at Walmart when I realize that I can't pick up Sriracha chips for Kevin because he's gone. She's trying to help me accept my New Normal, telling me that everyone walks around with a metaphoric stone in their shoe that they can't shake out no matter how hard they try. My first reaction is disbelief, but then I start talking to people and I realize how many times Grief is replicated among the people I know.

At first, my reaction was "Look, Grief. I don't wanna hang out with you! Leave me alone," with a few F-bombs sprinkled as a garnish. But I was expending so much energy fighting Grief that it was draining what little reserves I had in my tank.

So I pivoted towards radical acceptance.

What if I sat down on the couch next to Grief and allowed her to hand me tissue after tissue while I sobbed and mourned the losses of my son and my brother? Would it possibly help? After all, I couldn't feel any worse than I already did.

To my surprise, my experiment worked. Like the chef's trick of soaking raw onions in cold water to decrease their pungency, Grief was becoming progressively defanged. I wasn't exactly welcoming her presence, but I was resisting less. Maybe I was starting to come to terms with my New Normal. More likely, my pain was moving from acute to chronic. It's still there, but it's a different experience.

Whatever the reason, I don't spend as many days in bed doomscrolling. I used to rise early and I still do. But I identify as a mourning person as well as a morning person. Honouring my loved ones looks different to lying in bed with the lights dimmed. Now it can look like hopping on a plane with my niece to attend a music festival because Kevin's and Ian's fave bands are playing, and wearing their t-shirts so they are present in some form.

The bottom line is that Grief is here to stay. She will be a part of me as long as I am here. And when I leave this Earth, I will ask her to be a faithful shadow to everyone who loved me. It's a tough job, but somebody's gotta do it.

Most importantly, Rachel Abugov is the proud mom of Kevin, forever 43, and devoted grandma to his son, Jacob. She is a former stand-up comic and romantic comedy author who lives in Montreal with her cat, Monty.

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Winter Grief and Solace

by Jim Narel, Veronica and Joe's Dad

Joe was twenty-nine when we lost him. A bit more than a year had since passed, so we had lived our grief through the cycle of the seasons. Yet now we were experiencing a new stab at the heart.

Several inches of snow had fallen. Some heavy shoveling would have to be done before we could be out and about. Joe had always been here for that.

Without fail, Joe would lean into this task with enthusiasm. He seemed to welcome the opportunity to exercise his youthful strength and energy—and to help out. If we were doing the chore together, I would pace myself, as befit my senior status. At some point Joe would say (without having to pause for breath), "Why don't you go back inside, Dad? I got this!"

Now Joe wasn't here.

The second day after the storm I was headed out the front door and Janice announced firmly, "Jim, you are not going to shovel snow!" Of course she was right, and in truth I hadn't planned to. I was going to brush the car off and warm it up, then size up the situation from there. I was ten or fifteen minutes into this when a pickup truck was slowly passing on our narrowly plowed road. The driver, a man some decades my junior, stopped, lowered his window and asked, "Are you having car problems?"

"No," I said. "Just clearing things off. My only problem is the same as everyone else's: a driveway full of snow."

He said, "Tell you what. Why don't you let us take care of that for you? I got a couple of boys, and I told them I'd take them sledding. But we'll come back right afterwards." He waved off my protest and slowly pulled away.

It was only a few minutes before he returned with his wife and boys.

"Hey," I said, "I thought you were taking them sledding." "We'll do that later," he replied as they all exited the truck. "We thought it was important to show the boys that this comes first." With that they took shovels and a vintage snowblower from the pickup bed and spread out to different spots in our driveway, along the sidewalk, and at the front door stoop. They got to work with energy and good humor, and in moments snow was flying in every direction! For a time, our front yard resembled not so much a work zone as a winter festival.

The project went quickly, and as they were finishing up I approached my new Samaritan friend, trying to be subtle as I reached for my wallet.

"No, no, no," he protested. "This is neighbor helping neighbor. It's just the right thing to do."

I told him how grateful I was and then explained, "Our adult son used to do this for us. We lost him last year." He turned to me, put his hand on my shoulder, and looked me in the eyes. "I am so, so sorry."

I needed a moment to compose myself. Finally, I put out my hand and said, "By the way, I'm Jim."

He grasped my hand firmly. "Hi, Jim," he said, "I'm Joe."

Jim Narel and his family live in Northern Virginia. He is a retired Army officer and college professor. He and Janice had eleven children—eight of them adopted. They lost Veronica in 2017 at age 43, and Joey in 2023 at age 29.

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

The Compassionate Friends offers virtual support through an Online Support Community (live typed 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.

MONDAY

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

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

TUESDAY

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

FRIDAY

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

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

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

I Loathed the First Christmas After My Brother Died

by Lynn Shattuck, Will's Sister

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I felt like the strands of jewel-toned lights were taunting me, the ads flashing symbols of family and love and togetherness. The tumbling of decades of holiday memories rising in my mind: the time my brother and I secretly opened each other's gifts weeks before Christmas. The photos of us hunched beneath the tree, unwrapping sweaters or skis. It all felt like salt on the wound, stinging and mean.

All I could see was what was missing—my brother. My family as I'd known it.

To cope, my parents and I followed the advice of grief books and created new traditions. We spent Christmas morning with two women whose husbands had died within the last year. It sounds like a real party, right? Two grieving parents, a bereft sister, and two widows. But it actually was. Not having to pretend that life was shiny and tinsel-lined was a relief. Together, we agreed it was okay to hate the holidays, and with that permission hovering in the air around us, we actually found small pockets of joy.

It was still hard and painful, and everything felt off-kilter, tilted. But we survived it. We gave each other silly gifts, and we giggled a little, and together, we wrapped gauze over that first set of holidays without our lost loves, knowing that the following year would likely be a little easier, having gotten through with our new, unwelcomed normal.

It often feels like a lifetime since that first Christmas without my brother. Yet, the holidays still bring up a distinct sense of unease in me. All the expectations of cheer and joy and brightly wrapped gifts doesn't make the ache in our lives go away.

Sometimes, it simply illuminates it.

We never get over the loss of a loved one. We get through. With time, the rawness eases. But the pain also settles into our joints, into the hollow of our bones. It is patient and stubborn. It lingers. For many of us, the holidays bring it all rushing to the surface.

My life today is good, and one that a younger, haunted version of me couldn't have imagined. I have two beautiful babies, a kind, funny husband, and amazing friends and family. This is not the raw, metallic grief of those early years. Yet, I still can't totally embrace this season. I can't string lights without those sore parts making themselves known, reminding me they're here—still, and probably forever.

One of the hardest lessons of my adulthood is about figuring out how to hold the dark and the light at the same time. To understand that emotions can be layered and complex, that we can be grateful and grieving, hobbled and happy, devastated and daring, all simultaneously.

This year, I'm going to more fully invite the richness of all these feelings. The delight of smoothing snow-white frosting across sugar cookies and dusting them with ruby-colored sprinkles. The anniversary of one of my closest friend's death that brought so many tears today. The sparkle in my children's eyes as they make out their gift lists. The feeling of my husband's palm. The ancient, yet ever-present loss of my baby brother. There is space for it all if, just like that first Christmas without my brother, I allow it.

I am overflowing.

May this season be rich and real. May we not need to hide from our sadness, our longing, or our goodness. May we find space for all of this to mingle. May we feel it all, brightly, achingly, deeply.

*Story first published on **Elephant Journal**. Lynn Shattuck grew up in an Alaskan rainforest and now lives in Maine. Her work has appeared in Elephant Journal, Headspace and Mind Body Green, among other outlets. To learn more about her, visit her website, The Light Will Find You.*

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TCF Sibling Zoom Meetings

SIB Suicide Support - Meets 4th Monday of the month at 9:00 pm ET
Meeting with Jordon - Meets Tuesdays at 7:00 pm ET
Grief Book Club - Meets 1st Tuesday of the month at 7:30 pm ET
Write Your Soul - Meets 1st and 3rd Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm ET
Meeting with Jason - Meets Thursdays at 7:00 pm ET
LGBTQ+ Sibs Meeting - Meets 1st and 3rd Thursdays at 9:30 pm ET
Sibs That Died of Addiction - Meets 4th Friday at 7:00 pm ET
Canada Sibling Sharing Circle - Meets 2nd Saturday of the month at 1:00 pm ET
SIBS in Relationships and Partners - Meets 2nd Sunday of the month at 7:00 pm ET

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

Grief is Not a Season

It's a Language We Learn to Speak

by Melissa Hull, Drew's Mom

There's a phrase I used to hear all the time:

"Grief is just a season."

At first, I clung to it like a lifeline. A season meant temporary. A season meant there would be an end. A season meant I could eventually go back to who I was before the loss.

But now, twenty-five years after losing my son Drew, I know better.

Grief is not a season.

It's a language—one we are forced to learn when our world splits apart. A language of silence, ache, surrender, memory, and presence. A language that shapes the way we move through the world forever.

And like any language, it takes time to understand. Time to become fluent. Time to learn how to speak it, not just feel swallowed by it.

The First Words We Learn in Grief

In the beginning, grief only knows how to scream.

It doesn't come with words or wisdom. It comes with a roar—a guttural, breathless, bottomless wail that language cannot hold. That's how it was for me in the hours after Drew died. The sound that escaped me was something I didn't recognize in myself.

It was raw. It was primal. It was truth.

And it was the beginning of my fluency in a language I never wanted to learn.

When the World Speaks a Different Language

One of the most painful parts of grief is realizing how few people around you speak it.

You're walking through a grocery store with a broken heart, while everyone else talks about weekend plans and birthday parties. You go back to work and people expect you to "be okay" again, as if the return to routine means the return to your former self.

They don't mean harm. They're just speaking a different language—one of goals and tasks and surface-level conversation.

And you? You're listening for echoes of your child's voice in a quiet room. You're deciphering meaning in a song, a scent, a flicker of light that feels like a message. You're still holding their toothbrush. Their favorite cup.

You're speaking grief. And it feels like no one else can understand.

Finding the Words to Stay Alive

There's a point in grief—different for each of us—when we stop trying to survive the pain and start trying to understand it.

That's when grief begins to shift from chaos into communication. From screaming into whispering. From a force that flattens us to one that speaks to us—if we're willing to listen.

I remember when I began to journal again. I didn't have anything profound to say. All I could write was:

"I got out of bed today. I fed the dog. I cried in the car."

But even that was progress. It meant I was starting to give shape to my sorrow. Starting to find rhythm in the storm. Starting to interpret the language of grief, one fragile word at a time.

The Language Evolves

Over time, the way grief speaks to us changes.

In the beginning, it's all pain.

Then it becomes memory.

Then it becomes perspective.

And sometimes—when we least expect it—it becomes love again.

Not the kind of love we once knew. Not the cuddles and giggles and hand-holding kind. But a spiritual, infinite, knowing kind. A love that transcends time and space and touches you in the quiet.

Sometimes I feel Drew in the way a breeze moves through a room. In the lyrics of a song I wasn't expecting. In a stranger's laugh that sounds just like his.

That's grief, speaking in a new dialect.

That's love, answering back.

Grief Fluency in the Real World

You don't stop grieving.

You learn to grieve well.

You learn to let it move through you without controlling you.

You learn when to speak it and when to hold it in silence.

You learn how to show up in joy and still carry your loss with grace.

This is fluency.

This is what it means to live inside the language of grief while still building a life worth living.

Speaking Grief in Relationships

Learning to speak grief doesn't just help us understand ourselves—it helps us communicate with others.

It teaches us how to ask for what we need. How to say "I'm not okay" without apology.

It teaches us to hold space for others without needing to fix them.

It teaches us how to sit in discomfort, to bear witness, to be present.

Grief made me a better mother to my living children. A better partner. A better friend. A better guide for others. Not because I figured out how to get over the loss—but because I learned how to stay with it, and with myself, and still live.

You Don't Have to Be Fluent Yet

If you're still in the screaming phase—where words don't work and nothing makes sense—I want you to know:

You're not broken. You're learning.

Grief doesn't come with a dictionary. There are no phrasebooks. No easy translations.

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But the more you meet yourself in it, the more fluency you gain.

One day, you'll find yourself explaining your grief in a way that helps someone else feel seen.

One day, you'll notice beauty again—and realize that grief has taught you to notice it more deeply.

One day, your grief will say something so honest and so clear, you'll feel your own soul nod in agreement.

And that's when you'll know:

You didn't get over it.

You didn't let go.

You learned how to speak it.

Grief Has a Voice. Let It Speak.

We don't need to silence grief. We need to give it vocabulary.

We don't need to outrun it. We need to understand its rhythms.

We don't need to deny it. We need to learn how to live inside it.

Grief is not a season. It's not temporary. It's not linear.

It's a sacred language—and when we learn to speak it, we also learn how to live again.

Melissa Hull is a mother, best-selling author, international speaker, media host, master coach, and CEO. When Melissa tragically lost her young son in a drowning accident, she chose to embrace healing as an intentional, ongoing process. She encourages others to meet grief with courage, resilience, and love, showing that healing is possible and love transcends physical existence. Her new book, ***Dear Drew: Creating a Life Bigger Than Grief*** *is available now. Learn more at www.melissahull.com.*

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

This is our third holiday season without our child, and the season is still very hard. Not having grandchildren or the future I hoped for as a parent adds to the sadness. Even so, there are a few things that bring me small moments of peace and connection.

My work helps me the most. I work with people who are living in poverty and applying for social-welfare programs. Seeing the challenges others face reminds me that everyone carries some kind of pain. This understanding does not take away my own grief, but it helps me step outside of it for a moment and lift my head enough to see beyond it.

When I can help someone else or make their day a little easier, I feel a sense of purpose. Those moments give me a quiet feeling of hope and remind me that connection is still possible, even in the midst of losing my only child.

- Ranj Reddy, Sameer's Mom

Days

by Danielle Tavares, Cody's Mom

There are days I wake up with the weight of my broken heart so heavy I can barely breath.
Days that I wake up so angry at the tragedy of your death that I want to scream.
Days that the tears ebb and flow so freely as if it were just yesterday that you were taken from me.
Days that the memories we shared flicker just out of sight and mix with the memories we don't get to make anymore.
But then there are
Days that I wake up and feel the slightest warmth on my face and smile.
Days that I can hear a song and instead of cry I laugh.
Days that I am reminded of just how wonderful you were.
Days that show me grace and comfort.
Days of gratitude for being your mom no matter how long or short that may have been.
Days with pride that you saved others lives with your own.
Days that I know with so much certainty that you are right beside me in everything I do.
So no matter what Day I am waking up to.
Know that I take you with me.
I take you down the road of sorrow as well as the road of joy.
I hold you in my heart with every beat.
I share in you my laughter, my tears, my pain, my pride and above all my love.

Danielle Enborg writes to honor her son Cody, whose life and legacy continue to guide her. After his sudden passing in 2020, Cody became an organ donor who saved others. Danielle shares her grief journey to keep his memory alive and to help others feel understood, connected, and less alone. Inspired by her son, Danielle recently published a fictional novel about grief and healing titled ***Last Light at Willow Creek****.*

Together For Him

by Tina Bourgeois, Tristin's Stepmom

It is often said that moms and stepmoms don't get along, and for my family, that was painfully true. We both loved Tristin, but from two different places, and that love sometimes felt like competition instead of connection. Our differences built walls, and over time, it became easier to stay guarded than to risk trying.

Then came the unthinkable. On the morning of October 31, 2024, I was driving to work with busy thoughts about our grandkids and whether I'd get to see them in their Halloween costumes. Suddenly, my attention shifted when I saw an accident ahead. My heart sank as my sister-in-law drove toward me, her face confirming what words hadn't yet said—that it was a horrific crash, and someone had died.

Moments later, the calls began. Tristin's sister had seen a photo on social media of the truck involved, one that looked far too much like his. Our blended family gathered in a blur of panic, waiting together, desperate for answers. We kept calling his phone, but there was only silence. What felt like an eternity ended when a CHP officer arrived to confirm the unthinkable: it was Tristin. He had been driving to work, living his best life, when a semi-truck lost its brakes and crashed into him. In a single moment, he was gone. I remember hearing the words, but they didn't feel real. They belonged to someone else's life, not mine. I was in complete shock.

At first, grief was awkward between us. We didn't know how to lean on one another when our history had been marked by distance. But slowly, the rawness of loss began to do what years of trying could not—it softened us. We cried the same tears. We shared the same sleepless nights. We sat in silence, realizing we didn't need the right words, only the willingness to stand together in the pain.

Grief made us family in a way nothing else could. It showed us that love is not limited to roles or titles—it is born out of presence, of choosing to show up when the storm is raging. We no longer saw each other as "mom" and "stepmom" in opposition, but as two women bound by the same love for the son we lost.

We may not have had unity in the beginning, but grief created what nothing else could: a bond rooted in love for him. It doesn't erase the past, but it transforms the present. Now, instead of division, there is compassion. Instead of walls, there is understanding.

When I imagine Tristin now, I see him smiling from heaven, finally seeing both of his moms—not divided, but standing side by side. That unity is his gift to us, born out of sorrow yet carrying the beauty of love.

We are not the same, and we never will be. But we are together. Together in the loss, together in the love, together for him.

For anyone walking this journey in a blended family, please know that healing and unity are possible. Grief doesn't have to divide—it can bring hearts together. It may not look the same for everyone, but even small steps toward grace and compassion can open doors you never thought possible.

Grief doesn't have to divide—it can bring hearts together.

Tina Bourgeois, a wife and stepmom whose world was forever changed by the loss of her stepson, Tristin Samuel, who was just 27 years old. She never expected to write an article—then again, she never expected to lose a stepson. Through this journey, Tristin's mom and Tina moved from a place of tension and opposition to one of understanding and unity, coming together in our shared love for him. Her hope with sharing her story is that it will bring comfort, insight, and encouragement to others navigating the joys and challenges of blended family life.

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

I spent the first couple of years trying to hide from the holidays. It didn't work very well. Last year I faced it head on by volunteering to direct our church Christmas play, complete with carols and costumes. It worked much better for me, so I'm doing the same thing again this year. It keeps my mind and my hands busy, which helps me to cope with the extreme emptiness of not having my only child with me.

- Beverly Mott, Ben's Mom

Holiday Haunt

by Lora Krum, Dylan and Gavin's Mom

Looking up the attic steps, my heart pounds as I remember locking you up there in the dark

I break into a cold sweat as I touch the knob of the door that seals the closet you've been stashed in

My legs and feet are paralyzed as I stand at the doorway of your room where so many of your prized possessions are imprisoned

And somehow I've managed to avoid the music that we once shared, because it now hurts my heart

I find myself breathless as a cold wind blows harshly and snowflakes pelt my face

It makes me shiver and want to take cover somewhere far away

The ornaments and decorations remain in boxes, And the twinkling lights have ceased to sparkle both within and outside of the house that used to illuminate the neighborhood.

No longer does the aroma of baked cookies, or the scent of a lovely pine tree, permeate our once bustling home… Nor do our once coveted traditions continue.

No matter how tightly I have sealed you away and avoided tears, It's impossible to avoid the memories of the life we shared.

Even through locked doors, closed rooms and silent surroundings you creep up on me,

sneak into my thoughts and inhabit my heart.

Thoughts seep into my mind…Apparitions catch my eye… spirits tap me on the shoulder

At times, memories of you feel like I'm being punched so hard that I don't think I'll ever breathe again

While other remembrances are like a persistent ache that will never go away

Some say that I should run away from all of that pain, and never look back

However, that simply is not an option

Through the long and hard process of grief work, I have learned the importance of holding on to ALL of my memories,

no matter how much sadness and angst accompanies them.

It's painful to walk through the holiday season missing you. Yes, always painful.

But when I cautiously walk up the attic stairs and peek into boxes of garland and bells, I also remember your happy smile, your hearty giggles and joy we shared.

When I reach up on the top shelf of the closet and hold your holiday sweater, I remember how we posed for that special photo for our annual holiday card.

And when I open the door to your room, you open up my heart to all of the love I have because of you.

The twinkling lights help my mind's eye see the sparkle in your eye

The music allows me to hold the sound of your voice in my head

And the smell of cookies baking in the oven reminds me of how sweet our lives were when you were here.

Cold snowflakes that tumble on to my face soon melt, trickle down my cheek. They get absorbed through my skin and in some way nourish me.

You're still here with me. You always will be. And part of me left to stay with you.

I'll always wish you were still here with me.

Remembrance is my way to keep your love close in all I do.

Thank you for haunting me on holidays and ordinary days

And thank you for all of the love that will always fill my heart.

Lora is the mother of Dylan (1995-2010) and Gavin (1998-2012), who are her only two children. She and her husband, Dave, live in Lehighton, Pennsylvania and do their best to keep their boys present and remembered.

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

I vowed I would never celebrate the holidays again after losing my daughter unexpectedly on December 23rd a few years ago. However, something changed my mind. I have decided to embrace the holidays as Ashley loved Christmas. I put up what I call the "Ashley Tree." Every single ornament is something Ashley related, her favorite foods, hobbies, places we visited, etc. Her name is placed down the tree in wooden letters. It brings me peace and comfort knowing she would want me to still celebrate her favorite holiday. Each year I add an ornament that is specific to Ashley. It brings me peace.

- Linda Jones-Blau, Ashley's Mom

The Scavenger Hunt

by Kristi Rothbauer, Wes' Mom

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We lost our son Wes the summer of 2016. Grief as you know, is a difficult journey. That first year was so painful. As each holiday approached, my anxiety ramped up, thinking about how I could possibly get though this coming birthday, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas…you get the idea. We had already celebrated several of those earlier in the year before his death, but then that familiar chill was in the air and I dreaded what came next.

As the winter holidays approached, my grief was still so raw and I began to have anxiety about celebrating without our son. How could I decorate the house and follow our families traditions without our son present. Not only did I grieve Wes not being there, but I also felt guilt celebrating without him. I tried to find some special ways to honor Wes here and there to smooth my pain. As I pondered how to get through the end of the year, I remembered the tree with the little angel tags on it in town for the local families that needed a bit of extra help. I picked out a boy's card that I could shop for that had requested toys Wes would have enjoyed when he was that age. I shed tears as I shopped, but also felt an inner comfort while shopping for him. Not only did I shop, but I also volunteered to help with the annual party given to those families when they came to pick up their gifts.

As December arrived, I was going through some of our son's clothes, and the idea came to mind to try and make something out of them to honor his memory. It felt good (and sad) thinking about including something that belonged to him as part of our decor as we decorated our home for the holidays. I searched the internet for ideas, finally deciding to make stockings for the mantel. I gathered his old flannel pajamas and blue jeans as I did my best to create stockings worthy of his approval with my limited knowledge of sewing. I used the flannel for the inner portion of the stockings and the denim for the outside. I cut around the back pocket area of the jeans and left the pocket in place as a little extra spot on the front of the stocking to hide a small gift. I cut a short piece of the thick seam off the jeans and sewed it at the top corner to form a hanger each one. With a little bit of leftover material, I was able to fashion a little stuffed heart. I displayed the heart at the center of the mantle, and the stockings proudly hung in front. As an extra little touch, we wrapped boxes as mantel decor and added tags to them that said, "to Wes". I have to admit, I was a little bit worried my daughter might feel like I loved her brother more than her as I spent so much time trying to get a handle on my grief. Grief is an odd thing; I found myself wallowing in establishing remembrances of Wes, and tip-toeing around over-doing it.

As a final act of honoring Wes that Christmas, the tradition of the scavenger hunt began. Wes loved playing games, so I thought that I'd surprise our daughter and make her final gift a little bit more work in her brother's memory. I came up with 10 different clues, each one leading to the next one, with the final clue leading to her final gift. Some were more difficult and some she'd know where to look next before she had finished reading the clue. I hid the clues around the house and left the first clue in an envelope with our daughter's name on it and wrote, "final gift" on the outside. As she opened the envelope, a huge grin formed on her face. She thoroughly enjoyed the scavenger hunt. My husband and I giggled as we watched her puzzle her way from one clue to the next, giving a little nudge here and there if the clue had her stumped. The final gift as she opened it, was a board game. A fitting ending to the first annual scavenger hunt. We videoed the scavenger hunt and shared laughs I was very grateful for that year.

Kristi Rothbauer, a former senior living activities director, has been married for 37 years to her husband, Andy and they have a daughter as well as their son Wes who sadly died by suicide in 2016. Kristi and her husband retired in 2020 and are enjoying life in southern Indiana.

Grief is an odd thing; I found myself wallowing in establishing remembrances of Wes, and tip-toeing around over-doing it.

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

I have the Hanukkah menorah that my son Andrew lit on the last night of his last Hanukkah seven years ago. The melted candle wax is still in each of the holders as if it was yesterday. I take it out every year and place his menorah beside mine all eight nights and remember his beautiful voice singing the blessing when we lit the candles together.

- Lisa Hytoff Mayer, Andrew's Mom

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Surviving My Loss

by Ronald Ross

The shock of losing a child—it's a mental trauma to your soul. When you first hear of your child or loved one's death, there is deep sorrow and unimaginable pain. The journey one must experience when losing a child is the most challenging time in a bereaved person's life. It involves all the complex emotions one can experience. It is a nightmare, and there is no sidestepping the anxiety, sleepless nights, and raw emotion that come with the death of your child.

There is raw emotion, and there will most likely be unending tears for the first thirty to sixty days. After that, anger may set in, but persistent sadness is the most prevalent. Even with friends and family offering support and compassion, there is loneliness. You are not OK, and that's OK. Expect changes in your well-being. Initially, you are unfocused and confused; the daily suffering is overwhelming. But you allow yourself to surrender to Grief; it's necessary and best not to suppress it if you want to feel well again.

Ninety days sometimes feel like 90 minutes. When reality sets in, you feel numb with sadness, as if you'll never be happy again. Know this Grief because when you expect it, it's more manageable. Most people have told me, "I can't imagine what you're going through," and "I can't imagine how it would feel if I lost my child." They are correct. It may be difficult to imagine the searing pain of this kind of unexpected tragedy until it actually happens. Through this journey, you'll see the many emotional mountains to climb: funeral arrangements, the viewing, the funeral service, and learning about what happened. You might question your Faith and ask, "Why my child and not me?" You challenge the wrong order of life's events.

Your child was not supposed to die before you.

Many bereaved parents feel that part of them died when they learned of their child's death. You wonder who you are and how you'll live without them. It's still difficult to believe this has happened; it may take months to accept the reality of your loss.

How you survive

Yes, tears will be your companion. You will drop many tears when you grieve hard, and these tears will be your salvation. It is healthy to grieve hard. It will make you feel better after a good cry because you experience extreme internal pain. So in searching for happiness, I believed I would see my child again someday. You think you're still on this earth for a reason, even though your child is gone. It was my only way to move forward and enjoy the remaining days of my life. We never know if tomorrow will come.

Rebuilding and Remembering

When you feel it is time to rebuild, you must find something to help you survive this tragedy. It could be writing poems, doing artwork, building a collage, constructing a book of photographs, writing a journal, or doing anything that helps you keep calm and keep the memories of your child fresh in your mind. For me, it was writing and reading. A bereaved parent often feels overwhelmed with emotion, and expressing your feelings on paper can be healthy. I remember lying in bed early at night with many thoughts and feelings. Those thoughts would continue throughout the sleepless nights. Waking up and starting to write became an obsession. I needed to get to my writing and put my thoughts and emotions on paper. The words just flew out of my head. I didn't have writer's block whatsoever. It was healthy for me to write. It was easier for me to write than to talk about it. It calmed me down and allowed me to open up the deep feelings of despair. Anyone who loses a child or a loved one will experience many emotions. Unfortunately, men don't convey their feelings as well as women. As a result, men generally avoid conversations during these sensitive moments. However, not all men avoid these conversations. Some kindhearted men and women can be open and help you get through a rough day. A bereaved parent will explore avenues to remember their loved one.

Committing to heal

When you commit to forging through this journey to get well, there are many turns and setbacks. Time will move more slowly than expected. It is agonizing to grieve. There may be others trying to rush you, and this is something you need to push back on for your well-being.

People don't want to see you stuck in your Grief. They want to make you happy again, and they all mean well. But you can't just get over it and move on from your life. You have to do those sentimental things that help you survive. I kept some of my child's belongings and wanted a few precious clothes. You may need to light candles, pray at church, or set aside private time to reflect on your love for your child. Recommendations will come from friends and family who have good intentions. It would be best if you were gentle and appreciative of their suggestions. You stay true to grieving at your timing and pace. People want to help you feel better. Sometimes you need solitude. Always make time for yourself, even if it means that others may not understand. A year or two down the road, you may still need to set aside time for yourself because you will never forget your child's love.

Ronald Ross' debut book, "No Greater Pain," he speaks to parents everywhere who have suffered the devastating grief of losing a child. Ron shares his vulnerable feelings about losing his daughter, and desires to help others who have suffered a similar significant loss through his personal experience, readings, and research.

What has brought you a moment of peace, hope or connection this holiday season?

Paige and I always decorated the Christmas tree together and would always laugh about some of the handmade ornaments she made as a child. It felt really important to me to still have a tree this year, so I invited my niece over and told her the stories behind some of my favorite ornaments while she hung them on the tree. I cried and laughed but it was comforting to share those memories.

- Laurie Pant, Paige's Mom

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/tcflossofastepchild

TCF – Loss of a Grandchild
facebook.com/groups/tcflossofagrandchild

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/tcfsuddendeath

TCF – Loss To Substance Related Causes
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstosrc

TCF – Sibling Loss To Substance Related Causes
facebook.com/groups/tcfsiblinglosstosrc

TCF – Loss to Suicide
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstosuicide

TCF - Loss to Homicide
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstohomicide

TCF - Loss to Domestic Violence
facebook.com/groups/losstodomesticviolence

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 Due to Drowning
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstodrowning

TCF - Loss to COVID-19 or Other Infectious Diseases
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstocovid19

TCF – Loss to Cancer
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstocancer

TCF – Loss to Miscarriage or Stillbirth
facebook.com/groups/tcflosstomiscarriagestillbirth

TCF – Miscarriage, Stillbirth, Loss of an Infant Grandchild
facebook.com/groups/miscarriagestillbirthinfantgrandchild

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/tcflossofanlqbtqchild

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/tcffindinghopeforparents

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/

We Need Not Walk Alone

To have material considered for publication, send to: **nationaloffice@compassionatefriends.org**

Correspondence for The Compassionate Friends should be sent to:
The Compassionate Friends
PO Box 46
Wheaton, IL 60187
877.969.0010

The Compassionate Friends annual Worldwide Candle Lighting unites family and friends around the globe in lighting candles for one hour to honor the memories of the sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, and grandchildren who left too soon. As candles are lit at 7:00 p.m. local time, hundreds of thousands of people commemorate and honor the memory of all children gone too soon. The Worldwide Candle Lighting creates a virtual 24-hour wave of light as it moves from time zone to time zone.

The Compassionate Friends

Worldwide Candle Lighting

Join us on December 14, 2025

"...that their light may always shine."