

# 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 2026



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

# The Mother's Howl

*The thing happened.*

*The unspeakable thing.*

*The unimaginable thing*

*Happened.*

*Tears, scant and scalding,*

*Lodge in my chest, stepping behind my heart,*

*refusing to be seen or heard.*

*Until one day, one sentence*

*Of one song unlocks the door*

*And the tears ride out on a*

*Howl that rams through my teeth*

*Loops through the living room*

*Smashes out the front window and*

*Escapes to rampage through the trees.*

*This howl releases the tears*

*And comes back to punch me in the face.*

*It joins the howl of other mothers*

*who've lost their beloveds*

*Through war or violence or accident*

*or the fickle fury of misfiring brain cells.*

*It's a howl that crosses oceans*

*Spans continents and generations.*

*It's universal and intimate*

*And abominable.*

*And now it comes to me and*

*And from me.*

*And I just want to close my ears*

*And my mouth*

*And keep the howl from existing.*

- Robin Dake

*Robin is a mother, daughter, friend, and writer. She has spent her career working as a journalist or non-profit manager while writing on the side. Her work has appeared in Amaranth Journal, Snapdragon Journal, Amethyst Review, This I Believe radio program and in Trailway News magazine. Her poetry can be found on Instagram at poetryonthecouch. She lives in Northeast Georgia with two hoodlum cats.*



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# Walking with a Friend in the Dark

*"I would rather walk in the dark with a friend than alone in the light."* – Helen Keller

This quote attributed to Helen Keller, the famous American author and educator who became deaf and blind at 19 months old, holds deep meaning surrounding her own personal experiences. It also speaks to the enduring power of true friendship, that walks with us even during our darkest of times. Grief after a profound loss can be a lonely experience, where, sometimes, those we thought might be there, are not there in the ways we may have hoped.

In his book, *Finding the Words: Working Through Profound Loss with Hope and Purpose*, Colin Campbell writes, "The bonds between friends are tested in such an excruciating way by grief. He goes on to write, "Take as many people as you can with you on this terrible journey by making it easier for them to accompany you in your darkest moments." In this, Colin suggests that building community takes great personal effort and a commitment to allow others into life. Colin shared that in their commitment to open themselves up to others, they found community through many different avenues. They shared in mourning with others through grief groups, found support from people at their temple they did not know previously, educated friends who, at first, said and did the wrong things, and connected with others who did not know them previously, but who knew their children, Ruby and Hart.

As is true with many experiences in grief, creating a community can be hard work, particularly when we are physically exhausted and our spirit is diminished by the weight of profound loss. If you are not sure where to start building your community of support, The Compassionate Friends has created a peer-support network of resources and connections that offers an opportunity to lean into, learn from, and share with others. In this edition of *We Need Not Walk Alone*, you will find helpful articles from across the TCF community on the topics of hope, lessons learned, the transformational nature of grief, finding our voice in grief, carrying grief, the possibility of joy, and finding support in reading and hobbies.

The Compassionate Friends offers virtual and in-person support reaching communities around the world. We encourage you to plug into one of our private Facebook groups, connect with a local chapter in your area, or view one of our supportive webinars. This publication, just like our other supportive opportunities, is our way of extending a hand and offering community, even in the midst of the darkest moments. To learn more about all the programs and services of The Compassionate Friends, visit us at [www.compassionatefriends.org](http://www.compassionatefriends.org). We need not walk alone; we are The Compassionate Friends.

*Andy McNiel*

CEO

The Compassionate Friends

# Absence

*Your absence is felt like a solid presence.  
During family gatherings, I can feel the lack of your voice  
The lack of your laughter.  
You are so noticeably missing,  
A gaping hole in the family garment.  
As I join the gathering  
Chatting and laughing  
playing with the kids.  
I can feel your absence under my skin,  
an ache in my heart.  
An ache I'm coming to accept  
as a natural part of me.  
It is silently carried.  
The quiet introspection is saved for the ride home  
When I can process the ache  
Of losing you  
where no one can see  
the evidence on my face.*

- Leanne Davidson

*Leanne Davidson, lives in her hometown of Kenora, Ontario with her husband and two spoiled dogs. She is an author and blogger, supporting those grieving through her writing and honest sharing of her own journey after the loss of her son. She is the author of two books, "A Beautiful Pain" and "Tattered Hearts and Hopeful Souls."*

*How has the loss changed who you are – in ways both visible and invisible to others?*

*I carry a weight within my chest that was never there before. When I lie down I feel that weight against my heart. I still go on, I have three other adult children and one grandchild and I could never cause them a moment of sadness if I can help it. But the joy and laughter is subdued now and there are still tears every day as I miss my darling daughter so much, and I know I will miss her forever.*

- Marg Elliot, Candace's Mom

# Crying Out Loud

## *The Metamorphosis of Grief*

by Dr. Laura Berman, Sammy's Mom



People often say to bereaved parents, “I don’t know how I’d survive something like this.” It’s usually an attempt at empathy, but what are we supposed to say to that?

In the early months after my son died, I would answer, “I don’t know how I’m surviving either.” I was upright. I was breathing. I was answering texts and making arrangements. From the outside, I looked functional.

Inside, everything had collapsed.

Now, years later, my answer is different.

I didn’t survive. Not intact.

The woman I was before February 7, 2021 does not exist anymore. She believed love and vigilance could protect her children. She believed tomorrow would resemble today. She believed the world, while imperfect, was manageable.

She could not contain what happened.

When my son died, something in me dissolved. Not metaphorically. Physiologically. My nervous system fractured. Sleep shattered. My chest felt tight for months. The sound that came out of me that day was primal. It was

not composed or polite. It was grief ripping through a body that could not hold it.

And that terrified me.

Because for most of my life, I believed strength meant staying functional. Cry privately. Gather yourself. Show up. Perform steadiness. That strategy had always worked.

Until it didn’t.

The loss of a child, a sibling, or a grandchild is not tidy. It is not discreet. It is not something you manage efficiently.

And neither is love.

What I slowly learned is that when grief is too large to contain, fighting to appear intact only prolongs the suffering. Allowing myself to cry, shake, or collapse when I needed to was not weakness. It was my body doing what bodies are designed to do when overwhelmed: release.

For some of us, letting grief move begins in small ways. Saying their name out loud. Allowing tears to fall without apologizing. Telling the truth when someone asks how we

are instead of defaulting to “I’m fine.” Sitting beside another bereaved person and not needing to explain a thing.

Grief expression is not dramatic. It is honest.

Each time I let the wave move through me instead of bracing against it, I discovered something radical. I could break open and not disappear.

That was the revelation.

Not that I was strong.

But that I could feel this fully and still remain here.

Grief this large lives in the body. Insight alone was not enough. I needed trauma-informed support. Gentle movement. Breathwork. Time outside. Community where I did not have to protect anyone else from my pain.

Healing did not come from thinking differently about what happened. It came from allowing my body to process what had overwhelmed it.

The metaphor that makes the most sense to me now is the butterfly. Inside the cocoon, the caterpillar does not grow wings. It dissolves into cellular soup. Its former structure disintegrates completely. And yet within that dissolution are imaginal cells carrying the blueprint of what will become the butterfly. Slowly, those cells begin to reorganize into something entirely new.

Grief can feel like that dissolution.

You feel undone. Your identity shifts. The assumptions you relied on collapse.

This does not mean the loss was a gift. It means the old structure could not survive it.

And slowly, almost invisibly at first, something begins reorganizing.

Over time, many of us notice changes we never asked for. Boundaries become firmer. Compassion deepens. Superficial concerns lose their grip. Love feels more urgent because we know how fragile life is.

This is not growth in the way the world markets it. It is transformation born of love.

In the beginning, grief feels like drowning. There is no rhythm. A memory pulls you under without warning. But if you allow yourself to feel instead of flee, you begin to recognize the pattern. Waves crest. Waves fall. The ocean does not disappear, but you become steadier within it.

The pain does not vanish.

Your relationship to it changes.

Would I trade every ounce of growth to have my son back? In a heartbeat.

But since I cannot rewrite what happened, I have had to ask a different question:

How do I choose to live now, knowing how fragile life is?

For me, the answer is embodied. I listen when my body says slow down. I rest without apologizing. I leave what feels misaligned. I allow grief to move instead of forcing it down.

Loss reorganized me.

It sharpened my boundaries.

It deepened my compassion.

It made ordinary moments sacred.

It made love urgent.

Crying out loud is not about volume. It is about honesty. It is refusing to apologize for loving deeply. It is letting your body tell the truth.

We do not survive this loss intact.

We are transformed.

If you are early in this journey, breathing is enough. You do not have to grow. You do not have to find meaning. You only have to stay with the next wave.

If you are further along and you feel something in you softening in some places and strengthening in others, that is not betrayal.

That is love still shaping you.

Inside the wreckage, the imaginal cells are already there.

And when we allow grief to move instead of silencing it, a reconfigured life can slowly emerge.

Not because we wanted this.

But because love reshapes us, even through loss.

*Dr. Laura Berman is one of the world’s most recognized love, and relationship therapists, as well as a New York Times bestselling author who’s written 10 books, an award winning radio and television host, and media personality. Laura’s journey into grief work began after the devastating loss of her son, Sammy in 2021. Today she combines her clinical expertise and lived experience to guide people in creating lives filled with connection, resilience, and love in the Grief Healing Collective.*

# The Books That Carried Me Forward

by Stephen Panus, Jake's Dad



In the days and weeks after my sixteen-year-old son, Jake, was killed in the summer of 2020, time lost its structure and any sense of a future had collapsed into something shapeless and irrelevant. There is a particular silence that follows the death of a child. It is not the absence of sound, but the absence of orientation. You no longer know where to stand inside your own life.

In those early days, survival was the only measurable goal. Breathing. Standing. Enduring. Reading was the last thing on my mind.

Books had always been companions. They were tools for growth in a life that felt expansive and forward-moving. But after Jake's death, growth felt impossible. What could possibly grow in scorched earth?

And yet, quietly, almost reluctantly, I was drawn to books. It began when fellow bereaved parents generously dropped off books. I didn't believe they would heal me. But I needed someone, somewhere, to explain how a person continues after the unthinkable. I was rudderless and lost.

Grief is not only emotional, it is neurological. The brain in acute grief shifts into survival mode. The amygdala,

responsible for threat detection, becomes hyperactive. Sleep is disrupted. Memory falters. Concentration fragments. The prefrontal cortex struggles to function under the weight of shock.

Reading, at its core, is a high-order cognitive task. It requires working memory to hold sentences together and absorb meaning. It also necessitates sustained attention across paragraphs and pages. In grief, those capacities are compromised.

The grieving brain is under siege and is trying to reconcile an impossible reality: someone essential is gone, yet the world continues. The brain's internal model of the world still expects the loved one to exist. When that expectation collides with reality, the brain repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempts to update itself. This loop consumes cognitive bandwidth.

In this state, my attraction to books was counterintuitive. Yet, it proved to be the one activity that somehow, somehow, offered a respite and a level of peace I couldn't find anywhere else. I was consuming books as if they were oxygen.

Why would someone whose concentration was shattered choose an activity that demanded concentration? Why turn toward language when language felt so insufficient? Why seek abstraction when pain was visceral?

The answers resided in what reading offered beneath the surface.

First, books provide structure when the universe has destroyed it. Grief dissolves routine as days blur and time is distorted. A book, however, has order. Sentences build and become paragraphs and then chapters. That order reminded my brain that some form of coherence still existed somewhere.

Second, reading offers borrowed cognition. With my own thinking fractured, I could lean on someone else's fully formed thoughts. Authors who had endured loss or adversity articulated emotions I could not yet name. This reduced cognitive strain. Instead of generating language for my pain, I could simply recognize it on the page.

Third, books provide safe exposure to meaning. Through someone else's story, I could approach existential questions indirectly. Reading, for me, became a buffer between devastation and reconstruction.

Neurologically, this mattered. Research suggests that narrative processing activates networks in the brain associated with empathy, memory integration, and perspective-taking. These networks help weave fragmented experiences into coherent identity. Grief shatters identity. Reading helps stitch it, slowly, back together.

Still, it was not easy. There were early days I could not get through a page and times when a single sentence triggered tears. The act of reading was uneven, mirroring grief itself.

What made this attraction to books particularly powerful was that it defied the instinct to withdraw cognitively. Many grieving individuals retreat from complexity. Television becomes easier than text. Distraction becomes preferable to depth. I, however, decided early on to lean into my pain, even when it hurt. There's no way around grief: you either walk through it or it walks all over you.

Reading demanded presence. It also validated the nonlinear nature of grief. Books normalized the rage, anxiety, pain,

grief, and sadness I was feeling. If what I was experiencing was documented, studied, and survived by others, then perhaps there was hope for me. There is a subtle but important neurological shift that occurs when pain is named. Naming activates language centers in the brain that help regulate emotional intensity. So, when I read words that matched my internal chaos, it made me feel less alone in my circumstances.

Grief is isolating not only because of what you've lost, but because of how difficult it is to articulate what remains. When an author described the disorientation, the anger, the guilt, or the strange numbness, it loosened something inside me, reminding me that I was not broken beyond recognition. I was broken within the spectrum of human experience.

Others had stood where I now stood. Others had survived. The dual capacity of pain and perspective signals neural integration. Integration is not forgetting. It is incorporation. Books modeled lives reshaped by tragedy, not erased by it, and that purpose can emerge not in spite of suffering, but because of it.

Books also reintroduced me to future orientation. Every book moves forward. Even memoirs written about loss are structured toward progression. By following narrative arcs, my brain was rehearsing movement again. Page by page, story by story, my brain quietly practiced moving forward.

Importantly, reading did not remove my pain nor did it rewire my brain overnight. But it offered small moments where cognition strengthened, language sharpened, and my identity expanded beyond the singular event of my greatest loss.

The counterintuitive attraction to books became my quiet act of resistance. Instead of numbing complexity and avoiding reflection, I entered it and cultivated it. The books became scaffolding for me. They did not rebuild the life I had. Instead, they supported the construction of the life I

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*Importantly, reading did not remove my pain nor did it rewire my brain overnight. But it offered small moments where cognition strengthened, language sharpened, and my identity expanded beyond the singular event of my greatest loss.*

would now live. The books also became witnesses to my pain. They did not interrupt nor did they rush me toward any acceptance. They simply told the truth.

Meaning, I discovered, was not found in avoiding suffering. It was found in what I chose to do with it. I read stories of people who had endured unimaginable loss, profound hardship, and extreme adversity and still found ways to keep moving forward, contribute, love, and lead.

They did not move on. They walked on. That difference mattered.

Books helped me see that while I could not change what happened, I could choose how it shaped me. They helped me take the first steps. And then the next step. And the next.

Until, without fully realizing it, I was walking on.

Stephen Panus is the author of the best-selling book, *Walk On*, which was featured on “Good Morning America” and which Kirkus Reviews proclaimed, “a raw, moving memoir that deftly explores grief and hope in equal measure.” His debut novel, *The Circles We Carry*, is set to publish on December 4, 2026.

Here’s a few of my favorite books from the many, many books I read (listed in alphabetical order):

- After the Death of a Child* by Ann Finkbeiner
- Bearing the Unbearable* by Dr. Joanne Cacciatore
- Good Grief* by Deborah Morris-Coryell
- Healing After Loss: Daily Meditations for Working Through Grief* by Martha Whitmore Hickman
- Journey of Souls* by Michael Newton, PhD.
- Man’s Search for Meaning* by Viktor E. Frankl
- On Life After Death* by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross
- Swallowed by a Snake* by Thomas R. Golden
- The Hero Code: Lessons Learned from Lives Well Lived* by Admiral William H. McRaven
- Where God Lives* by Melvin Morse, M.D.

*Stephen Panus is a storyteller and mentor and coach at heart, one driven by purpose, resilience, and the unwavering belief that we can turn pain into positive change. As the author of the best-selling book Walk On, he shares his deeply personal journey following the tragic loss of his 16-year-old son, Jake, who was a passenger in a vehicle tragically killed in a reckless and senseless car crash in the summer of 2020. Through telling his story, inspirational speaking and leadership development training, Stephen inspires others to find strength, create meaning, and hold tightly onto hope in life’s most difficult moments.*

*How has the loss changed who you are – in ways both visible and invisible to others?*

*Let me count the ways my life has changed since my only surviving child, Jim, died! At one point I felt like I had moved every part of me out onto the lawn and street - what I assumed about the world, what I had accomplished or wanted to accomplish. I envisioned moving everything out of my literal house...and then choosing what was appropriate to keep and what to let go of. Massive cleansing effort. My “inner space” is more spacious for my health, my relationship with my husband and family members. I evolved into a new career that I didn’t know I wanted. While I’m not ready to let go of life, I have no fear of death. The death of my son helped me cleanse my life in ways I could never have wanted or imagined.*

**- Barbara Allen, Jim’s Mom**

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# The Fog Still Comes, But Joy is Allowed

by Kay Barclay, Jennifer’s Mom



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I’ve learned there is no predictable pattern. There are days when grief feels like a quiet companion, and days when it feels like fog so thick I can’t see my way forward. What I didn’t expect to find was how grief and joy would eventually live side by side, how both could exist in the same moment.

For several months after losing my daughter, Jennifer, I went through the motions. I did what needed to be done, talked when I had to, showed up where life required me. Everything felt different—it was different. I kept reminding myself to breathe, to put one foot in front of the other. Most days, that was all I could manage.

And then one day, I’m not sure when exactly—I realized I was feeling something other than numb. It was a quiet, unexpected sense of peace, like my body had finally exhaled after holding its breath for several years. I felt...okay. Not happy, not healed, but okay. In that okay-ness, I found I could feel Jennifer’s absence and also feel grateful for her life and her beautiful children. Both at once.

That’s when I realized that sadness and joy weren’t taking turns. They were both living inside me at the same time. Joy didn’t replace grief. Grief didn’t take away joy. For a long time, I believed that feeling joy again would somehow

betray Jennifer’s memory. But in that moment of peace, I understood that joy is not moving on. Joy is moving forward. It’s letting love continue inside us, even when our hearts are broken.

The fog still comes. There are still days when I feel her absence like an unbearable ache. But there are also days when—in a beautiful sunrise, in her children’s laughter—I feel her presence. I feel the gift of her life. And that gift invites me to keep living mine.

I used to think healing meant “getting over” the loss. Now I understand that healing means learning how to carry it. Learning to live with both the love and the sorrow, and learning to let joy in without pretending the pain is gone. This is what I want people to know.

I’m still figuring it out, one day at a time. Some days I’m okay. Some days I’m not. But I’m learning that allowing joy—even in the smallest moments—is not forgetting Jennifer. It’s honoring her. It’s carrying her forward.

*Kay Barclay is a mother and grandmother living in Texas. She began writing to honor her daughter Jennifer, who passed away in 2019.*



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# What My Grief Taught Me

by Amy Reha, Jeremiah's Mom

This grief journey has humbled me, it brought me to my knees.

- It has shown me that while I may be fiercely independent...I do need others.
- I have learned to recognize and name my feelings and emotions.
- I have learned to ask for help, and discern who in my tribe has the capacity to fill that need.
- I have learned that grief is really love with no place to go...and with great love comes great sorrow.
- I have learned that self-care is not selfish but necessary.
- I have learned to live with duality...sorrow and joy can co-exist, and beauty can arise out of chaos.
- I have learned that death ends a life not a relationship.
- I have witnessed the power of alchemy turn lead into gold and sorrow into compassion.
- I have learned that while I am crumbling the pieces can start falling into place, that as I constrict I also expand.
- That Vilomah is a Sanskrit word meaning “against the natural order” and is used to describe a parent who has lost a child because it was not supposed to be this way. This is a disruption of life’s fundamental cycle.
- That like grief: a Phoenix can rise from the ashes.
- Most sharks are harmless. Some are bioluminescent and glowing in the deep dark ocean.
- When our grief cannot be spoken it cannot be healed.

- A bear hug from your child can NEVER be replaced, but a hug from a stranger can offer comfort.
- It takes outrageous courage to face outrageous loss
- It can be both gut-wrenching and heart-warming at the same time.
- The beauty of the world is wet with the dew of tears.
- The Japanese art of Kintsugi (golden joinery) finds beauty in the brokenness, and scars can make something more unique and resilient, transforming cracks into beauty.
- That joy can be found in the mourning, and joy can come in the morning.

And I think I just might make it. I will forever miss you, and my love has only grown stronger, because in my heart is where you now reside. And I still believe in doing what is right, not what is easy.

*Jeremiah was 15 years old when he made Robin a mom. He came into her life through the foster care system as a “temporary placement.” Somehow she knew immediately that he was to be her forever son. Unfortunately due to past trauma much of his life he struggled with demons, and self-medicated to relieve the pain. On December 11, 2024 he passed from acute liver failure.*

## 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

Visit [www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/online-support/](http://www.compassionatefriends.org/find-support/online-communities/online-support/) for more information and to register.

### 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

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# Healing with Hobbies

by Katy Myers, Kristin's Sister



When my sister, Kristin died in 2011, it was unexpected. Outpatient surgery spiraled into a frantic return trip to the hospital and ten days of fear, with the worst ending I could fathom. Leaving the hospital with my brother-in-law, we were in shock. I had no idea how to exist without Kristin. She was 12 when I was born, and I had never known life without her. After all, she was the “good one”. That’s how I introduced her- because it was true.

The first nine months I spent on Kristin’s couch trying to help my brother-in-law with the kids and keeping the house running while we navigated what was next. When I think about it now, I’m still in shock that I survived it. Eventually, I was back at my house trying to figure out how I was supposed to function in a world that seemed so much scarier without my big sister to talk to about anything and everything. The grief came in waves, and I couldn’t call the person I always had reached out to for advice and to discuss life.

Life felt like it was crushing me most of the time. My boss told me that I wasn’t as cheerful. Friends didn’t know how to respond, and the fractures in my family only became bigger. Functioning was a task most days, and others were an outright challenge.

Three years after Kristin died, I moved. I found the house I thought I would stay in forever. She helped me move into my first house, so it was hard to think about moving without her. I pushed forward, but sometimes I still felt like I was going through the motions. I did the things I was

supposed to do-work, errands, conversations -but none of them felt connected to who I used to be. It was as if I was watching myself live a life that no longer quite fit.

It was a bigger house and yard than I had before – more work. Kristin liked planting and gardening. I tried that. I got more into the yardwork and landscaping. It made me think of her and it gave me something I could work on. Purple was her favorite color, and I found so many purple flowers. I’ve even been able to keep houseplants alive. Kristin told me it was possible when I said I had “charcoal thumbs”. Turned out, she was right again. Plus, doing the things Kristin enjoyed not only made me happy, but it made me feel closer to her.

Two years after I moved, I decided I needed a new hobby. My grandparents were the most well-rounded people I’d ever known, so I thought about the things they enjoyed. My grandpa built their house and loved woodworking. I joined a club. They had all the tools, and I could buy lumber if I wanted or bring my own. It started with a box around the air conditioner and then a wall of bookshelves with a window seat for my dogs.

Almost overnight, I had this wild ‘things I’d like to make list’, and it gave me purpose. One project led to another and another. Eventually, I bought more tools and now I have a well-stocked wood shop in the garage. Many projects and more tools later, I’m still planning ideas.

Somewhere along the way my mind shifted from feeling like I missed Kristin so much I didn’t want to move, to wondering what she’d think of the projects I was working on. The times I felt like I may have bitten off more than I could handle, left me laughing with Kristin’s memory, wondering what she would be thinking. That shift didn’t erase the sadness, but it softened it, turning loss into something I could carry rather than something that stopped me in place.

I found a hobby that I enjoyed, but it also gave me a gift. When I couldn’t get out of my own head, I could still work with my hands. I could still create something. Knowing I could still create something tangible gave me proof that I was still capable of growth, even when everything else felt stalled.

I got serious about more hobbies, projects, and learning new things twelve years ago. I’ve tried more and more things I thought I couldn’t do and found out nearly anything is possible.

In Indiana, we have some cold winters, and it’s made working in the garage incredibly frigid. I turned to older hobbies. When I was nine, Kristin was getting ready to have her first child. My grandma taught me how to crochet. My first project was a baby blanket to give Kristin for my new niece. Three more winter scarves have been finished in the last couple months.

There have still been some hard bumps in the road with bittersweet moments. Watching both her kids graduate high school and college. Knowing Kristin should’ve been here to meet her first granddaughter last year. Turning 40. Forty normally wouldn’t mean anything, but Kristin died at 40 and I spent months anticipating how scary that would

be. Now I’m looking at 43 and some of the things I thought I’d never get through aren’t nearly as scary as I thought they would be. I’ve made it fifteen years and counting. There were days I questioned how I’d make it to the next day in the beginning and the thought of years seemed impossible.

Hobbies have kept me focused on something when everything else felt like chaos I couldn’t navigate. A time for me to be grounded, creative, and find a new path forward.

Maybe part of it is the passage of time – this October will be fifteen years since I got my last hug from Kristin. I’ll never know if I would’ve developed the same hobbies if she was still here.

I know without her, I wouldn’t have been to 13 Rick Springfield concerts, ten of which I attended with her in less than two years. We’re talking about matching outfits and Kristin making me listen to Rick’s music on the way and on the way back. I’ll never love Rick the way she did, but I appreciate his music.

I still miss her in ways that surprise me, but I’ve learned that loving her doesn’t end my story-it continues to shape it. I hope I’ve kept her entertained and made her proud along the way.

*Katy Myers found The Compassionate Friends after the death of her sister, Kristin, and over time, found her tribe—fellow siblings, her chosen family within her local chapter, and a national community built through service and connection. Her annual workshop, Finding Your Tribe, grew from her own search for belonging and has become a consistent space where siblings feel seen, understood, and less alone. Katy often shares that TCF saved her life—and as a keynote speaker for Sibling Sunday, she brings her whole self: a devoted sister, a committed leader, and a passionate advocate for siblings carrying love, loss, and hope forward together.*

## TCF Sibling Zoom Meetings

**SIB Suicide Support** - Meets 4<sup>th</sup> Monday of the month at 9:00 pm ET

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

**Grief Book Club** - Meets 1<sup>st</sup> Tuesday of the month at 7:30 pm ET

**Write Your Soul** - Meets 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of the month at 7:00 pm ET

**Meeting with Jason** - Meets Thursdays at 7:00 pm ET

**LGBTQ+ Sibs Meeting** - Meets 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursdays at 9:30 pm ET

**Sibs That Died of Addiction** - Meets 4<sup>th</sup> Friday at 7:00 pm ET

**Canada Sibling Sharing Circle** - Meets 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of the month at 1:00 pm ET

**SIBS in Relationships and Partners** - Meets 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of the month at 7:00 pm ET

To sign up for TCF SIBS newsletter, visit [siblingsland.com](http://siblingsland.com) or scan the QR code.





# A Message of Hope

by Ray Klahne, Justin's Dad

This past December, I was asked to deliver a message of hope as the keynote at the candle lighting service for our local TCF chapter. At first, when I was asked to deliver the message of hope, I wondered if that was even possible. How could I possibly be the best choice? All of this still seems so new and raw. I had always been a hopeful individual; a glass half full kind of guy. For the fifteen years that my wife, Sue, and I educated ourselves about mental health and substance abuse in order to forge the best path for our son Justin, who suffered with bipolar disorder, I always held out hope that the next answer lay just around the corner. And that optimism led to some therapies and unconventional approaches that really made a difference. However, after fifteen years of being hopeful, all that was lost on July 25, 2023, when Justin's journey ended by suicide.

In the immediate aftermath of this tragic, heartbreaking loss, there was no hope. None that I could imagine. The thought of life without Justin in it seemed hopeless and free of joy. The guilt that I heaped upon myself, convinced that I could have somehow saved him or done more was a heavy load to carry. Smiling or laughing – full of guilt that I was disrespecting him. Eating a meal that he would have enjoyed – guilt. At every turn, I was my own worst enemy, when the reality was, I had done everything I could possibly have done to provide a better life for my son. The only thing I failed to provide was the thing I hadn't yet thought of. Every day was like being draped in a wet blanket under the hot Florida sun. The mass of anguish in my body drained the life out of me. I was full of anger, not at Justin, not at anyone, just angry that it seemed all of my efforts were for

nothing and the future I envisioned for him was never going to be.

Yet, at some point, things began to change. I don't quite know when that was, but I do know that it was over time, not in an instant. Not like a switch, but slowly, more like a plant sprouting from the earth. It started with trying to convince myself that Justin would not want me to continue my life feeling like this. Justin's greatest quality was his ability to forgive. I needed to forgive myself to release all this pent-up pain. I did all I could, and I believe that now.

A few months after losing Justin, I thought it might be helpful to get out in nature by myself and do some backpacking. I've enjoyed long-distance backpacking for many years, and on a number of occasions, Justin would join me. So, I returned to Harpers Ferry, WV where he and I last left off, and placed some ashes in the Potomac River as I crossed the bridge into Maryland. At times the journey was painful, at times I felt he was with me and it was peaceful. On my final day, I met a man named Dave at the top of the last mountain of the trek. He asked me how my week had been, to which I replied, it was "sweet & sour", as I had recently lost my son. He responded back that he had lost his son ten years prior, and he insisted we exchange phone numbers, convinced he could help me through this tragedy to find joy in life again. No one knows better our loss than someone who has suffered the same. As I walked away with tears in my eyes to finish the final few miles of my hike, I was hopeful - hopeful that this chance encounter might bring me some relief, perhaps reframe my perspective. Justin always used to tell me "There's no such thing as coincidences", feeling certain that our destiny was already mapped out.

A little while later when I arrived in Boiling Springs, PA, I stopped at a café for dinner. By chance - maybe, maybe not, I met a young lady and her grandmother. They too asked about my hike and the story went much the same as with Dave. They asked if Justin was ill and I informed them that he had fought a long battle with bipolar disorder. It turns out that the young girl, perhaps in her mid-twenties, had just been discharged into her grandmother's care from a mental health treatment facility where she was being treated for bipolar disorder. I shared with them the vast array of things we tried with Justin - what worked, what didn't, and as they left, I was again hopeful - hopeful that she might find the relief that eluded Justin. Hopeful.

Dave and I spoke nearly every week, and eventually he asked if he could hike with me. I generally prefer to be solo, but I knew this was a case where I should probably make an exception. I told Dave he could use Justin's gear, so he didn't have to shoulder a big expense just to try this out. When he picked me up at the airport, we traveled to a hiker hostel for the night where we met another hiker from New Hampshire named Roger, who is a pastor. He and Dave were chatting in the hostel kitchen while I was in the basement bunk room checking through my gear. Roger came downstairs to the bunk he had already chosen, sat down and said - "Dave tells me we all belong to the same club". I was caught a little off guard and confused asking "what club is that?". "I too lost my son", he said. Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not. One thing Roger said that really stuck with me, was how he quickly came to the realization, perhaps through his strong faith, that while his son had died, he had not. Nor had I. From that perspective, I was once again hopeful. There's a Buddhist saying, "when the student is ready, the teacher will appear". I was not prepared when these men entered my life, perhaps by chance, perhaps not, offering a vision of hope through their own example, yet I can see their part in that more clearly now.

As time went on, I found joy sneaking back into my life. I could smile again, I could laugh, I could enjoy myself – all without feeling as if I was doing something wrong. There was hope, again, that life could still be good, just never the same as before.

When hiking a long-distance path like the Appalachian Trail, you will often come to a fork in the road. Hikers will lay branches or fallen limbs across the incorrect route as an alert that this is not the way. But if you're not paying attention, it's easy to step over them and continue on. I've done it a number of times and then I have to backtrack to where I left the correct route, adding unnecessary mileage to my day. Sharing life with grief is the same way. It's sometimes very easy to take the wrong path, forcing us to backtrack to get back on course. It reminds us that we will occasionally deviate from the path of hope only to feel the pain of that misstep, but we can find our way back and continue the journey forward. As we move further and further along this path, we get stronger, and our grief is a little easier to carry. While grief is a reminder of the love we once shared, that love is not lost. Our inability to express love as we had before, caused our grief. It is the absence of the person, and the disruption of our hopes *continued on page 18*

and dreams, which is so painful. Sadness and longing are the side effects of grief that make it almost unbearable at times. The greater the love, the worse the grief. And while grief will never go away, we cannot allow it to steal anymore from us than it already has. The day before Thanksgiving, we had to put Justin's service dog, Indie, to sleep. She was like a family member, and to break the connection that she provided to Justin, was heartbreaking. I hadn't realized that her service continued to Sue and I at a time when we really needed her. Now we grieve her loss as well. I am hopeful, that she and Justin have been reunited, pain free, whole again, crossing over the Rainbow Bridge together.

Sometimes in life, hope is all we have. It is my hope for each of you, as well as for myself, that when you witness a small glimmer of hope, and you will, I promise you, that you can each hold onto it. Tuck it away in the hole in your heart, where it can grow like that sprout, I mentioned earlier. Give it the attention it deserves, nurture it into something that

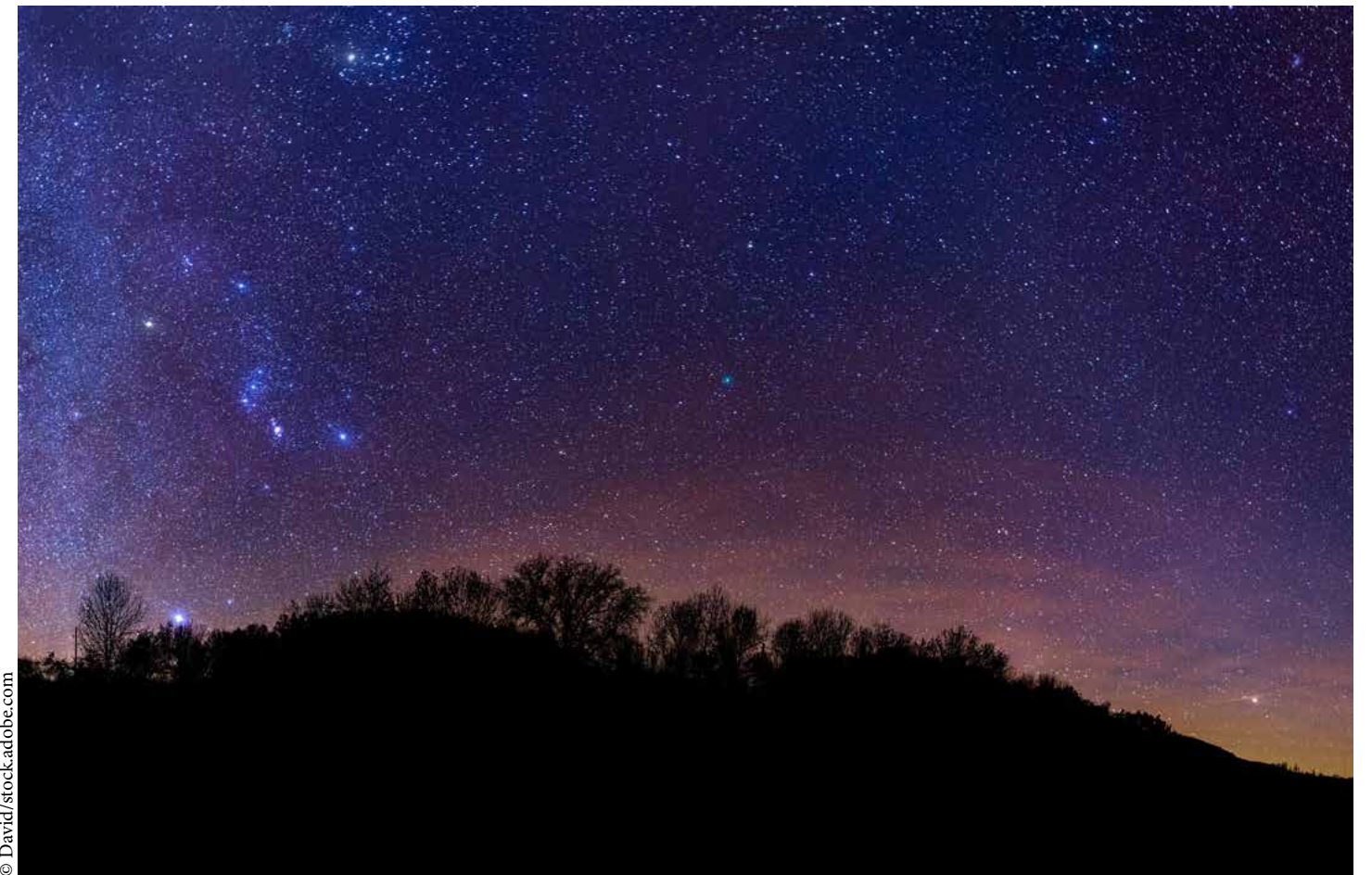
can soothe the place where you hold it. It will take time, only weeds grow quickly. Be patient, be kind to yourself, and when what you've planted begins to bear fruit, it will be the fruit of hope, hope for a life no longer dominated by sadness. You will begin to be thankful for what you had and just a little less bitter for what you lost. You will, in time, more quickly reflect on the wonderful moments you shared and less on the heartache. Your anguish will begin to evaporate as you get stronger from what you've been carrying, and that little bit of hope that you planted long ago, will continue to grow, allowing you to live a life that once again contains joy, and that's what your loved one would want. I know that's what Justin would want for me.

*Ray Klahne lost his thirty year old son, Justin, to suicide on July 25, 2023. Ray is an avid long distance hiker and was joined by Justin for many miles of Appalachian Trail. A return to the woods, although bittersweet, helped Ray to process the overwhelming grief of this tragedy. The Compassionate Friends has provided much needed support to Ray, his wife Sue, and their daughter, Taylor.*

*How has the loss changed who you are – in ways both visible and invisible to others?*

*I spent most of my life trying to keep my daughter alive. We had a long, rough road. So many attempts and institutions. I lost her 8-12-25 at 26, seven months today. I will never be whole again as I've lost half my heart and soul. I only wanted to be a mother, she was attached to me 24/7. Now I literally don't know what to do with my life. Healthwise, I'm a hot mess. Her last year was the worst, I was very stressed and worried. I lost 60 pounds now. I fit into her clothes. My sleep is all over the place. My nerves are shot, my anxiety and depression at its worst. My eyes have no soul, I don't recognize myself.*

**- Gail Peru-Owens, Joscelyn's Mom**



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## Finding the Words

### *Poetry, Astrophotography, and the Search for a Voice in Grief*

by Daniel Stern,

Grief is one of the most disorienting experiences a person can face. The death of someone close rearranges the world in ways that resist explanation. Words often feel inadequate, and ordinary conversation can seem unable to carry the weight of what has happened. What does one do when language falters under the heaviness of grief? For me, creative expression provided a path for understanding that did not rely on explanation alone.

My creative journey through grief began after the sudden death of my son at age forty from an undiagnosed illness. He was not married but shared custody of a young daughter, who now lives with her mother. The loss arrived without warning, leaving questions that had no answers and emotions that did not fit into ordinary speech. Conversation felt strained and incomplete, and even sincere sympathy often felt too small for what had happened.

I turned to two forms of creative exploration: writing poetry and astrophotography. Poetry began only after the loss, while astrophotography had been a long-standing interest. Yet both became ways of expressing what could not easily be spoken. What had once been a technical and aesthetic pursuit took on an unexpected meaning.

Poetry emerged not as a deliberate project but as a response to silence. The poems began in loss, when I had no language to express grief. They arrived less as acts of craft than as necessity. Writing poetry provided a way to speak when ordinary language failed. Instead of explanation, poetry offered images and fragments that made room for experience without requiring a complete story.

In one poem, I wrote not to ask others to carry my sorrow but because "my voice still walks the earth even when his footsteps do not." Writing did not remove grief, but it made

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it possible to live alongside it. The page could hold what conversation could not — contradictions, questions, and silence itself.

Poetry seems naturally suited to grief because it does not require a complete narrative. One day may bring sharp sorrow, another numbness, another unexpected calm. Poetry allows these fragments to exist without forcing them into a single meaning.

Astrophotography entered this experience in a different way. Long before my son's death, photographing the night sky had been a source of fascination. It was an absorbing technical challenge — aligning equipment precisely, capturing faint light through long exposures, and processing images until hidden structures emerged.

After the loss, however, the practice began to feel different. Nights spent under the sky became quieter and more reflective. Without intending it, astrophotography became a form of expression rather than simply observation. The images did not describe grief directly, yet they carried something of the stillness and distance that grief introduced into everyday life.

Unlike poetry, astrophotography does not depend on language. It involves looking outward rather than inward. Yet that outward attention created a space where emotion could settle. The night sky did not require explanation. It existed on a scale far beyond individual experience, and that distance offered a kind of steadiness.

Photographing distant nebulae and galaxies introduced a different sense of time. The light recorded in a single image often began its journey years, centuries, or even millions of years ago. Seeing these images develop on a screen made individual grief feel part of a larger continuum. Loss remained personal and immediate, but the universe suggested a broader perspective in which change and permanence coexist.

Astrophotography also required patience. Clear skies

could not be forced, and some nights produced usable images while others did not. Over time I came to see this unpredictability as part of the process. The slow accumulation of light during long exposures became a quiet metaphor for endurance.

If poetry gave grief a voice, astrophotography gave it a horizon. The poems explored the interior landscape of loss,

while the photographs opened outward into distance and silence. Words allowed emotion to take shape; images allowed emotion to exist without explanation.

Both practices shared an element of listening. Writing often felt like waiting for language to settle into a form that

felt true. Astrophotography required waiting for darkness and clear skies. In both cases the creative act depended as much on patience as on intention.

Writing also became a way of preserving connection. My granddaughter will know her father largely through the memories others share with her. Stories and poems have become a way of passing something forward — fragments of a life that mattered and always will.

Astrophotography preserves something different. The images do not record personal memory, yet they mark moments of attention and presence. Each photograph reflects a particular night. What began as a hobby gradually became a quiet record of time passing.

Creative expression does not follow a single pattern. Some days writing came easily, while other days it did not. Some nights the sky was clear; others were lost to clouds. Even a few lines written in a moment of clarity or a single successful image could hold meaning.

Writing about grief is not the same as solving it. Over time the poems began to change in tone. Early work reflected shock and disorientation, while later pieces moved toward memory and reflection. The shift was gradual but suggested that grief evolves even when it does not disappear.

Eventually the poems became something that could be

*The death of someone close rearranges the world in ways that resist explanation. Words often feel inadequate, and ordinary conversation can seem unable to carry the weight of what has happened.*

shared. What began as private writing took on broader meaning when others recognized parts of their own experience in the words.

The photographs also became shareable in their own way. People often respond to images of the night sky with a sense of wonder that requires no explanation.

Grief rarely becomes simple or fully explained. Language may fail at first and return only slowly. Yet creative work offers ways to approach loss without needing to resolve it.

In the quiet space of the page or beneath a dark sky, grief can be carried without being reduced. Over time, these attempts can become a voice — or a vision — that does not erase loss, but allows it to be lived with.

*Daniel Stern is a retired engineer turned astronomer and astrophotographer whose poetry explores grief, silence, memory, and renewal. His work lives at the intersection of science and emotion, where observation becomes reflection and language reaches for what cannot be measured. He is the author of *Aphelion*, his debut book of poetry, and the chapbook *The Roar of Silence*, a collection born from personal loss and the search for meaning in its wake. In his work as an astronomer, his astrophotography has been recognized numerous times by NASA (APOD), he has discovered planetary nebulae and, in collaboration with others, has been published in peer reviewed astrophysics journals. Stern lives in Delray Beach, Florida, with his wife, Randie.*

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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/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/tcfsuddendeadth

## TCF – Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosrc

## TCF – Sibling Loss To Substance Related Causes

facebook.com/groups/tcfsiblinglossosrc

## TCF – Loss to Suicide

facebook.com/groups/tcflossosuicide

## 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/tcflosscovid19

## TCF – Loss to Cancer

facebook.com/groups/tcflosscancer

## TCF – Loss to Miscarriage or Stillbirth

facebook.com/groups/tcflossmiscarriagestillbirth

## 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/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/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/

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# The Compassionate Friends: A Personal Testimonial

By Dennis Gravelle – Bereaved Parent, Sibling and Uncle

After losing our beloved son Jacob, in 2009, my wife Linda and I were fortunate to find The Compassionate Friends just a few months later. We firmly believe that this remarkable organization played a monumental role in helping us process and cope with our grief. The support, understanding, and community we received from fellow members made an incredible difference during the most challenging time in our lives. Beyond the comfort and healing we personally gained, we have discovered that volunteering to help others has been tremendously positive.

Today, I am honored to serve as your Board of Directors President for The Compassionate Friends. We feel it is vital to continue supporting this organization that has given so much to us and to countless others. When considering the level of support for The Compassionate Friends, we always reflect on the immense benefits we have received and the importance of helping others along their healing journey.

I encourage everyone to support others who have lost a child. Please consider donating to this wonderful organization!

Warmly,  
Dennis Gravelle – TCF Board of Directors President



## Ways to Support The Compassionate Friends

### DIRECT SUPPORT

Direct Support is a valuable gift to TCF as it allows us to invest in the areas that need it the most. Support can be given in the form of cash or securities.

### GIFTS IN KIND

Often a donor's products or services are at the top of our Wish List to support our members. This can include airfare, gift cards, hotel rooms, catering, printing, shipping and much more.

### SPONSOR AN EVENT OR PROGRAM

Gifts identified for a specific program or event provide immediate funding for a service aligned with your geographic location or giving priorities.

### LEGACY GIFTS

Pledge to donate a portion of your assets after you die and be recognized today as a member of the TCF Legacy Circle. Leaving a legacy is a meaningful way to impact TCF. Through planned and estate gifts, you can help build a solid foundation for years to come. TCF accepts gifts of stock and securities; life insurance proceeds; and gifts from being a named beneficiary in a will.

### GIFTS IN TRIBUTE

Honor someone special by making a gift to TCF to celebrate a meaningful occasion or memory of a loved one.

### STOCK AND SECURITIES

You can support our TCF Families through a transfer of stock or securities. Make a stock donation to TCF now or learn more about gifts that reduce your taxes.

*For more ways to support TCF, visit [compassionatefriends.org/support](http://compassionatefriends.org/support) or email [Katie@compassionatefriends.org](mailto:Katie@compassionatefriends.org).*