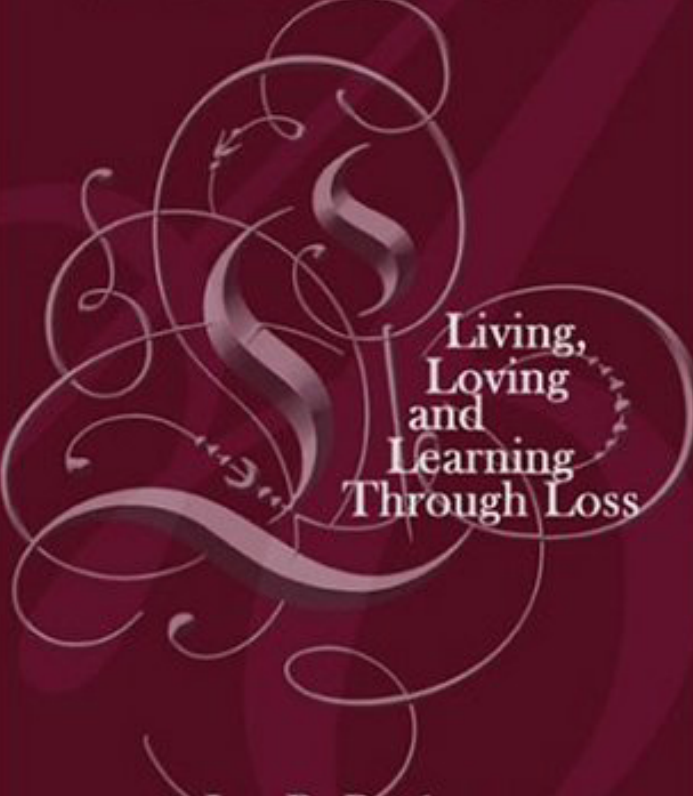


# Cover Me



Living,  
Loving  
and  
Learning  
Through Loss

Joy R. Basham

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*Living, Loving, and Learning Through Loss*

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*When I was low, you lifted me up. When I felt like crying, you made me smile. When I wanted to be enraged, you showed me how much better peace felt. When I wanted to keep it all to myself, the endurance of our friendship showed me why I had to write it down. I hope one day you will understand how much your presence in my life has meant to me. I hope that day is today.*

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# Prologue

For all those who have lost someone they love, my heart goes out to you and the book itself is dedicated to you, but the honor goes to my two best friends who lost their lives at such an early age. As well as to the others I have lost along the way. The three men whose stories I tell here are not the only loved ones of mine who have passed on and out of my life, but their lives and even their deaths had the most impact on my life, my soul and my spirit. Living with them, learning about them and loving them made me mostly what I am today. Living through the losses of these three guys that most of us loved but all of us admired has also had a great impact on the relationships our circle of friends' shares. As we mill about in our daily lives even to this day perhaps some do not realize that we have attained a higher plateau in the friendships we have in common. We have seen how one another lives, how we love, how we play and how we survive but there were days when we had to witness in each other how we grieved. As close friends of course we have the tendency to shelter or protect the people around us from some of our hardships and pain but in those days around those incredible losses we suffered we witnessed in each other our own personal of lowest moments. Questioning your mortality is likely not a first time thing for most people, even some of the youngest ones, but doing so while seeing the same bleakness reflecting from the eyes of your strongest and closest companions is perhaps somewhat of a forced moment of reckoning. One of those timeless minutes where at once we realize that indeed, we are all in this together.

Nowhere in these pages will I pretend to understand exactly how you feel. No one knows that but you. I will however, take you on a journey through life and death, and with the deepest of wishes, hope that you will understand things that may have been out of your reach before this book found its way to you. Let these experiences help you grow, instead of hindering you.

Life is a fragile thing to all of us. Sometimes it takes a tragic loss to bring this point home to you. I will not preach my beliefs to you, or try to tell you that it will get better with time. Better? It's not likely that the word better will

ever come to describe this difficult phase of your life. But with patience and some good coping skills the pain will become more bearable as time carries you through new memories and comforts you with the old ones.

In this book I will tell you three stories of personal losses I have lived through, from age 17 to age 27. It will seem hard to believe but in each and every one of those stories is a smile, a warm feeling and an all encompassing feeling of peace. It may have taken me years to reach them in some cases, but each and every moment of pain that I suffered short of the losses themselves, was worth it. In the end of this book I will share those moments, the ones that brought me to my knees in happiness and peace that I searched so hard for from the day I lost my first friend. I am writing it in hopes that my hard earned lessons will ease your transition as well. Things it took me 10 years of struggle and pain to learn can be shared here with you. If I save one person one moment of unnecessary pain, then I am satisfied and the deaths of my friends and the lessons I learned from them were never in vain. I want to show you how to look for the things that may comfort you and give you the closure you may need now, and exactly where to find them. I will not pretend that it is easy. As a matter of fact I want to make it clear that this is likely the hardest journey that life has ever taken you on. I will however pledge one thing, that you will come to the end of this passage and be a different person than what you were before you faced this loss. Death does different things to different people. We are not all so lucky as to have a wonderful counselor by our sides. We are not all so lucky as to have a guidebook with which we can decipher our emotional tribulations in facing such tragedies. One thing we are all lucky to have though, is friendships and families that endure these heartbreaking trials. Even though these things should be enough to carry us through the heartbreak, occasionally we need the wisdom of an outside voice, one that isn't so close to the heart. I only hope that no matter what you learn from the following pages, that you take from it a lesson that I have learned. In doing so, you will be saving yourself a lifetime of relative despair. You may be saving yourself worlds of pain by just reading these words and trying to feel yourself within them.

Although it might seem to be, the following pages are not about my individual pain in particular. They are about human pain, human suffering and the very human emotion of love. The most important thing to go into this book with is the awareness of one truth. Just because you have lost someone dear to you, it does not mean the love is gone. Indeed, the love has not even been altered, it lies within the very same place that it did before you suffered



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this loss. The only difference is that right now, it lies beneath a place that is aching with emptiness. That place is your heart, spirit and soul. That place deserves to be uncovered and cherished just as it was when this life that you valued so much was available to you as it sadly never will be again. It is of utmost importance to appreciate the entire journey, before you can learn to value the destination, the end of this journey you never wanted to embark on. Let my mistakes help you to understand why the pain seems to be intolerable, but that in the end, it is that very pain that will help you to gain the knowledge that will carry you through the rest of your life past these devastating days of loss to a place that is more comfortable and enduring. Under that hollow aching pain in your chest you still have a heart, soul and spirit that needs to be uncovered and sent back to work in the world that so desperately needs it.

# Loss

It's hard to describe in words what the loss of a loved one feels like. Perhaps these feelings are now familiar to you as well. The loneliness, anger, sadness and confusion just to start, just a small handful of the emotions you experience. What about the physical pain? Some people would like you to believe that you can not possible be experiencing physical pain, even from such a great loss. "It is just stress and anxiety." For them you may not want to take the extra time to convince, because to you, the ache in your chest is very real. After all, your grief is yours. You know what it feels like. What about the racing heartbeat? You know the one. The one you felt when you learned you had lost someone near to you. It's the same throbbing heartbeat that you can almost hear because of its force and intensity. The same pulling, sinking feeling in your chest, right over your heart, you feel when your mind is racing through the memories of your lost love. Those are real, not just your imagination. Those are the pains that will force you to realize, if you didn't already know, that the one you lost, was one you had truly loved. If you are now questioning whether or not you loved this person enough, or whether you felt what you should have for them, then let those feelings of loss and pain be the reminder that undeniably, you did love them enough and cherish them enough. Pull some comfort from that knowledge, you will need it.

The first few days you will likely feel that you are living in a fog, a blur. You will spend a lot of time thinking about things that never seemed so significant before. A passing moment spent with your loved one, an argument you may have had, a certain look this person had on their face one day in particular. A lot of the time for some people, these thoughts will begin to create more sadness, possibly feelings of guilt. Those are the same memories that will serve to honor your loved one in the days, weeks and years to come. Hold onto those even when they still hurt a little bit. We will talk more about those later.

I want you to understand that whatever you are feeling right now, and as horrible as this type of experience can be, you will learn from it. What you

take away from it is entirely up to you. There are thousands of ways that we can leave this earth and death is a part of our lives. But just because the people around you may be used to death and perhaps not prone to grieve openly at all, does not mean that what you are feeling or acting out, is abnormal. I am going to share with you my first experience with the death of a young man who meant a lot to me.

When I was 17 my best girlfriend in the world, Janet, 19, found out she was pregnant with her first child. Her fiancé at the time was someone I had known since I was around 12 years old. Paul, 22 at that time, was what I would call a tough love type of friend. He was the type of guy that would be the first one to tell you to straighten up when you were being a wild and careless person. I respected him for his straightforward attitude. I was so happy for both of them! Every moment I was not at work, I was at her house. I was more than ecstatic the day she gave birth to their daughter, Ashley. Paul was so blissful. He loved his daughter from the day she was conceived. To see him holding her was to know that you were watching a love develop that nothing would ever divide. Not even death.

A bit over a month after Ashley was born, Paul returned from a doctor's appointment with terrifying news. A lump that had been surgically removed from his neck weeks earlier came back positive for cancer. Because of the type of cancer he had, it was recommended to him to immediately start some pretty intensive chemotherapy. He was given a dire prognosis with around 6 months to live.

I was shocked and upset; Janet was frightened and more often than not had the look of controlled terror on her face. I did what I could to comfort her, but even I knew at that moment, that it could never be enough. Trying was all I could do, sometimes that is all that is needed. I kept a vigilant watch on her for signs of breakdown. I would be there to pick up every piece the second she crumbled. I could do no less for Janet, for Paul and for Ashley. Paul, he was himself, tough, unwavering and untouched on the outside by what he had just learned. He even refused to quit his job at a local restaurant. That restaurant was a few miles from his house, and he rode a bike to it everyday before he found out he had cancer, and then after that too, until the disease took all the strength from him. Anyone that knew Paul knew that he was one of, if not the strongest one of us all. It was an ugly moment in my life. What was left of my carefree innocence was stripped the second I realized that the toughest person I knew would be destroyed by something so seemingly small. So larger than life Paul was, and here I had to watch life itself destroy him. The person I had

been before was gone. The unbreakable girl I had been just received her first crack in the iron will she had so prided herself on. Paul was a universe stronger than I was. When he broke the news to us, he had no reservations about letting us know it was going to kill him, and fast. Mortality had just kicked in the door on my life and there could not have been a more undesirable visitor at that time. I feared that watching him weaken, would weaken my own resolve in life. I feared it would kill some of the fragile hopes I had barely hung onto through a difficult childhood. I was so naive in those fears and naïve was never a word used to describe me before. Those were not doubts exactly, they were an inevitable consequence of watching someone you love and admire die. I could have let it change me, make me bitter and angry, but I decided right away to try to learn from it. I decided to observe in the most covert way that I could and prayed wholeheartedly that it would not make me into something I did not ever want to be.

Through months of chemotherapy we all watched him slowly fade away from us. I really had been a hard-hitting girl around my neighborhood, and I had never really crumbled publicly. Until those last few months of Paul's life, I had doubted I ever would. I remember one visit to the cancer center where Paul lived out the last few months of his life. I recall as if it were yesterday how I walked into his room, and where I had last seen about a week before a man who was still determined to cheat this disease of his death for so long, I found a shell. He was small and pale where before he was an imposing presence just to be near. I remember holding myself together for as long as I could. As I reached a seat, next to his father who was visiting at the time, I fell into it, literally crumbled myself. I couldn't look at my friend, I felt ashamed for seeing him so weakened. I felt embarrassed, because I couldn't hold myself together while the man next to me was a father watching his only son die before his eyes. I glanced at Tom's face while being annoyed with the tears I could not keep from falling from my eyes. He was smiling at me. He was offering a silent encouragement for me to be strong. I kept thinking that the last thing Paul would want would be for us to see him this way. This was not the man I loved and admired. This was a living ghost of the person I had known before. I knew in that moment that love, no matter how great or free it is, can hurt more deeply than I had ever imagined. Help him, my heart and soul cried bitterly. In that moment I understood how the feeling of helplessness can overwhelm the spirit until you have to dig amazingly deep just to make sure it was still there. So helpless was the feeling that no matter what I did, even if it was to give my very own life, I couldn't help Paul. He was

beyond help that this world has to offer. I remember bowing my head, partly to hide the tears and sobs, and partly to offer some prayer to someone, somewhere, anyone...anywhere, to please ease my friends' pain, whether it was through death or recovery. I finally understood how people could feel relief at the death of a loved one. It was still a painfully guilty feeling, but it took away the helplessness of the disease. It eased the burden of injustice we were all forced to witness. It was seconds after this personal discovery that I felt a hand on my back, stroking and soothing. As I looked to my right I found myself looking into Paul's fathers' eyes. Tom looked at me, smiled, and said that it would be alright. I thought then, that even though I was not so naive as to believe that things would be alright, I felt that it had to take incredible strength to be where Tom was at this moment, and comforting another. He was not really treating me as a father would treat a teenage girl, at that moment, he was my brother. I think I took away with me that day that in the lowest points we reach in our lives, such as moments like this, we are all brothers and sisters. Not there to judge or there to coddle, but to console one another on equal ground, sacred ground. Where people who love a single person gather to honor and ease the loved ones passage onto the other side.

It was also the same day that Paul, who was fading in and out of consciousness, woke up for a few minutes and made a very prophetic statement to all who were in his room that afternoon. "I will make it until Ashley's first birthday." It was as if he could sense our uncertainty at his words, his promise. He was angry with us for doubting him in that moment, but we had only to look at where the last few months had taken him to see that what he was stating seemed to be just a dream, though one we all desperately hoped he could fulfill. No one even spoke in that moment; we all just looked up at him. He was talking, that was odd enough at that moment. He had been mostly unconscious for the last couple of weeks. Looking around at each of us, you could tell he couldn't exactly focus, but directly speaking to each of us and we knew it. "I will make it, I promise." He acknowledged to us at that moment what we had all feared but was scared to face. He would die, and in the near future. But even he had a goal. If we could all be so strong and goal oriented in life as he was near death, we would be more than blessed human beings.

Even the friends I had gone to visit Paul with that day were taken aback by the intensity of my emotions. Leaving there that day we were all shattered a bit more than we were when we arrived. I blamed myself a little for their break downs too, because we do tend to have an effect on those around us. I knew if I had come out of that hospital trying to crack jokes and lighten the mood,

the others would have traveled that road with me. I could not though, not that day. I made the subconscious decision to let my grief free for that moment. A while later I considered that same fact, and decided then that I would always be very careful as to when I would keep things to myself and try to save others from more pain or heartbreak. Isn't that exactly what Tom had done for me, in that weak and hollow moment? Instead of letting my overemotional state drive him to tears, he had pulled out his strength and carried me through that moment. Yes, I would be stronger because of that day. I had learned an important lesson about human nature in that moment. Although we were all in the same agonizing emotional state, at that moment, another person near me had a tad more strength than I could collect for myself. He gave that strength to me. He gave to me something I could never return, or at least that was how it felt at that moment. Years later I learned how to give it back. Perhaps I was not able to give it back in a moment that it would have been far more treasured, more needed, but give it back I would, and ten-fold.

Around 3 months after Paul's prophetic statement, we found ourselves again in the cancer center celebrating the first birthday of his daughter Ashley. Paul, the 80 or 90 pound shell of his former self was there with us, but unconscious and on very high doses of pain medication. We celebrated her birthday from around 8 pm that night. I remember leaving not too long after arriving and telling Janet that I was there for her if she needed me, she only had to call. We had been friends for 8 years or so by that night. I left with a renewed faith in the human spirit. Paul was so unaware of what was going on in that room that night, or was he? He had kept his word. It was an incredible prediction fulfilled. For all appearances it seemed he was already gone from us, yet his heart still beat, his breath still filled his lungs and we felt a bit more complete in those moments. His life had come full circle in that last year. Not in the way we want our lives to be returned to us, but in the way we want to have some control over a situation that is unmanageable.

That November, not quite a year since Rob had been diagnosed with cancer; the phone rang and woke me out of a dismal dream. It was 4am and only a few hours after I had left the cancer center, and only 4 hours after the date of Ashley's birthday, and Janet was on the other end of the phone.

"He's gone Joy," she said. I could feel the pain and I could feel the relief in her heart as if it were my very own. I think that was the first full breath I had taken in months.

"Ok. I am sorry Janet, so sorry. He did do what he said he would do. He made it. He loved you. He loved Ashley. I love you. I am here anytime you need me."

“I know he did. I love you too Joy. I’ll talk to you later today.”

I think I learned the same thing that a lot of people learn when they have an experience with cancer or other diseases that take a loved one. I’ve learned to humble myself. Paul had been alive at what seemed to be the peak of his young life at age 22 that December he found out he had cancer. He died at age 23 the following November.

Yes, I could be the strongest person in the world too, just as he was. And I could wake up one day and find out I had less than a year to live and be so shaken that I could not pick myself up out of bed. I just don’t think that’s how it is for them, the Paul’s of the world. I think whether you are Christian, Buddhist, Islamic or even agnostic, when we are faced with our own mortality, as we are when a loved one has a fatal disease, we tend to find an inner peace, a safe place where we know we do not have to fear death, only live the life we have left. Although Paul couldn’t beat the disease and win his life back, he did beat it and keep something that was dear to him, a simple promise. That is one of those memories you have to savor. I know if you have suffered a similar loss, through a disease that prolonged your emotional pain and your loved ones physical pain, that you have a couple of those memories too. A moment of strength or depth where you could only see bleakness, but your loved one, ill and weakened showed you just how strong it was possible to be. The same place that maybe you found yourself losing faith, and had a moment where you couldn’t even deny yourself that. Those memories, the ones that hurt to watch, are the same ones that will honor the life and death of the ones you lose.

As I said, I will not write these words that mean so much to me and mingle them with false hopes or overly optimistic feelings that would be trying to reach cloud nine for you right now. But I do mean to tell you that you will have some of your faith and hope restored before its all said and done. You will heal, perhaps fully and perhaps never really feeling quite the same. It is perfectly acceptable to come to the realization that your life may never be the same again. It is likely it will not be. It is only up to you which path you allow it to take. It is in the best interest of your own spirit to allow these moments to teach you, instead of take from you.

When Paul first passed away, that memory of his promise used to bring me to full sobbing tears. These days, many years later, that same memory brings a smile to my face, sometimes with a prick of tears behind my eyes, but always with the smile and comforting feeling that I silently begged for when the pain was so fresh. So many people suffered Paul’s loss more than I did. In

those moments I couldn't fathom what it could feel like to those who had been so close to him, to his parents who remembered the little baby he had been. I hope Paul's parents take full responsibility for having raised a son, a man, into someone who could impact all the lives that he did in such short time. Without them Paul would not have been in our lives at all. Paul would have wanted us to continue to honor them in his memory. So I do. Does grieving for Paul ever get better? No, never better. Though now days it does inspire other feelings, comfort, love and honor. Honoring his memory by keeping that on the surface does him far more justice then tossing a rose on his headstone would ever do for me. Everyone grieves differently, but there is one goal in mind always. "How can I honor my friends' memory?" That's how, do whatever you do that gives you that comfort, that smile filled with tears, a giggle over a memory that you no longer feel guilt for feeling. This is healing, that's how it works and there is no set time for anyone, there is no grief clock ticking, and no one can tell you "It's been a long time" or "He/she would want you to move on." You do those things on your own time. Healing is for you, not for what others think it should be.

### Coming to terms with your loss

There are people who grieve that can do so while still going about their daily business. There are others who are nearly crippled by the loss of someone they loved. No one is wrong or abnormal; they just experience strong emotions in different ways. There is no set way to mourn. It is of utmost importance to the mental health of either type of person to realize this fact right away. The following suggestions are specifically for the initial actions and reactions to the death of your loved one. Coming to terms with the loss, the permanence of it, immediately, will help you to get through the days ahead.

Forget what people think. This is your time to honor the life of your loved one. You know what was important to your loved one. If saving stray animals was a passion for your friend or relative who passed on, then donate something to a local animal shelter in their name. If roses were their favorite flower, buy a dozen and write out the card to the one you are missing. Put them on your coffee table and remember when you feel like remembering. Do what you can to honor what you know was in their heart.

If you feel like doing it and just haven't allowed yourself to, then go ahead and cry as much as you want to. Find somewhere private to do it if you don't



feel comfortable displaying emotions in front of others. This is no longer a male only issue. A lot of young girls have learned to or have been taught to hide their emotions as well. It is perfectly fine to be self protecting and to control your feelings in public places. This is not the time to hide them from your self. Now is the time to cry out louder then the hollow ache in your chest is making itself heard and felt.

Gather some memories. Find a picture, a T-shirt, an old toy, anything that will keep the memory of your loved one near you. Put it in a place that is special to you. Although it may not be the best thing for your mental health at this point to surround yourself with so many memories that you can not look left or right without crying, it is good for your soul to have a quiet peaceful place where you can take out a box of memories and contemplate them, shed a tear over them and just in general remind yourself that the love for your lost one still lives as long as it is in your heart. This is also a good way to measure your grief and how far you have grown from this desperate moment in time. Today, those old toys and your loved ones favorite keychain may bring you to bawling tears, but tomorrow, a year from tomorrow or ten years from tomorrow you may sit down in that same spot with that same box full of memories and just smile. It will happen, be as patient as you can by knowing that you will reach that day in the future.

Write down your feelings. Keep a brief journal. Even if the entry reads, "Today was horrible, I miss him/her!" You will not regret it in the days and years to come. Keeping a record of your feelings will only prove to you in later days how much you have grown, how far you have come since those tragic moments that passed through your life. Having proof of your emotional development is a good reminder that without a doubt, we do learn, even from the most horrifying moments in our lives.

Find another person who is suffering the same loss you are. It will ease the suffering a bit if you have someone who can understand directly what you are going through. We are not looking for friends in misery. We are looking for brothers and sisters in pain, and doing what we can to share in our own, and ease theirs a bit while we go. It is important to make sure that you are sharing these moments, not completely unloading your emotions on them, while they suffer in silence. Make sure anyone you are offering comfort to gets it. In moments of silence, repeat what you heard them say. In your own words, reflect their emotions back to them. "I can tell you really loved her, she had a great friend in you, I am sure she knew it." Do not expect to receive the same back from them, and if you do, make sure they know how much you

appreciate their comments. Use logic to eliminate blame placing. I have had friends tell me of their losses. Crying their hearts out telling me how much they loved their lost loved ones. Only then to tell me that they were sure their loved one had no idea how much they loved them, how much they cared. I have done this to myself a few times in the past; it is what made the guilt and self blame so easy. In the light of pure logic, it is easy to explain to them at a time like this “You have been talking to me for five minutes and I can tell you loved her. If you knew her for 7 years, then she must have known this as well.” You may only get a faint nod and a lack of faith in your logic, but you also may have just flipped on a switch that will help them turn the tides of grief into a moment where their guilt is irrevocably and resolutely lost. Their grieving can now begin, so can yours.

Try to do as much as you can to keep busy. If it’s just listening to music with friends, or doing some physical activities that you are used to doing, keep it up. The hardest times you are going to experience in the coming days are going to be when you lay down to sleep at night. By remaining idle, you are going to increase the energy your body stores for daily activity. Keeping busy will help your mind rest when your body is ready to. Do not overdo it either. A lot of people in various stages of mourning tend to over exert themselves in the hopes of drowning out the pain. It is usually successful in a temporary manner, but very destructive to a permanent healing process. You are only prolonging the pain by doing this. There will eventually be a collapse in the emotional state you have been ignoring. These hurt far more. Now you have gone months without taking the time to mourn your loss. Now others have moved on and past where you now find yourself. Now people who have gone through the grieving process are miles ahead of you and may be unwilling to relapse themselves into full blown pain again just to comfort you. You can not blame them, they have already faced their fears, and they have suffered the loss and gone onto learning from it. You will now be just beginning the entire process, except now you may find yourself completely alone in doing so. It is something near to failing a grade in school. Just because you failed does not mean your close friends should have to repeat that same grade with you, right? Avoidance will get you nowhere, and soon you will find yourself alone in this mourning that would have been far better had you shared it when others around you were struggling with the same issues.

These are just a few things that will ease the pain of what you are already feeling. It will also help you to not be so shocked in the days to come.

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Remember always that some people grieve through joking just as others grieve through crying. Never judge someone for something you would not want to be judged for.

In making a decision to not be judgmental during this rough time, remember also that people of different ethnicities and religions may have funerals or ceremonies that are unusual for you to understand. If you are closely involved in or have to deal with relatives or others who would want to argue about something that seems unimportant to you, again, remember, you've decided against being judgmental.

Freeze a moment in time. It could be the smallest of victories or the hugest of losses. Make sure it is one of those crowning moments of your relationship with your lost loved on and hold onto it. Keep it in a sacred place in your heart. You are going to need a cup in which to measure your healing with. Grab that memory and savor it, cry over it, release the built up tension over it. It will serve you well in the days to come. Today, while the loss is so fresh it may inspire tears, it may inspire laughter and it may inspire a hollow feeling that you are trying to suppress. Give that memory the freedom to haunt you right now. In later days, that same memory will give you a freedom, a healing that you might never find without it.

# Acceptance

It takes a lot to accept the loss of someone you love. You start asking yourself the impossible to answer questions. What if I had just done something different? Where is my loved one? Did they suffer? Do they miss me? Are they watching over me? These questions are perfectly normal to ponder. They are also a part of the healing process. They can also be more than frustrating if you seek, but find no answers to. Well, I can not answer those questions with complete certainty, but I think I can come very close, and very comforting.

My story about my best friend Alex teaches me what it takes to make yourself accept that you will never share those laughs, whisper those secrets or have one of those moments where no one speaks but everyone understands, again. It's a hard won acceptance, but it's worth the fight.

Alex was my first crush. I met him when I was 7 years old. He was everything that I thought was adorable. He was tiny like me, but full of courage and strength. When we were around 9 we had a conversation on his grandmothers' couch that was very childlike and extremely adult at the same time.

"What's this kissing stuff about that has everyone acting stupid?" He asked.

"Well, I'm sure I don't know because I've never kissed a person that wasn't my mom or dad, and I know it's supposed to be different when it's just a friend."

"Hmm, I think we should try it." He replied.

"I think so too," I said, my little nine year old heart fluttering.

This was the first boy I'd ever wanted to kiss. All others before him had been dubbed yucky and not to be touched.

As we experimented with our first kiss, his grandmother and aunt came blasting out of the bedroom behind us, hiding laughter and putting a direct halt on our research. They had overheard us, and had probably contained themselves for as long as they could. One of my fondest memories of Alex,

one that brought me so much joy as a child, then so much pain as a teenager who lost her first puppy love. That memory caused me so much pain in the beginning, and so much happiness in the end.

In my experience, it's harder to lose someone you grew up with, whether they are a sibling, a parent, or a childhood friend. The problem is you remember them in their phases of life, just as you were passing through your own. The day I lost Alex, I didn't have just the memories of the last couple years, what he looked like the day he died, but I also had the little boy in my head, the one with the bad haircut we made fun of, the same one who I watched go from gangly clumsy junior high school kid to a grown man. I had his whole life to remember, not just a few years or moments. How possible would it even be to honor and cherish what we had, without feeling the hollow loss and letting it take over? It may be very hard, but again, a battle worth fighting for. I had unwillingly just learned a small bit of what Paul's parents must have felt when they lost their son.

I learned a horrific lesson around midnight of May 1993. I was 19 the year my soul died and my spirit was lost.

"Joy? Hey, come with me, its Alex." Janet whispered.

I instinctively knew he was dead. I jumped in her car and rode in my own fog to the place Alex and I had been staying. The guilt was the most agonizing thing I had, even to this very day, suffered. Alex had lost his license a few months before he died. I was the only person he trusted to drive his car, to drive him anywhere. He and I and his current girlfriend had been holed up in an apartment together for too long. I felt it was in everyone's best interest if I took off and gave them some time to be together. It was apparent that Alex didn't want me to leave him; he wanted to jump in the car with me and take off, as we always did, as kids, as teens, as friends. In effort to keep the peace he stayed that day at his girlfriends' apartment. No matter how long I live I am sure I will never forget the last conversation I had with my best childhood friend.

"Alex," I called up to him sitting in the window of the second floor apartment. "Are you sure you don't want to go anywhere tonight? I swear I don't mind, Ill stay and we will do something later."

"Nah, you go ahead and go enjoy yourself. I am not going anywhere tonight," were the last words I heard my best friend say.

Janet and I drove off, happy chatting young women. It was my last moments of being anything near innocent, and perhaps that is why even then to me, it played itself out as a movie, in frames, choppy and slow motion.

That's how I always see that scene there. I am sure I always will. Pulling into the apartment building that night and seeing several police cars had the same effect on me. I recall my heart banging so loud in my chest I had to glance at Janet to see if she could hear it. As I glanced down into my lap towards my wringing hands I could actually see my heart banging in my chest. Those moments held a surreal quality. As if I was dreaming, or having a nightmare. They seemed fake and entirely deadening to my physical senses. No matter what you have seen or dealt with, there is nothing that can prepare you for the moment when your own emotions take over your actual physical presence in the environment. I've accepted them as some kind of tragic movie reels in my life. They play out as if they are dreams or false memories. They are very real indeed.

Not even 4 hours later after being picked up from Alex's girlfriends house Janet was picking me up and driving me to the end of my life as I knew it. How could I have done this? I've killed my best friend. I could have done something. If I only had not left that night, then it would have been me driving his car, capable of doing so, and not the person who had driven him to his death in the four hours I had been separated from him in the last five months. Alex had let someone else drive him that fateful night. That person didn't deserve to be entrusted with the life of my best friend. Even in that blindingly angry and guilt filled moment, I had to stop to realize that someone else had lost a friend, someone else had lost a son. Absorbed in my intense anger, I still had compassion. Blindingly painful losses teach the soul lessons the heart never wanted to learn. I was the messenger of disaster that night, I did not have to do it, but I took it upon myself, in honor of my love for my friend, to be the one who called all of our closest friends to tell them what had happened. I received a lot of different reactions to my message of our friend's death. Some were silent, some were openly upset and some seemed to be hearing that the price of gas had just gone up a couple of cents. It occurred to me then that everyone had different ways to deal with tragedies and grief. Even the officers that arrived that night were shaken by this tragedy. I remember when I had first arrived back to the apartment with Janet that I had almost busted through her front door I was so scared, the officers inside looked at me and asked his girlfriend who I was. "His best friend", I heard her say from what seemed like miles away. They leveled cold gazes on me and asked me if I wanted to be the one who told his aunt and grandmother about his death. I don't even remember replying; only shaking my head while choking back burning tears and nausea. Even the officers did not want a part

in this horror, and I even understood their anger that was misdirected at me when they asked that question so deliberate. At my reply of no, I recall the younger officer shaking his head at me and telling me that he didn't want to have to tell them either. He had no choice. His eyes said.

It took me 10 years to appreciate how lucky I am that I can say I had a best friend to bury. No one would see it that way in a moment of blind grief, but it's true. It took me 12 years to understand that I didn't cause his death. How does acceptance play its part in your grief? It is the difference between those fond old memories causing heart wrenching, tear jerking pain, or those same memories, causing you private laughter and comfort, soul rending tears or a private moment of fond remembrance. That choice is solely yours to make, to accept.

I've been on both sides. It honors my friends to share their stories, it cleanses my soul to be there for even one person who needs a helping hand reaching the conclusions it took me a decade to reach. As hard as it is to do at this moment, please give it a chance to work, it will. I won't attempt to alter your faith or hope in the world. As a matter of fact, I would be the last one who could say anything vaguely upbeat when the loss was still so fresh. So I won't patronize you, I will only share the truth, beautiful or ugly as it may be.

If guilt or imagined culpability is keeping you from allowing yourself to grieve for a lost loved one then you need to transfer your energies. Unless you actually first hand murdered your loved one then you are not responsible. While you are sitting there asking yourself, "What could I have done differently?" "What if she/he hadn't left to come to my house, then maybe they would still be alive." These questions, although natural, are just misplaced emotions. You are not responsible. If you are responsible, then so is every other friend, family member or acquaintance of your lost loved one who could have, should have or would have if they had known done something different before that moment of passing.

I am not going to preach fate, or destiny here. At age 31, I'm still not quite sure if I believe in those things, or just that we are all chaos contained and bouncing around in a universe waiting for what is our own personal last moments. I am still learning just as you are what this world is about. What it's stealing from me, and what I am freely giving it is something I am still trying to decipher. I halfheartedly joke with my friends in conversations that I am the same person at 31 that I was at 14. It's not really as much of a joke as I'd like to think it is. I don't see that much difference in the way I would cope with something so painful. At 14, it's quite possible I was even stronger then I am now.

Oh, if I knew then what I knew now, is the only statement I can fathom that reminds me that I am not that 14 year old, too smart, but not wise enough, innocent spirit I used to be. I am now going to share the adult secret. Likely the one that adults wish they could deny is truth. You are the same person you were at birth; you are the same human at 10 that you are at 20, 30 and so on. An honest mother can attest to this. My own children are still mirrors of what they were as babies. My oldest, who was the serious, brooding baby, is still the same person at age 16. My youngest son, the lovable teddy bear as a toddler, is yet again, the same at 12. When you are 14 and are suffering a loss, it hurts just as bad as it does at 20 and 30. Do not let the jaded natures of those older than you tell you that your loss isn't as bad now as it would be had you known the person longer, loved them more, been in their life more or the worst yet, that you will grow out of it. Do not watch others and judge from their reactions how you should act, how you should feel. It was never more important in your life to be true to yourself than it is at this moment.

You will see others, who appear to not be as hurt or emotional as they should be. It might even make you angry, but you have to brush some of that off because maybe they were never told it was alright to grieve openly over a lost loved one. Perhaps they were raised to be that way whatever the issue. It is not for you to judge their behaviors no more than it is for them to judge yours.

In order for you to finally accept the death of a loved one, you have to accept what your true place in their life was. In order for me to accept the death of Alex, whom I loved so much, I had learned to appreciate the fact that I could have the ability to bury a best friend. I was so blessed for having even known Alex for a few passing moments much less for 13 years, that I had to just come to terms with the fact that others had not gotten the chance to know him as I had. It was for them I felt the most grief. I spent a lot of time feeling so unlucky. What was unlucky about me? I got to spend a lot of happy years loving my best friend and even though he was gone now, what would my life had been like without him? Indeed, I had been very lucky.

Believe me; I didn't make it to that moment of clarity without a lot of 'poor me' moments. I'll never forget the things that people said to me about the death of my friend. My own mother in a moment of thoughtlessness said "people die everyday." It took me years to comprehend and forgive that statement. It was the wrong thing to say. Of course people die everyday, but not my people, not my best friend, not the first boy I kissed, not my little gossip mate, not the boy that I swore to take care of. My mother had dealt with



her own personal losses in her own way. It wasn't just the same way that I did. With Alex, I learned the hardest lesson yet. To count my blessings in those moments that I felt cursed.

How could Alex be taken from me? The blessing in that thought was that I was even able to say he was taken from me. Like a child who felt, 'that's MY friend you can not play with him!' I came to the realization that even calling him my anything was proof of the gift I received. Millions of people didn't get to know him. They never got to feel that silent comforting moment when it was just him and I against the world. They never had that genuine connection with this person whom I took for granted before his death, and never forgot what a gift I was given after he left this world for the other side.

There is a saying that I do believe in. "The dead do not suffer the living." I wholeheartedly agree. It is not death that is harsh and merciless; it is living that hurts the most. The moment you can understand that statement, then you have learned to accept the loss you have suffered, and only then can you move forward from there, to the next fork in the path.

#### How to accept the loss of someone you love

I want to say that one day you will no longer suffer the loss of the person you are missing. But I don't mince words, or offer false hope to anyone. There may always be moments when you find yourself saying aloud or to yourself that you wish that person was here to see this or that. Nothing that I write or that anyone talks you through is going to take away those moments of remembrance. Never should you begrudge yourself those moments. Relish those, because at those times you know that you have come to accept the loss. Accepting the loss doesn't mean you approve of it. Accepting the loss doesn't mean you have forgotten how important this person was in your life. Accepting the loss simply means that you fully realize they do no longer exist on the same plane as you.

It's almost as if you had died. You can literally see your life flashing before your eyes. It is those times when you and your loved one shared a moment, a giggle or even a good cry. I know you want to get past these lonely moments. The first step to doing so is going to be one of the hardest battles you have fought so far. Acceptance isn't the key; it's the deadbolt lock keeping the door closed even if the key in the doorknob has already been turned.

Just as in grief, people find acceptance in different ways.

How did it happen? I know that a lot of people tend to feel this is a morbid issue. If you have ever lost someone you loved tragically it does not seem that way at all. We struggle with the fact that our hearts are breaking because we worry that they suffered. Was he alone? Did he feel pain? Did he say anything? Was he scared? These are all serious questions and simply having an answer to any of them will spell relief for you, even if just momentary. A word of warning, the answers are not always comforting. With acceptance we are not necessarily seeking comfort, but closure.

You will now have to use your own judgment as to whether the rumors you hear about the death of your loved one are true. Luckily, most people do not choose this particular hard time to make things up or embellish stories into horrors. Without causing others pain, it might be the time to seek out some of these answers. You have to accept one way or another that your loved one is gone. They had a life, from beginning to end. It is normal to want to know how it ended for them if you were not present when it occurred. Be as emotionally prepared as you can be before you begin to ask questions. Give yourself a bail out promise. Promise yourself that if hearing anything painful hurts worse than the loss itself, you will stop and weigh out whether it hurts more to know or not know. Do what is best for you. DON'T do something such as subject yourself to more intense misery because others feel you should. Don't forget to tap a bit into foresight as well. Are you the type who would regret this later? Be prepared to be upset if you read news stories on the incident that took them from you. The media does not usually cover how great of a person your friend or loved one was, just the facts on the tragedy. Do not take that personally.

Right now it might seem impossible that you will ever accept that they are gone. You are still seeing them walk into the room at the same time they did everyday. You are still expecting to hear the phone ring at the same time they used to call. You may even believe you heard their voice or seen a glimpse of them, even when you know it is not possible. You are not going crazy. The human mind works in incredible ways, sometimes it gives you just what you want, a voice, a sound, a warm memory, and just as often it deprives you of those same things. Try to cherish the memories instead of hating or dreading them. Just a glimpse of any of my lost loved ones, even in a dream, gives me a quick lift of my own spirit. I've definitely learned to appreciate those.

Take the time to write a letter that explains how you felt about the person you lost. Include good memories, bad memories and how losing them makes you feel. Keep it to yourself forever if you choose. One day you may feel inclined to share it with someone who would want to know what it contains. I will show you how important this could be to you later on in this book.

# The Funeral

The day we buried Paul was full of so many ups and downs. I believe the queasiness I felt that day did nothing but continuously remind me that this was really happening. It was over, he was gone. That day we were all going to come to accept it, like it or not. Paul's family had been friends with a lot of motorcyclist. They had been there having charity events to help Paul and his new family along the way, through the hospitalizations and all the bills that came with it.

When we got to the funeral home, there were so many motorcycles there the sound was vibrating the funeral home, even once inside you could feel it. That loud throb that so many motorcycles made in the environment was the same loud throb that my heart had been making from the day I found out his disease was going to take his life. I recall the feeling of pride that I had been lucky enough to feel the moment I witnessed all those people there paying tribute to the friend I had known. The service was incredibly painful, but done very respectfully. We all sat while the preacher talked about what a strong person Paul was. The preacher described moments in Paul's life that some of us had been there for, and moments that some of us knew nothing about. Although painful and tearful, all of those people listened in utter silence to the things that were said about him. After the eulogy, they played a couple of songs that Paul had requested be played during his service. Choking on tears I sat and listened to each and every word of them and once again realized how very unselfish that Paul had been. Indeed, we had been the selfish ones. We wanted him to stay; we did not want to give him up forever. All the while he had been doing things, taking steps that would prepare us for letting him go. He wanted us to have comfort in those moments, and most of us found some. Unbelievably, I think everyone there found a little bit of peace that day. I learned that day that the funeral itself was not the time to be alone and suffering inside of my own grief. It was the time to share in common knowledge and even common pain over someone who was the cause of us all being there that very moment. His life had brought us all together. Paul was one hell of a link in our world.

Sometimes people treat others badly. Sometimes they do things they regret. At a funeral you tend to find those same people, suffering just the same as the others who never wronged anyone. The death of a loved one brings you to a common place with others, no matter who they are. We all feel the pain, as we bow our heads and listen to the words of the eulogy, or the songs that they play, we are all in the same place. We are truly brothers and sisters in this moment. Sure, there are some people who come to a funeral because they have to for appearances or whatever drives them. It's in the eyes of the people who are there for the same reason you are. You can nearly sense the ones who are there, who just like you, never wanted to be.

The day of Alex's funeral was one of those days I broke my promise not to judge. I learned an ugly lesson a few years later. The girl Alex had been seeing for a few months did something that I felt was unforgivable. After all, I knew how he really felt about her. I was his little gossip mate. She went out of her way to provide the attendees with a dramatic scene. Screaming, crying, nearly faking a faint, just to draw attention to her self. Alex's grieving mother had to set aside her own pain just to attend to this girl. It burned my very soul. I just kept it all to myself. After spending a couple of hours nearly carrying this girl through the funeral and graveside service, Alex's mother looked up at me. Dana, she had always been so gentle and sweet to all of his friends. As I stood there silently grieving away from the area reserved for the family, I tried to look at her with strength. Chin up and sunglasses barely hiding my red and swollen eyes, I was hurting to my very soul but I did not want my pain to draw away from theirs. I did not want his mother having to worry for me instead of comforting Alex's siblings. I did not want to be selfish. She seen the desperate pain and loneliness in my body language and nearly ran to me, arms spread wide. She gathered me into her arms and said something that I will not ever forget. "Oh Joy, I am so sorry. He loved you so much; I hope you never forget that." Thanks to her, I never will. Even that small moment made me feel a bit guilty. How can this mother who lost her firstborn be so concerned with me? I wasn't being dramatic or leeching attention for myself. I was almost hiding in shame of what Alex's girlfriend was doing to them. I knew then that as she held me in her arms and offered me comfort that she knew how very much this was hurting me, no matter what I appeared to be feeling. She knew the feelings and well being of the living were what was important in that very moment. That was why she offered the support she did to the seemingly overly distraught girlfriend. I spent a few years inwardly hating that girl, his girlfriend. A girl, who had known Alex a whole 4 months

before he died, took all of those at the funeral that day and had them feel sorry for her. In my heart it was an unforgivable action. About five years after Alex's death, I found out that same girl, had wrecked her car and died as well. Perhaps she just never knew how to grieve, but I wasted a lot of energy having contempt for someone who had been dead for a few years. No judgment. It is very important to remember that. It is an ugly feeling to find yourself hating someone who had also left people hurting and grieving for them. No matter what a persons actions in life, death is the same for all. An ending.

### Attending a funeral

When attending the funeral of your loved one try to dress comfortably and respectfully. Bring some sunglasses if the day is sunny or an umbrella for the graveside service if your loved one is being buried. If you are family to the person who passed then be prepared for a lot of people to engage you in conversation that you might find upsetting or just annoying. A lot of people have no idea how to grieve. There are a lot of people even at my age, who have never lost a loved one. People tend to suddenly turn awkward when it comes to offering condolences to others. They may tell you that your loved one was a great person, or they may simply tell you they are sorry for your loss. At the same time, you will likely find yourself at a loss for words. That is understandable as well. A simple "Thank you" or "I appreciate that" will be more than enough to indicate you have heard their words. Just as it is important for you to find your closure and acceptance, it is important for them as well. Instead of being distant and struggling alone in this accept the kind words; accept the embraces people may offer. It is in the dual natures of human beings to not only feel pain but to be compelled to comfort others who are feeling it as well. Accept the comfort of others even if you just want to be left alone right now. While you are grieving over a loss, others around you who may not have felt the loss with the impact that you did, are only trying to do what you yourself want to do right now, comfort someone in pain.

If your loved one was not a family member and you want to offer your condolences there is usually a receiving line where the family is lined up to talk to the people who attend the funeral. Wait patiently for your turn and when given it, offer your condolences and move on. I know it's incredibly tough to think of the right words to say right now. It took me a few losses to realize that some things will always just go in one ear and right out the other at a time like this. If you find something that is true to your heart, and offer it

in a short simple sentence or two, you could be offering something that person will carry in their heart for the rest of their lives. To the parents of a loved one I've found a simple sentence that means the world to me, and to them. "Without you, I would have never known him/her. Thank you for giving me the chance to have had someone so wonderful in my life." I'm sure most people do not see it this way when they are suffering. Pain does distort our perceptions. You have just given a mother or father a wonderful compliment and reminded them that their child had impact on the lives of others. No parent could ever toss that statement down, but they could carry that as one of their peaceful moments forever. For siblings it is not too far off of the other comment. "He/she felt like my brother/sister too. I wish I had half of the memories you must have, as I must have half of the pain." It is important to not let your grief at the funeral swell up over to what the people who lived near your loved one for most or all of their lives. You may be in tremendous emotional pain, but try to understand that not only have you lost a friend, but someone lost a brother or sister, someone else lost a son or daughter. A mother remembers the baby she brought home from the hospital, a sister remembers holding her little brother for the first time. There may come a time for you to cry or scream your grief to the world. The funeral is not the time. It's a time for family and recognizing the brotherhood in which we all share, and for coming to terms with a loss.

Be respectful to other friends and family. You may not be able to contain your tears. Do not even try. You may not be able to talk well or focus on anything but the pain and emptiness in your heart. The moments at the funeral are likely the first concrete moments when you come to the realization that you have lost something that means the world to you. But remember the respect that your loved one deserves. Do not attempt to use this time to settle old grudges or place blame for the death on any others present. Allowing others to grieve in their own way is also a part of your personal healing process. Do not add regrets to a time in your life already filled with them.

It is very important to take this time to listen, and to reflect on what you have learned. It is entirely possible that no matter how much you feel you know, that you will feel there is a lesson in this. It is the struggle to realize that this did not happen to you. This loss happened to everyone who ever spent a moment with your lost loved one. Look at the people around you if you feel alone for a moment. They are in the same place you are, they are hurting too. In the moments you feel strong, carry a friend through. Cover them. Because maybe, just maybe, in the next moment of weakness you suffer, they may cover you.

## COVER ME

There is nothing more unforgettable than guilt. You do not want to find yourself where I found myself a year before I wrote this book. I struggled inwardly to decipher the message I felt I must have been sent in the deaths of three of my friends. Two of those guys were my best friends. One was simply an earth bound angel who showed me that no matter how strong you are, you can still accept moments of weakness. It is ok to cry. It is ok to grieve, openly. It is ok to be angry. It is ok to feel alone. These emotions only become less acceptable when you feel you have to inflict them on others.

Occasionally, people consider suicide when they are dealing with the loss of a loved one. This is the same type of unacceptable behavior I am talking about. Knowing the loss you now feel, how could you ever willingly inflict that upon others? It would be unfair to pierce the hearts of your own loved ones in a selfish moment in which you desire to join your lost loved one. The feeling is understandable, the action unforgivable.

On this same note we want to remember our promise not to judge others. If you lost a loved one to suicide then you need to read these words more than a lot of people. People who commit suicide over the loss of one of their loved ones had no idea how to grieve. They had all the same feelings you may be feeling now, the emptiness was something they could not cope with, but the end result only caused more pain to you or others who loved them. More than anything for those effected by suicides, it is important to realize that you will live through this if you simply allow yourself to. You will be stronger for it. You may even be able to help someone who doesn't have as many coping skills survive a similar inner battle. You may be the only link that a nine year old whose mother committed suicide has to avoid making the same mistake. You may be the only one who can hold together a family who is suffering the same loss. Never discount what you are learning from this experience. It may save another life one day. It may renew someone else's soul in just the way yours needs to be renewed right now.

Above all, through the tears and the pain, hold your head high and honor the love and the friendship in the way your friend would remember you if the roles were reversed. Be yourself and don't be afraid to be that even if it's not what others expect of you. You will live through this day. You may not want to, but you have to. If you are not around to honor your lost loved one, then you have broken a very important link in the world. Today is the day you get to forget what others think, what they want. Exercise your feelings, ones you may not want to feel, but have no choice but to. Tomorrow will be a new day, and it might not be a better day, it might even be worse, but for now, you have

nothing to do but be another person who is there to simply honor the fact that the person who passed was one that you loved and want to remember.

Imagine life after today. How could the little trivial things we concern ourselves with matter? A very simple answer is that they won't. Once you have made it through today and learned to live with this loss, you are stronger, like it or not, want it or not. As a person, as a friend, as a parent, as a son or daughter, as a wife or husband, you are stronger for having lived through this day. Now all you have to do is prove it to yourself. There is no one to impress here, just a soul that needs to be refilled with faith.



# The Aftermath

You may have told yourself that if you could just get through the funeral, that you would be ok. That is not always the truth for some people. The funeral was easy compared to what you face now, emotional and spiritual restlessness. What can you do? What do you do now without the person you loved so much in your life? It can be harsh to realize that today it is over. The wake is over, the funeral has passed and here you are. You are doing the same things, driving the same roads, living in the same house, but nothing will ever be the same again. Get a firm grip on that fact because we are about to learn that although things will never be the same again, you can improve on what you are, what you feel and what you do, because of the harsh loss you have experienced.

After Alex was killed in a car accident that I felt responsible for, I felt a whirlwind of horrible feelings. Guilt, sorrow, loneliness and anger just barely touched the surface of all the horrid things I felt. Things you never considered may begin to pop into your thoughts now that the hectic moment after their passing has passed you by. I remember a couple of days after Alex's funeral I woke up in tears, and remembered something horrible. I never really told him I loved him.

A couple of months before he died he had lost his drivers permit. He was very upset one day when we were discussing what he was going to do. He had been delivering pizzas and without a permit, how could he keep doing that? He was so upset at the thought that he would lose the car that he had worked so hard for. I told him very honestly, that if he couldn't do the job, I would drive him and his pizzas around. I remembered that day the look on his face, the smile and the warm feeling he gave me when he looked at me and said "You would really do that for me?" Of course I would was my reply. I'm sure he knew I loved him in that moment. In my heart though, I kept feeling horrible because I had never just came out and said the words. Oh the pain and the guilt and the anger at how I should have said so, how I should have done more things that would have let him know. It's not fair that someone who

gave so much happiness and comfort to my life had to leave without my having told them just how much they meant to me. That day I learned a hard lesson for me. I had been raised to keep feelings that may make me vulnerable to myself. To not use the words I love you too freely, or they would be diminished from overuse. My reserved nature that had protected me for so long hurt me the most in the end. I had protected myself alright, but in the process I had hurt myself more than I would even be able to figure out for years to come. I hated myself for that for so long. My best friend died without me ever having just looked at him and told him exactly how much I loved him. We are all scared to bare our emotions to some extent. We seem to fear that saying those things will make us defenseless. To be honest they do just that. They make us vulnerable. Telling a friend you love them might make them think they can treat you differently, and you may fear that. Take a moment to reflect on someone in your life you may have this with. A friend or loved one that means the world to you, but has no idea the effect they have had on your life, your love. Imagine for one second living your life without them. Find the strength here and now to write it down, or call them and tell them. It may surprise them, or even upset them. In comparison to what you will feel like if you never speak those words, or share those feelings, telling them right now will cost you far less pain or struggle than living years and years beyond them knowing they never knew how you really felt. Consider how doing so will honor the love that you so recently lost. If that is not honoring a memory, and a lesson gained from it then nothing is.

For a couple of years after Alex died I kept telling myself that no one would ever replace him. Allowing someone to replace his position in my life would be doing a disservice to him. I was wrong, totally. I was only dishonoring him by not allowing myself to have that same love and respect for someone else. That was fine too. But I promised myself and Alex that the one who I would call my best friend again would earn that right. They would be at least what he was, if not more. They would have to do worlds of good in my life to be so labeled. This time though, they would know that I loved them. Every chance I got. Every time I felt it. That's what Alex's death taught me. I learned that I had to say it out loud. No matter how shy or reserved you are. When you feel it, say it. You may not get a tomorrow. You may have to live your entire life having the guilt on your heart and soul over something that would have taken you only one single moment of vulnerability to share. It's worth the risk. Trust me, I know. I didn't at that moment, but life showed me that I was more right at that moment of clarity than I had ever been.

It always amazed me the behaviors of the parents of the friends of mine that died. Such as Paul's dad comforting me in his sons last moments. Like Alex's mom approaching me at the funeral and apologizing to me for my loss. I was always stunned into silence. I couldn't even fathom what kind of love it took to comfort me in those moments. She was the one who needed comfort. Her firstborn died, and his childhood friend was her concern. I understand now. It is those still living who concern us in a time like this. The ones who have passed on have already taken their walk to the other side. Those left behind are the ones who suffer. I have no idea what I would do were one of my sons to die. I would hope that I could show the compassion that they showed me. It's unforgettable and impacting. I recall riding to the graveside service for Alex. As we turned into the cemetery a meaningful but sad song began to play on the radio. The friend I was riding with cried and told me she was sorry, and reached for the radio dial with a shaking hand. I told her no, to leave it. The song was describing a loss of love, having to leave before its time. The song even mentioned the day of the week, the same day we were burying Alex on. It spoke of a friend who had disappeared like the wind. Perhaps it was a message, perhaps not. One thing is certain. I will never hear that song again without seeing that exact moment in the cemetery. Somehow, I've got to carry on the message in the lyrics said. Yes, somehow, I knew I would have to. Little things like that can offer worlds of comfort later if you just take the time to savor those moments. Even if they are unpleasant, they could carry you when you have not the strength to carry yourself. Today when I hear that song, my chest gets a little tight and I reflect on where I have been, and how far I have come since that day. But it always brings back memories of the friend I so loved, his beautiful face smiling at me. The memory stings and brings love with it at the same time. It is and always will be one of those cherished memories.

With Paul's death I learned the importance of living fully. You never know what might happen to you. You can be the most safety or health conscious person on earth and an illness can still sneak up on you and try to claim your life. His death took a bit of my teenage innocence. The part that it took, I could live without. I was nearly an adult; it was time to grow up. It was just an ugly way to have to do it. Alex's death was entirely different for me. Whether it was different because of the length of time I knew the two, or because of the amount of time that I spent being close to each of them, I am not quite sure. It only matters that I took important lessons away from both of those funerals. I would never again take the love of a friend for granted. Any friend I had would hear my feelings towards them, good or bad.

Around five years later I met the person who may have very well been the only person I'll ever meet that could have come remotely close to replacing Alex's friendship in my heart. I was working in a manufacturing plant as a temp. My heart was still breaking daily over the loss of Alex. Yes, five years later I was still in much pain. I can say with certainty that I cried once a day for Alex. Probably more. I was so alone. Partially by my own hand, partially the loss of my friend. I refused to let anyone in. I had gotten married in the five years since I had lost him, but it did nothing to fill the empty space his death left in my heart. It should have, it just didn't. I had even married a man for the wrong reasons, he reminded me of Alex. I had went into the marriage unhealed from my losses and falling into the same old trap of relying on another human soul to carry yours when you are too worn out to do so. All of the wrong reasons. I began to doubt that anything would ever bring me out of the hole I had let myself fall into.

One day while shaving some parts down a guy, very good looking and very outgoing, came and sat in front of me. I must have stared at him oddly because he laughed and asked me what was going on. He looked so familiar. We began talking and I found out he was the son of the only woman outside of my family that I had ever loved. His mother, Jen, had been a counselor in a facility I was placed in as an errant teenager years before. She was the one person who had taken up for a confused teenager. She had a backbone of steel. Even as a wild unruly teenager who thought she feared nothing. I feared Jen. I didn't fear she would hurt me or anything so dramatic. I respected her. She demanded respect, and she got it. She got it from kids who respected no one and nothing. I had not seen her in years. When I found out that her son, Rob, was sitting in front of me in that plant that day, I felt an odd relief. I always felt that maybe Alex had sent him to me. It was going to take an incredible person to be my new best friend. Incredible sat in front of me that day. Rob was tall, long blond hair and had the deepest soul searching eyes. It felt like he read my soul that first day. Rob had a lot of female friends. He was a sort of playboy type. At the same time, he respected women. It was a new experience for me. One I will never forget. Whereas all these young girls were fawning around him, I was there to be his friend, a very good one. I think he knew that. We became so close so fast I didn't really know what hit me. One day I was still crying myself to sleep, the next day I was laughing again. He was a true gift to me. With my logical brain it was safe. Rob was safe. I had a friend, and logic dictated that he would be there forever. Looking back now I know that Rob was the one person that seen the tough girl I was, but knew

I still needed to be protected. Without ever having asked him, that is just what he decided to do. For quite some time I struggled with how much I cared for Rob, and how Alex would feel if he knew that all the love and respect I had reserved for him was being, even cautiously, given to someone else. I remember talking to Rob about Alex and how that all felt. I think that was when Rob realized that I was a tough girl on the outside, but so much love and softness underneath. Somehow, he figured out quickly exactly how to treat that. Within months we were best of friends. Best friends. We worked together every chance we got. We took our breaks together. Even the boss there realized how close we were and made sure we did get those breaks together. He made sure we were put on machines next to each other. We spent so many evenings at work, on break, sitting in his car discussing everything. Life, death, people we loved, people we missed. We talked about how we wanted to be buried when we died. We talked about all the ways we could die. Even though Rob was almost five years younger than me, he was just as intelligent as me, if not more so. His parents had raised him right. You could always see the respect and love in his eyes when he talked about his mom and dad. That was a new experience for me as well, one that I very much needed to see and be a part of.

Rob knew that my husband was abusive towards me, and it enraged him. Where most people will refuse to get involved, Rob refused not to. Where most people would lay down judgment on me for remaining with the man, Rob never did. He did exactly what a real friend would do. He covered me. He was there for me when things went bad, and he comforted me in my pain. He never raged at me in judgment, he never told me I was stupid. He only told me once, "I hope you get away from him before he kills you, but until you do, I am here for you." Maybe I felt like all the suffering I had been through had earned me Rob. If that is the case, I would do it all over again. He was worth it. For four years we were inseparable. My husband didn't like it of course. Even without the abuse factored in, most men wouldn't like it much. Rob got all my respect and love, but then again, he deserved it. At that time in my opinion my husband, John, didn't. I recall several nights where I would call John to let him know I was on my way home from Rob's girlfriends' house. John would be already drunk and Rob knew it. He would always watch my face when I spoke to John on the phone. He could tell by my expression what kind of reception I was looking forward to when I got home. Every time I got off the phone looking concerned, Rob was there. "I'm following you home." I lived 30 miles outside of town.

I always told him he did not have to. He always knew how very much I appreciated that he wouldn't let me talk him out of it. Rob was a lot bigger than John, and it became clear to him the first time that Rob escorted me home, that had he said or done anything out of line, Rob was going to make sure he couldn't hurt me that night. He would come into my house, and sit there, sometimes for hours, until John slept, and he felt he could leave me in relative safety. Never judging me. If he got frustrated with my ignorance, he never said so. I always went home those nights with Rob following me, fearing the worst. I knew if John made as if to hit me, Rob might beat him, Rob might beat him to death. I resigned myself to that very thing many times. Love John as I did, I wouldn't have ever defended him or stopped Rob from hurting him. He only did it for me. He protected me like no one ever had in my life. I think he knew that I endured the suffering because I simply didn't know what to do with myself. I am not the type who is scared to be alone, but in the early days, my husband had reminded me so much of my long dead best friend, it was hard to let go of that entirely. This is exactly the reason why we have to look for our healing moments from the day we lose one we love. If we do not seek them, or do not find them, it's quite possible that the loss will continue to cause us more losses, or even just bad judgment. I'm sure that bad judgment racks up the biggest death tolls all over the world. It has come very close to taking my life several times.

One night, four years into our friendship, in early spring, Rob and I went over to Tom's house to visit with him. I've always kept in touch with Tom. So I wanted to take Rob over there to meet him and hang around a little bit, keep Tom company for a few moments. While sitting in Tom's living room, Rob got up and went to the bathroom. He was in there for what even seemed like too long to me. I began to worry a bit. I had fears that Rob was doing some drugs that never do anything but kill or maim its users, but I also knew that if that was the case, I had to do what Rob had been doing for me for so long. Cover him. Not judge him. I was scared to death. When Rob came out of Tom's bathroom my worst fears were confirmed. Rob was pale, sweating and had a sick looking smile on his face. My worse suspicions were founded, he was doing heroin. It took all I had to not just jump out of my chair and start screaming at him. No judgment Joy. He's never laid me out and he very much has reason to. I loved him so much; I promised myself that very moment that he would know how much, that very night. When we left Tom's house a little while later, I took a deep breath. I knew what I had to do wasn't going to be easy. Love of a friend was stronger than my feeling of weakness for what I had to say.

“Rob, you know I love you don’t you?”

“Yea Joy, I know you do, you know I love you too.”

“Yes, I do. That’s why we have to talk.”

“I know”, he said. He sounded defeated a bit. My heart was pounding in my chest, my blood was throbbing through my veins. I knew this feeling. It was the same feeling I got when I learned Alex was dead. I remember as I was driving that I got stuck on some words in my head. Please, please, please, please. I didn’t even know what I was saying it in my head for until we reached his driveway.

“Rob, you can’t keep doing this. It is going to kill you. I can’t take that. I can’t be without you. Please Rob, please.”

I knew where he was coming from. Although I never had the problem he was having, I completely understood. He talked to me, in tears. He explained that he wanted to seek help. He explained that it was hard for him because both of his parents, whom he loved more than anything, were drug counselors in our city.

“How can I go get help without breaking their hearts?”

I became Paul’s tough love friend in that moment. My heart was shattering for Rob. I was angry and scared.

“Really? Well just how much do you think it will break your moms heart to bury her baby Rob? I want you to sit here right now and picture your moms face at your funeral. Do it.”

He broke down into sobs. I just grabbed him and we sat in his driveway for what seemed like hours, holding each other. I had never heard Rob cry. I had never even imagined that he would. So strong for me he had always been. I was the secret mess. For all appearances all of our friends thought we were the crazy ones, the risk takers, the ones that drove too fast and did all the wrong things and should have probably been killed by something long ago. In that moment, we were both just lost little kids. Him, wondering how to fix himself without hurting the people he loved, and I, wondering how to help him without losing the one I loved.

“I love you Rob, please stop doing this. I’m here for you; I’ll help you go get help in another city, another state if you want to.”

“That’s what I want to do Joy, I talked to someone about a place in Utah, that’s where I will go.”

We hugged each other one more time, hard. I didn’t even know I had strength left in me until Robs tight hug tore a bit of it from me. I didn’t care. I hoped he would take all my strength if it would only save his life. With all

of the emotions I had felt in the past hour or so of talking to Rob I had almost completely forgotten that I had offered to give a considerably younger friend a ride home after I dropped Rob off. He was sitting in the backseat, quiet, which was something this particular friend wasn't ever. Even though he didn't know Rob, I knew even he could tell the situation was dire. His silence only concreted in my heart that this journey could only end badly. As I backed out of Robs driveway I remember telling him I was sorry for taking so long. His softly spoken "its ok" only increased my fears for Rob. I dropped him off and cried the 30 miles home that night. Feeling like I had lost Rob already. Thinking that even never quiet Chris knew something was horribly wrong by being so silent. I felt I sat there knowing with my very soul that eventually, this would take Robs life.

Things seemed to have changed after that night. We were closer if it was possible. If it was even possible, he shared even more of himself with me. He told me his deepest fears and biggest dreams in the year that followed. I never seen him look the way he did in Toms living room that night again. We didn't discuss the drug. We simply did what we always had done, covered each other. I'm quite sure that he hid any future use of the drug from me. He didn't want to hurt me more. I still worried. I still watched him. I still made sure he knew I loved him every chance I got, in play and in seriousness.

Late one night the following March, Rob, his girlfriend Felicia and I were all hanging out at her house. I once again made the call home, and once again, Rob followed me home. When we got to my house we all just sat around talking. Felicia's brother was getting ready to go to college, so we discussed what he was going to have to do to get ready for it. In the morning Rob was going to be taking her brother out to get some supplies. Rob sensed some extra fear in me about my husband that night. I knew what he was doing when he made plans with me for the next morning. He was letting John know that he was leaving, but it would be only a few hours before he was back at my house, picking me up. Without instigating a fight he was letting John know that he was going home and pretty much coming right back, and any marks or bruises on me were going to cost him. After John went to the bedroom and passed out, I walked Rob to the door.

"Are you going to be ok?"

"Yes, I am now," I said, smiling on the outside and within.

"Good, I'll see you in the morning."

I lay down on my couch that night feeling like everything would be ok. I knew I was right in thinking that even if my husband did hit me that night, he



would pay for it in the morning. Knowing that if he hurt me badly, I would only have to suffer a few hours before Rob was there, repaying him for it.

As the phone rang and woke me up I realized I had actually slept a restful sleep for once in a long time.

“Joy,” the voice on the other end of the phone said. “It’s Felicia, Robs not going to make it up there today.”

“Oh, that sucks but ok. Why? What’s up? What are you guys going to get into?”

“Nothing Joy, Rob is dead.”

“Felicia don’t mess with me like that its sick. What the hell is going on?” I cried. I didn’t even believe what she had said was true. I thought it was a sick joke.

“Joy, I’d never mess with you like that. He is gone Joy, gone.”

I know I hurt her with my comment. She was who I had been the day Alex died. She was the bearer of bad news, the messenger. I had been there, I knew how hard those phone calls were to make.

The receiver fell from my hand. I remember hearing screaming, Robs dead, Robs dead, Robs dead, Robs dead over and over. I wanted the voice to shut up. I wanted to kill whoever was screaming that in my face. I didn’t even realize it was me who was screaming. John came running out of the bedroom we hadn’t shared in a while. He fell to his knees in front of me and just held me, tried to calm me down.

The voice changed its mantra. “Kill me, Kill me now, damn you. I want to go with him. KILL ME!!!”

He didn’t say anything that I remember. Just held me and refused to let me move. I know that he knew something horrible inside me had just broken free. He probably saved my life by doing so. I am sure that had I gotten into my car at that moment to race to the city, I would have died along the way. I don’t know how long I lay on the couch that day screaming, but I know I screamed until I couldn’t scream anymore. The girl with the iron will and steel backbone had just died in his arms. I was the shell that I had seen Paul become so many years before. I wanted to die. I wanted him to kill me right there on the spot. I had enough friends who were gone already. They would welcome me to the other side. I had no fear. Living had suddenly become a burden. It is so much harder to live. I gave up. I had no strength left for this fight. Even in those raw moments I never considered killing myself. I just gave up worrying about being killed. All the natural fears we are born with, were dissolved in that one single phone call. I felt caged, beyond trapped. Suddenly

my life was thrown into tunnel vision and I ceased to care if I'd ever find the end of that long lonely tunnel. I railed at God, at the creator, at Fate, at whoever had their hand in this. I kept telling myself, "But I loved him, I told him I loved him, I did the right thing, I did it ALL RIGHT! How could he be gone?"

It didn't matter what I had done this time. Rob didn't die leaving my house that night. I am not sure how I would have lived with myself if he had. He had died the next morning when he and Felicia's brother were coming back from a department store after having gone out and bought some college supplies. He died crossing some train tracks, going 25 miles per hour. Tracks he had crossed almost every single day of his life. His car had flipped into a ditch that isn't even big enough to cover my head if I stood in it. Not long enough to fit a bus in. When I heard the details of his death I felt I knew how he died. Heroin. He had likely just floated out of consciousness for a moment, a deadly moment. As his car flipped he was ejected and the car landed on him. Felicia's brother had come through the accident unscathed. He had crawled out of the car and spent Rob's last moments with him comforting him. Telling him he would be ok, he likely knew he wouldn't. I have to be thankful for him. Had it been Felicia or I there that morning, our reactions would have made his last moments terrifying. A moment after he crossed those train tracks he would have been back at Felicia's, picking her up for the trip to my house to get me, to check on me and to protect me.

"Bad things come in threes." Rob used to say. He was a bit superstitious. I always joked with him about it. He was right this time though. Three dead boys. Ten long years, but three dead friends nonetheless. I had thought that my journey through these harsh lessons had ended with Alex. I had felt safe loving Rob, because the chances of him dying had to be slim. We teased and taunted death every chance we got. We slapped fate in the face with our wild activities that were reckless, carefree, and fun. That was the friendship, unrestrained. No one could have shared that but us in those moments. People who loved us would have been so mad at us had we died doing some of those stupid things. We always knew that, but still pushed the limits. Those things will always haunt me and yet still comfort me.

'Only the good die young,' the old saying goes. I believed that finally. Someone told me around that time that God takes the best ones back sooner. I hated that. I hated the people who told me that. Rob was my angel. Rob was protecting me, without him it was very possible I could be killed by my own ignorance. I didn't care. Then I would get to see my long lost angels that much sooner I told myself.

A few days later I found myself at the funeral I had warned Rob about. I found out I still had a heart that day, because whatever was breaking in my chest was killing me. The conversation in the car that night haunted my every move that day. Rob and I had talked many times about being cremated. He was. There was no casket to peer into, there was no fake looking friend laying there to cry over. I recall thinking then that it was kind of strange, but I learned something in that moment too. All those times I had visited Alex's grave, were useless to me. Alex wasn't there, six feet below where I sat. Visiting a piece of grass with a stone on it was not honoring his memory; it was not doing his life justice. It was not good enough for me. It was clouding my own perception of what death was. As I stood on my toes to search for Rob's mother Jen, I realized I would never go to Alex's gravesite again. I would find other ways to honor him. I would honor him in my actions, not by dropping a rose on the place his body was laid to rest. His soul wasn't there. Rob's soul wouldn't be in the urn that held his remains. The honor of those lost boys was in my heart and in my soul and in the actions I carried out in their names.

As I spied Jen across the room, the look on her face shook me. She was broken, as I was. When our eyes met across that room we peered into each others souls, for just a moment. Blinding pain was all that was there. I found myself near her soon enough. Here I was, looking at that face that I had warned Rob about.

Although I couldn't even believe I had found a voice at all, I found mine. Still gravely from the screaming I had done days before, I offered all I knew I could without sounding stupid, or petty.

"Thank you Jen. Thank you for giving life to an angel. Thank you for raising him. Without you, I would have never known him."

I walked away after that. I walked out of the funeral home and got in my car with my husband who was scared of me for once. I know it hurt him to see me grieving so hard for the love of someone who wasn't him. I relished in it. Something died in me, something was also growing and I was scared to death of what life was about to bring me to.

I went home and wrote 3 pages of words about Rob. How great he was. How he was an earthen angel for me. How he had probably saved my life more than once. How his death had taught me how to honor him and my other friends. All the love and tears I poured into those words exhausted me. I was indeed a shell. I had grown up beyond what I ever wanted, or expected.

What do you do when it's all over?

I have always been a face your fears type of person. When I was scared of

heights I went into the tallest building I could find and looked down from a window. When I was scared of small closed places, I went into a cave where I had to untie a shirt from my waist to squeeze through a hole, in the dark. I don't believe you can make progress through life if your fears stall you, stop you, and you never face them head on.

Go visit the places you and your loved one went together. Go alone if you do not want others to see your pain.

Write your feelings down. Write it as if you will share it, even if you never do. Write another one that is never meant for anyone's eyes but yours. Put it in a special place.

Find the lessons in these miserable moments. You can find a lesson in about anything, finding a lesson in the death of a loved one should be relatively easy. Learn from those things. Act on them.

Change past regrets into good memories. I tried to find Felicia for about a year after Rob's death to apologize to her for doubting her in that phone call. I never found her. If I run into her 20 years from now, I will apologize to her then. I do not carry that as a burden, I carry that as an honor I owe to Rob. He would be upset with me for hurting her, but he would understand why it happened. He would smile upon me for just wanting to right that wrong.

Find people who knew your loved one and talk about their memories. Talk about the good and the bad, and enjoy the visuals and thoughts that you gain from it. Honoring a memory requires that you face down those fears of how it may hurt to talk about it. It will hurt, but eventually the pain will cause the tears and hurt to turn into joyous memories you find you couldn't easily live without.

Rely on your friends a bit. Without the close knit group of friends I have grown and matured with, I wouldn't be half of the person that I am today. Just as I was there for them when they needed me, my strength, they were also there for me. Over the years and above the tragedies we have all seen the best and the worst we have to offer one another. Because of the things we have been through together, and carried each other through, we have some pretty incredibly close and candid friendships, though not always as loyal as I would prefer. Nevertheless when we say we love each other, we mean it. And even if life and death carries any of us away from each other, we will have known that kind of soothing honor in love, the words never needed to be spoken.

Pick yourself up and go on. There is nothing else you can do.

Remember.

# Honoring

Whenever I run into a problem that requires me to be tough with people, like my sons, I remember Paul. I remember how I felt one day when Paul looked at me and told me he was disappointed in me. I remember how much I, who cared so little about what others thought, cared so much that I had disappointed a man as tough as Paul. I do not fear a fatal illness because of him. Most people fear death not because it's the end, but because they fear what the ending will be. Should I ever find myself in that position I have something to model my last moments after. I will make every effort to be as strong as he was. I will make the moments I have left in life worthy of remembering.

I will never leave another friend behind because of Alex. I will forsake a moment of my own pleasure, and I will never know for sure if my action saved a friend's life, or just a moment's pain. Good friends won't ask you to stay by their side when they can't move on their own. Good friends don't have to ask, they just do it. As will I from now on. I will never walk away from someone I love again. I will always tell people I love that I love them. I won't care if it makes me vulnerable for a moment. I will not worry they will abuse me or use it to hurt me later. If they do, they are not really a friend. No better way to learn the truth. It does not make me the weak one to admit my feelings. Just the opposite, it makes me far stronger than most. Should a friend of mine ever dishonor our friendship, I will renounce it, as they do not deserve to be put in the same class as those people who did deserve my love and respect. Honoring myself, respecting myself in this manner, is the utmost in cherishing the memories of my lost friends.

## Rob's Honor

Because of Rob, people who I call friend will earn that right and respect. I will not overuse that word. I have learned what it takes to make a true friend. I will not dishonor the memories of my true friends by calling someone less

deserving by that same name. And because of Rob, I will always honor those who have gone before me by actions that make a difference in someone's life. Sitting on a gravestone honors the death of the person, not their life.

I will be a stronger parent because of the things I witnessed other parents doing after the deaths of my loved ones. Should I ever find myself in such a horrible position, I will honor those parents in my own reactions. I will look out for their friends and do what I can to make sure we carry on this circle of brotherhood. I could do no less. We carry around the baggage of our parents and their parents so often; it's up to us to pack our own bags in the end. It's easier to carry on a circle of hate and anguish than it is to toss those bags to the side and carve out your own paths.

I want to make it clear that this is simply my opinion, but I feel the best way to honor the dead, is to honor the living, openly. It's incredibly sad that on a normal basis we do not talk about the good in people until they are dead. So often we keep silent on how great someone is, but then they are gone one morning, and we go on and on about their virtues until it brings us to tears, and regrets. It's more apparent when you watch the Hollywood drama play out after a celebrity's death. One day someone is alive and well and making movies, that's all you hear. The next day they are dead and you hear about all the time they spent in children's hospitals, you hear about the hours they put into charities to make money for uncountable causes.

When you hear about someone going above and beyond the call of duty, find them and tell them. Write them a letter. Make sure they know how much you appreciate what they are doing. Make sure they know how much you respect them for it. Most people would rather be recognized for running a marathon to raise money for cancer patients, than be recognized for how great they did at school last week in that football game. If you pay attention to things you see on television then pay attention to the proof of this. So often you will hear someone famous talk about how their best moment in life was when they touched the heart of another person from Idaho or Ohio. Rarely do you hear them talk about how their one shining moment in life was when they made that movie and someone congratulated them on a performance well done. It is the private performances we are the most proud of. Those are the things we want to be remembered for.

I finally got some use out of all the years I've been journaling. No more than a week after Rob died I had written a page of feelings. They were my feelings on appreciating life and honoring my friend. One day I stuffed down what little bit of a shy self conscious girl that was left of me and called Robs

## COVER ME

mother. I had to let her know how much I had been thinking of her. I told her I had something I wanted her to listen to, something I had written in honor of Rob.

“Of course I want to hear it. Read it to me.” So kind, gentle and still freshly wounded, she was allowing me to help us both heal a little bit. Swallowing the lump in my throat I read to her.

*On March 13th of 2001 I lost something that was most dear to me. I lost my best friend Rob. I call him my best friend not because he was there with me everyday, but because he was there when I needed him the most. He was the friend that I did not have to worry about stabbing me in the back for ANY reason. Most people can not say that they have ANY friends like that. He was the one who was there for me when I had a hard time coping with the death of another friend I had lost shortly before I met him. He was there when I came to work upset with the world for all the crap that is in it. He was the one to listen to me rant and rave when I was mad as hell and tried his damndest to make me laugh instead. It always worked. You would have to know me to know what an awesome feat this is.*

*I met Rob 5 years ago at a job I was working. I just felt instantly like I knew him. I told him he looked very familiar to me. We talked and figured out that his mother was a Social Worker whom I had met when I was 12. My mother was frustrated with my rebelliousness and sent me to a facility in which Rob's mother Jen worked. That's when I looked at him again and thought that he was a carbon copy of her. She was the only female in my life outside of my own family that I had ever looked up to. And still to this day, that thought remains the same. She was the only role model I have ever had or ever will. I admired the way she dealt with the teens in the facility I was housed in. I loved her for taking up for me to my parents when no one else had ever done the same for me. I wished for her strength in my own life. She is rock solid in her opinions as I am, and there's not a damned thing anyone can do to change them. I love her for that. And that's why I love Rob. He is a carbon copy of her. You could not feed him crap and expect him to eat it and say nothing. He was the first one to tell you how full of it you were. His personality so closely resembled mine that it was not long before I ceased thinking of him as a friend and began to see him as my brother.*

*After all, his own mother was there for me at a time when my own was not. As a teenager of course I did not see the sacrifice she was making, as an adult I see it clearly. She had her own sons to raise. And from what I know, Rob was not the easiest to raise. Just like me. But she came to work everyday and*

worried about these kids who had no one. They were her kids, and they felt it. When we were busy torturing the other counselors and Jen arrived we all scurried back to looking like we were some kind of innocent kids. She saw right through all of that, every time! All these qualities she possessed were reflected loudly in Rob. Although I am making this part of this journal for Rob, I wanted to say something about Jen and Pete. It's just too sad and selfish that we never say the things people need to hear about themselves while they are alive.

So while I am making this page a tribute to the dear friend I have lost, any tribute to him would be a tribute to his parents that raised him. I have yet to meet another person who loved and respected his parents more than Rob loved his. I don't know his father Pete that well, except for all the wonderful stories Rob left me with. I do know, that here's a man that works all day and came home probably almost every day to learn what Rob had done today. Not just that, I can not count the times I have been at Robs house in his room with just him and I or a few other friends, raising hell and playing loud music only to walk out of Robs room expecting to get dirty looks from angry parents and see him smiling and saying Hi Joy! Bye Joy! Be careful Joy! Any child from a not so perfect home would give the world to have had parents like these. Thank you Jen and Pete for giving the world a chance to know Rob, you gave us an angel and I appreciated him with my very soul.

Sometimes we talked about things important to us. Sometimes we need not say a word, just look at one another and grin because we knew what the other was thinking. I have a brother named Jeff that I have only met once; he is my brother by blood. Rob was and always will be my brother by choice. We all can not choose the people that we will give our hearts to and sometimes when we do it becomes some of our deepest regrets, but not here. Not with Rob.

I think all this only goes to show how you never know when and where you will meet that person that will impact your life the greatest. Do not always walk around thinking that the person you are looking for has to be your significant other. Do not think your soul mate is only in the guise of a lover. Do not wait unhappily for your knight in shining armor to whisk you off your feet, when he could be standing right by you kicking you in the ass for all the stupid things you do. Most people live a lifetime before they figure this out. Most all of those people leave this world disappointed. I will not, as I have learned way too hard and way too many times how important those people who we 'pass in the night' can be.

In the light of the ignorance of others and the need to 'keep on moving'



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*attitude that has so infested this city, this state, this country, this world, I wanted to take the time to point out that the 'small things' or the things you never consider to be an important part of your life, are really the only things. They say when you die, before you go, you see your life flash before your eyes. Those that have had near death experiences always come back and want to acknowledge or recognize those people who made a difference. Teachers get phone calls, old friends find themselves with renewed friendships and sometimes even feuding families or lovers find their way home. When I die, none of those moments flashing before my eyes will cause me pain, as I have made my peace each and every moment I have lived, and lived without regrets in I could have and should have, simply because I will have.*

After I read it to her, both of us choking down tears, she thanked me. She told me it was important to her that she felt as if her sons' life had effected others. That it was one of the most important realizations she had come to since he had died. My reply to her was that he had effected me, not only had he effected me, but he had taught me. He was only able to teach me, because she had taught him. This is why I encourage keeping a journal of your hardest moments. At the time I wrote the entry I had to stop every few seconds to wipe away the tears. The tears cleansed my soul at that moment. The entry itself helped to heal both myself and his mother. I could have kept it to myself and there would have been nothing wrong with that either. Sharing it though, had done worlds for a couple of people in pain over a deep loss they had in common.

Alex's honor

At the beginning of 2005, I sat and pondered for the first time making a New Years resolution. Through insane amounts of writing and blogging over the last year, I had truly found a settled peace. The 'not what I wanted but I'll gladly take it' type. I posted this on my web log, it was another little good-bye. Once you lose someone you find that every once in a while, you have those little moments where its almost like the first time you felt the loss, blindingly fresh for one moment then back to past where it belongs.

*To my missing angels....January 3rd 2005*

*That means that I've been missing you, Alex, for almost 12 years now. I can't even believe that myself. My boy, my running mate, my partner in crime, and the first boy I kissed, my best friend. You were, you are, all those things*

*to me. Every time I think about you I remember the dream, the night you died. I remember the Cheshire cat grin you had often. I remember the sneaky things we used to do. I remember the partying, I remember the laughter, and I remember the common ground we stood on with each other. I remember you putting your arm over my shoulders when I was about 12, to walk me to your house in the snow, when I was crying like a baby. I remember your efforts to protect me, though you were the same size as me. I remember all the nights we hung out. I remember all the mornings I woke up freezing in your car, sleeping in the same bucket seat as you. I remember thinking it was a good thing we were both so small or we would have froze to death one of those nights. I remember how you loved your mustang. I remember how you loved your aunt and granny. I remembered how you loved me. I remember that although you were a part of a big family, you were in essence just as I was. Alone.*

*Now I am alone without you. Now I have gone on 12 more years without a little piece of my heart that I grew so fond of. I remember the ache in my chest the night I learned you died. I still have the guilt fresh on my soul for feeling responsible for your death. I could have kept you here. I remember I learned that night to sacrifice anything, if you love and value someone enough to. Only if they don't ask. Someone who truly loves you wouldn't. You didn't. I remember the lessons I learned about true friends, and what they will do for you or with you, just when you need it the most. I remember always, that when things get hard on me, that nothing was as hard on me as the night you died. Nothing gets worse then that. Even if I knew I would die tomorrow, it wouldn't hurt as that night did, that year, these 12 have.*

*Never in my life did I dream anyone could or would come close to replacing you in my heart and soul. Then I met Rob. About 6 or 7 years after you left me. He was worth the risk. I called him my friend, and he called me his. He was my friend for over 5 years. I remembered the loss of you Alex, and I appreciated him that much more for it. I remembered the worst part was never having actually said I love you, though I know you knew I loved you. I made sure I told him I did. I did it all right. I appreciated, I loved, and I sacrificed. And Rob, my angel, he sacrificed for me too. All those times he drove me home and dared John to hit me in front of him. He would have beaten his ass. John wouldn't have ever messed with me with Rob around. One call and Rob would have been at my house so fast beating John up, defending me and I knew it. So did John. He always accused us of sleeping together. Right up until Felicia called my house and told me you had died. I*

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*thought she was lying. I was sick inside. All that pain, all that loneliness...it all came flooding back. I denied it to myself. I screamed. I remember the screaming like it was yesterday. The screaming brought John running from his bedroom because of course, as usual, I slept on the couch and that's where I was when Felicia called at 8am or so to tell me you were gone. He held me while I cried. He knew you were gone, he knew you had taken an important part of my heart with you. I'm sure it scared the hell out of him. Good. The pain was blinding, harsh and cold. Deep inside, I felt dead. I wanted to be. The funeral was horrible. You were cremated just like we talked about wanting to be so many times. But then, there was no where to go to honor you. I used to visit Alex's grave before you died. Then I realized that he wasn't there. You weren't there. The only place I could honor you both, was in my heart.*

*And here I sit. Trying to do so, pouring out my soul in front because there is no one to share this with. There is no one I hate enough to burden with the pain I feel for the loss of you both. To this day, when someone is nice to me, as you both were, I feel that aching loss for a quick moment. I feel alone although I know at least one of you has watched out for me over the years. I should have joined you long ago.*

*Ok so the lessons I learned. Appreciate the little things. Say so. Act so. Don't hurt or lie or scam the people you really care for. They might not be here tomorrow. Nothing hurts worse or longer than guilt. Take care of your friends, your family. Protect yourself enough to keep yourself alive and sane, but rely on someone worth your time to protect your heart from the worst the world has to give. You can't do it alone. No matter what you think. Even if you really believe you can, you don't want to. Quit wasting time. You don't really have that much. You might only have a minute, an hour, a day, a year. Do you want to risk it? Do you want the last moments of your life spent in regret for what you should have done, said, or been? I don't.*

*I love you Alex. I loved you enough to name my son after you. He has your calm demeanor. He has your sweetness. He was born a year to the day you died. In my heart and soul, I hope a little piece of you is in him. Nothing could make me more proud.*

*I love you Rob. That's all I can say to you. I know you heard it before. But I can't bring myself to type out any more of the reasons why I should have loved you like I did. I only know I did, I did the right thing. I told you, I appreciated, and I still lost you.*

*To this day whenever I get close to someone, I fear that my closeness to*

*them might cause their death. I know, it's terribly stupid. But for the life of me, I can't figure out why you were both drug through my sorry life, to protect me, to love me, then to die on me. I doubt I will ever get over that feeling. I don't even care to. It reminds me to appreciate the people who are worth it, right now. And not to wait one single second to tell someone how I feel about them.*

*I am a better person for the deaths of my two best friends. I'd rather be the same old piece of crap Joy though, if I could have you back, for even just a minute. Someone stole my angels. And most days, I can't wait to get back to them.*

*I do not fear death because of them. I know that no matter what, when I die.... I will have two beautiful angels to walk me home, arm over my shoulders, protecting me from all that I fear. Or showing me why I shouldn't fear anything as long as I have them by my side.*

*I can almost feel you both smiling at me for the decisions I've made recently in my life. I have a sad sort of peace today. Sad because you two are giving it to me, and I can't return it, not yet. Peace because I feel your approval. I feel whole for a minute. I feel that in writing this, you have heard me. That you know I still love you, honor you and remember you daily.*

*This year I quit wasting time.*

*Posted by Joy*

The last line was the first New Years resolution I've ever made. I've kept that promise to myself so far.

I had been blogging for over 6 months when I made this post. I made the blog to work out the issues I was dealing with over the deaths of Alex and Rob. I had typed their names, their whole names into that blog time and time again. Yet a couple of days after the missing angels post, I received an email from someone I had never expected to hear from. It was Alex's only love, his long time girlfriend, Tammy. The reason Alex and I had so much time together before he died was because him and Tammy had just broken up. All those nights in his car, all those lonely moments where he shared with me how much he missed her, how much he really loved her. And there she was in my email. I had never really known her but of course as a friend of Alex's I had made those ugly mistake years before. I had judged her. Alex was so sweet, she didn't treat him good enough, and she wasn't good enough for my friend. She didn't reply openly on my blog, but her email spoke volumes.

*Joy,*

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*I do not know who you are, but I know the person you write about very well. He was my boyfriend for years. I have spent the last 12 years missing him too. I know this is the same person, I just don't know how come we have never spoken. Please email me back. I'd like to talk to you. I have since been married and I am very happy in my marriage, but Alex remains in my heart. We parted badly and then he was gone. I googled Alex's name and came up with your blog.*

*Tammy*

I was astounded. I was so shocked. Then I immediately googled Alex's full name with the expectation that I would see it right away. I found over 10,000 hits. I flew through at least the first 30 pages of results, without finding my blog there. I remembered in that moment how much he had loved her. I recalled his sadness in missing her. I recalled him wishing over and over that she knew how much he felt for her. Suddenly, out of nowhere, out of a heartfelt post, I found meaning to my grief. Twelve years later I knew how very important my part was in his life and death. I realized that I had within my power the means to take a great weight off the chest of this girl who he had loved so dearly.

*Tammy,*

*I grew up with Alex. He was a huge part of my life until he met you. I want to say a few things here and I don't mean to bring up old hurtful feelings, I just mean to be honest and honor the love I had for my dearest friend. I have always known you, as you are the one who is the reason I didn't get to spend a few years with Alex. I have judged you unfairly. The fact that you still love him enough to have googled his name just as I have been still writing about him tells me one thing that means more than anything in my life at the moment. That he is remembered, that he is still loved. The fact that you found it through google when I can't find it that way myself tells me that perhaps there is a force at work here that is beyond both of us. I'll call that force Alex. Suddenly I know why Alex was brought back into my life so shortly before he died. All of the anger at having been taunted with the love I had for this man is gone with the arrival of your email. I was put in this position to ease your pain. I was given those last few months with Alex because you two parted before you should have. You parted still in love with each other. Alex loved you Tammy. Until the day he died, he loved you with all of his heart. I know this with so much certainty because of only one thing. He told me. Over and*

*over again. Enjoy your life. Enjoy your marriage and live guilt free over having parted with your first love. It was just chance that brought you together, just as it was chance that tore you apart. I hope I have eased your pain as your email to me eased mine. It has been a long twelve years for both of us. I think it is time to live again.*

*Thank you Tammy*

*Joy*

That was not all. The most beautiful part, the most healing part was yet to come. She had mentioned in an email that followed my last one that she still kept pictures of Alex. She kept an entire album of memories of him. I had mentioned that because of an unexpected move from my apartment where Alex's spirit had visited me that I had lost all of the pictures I had of him. Except for one that Janet had gotten Paul's mother to make for me years before.

*Joy,*

*I have made copies of many of the pictures I have of Alex. Pictures of our relationship. Even a picture of him in a tuxedo when he went to my prom with me. Meet me tomorrow and I will give them to you.*

*Tammy*

I believe that in that moment I felt the weight of the world ease itself off of my heart. I was going to have pictures. I was going to have a picture of Alex in a tuxedo! I was elated, I was happier than I had been in twelve years in that very moment. Oh, I knew it would hurt me deeply to see those pictures again. The only pictures I had left in my memory were the ones of my last moments with Alex. It was time to put those frozen moments to rest. I was going to see Alex as he had been in life again, not how he had been just before death. According to google, the chances of our having come together in this way was 10,957 to 1. In my heart, it was a billion to one. I don't believe this was just an insane coincidence. I believe it was angels at work. My angels. It felt like Alex knew we both shared in the pain of his loss, and there was no way to ease that pain short of bringing us together. I could share his feelings with her, she could share her memories. It was a beautiful trade. Proof that no matter what the loss, never give up hope. What if I had given up? What if I had caved into those emotions and just lost myself, not spent the time typing out my feelings, sorting them out? Tammy would still be suffering and that is so utterly unfair. We were lost links. Someone made sure we didn't stay lost forever.

## COVER ME

The basis of this entire chapter comes down to 3 words. Take the Time.

You will often hear people saying things like, “Well if I can’t find time to do it, I’ll make the time!”

We are merely humans, we do not make time. We can only take it as it comes and do what we can in the moments as they are passing us by. No matter how much some of us wish it otherwise, there are still only 24 hours in a day, 60 minutes in an hour. It would take 3 minutes of one of those hours to type up an email or 5 minutes to write that letter to someone who has done something special that you recognize. It would take 2 hours of that day to run that marathon in honor of someone you loved.

We rarely end up what we wanted to be. We always end up what we believe we can be. Carry that thought with you through this journey we call life. You will be exactly what you believe you will be. If you believe the worst, expect it to play itself out as you pass through life. Even in the moments when I said “I give up”, I knew that was just talk, just a rebellious moment. You can not give up. If you give up, then who is left to honor those that you loved? If you give up on yourself, you are giving up on them as well. Even in the days and years that passed by after the loss of my friends I had to face down their deaths again and again. Running away will do nothing but prolong the pain. I know it seems hard to believe, but if you just keep on going, keep on surviving, you will see proof of this, over and over. It is worth the wait.

# Powerful Peace Moments

I use this phrase Powerful Peace Moments because the things I have experienced in relation to the deaths of my friends, sometimes years after they have passed on can not be better described than they are in that phrase. A moment where you are filled with a powerful feeling, but that feeling can only be described as peaceful. Let me explain.

## Paul's Moment

One day when Ashley, Paul's daughter, was around 7 years old, I was at Janet's house spending some time with the two of them. As Janet went to fix lunch I heard Ashley babbling in her bedroom. It is one of those things parents cherish the most, when they catch a child, being just that, a child. I recall softly walking to the door of Ashley's bedroom. I remember when I got to the door, the exact conversation Ashley was having. It was as if I was listening to her talk on the phone. A one sided conversation. It took me a moment to realize who she was talking to. She was playing with an assortment of baby dolls.

"Ha ha, I know. Well, I like this one."

"I don't know, I guess because she is soft all over and has big blue eyes."

"I am not silly!"

"I have to go each lunch soon but Ill be right back, don't go without my hug Daddy."

I turned from the door and walked back into the living room and tried to comprehend what I had witnessed. As Janet came back to call Ashley to lunch she seen me on the couch with tears running down my face. She asked what was wrong. After several deep breaths I was able to tell her what I had seen. I had to tell her that knowing Paul as I had, it was clear to me she was bantering with him. That's how Paul talked. "Verbal sparring, that's what Ashley was doing Janet. She knows him, she knows Paul just like you and I did." Janet cried too that day. After lunch and Ashley went back to play in her



bedroom we talked about how children have not yet been taught not to believe in things like spirits or ghost, as they were always likely to see things like that and speak of them in such a matter of fact manner. What a powerful peaceful moment in my life. There I was feeling horrible for this little girl who never got to know her Daddy. And all along she did know him. He was there for her. I wouldn't have believed it had I not seen it, and even then I was somewhat a believer. That was a full six years after Paul's death. It did not surprise me, just shocked me for a moment. Janet tried to steal a moment watching Ashley in her room, but the moment was gone. I was singularly lucky to have witnessed it and been able to share it with Janet who had the same fears I did. That Ashley would never know her father. We both shared in a powerful peace moment that day. I realized then that the looks she always gave us when we talked of her father in past tense the look of confusion, all made sense. I am also sure that after that moment, we were careful to not assume Ashley had no idea who we were discussing.

### Alex's Moments

With Alex I lived almost a full year of moments that left me scared, shocked and in the end, at peace. Two months after Alex died I got my very first apartment. Almost immediately I began having odd things happen in my apartment. It didn't strike me until years later that the only time these occurrences happened were at night; as I lay down to go to sleep. Those are usually the worst moments of loneliness for someone who has recently suffered a loss as I had. I would lie in my bed and toss and turn, usually hours after lying down to attempt sleep. As I would finally get to sleep I would awaken almost petrified with fear the first few times I felt a presence in my room. The first couple of times I wrote it off as night terrors or even just simply bad dreams. After the first few times I had to buckle down and admit that something was going on. About a week into the occurrences, I woke up and ran to the light switch. Out of the corner of my eye I could see a shadow in the corner of my room. I had an old vanity, the only piece of furniture I had as a child, and one that Alex and I had played with and around for years. I was terrified to look directly into the shadow I knew was there. I began sleeping with the light on. Every night I would still wake up the same way. I knew I was being watched. I thought it was Alex, but I was scared to look and see. Although the presence in my room was disturbing, I was so sure it was Alex that I never looked over there. I desperately did not want it to disappear. I

began to get used to it, but still slept every night with the lights on. I know it may seem incredibly ridiculous to some now. The little kid in me I suppose because I almost felt like if he knew I had seen him watching me, he would run off.

Three months after Alex died I found myself pregnant with my second son. I decided before I was even 100 percent sure of the pregnancy, that if I gave birth to a son, he would be named after my recently departed best friend. For months I hoped that I would run into Alex's mom. I wanted to ask her respectfully if I could name my child after her son. I still suffered the long nights of trying to get to sleep aching with loneliness and regretting that Alex couldn't be around to see my new apartment, knowing that were he still alive, he would have been living there with me. And I was still waking up nightly sensing the presence in my room that I found comfort and fear in at the same time. There began to be nights I would wake up, sensing the same presence in my room, always sitting on the vanity in the corner, and it was almost as if I could feel a smile, a protective stare, a guard in a sense. Although I sensed comfort from the nightly presence, I still slept with the light on. Being twenty years old and sleeping with the light on leaves you with very little room for doubting your fears, or that you may have some. It leaves you with precious little room for denying what you feel is going on, when it occurs like clockwork.

At nearly eight months pregnant I finally ran into Alex's mother at the local library. I almost ran up to her to hug her. Choking back tears I asked her the question I had been desperate to ask her for months.

"I am having a son, he is due in May. I would like to ask your permission to name him after your son."

She looked at me, tears in her eyes. She reached out and ran a hand over my huge belly and asked me the most heartbreaking question I had ever heard.

"Is there anyway this could be Alex's baby?"

"No, I'm afraid not." I am so sorry it is not.

If she would have not been so hurt and confused by the moment I'm sure she would have realized that it would have been impossible for it to be Alex's son. When I told her it was not a possibility. She told me she would be honored if I named my son after hers. She reached her hands up and cradled my face for a moment. She looked as if she wanted to say something profound. She hugged me again and we silently departed the library, both with more than a couple tears on our faces.

As my belly grew and my due date approached, my friends began getting

antsy. Alex had died on May 16th of 1993. The day we had all been dreading since the New Year had passed. On April 19th, 1994 I went into pre-term labor. I rushed myself to the hospital where I was put on medications to extend the gestation time of the baby. I was dilated 3 centimeters for almost a month. For those who are not familiar with childbirth this is well into the labor process. It was painful and seemed impossible it could last more than a few days. A week seemed eons away. I did stay in labor for a week, for almost a month. The presence in my room offered its usual comfort and fear as I sat on the edge of labor through 28 long days.

I called Janet on May 16th, 1994. She answered the phone and asked how I was doing. Great, was my simple reply.

“Well, as long as you don’t have that baby today, I think everything will be alright.”

“Too late, he was born almost an hour ago. Come and see him.”

I joined my friends that day in a bittersweet type of ending to this journey we had all taken in the past year. Bitter to lose my best friend, sweet was my son born a year to the day he died, and named in honor of him and his life. The odds on me carrying that child for almost a full month after entering pre-term labor had to be high, astronomical. My first son had been born three weeks early as well. All signs pointed to me having Alex’s namesake early too. He wasn’t early; May 16th had been his due date for a couple of months before I began pre-term labor. Whereas before it had seemed haunting it now seemed a little miracle.

The day of his birth was full of ups and downs. Friends came to see him, and as they held him, they all seemed to have gained the same sense of peace that I had upon seeing him for the first time. There were tears, and there was laughter, and underlying it all was that this was the one year anniversary of my best friends’ death. People seemed scared to mention it. I encouraged them to recognize it. The ones that were comfortable discussing it with me left with that same feeling of peace that I had gotten. The ones who were not comfortable with it just left feeling alone as usual. I had to welcome it, what choice did I have?

I was excited to go home a couple of days later. I wanted to let the baby sleep in my room. I wanted the presence that I knew to be Alex, my best friend, to see Alex, my new son. I wanted him to know it was alright now. Look what I had been given, a gift to pour my lost love into. I wanted to face the shadow in the corner and set it free if that is what I needed to do. The first night I was home from the hospital, I lay down with the baby, got comfortable

and went to sleep, with the light on. I never was awakened that night by the presence of my friend who had kept me company those long nights alone in the months after his death. The next morning I woke up and felt sad for a moment. He had not come, for the first time in 10 months. What was wrong? I looked down at my sleeping son, and I knew nothing was wrong. Everything was, indeed, right with the world for a moment. My son Alex slept not only near me, but on my chest most nights those first few months of his life. Nothing could part us. He was a quiet, reserved and happy baby. I could see worlds of wisdom in those newborn eyes. I am still not sure what caused him to be there all those nights, the presence that loved to sit on my vanity dresser in the corner of the room. I am still not sure what caused him to depart. I am sure however, that I traded one gift for another that day in May when I gave birth to my best friends namesake. To this day he has the same peaceful spirit that Alex had in abundance. In the lesson I had been forced to witness and learn thoroughly, on that day of earthen angels and newborn babies I offered up a heart full of emotion when I put the baby in his crib, walked into my room and faced the vanity in the corner for one last good-bye. Thank you my angel. I hope more than anything that you made it...home. I look forward to you welcoming me there when it is time. I said those words with my heart, and a little bit of my soul, but not my lips. There was no need to speak.

Just as with his death I would never be the same, nor would I be after that intense personal, powerful peaceful moment.

### Rob's Moment

Janet and I had lost touch for about 2 years before Rob died. She didn't know where I lived or my number any longer. We had grown apart off and on through the years, but when we were reunited it was always the same, as if we had never parted. About a week after Rob died, I received a phone call. Before that call I had kept my eyes open. I remembered the presence that kept up with me with Alex's death, and because of it I kept my mind open. Surely Rob would let me know he was ok and watching over me if he could. The call wasn't welcomed by me right away. I was still horribly angry, and horribly alone without Rob. I was still desperately seeking signs of Rob's presence in my life.

"Joy, its Janet. Hi."

"Hey Janet. How are things going?"

"I was just going to ask you the same thing. I just realized that Rob died."

Her words cut to the core of me. She just realized it. I pretty much was still trying to.

‘Yes, he’s been gone for about a week now.’ I was angry, wondering how she even got my number. My mother never gave out my number, ever. She would always call me and have me return a call.

“Your mom didn’t want to give me your number, but I think she knew it was important from the tone of my voice.”

“What’s wrong? Are you ok?” I was beginning to worry a bit. I still loved her, my old girlfriend I had such great times with and shared in such sorrow with.

“I had to tell you as soon as I could. Don’t hang up ok. Just listen. I had a dream last night. When I woke up I wrote it all down so I wouldn’t forget. I have been trying to find you since around 8 this morning.” It was almost 5 pm.

“So tell me Janet, what’s so important about this dream?” I was annoyed.

“Joy, the dream was about Rob.” She almost whispered.

I was enraged. Why was she dreaming of Rob, she hardly knew him. That was my dream. I wanted to see him, in sleep or not, I wanted to see him again.

“Just listen please. In the dream he gave me a message. Are you ready?”

“Of course I am ready!” I was more then annoyed by now. My voice reflected it.

“He said, ‘You have to let it go Joy.’ He said ‘Not to be angry, that you are keeping everyone out and that you are keeping him out as well.’ He said that he is ‘ok’, he is ‘happy now’ and he ‘wants nothing more then for you to be too.’”

Silence.

“Joy?”

Silence.

“Joy, are you there?”

“Yes I’m here.” I did whisper.

“Did you hear what I said? He said you have to stop it, whatever you are doing stop it now. Its hurting him, its keeping him out, he said.”

Out of what I wondered?

“I heard you.” I seethed.

“Are you ok?” I could hear the genuine concern in her voice.

“No Janet, I’m not. I have to go. You have my number now. Let me think this through and call me back sometime ok?”

“Ok Joy. You know I would never hurt you. I am just telling you what he said. At first I thought it was just a silly dream. But in the dream I was big and pregnant.”

“And?” I wasn’t being very nice, but it was beyond my personal control by this time.

“And I am pregnant, but I haven’t even told anyone yet, not even my sister or my mom. It was like proof that he was really there, sharing a message. I had to find you, I had to tell you. Joy, I did not know he was dead until he gave me that message. Ok?”

“Ok Janet. I do thank you for sharing this with me. It’s just not what I wanted to hear right now. Do you understand?”

“You know I do Joy. I love you, ok girl?” she meant it.

“Thank you Janet, I’ll talk to you soon.”

I was appalled by my behavior towards her. She had been my best friend for years. We had shared in so much joy and so much pain. I should have meant it when I thanked her. I should have embraced the care and concern she was giving me, it was so needed at the time. I should have told her I loved her too. Intense pain does make us act out of character and that is understandable. It is not understandable to be fully aware of a mistake while you are making it, and still not make amends.

Around 6 months after Rob’s death. I had an intense moment of clarity. Rob and I used to joke about how it seemed Janet was always pregnant. The insistence that I had to let things go came into a sudden clear view of the pain I had been living with. That is how Rob would have handled our relationship too. After all, that is what I had done to him just a year and a half earlier. In the driveway that bitter night I had shown him that I loved him, I had told him that I loved him. Aside from the initial notion to disbelieve what Janet had told me in the first place, I had no choice to believe in something by this time. I had seen Ashley, knowing her father. I had been given the gift of life on the same day, a year from the day I had lost one so important to me. Those are just the peaceful moments truly. There are others as well.

There was the time I was going 65 on a highway in a torrential downpour when my truck spun out of control. Things suddenly slowed down, as they do in moments of intense fear or pain. During rush hour traffic where usually cars are at least 2 wide and a mile long, there was suddenly not a car to be seen ahead or in front of me on my side of the highway. I recall the speed at which I was going and it being so fast that it was a struggle to hold onto the wheel so I wouldn’t get tossed to the other side of the truck. I was spinning long enough, 4 full spins still going forward at 50 to 60 miles per hour, that I had time to realize this was the one weird time I didn’t have my seatbelt on. As the truck made the third spin I seen cars oncoming in the opposite lanes, there was

a median. In reality, my truck should have hit that median, and jumped it or even begun a roll from the sloped medians we have on that road, and into the other lane of traffic. There were a couple of small signs my truck would have easily taken out. And suddenly right after the fourth turn it stopped. Dead stopped. Even without a seatbelt on I was stuck in my seat having seemingly bypassed the laws of force and inertia. In the least, the last I remember I was heading into my fourth turn and still actually taking up both lanes on my traveling side, then I was sitting there wondering why I hadn't hit anything. The median, those other cars that were just a moment ago hurtling at me at the same speed I was flying towards them, in a spin. I thought for a moment I would jump out and see what I hit. Instinct, I think, told me to stay put and get out of the road before another car lost control on the same sheet of water that caused me to hydroplane in the first place. I drove away crying, shaking and saying verbal thanks to whoever had their hand in stopping my truck when it made no sense for it to have stopped. As I cried and shook from the sheer shock of it all I felt and heard a crackle of static inside the cab of the truck. The hairs on my arms and neck stood up and a relief like I had never known passed over me. The tears turned to laughter and to thanks once again as I slowly realized that perhaps it was not such a mystery that my truck had stopped so suddenly. It never really occurred to me until later to question why there was static electricity in the middle of a downpour. It was not an electrical storm. All these dynamic things have always happened to me. Some of my friends call me lucky now. It feels so out of place when I feel I have been quite a bit more unlucky than I ever thought was possible. Quite a bit more than most people I know.

I did not always recognize these moments when they were occurring. It makes me question my own sanity in those days, those years of my life. It shows me how down in that hole I really was. I had to stop to consider that I was again just wasting more time. I could be learning from this. I could learn something to help myself with later. I could learn something that would help someone else not sink into the despair I found myself in and out of for nearly ten years. Most of all, it makes me regret the happiness I could have strained into those miserable moments had I only recognized them as a beacon of hope or proof of some kind of love that isn't absolutely of what I was taught my universe should be.

The problem was that I was so inside of myself, outside of myself and hating myself so badly I couldn't see anything good anymore. It took me many months to realize what a blessing this could have been if I had been

smart enough to see it when it happened. I finally had to admit to myself that Rob's death had hit me the hardest. I was haunted for so many reasons. He was younger than me. That hurt a lot, so far the friends I had lost I had looked up to, knowing Rob looked up to me like he did, I felt like I had cheated him. I could have been better. What had I done wrong this time? Even though I fully understood that the universe was out of my control, how could so much death, so much horror, be so coincidental? I am quite sure to this day that the month following the death of Rob was the lowest point in my emotional state in my life. There had been a few.

A lot of people are raised with certain and sometimes even seemingly strict religious beliefs. Some people simply believe in something higher, they feel spiritual, but don't practice an organized religion. Whatever you put your faith in I truly believe that it is alright to embrace things that may not make good sense. Sometimes we ignore things because we have it bred into our personalities to do so for whatever reason. The best gift you could give yourself right now is an open heart. Hiding yourself in a hole of your own making is only delaying the pain. Not everything makes good logical sense. Sometimes, in the case of Alex, even seeing is not believing. No matter what your faith is at a time like this, lean on it. Don't be afraid or so strong willed that you can't lean on a friend for help. Always be aware of how important we all are as links to one another. We are incredibly dynamic beings. Sometimes we feel small and unimportant in the world. The death of loved ones can intensify that feeling. What if today you introduce your best friend to an acquaintance, and next year that acquaintance just happens to be the same rare blood type that may save your best friend's life in an emergency or fatal illness? What if years later those two people you introduced give birth to a future president? **NEVER** discount your importance in the big or the little picture we paint on this huge thing we call earth. You don't have to be rich or famous to make an impact on earth. You may never even live to see the impact that you had no idea you made, but you have made a difference somewhere to someone along the way. Live your life as if you are well aware of the fact that you are an important link to something or someone. If you live your life everyday as if it may be your last, love your loved ones as if you may never see them again and act on things that you truly believe in right now, not later, then you are fully honoring the love and the lives of the ones who have been a link in your life, whether they are alive or have already passed to the other side.



# Missing Links

We miss the ones we've loved and lost from day one. It is quite possible to continue to miss them for months and years, perhaps even a lifetime. One thing that will not make itself immediately apparent is the impact of that one persons life on our own. It might be years down the road before we come to grips with what they added to our life, how they effected us by simply passing through our lives.

One thing we all tend to struggle with is the big 'Why?' Why are we here? What is our purpose? How do I matter in the big picture?

I want to make it clear that no matter whom you are, no matter your social or financial status, that your presence on earth does have meaning and impact. When we lose people that are close to us to tragic circumstances, including but definitely not limited to death, we tend to question this most heartily. Why was my loved one taken and I was allowed to stay? This happens especially in situations where a car or plane accident kills many and leaves few behind. It happens when there is a natural disaster where one neighbor survives while the people next door are killed horrifically. When the terrorist attack happened in New York City and Washington D.C. there were many people who didn't, for one reason or another, make it to work on time, or took that day off for something seemingly normal. After the attacks happened those same people were left with those same questions. Why was my cab delayed and I didn't get to work on time? Was it coincidence that today was the day I had the doctors' appointment that kept me out of those towers? One simple change in a daily schedule had saved a few lives.

I am not going to make guesses about whether fate or destiny has played a part in any of this. I am not going to speculate about coincidence verses specific life paths. What I am going to do is try to show you that you as an individual has already played a part in being a very important link in the world. I am going to try to explain to you how in just living your life day to day, you have already had an impact on your family, your friends, your city, your state, your country and your world.

On the day that you were born, you were irreversibly linked to several people instantly. Those people being your mother, your father, your siblings, and the doctor who delivered you and the nurses in attendance. Imagine for a moment, the doctor who delivered you was also in this position at one point. He or she was born and without seeming like he or she had an impact on the world, a doctor had just been born. That doctor has probably saved the lives of at least a couple of children if they are new to the profession. If they are seasoned warriors of the delivery room, they perhaps have saved a hundred lives, maybe even more. Maybe one of those lives they saved will also be a doctor; perhaps one of the lives they saved will be the scientist who discovers the cure for cancer. Perhaps they helped to save the life of the person you will eventually buy your first car from, or your first home. The caring individual, who gave you a thousand dollars off your car, because you just couldn't afford the asking price, was delivered somewhere today. It goes without saying that you just never know. Those are the more obvious links.

What about when you were a little kid? Maybe one summer you had a lemonade stand, and another neighborhood kid came by, seen you making money for that bike you were saving for, and that inspired him to be more ambitious. Maybe that kid will be the worlds next self made billionaire. You won't always know the effect you may have on people around you, but believe me, even the smallest thing you might do can affect someone, and it may affect their entire life.

In 1937 and 1938 a couple of babies were born that had this effect. Those two babies were married when they were 18. A few years later they were expecting their own baby. That baby was stillborn. Even that baby affected the rest of my life. In 1973 another baby was born. That baby's mother had given her up for adoption at birth. That baby whose life was cut so short inspired what are now my parents to adopt children. They adopted my two older sisters as well. If that baby had not died, perhaps my parents wouldn't have chosen to adopt. I would have different parents and be a different person. I would not likely have had the same life, I would not have gotten the chance to know the beautiful people who have walked through and passed out of my life, and they wouldn't know me. I would likely not have had the same experiences; I would likely not have had the inspiration to write this book and if you are reading it, then even your life was altered by events that happened way back in 1937 and 1938. Understand now?

If you are lucky then you may get to see the effect your life has had on others. I want to make an example out of a woman whom I admire. There once

was a girl who was born dirt poor. Those are her own words that describe her financial beginnings. Someone, somewhere in her life inspired her to believe that she could be more than just some dirt poor girl who lets life whisk her away where it may. She not only rose to the challenge but she conquered it. Some people think that it's the physical things that define what is within us. It is not. She has proved that time and time again. This famous woman has made incredible impact on our society. Thousands of lives she has helped are the same here, people who are inexplicably linked just by simply being born. Not only does this prove my theory on our links with one another, but it proves in solid concrete why we can not judge people by what is on the outside. Who would have thought that the dirt poor girl would have changed our world?

I often hear younger people, and sometimes even adults, say that they are nothing. That is never true. Your life, no matter what path you have allowed it to take has altered something, somewhere. All we want to do is make sure when we are altering things that they are for the good of us, the good of the world and the people in it.

A daytime talk show host which I admire was diagnosed with M.S. and has in turn used his illness to help many others who have found themselves in the same boat, just lacking the power of a voice that these two admirable people have been given. He could have kept silent and never offered a helping hand or a soft shoulder to those who he has now been able to help, but he didn't.

The impact of these two figures in what will be our history is phenomenal. These are only famous examples and I only bring them up because it is their compassion for human life and human suffering that brings them to be the shining links to humanity that they are. Not everyone that has this type of impact is famous. My parents are far from famous but they have made the same impacting sacrifices that millions of others make everyday. It is when we take the word, I, out of our vocabulary that we can begin to heal emotionally.

I lost Paul, I lost Alex and I lost Rob. I felt that way for years and years. It was the loss I felt I had suffered that astounded me, and crippled me for so long. The day I stopped to realize that everyone had lost them, the world had lost them and that links had been forever broken, that I started to heal.

When Paul died I swore that I wouldn't abandon Tom's friendship. Paul had been very popular and there were always kids in Tom's house to see him. Tom had been disabled years before in a work accident so he was always

available to us, always there. Paul's friends became his friends. After the funeral, so many people just faded away. They stopped coming by Tom's house. They stopped caring so much it seemed. They did what I feared I might someday do if I didn't keep the promise I had made to myself. They faded away, it was as if they had forgotten. It seemed like they had forgotten what had brought us all together so closely. They forgot that without Tom, Paul would have never graced our lives and taught us all those very important lessons. To this day, over a decade later, I am still close friends with Tom. I could never forget his selfless act that day in the hospital. In return for that selfless act, I have pledged my honor and loyalty to this man who had lost his only son, his only child at the time. In doing so, I feel I have honored completely the love and respect I had for Paul. I feel like Paul would be angry if he could see how some of his friends had abandoned his own father, who was like a father to all of us for so long. Paul will never have reason to be angry with me for that reason; I will be there for Tom forever. Those who faded away are sadly making broken links out of themselves. Just because Paul is no longer there does not mean that the link was broken. It is only broken by the lack of communication thereafter. Paul was a strong link that held us all together for many years. A lot of our friends disappeared after his death. So many broken links, so many more people we will never get to know, or know well. In my eyes those are now so many friends who will no longer introduce us to their new friends and create more and possibly needed and lasting links. That in itself is a whole new tragedy to me. It is important to our growth as human beings to overcome the pain that keeping these links intact may cause. Of course for the first couple of years it was hard to see Tom and not think about Paul. It was hard to sit there pretending like the reason we even knew each other at all was forever lost to us. These days it doesn't hurt at all. It brings happiness and healing each and every time I visit with him. I am sure my presence has done the same for him. At first bringing pain because of course I had to remind him of his lost son, but in recent years, friendship and understanding, sharing life and sharing love. I was also able to share with him something that had impact on him. I told him the story of Ashley and her conversation in her room that day. The conversation I was and am still sure she was having with her father. Tom, who just like Paul, didn't usually show a lot of emotion, or a lot of reaction to things, was clearly touched by my story. I felt privileged to be the one to tell him of it. I shared in something with a grandfather that gave him hope that he had long needed. I was getting a chance to give back some of what he gave me that day, so long ago in the hospital when I crumbled.

Alex's ex-girlfriend and I didn't make our link until almost 12 full years after he was gone. The link was not weakened by time. We found in each other the hope and faith that people continue to feel love and honor for their loved ones they have lost, long after the loss has occurred. Finding her did bring back fresh pain and the feeling of loss and loneliness. It brought something far greater with it though. It brought an almost complete healing, something I had been desperately seeking for years. It brought with it my faith in the fact that there was still a force at work. A force I had called an angel of mine while he had still lived. Best yet it brought with it something I had been wary of putting into concrete until that moment. The apparent end is not the absolute end. I was always skeptical about that.

Until the deaths of my loved ones I was so horribly frightened that the end was the end. You live and then you are gone, into blackness or void. Having seen the things I have seen, having witnessed the things I have witnessed and having learned the lessons that I had no choice but to learn, I have realized that the end is not the absolute end and that the journey called life has just been a taste of what is to come. No, I am still not sure what comes after and I no longer care. What I am sure of is that I have had something not of this earth, or not of this earth any longer, to protect me through all of these years. It has brought me to the point where I understand the meaning of friendships and love. It has taught me that those do not end in death. Those links are not broken simply because we can't see the ones who caused them anymore. That love never fades; it never disappears, unless we allow it. I will never allow the love or the memories to fade, because those are what healed me in the end. The letters I wrote, the journals I kept were just footprints in the sand. In the end, whether it was angels or an all encompassing deity, or even just my faith in my feelings and friends, those are what carried me, when I could not carry myself. The memories, the ones that caused so much pain and sorrow in the beginning of these losses, were the ones, are the ones I get so much joy from today. Never block those out. Those are the only links you have that will carry you, into a new day, a new time and a new place where you will eventually find your own joy again.

I used to laugh bitterly in those moments of deep pain when I realized that I had a name that was so ironic for me. Joy. I had so very little of it as a child, and even less as a young adult. It took so many pain filled years to realize that it was there all along, I had but to get off my rear end and find it for myself. It was hidden inside of the anger I had at the loss of my friends. It was covered by bitterness that I had allowed myself at feeling so cheated out of love so

many times. It was just like Janet's message from Rob so long ago, I was keeping it out. I was blocking it out, because in my heart, feeling happiness and joy at such an ugly period in my life seemed to do a disservice to my lost friends. In fact it is just the opposite. I do not believe that our lost loved ones want us to be in pain, they do not want us mourning them while losing our own selves. It was our real selves they loved was it not? It was the person we were before we dealt with their losses that was why they loved us so much. The real disservice we can do to them is to alter what we are and what we could be, in their names. The worst dishonor we could do to them is to tell ourselves we can not get over this, we can not live without them, and we can not ever love again because of them. By believing so little of ourselves, we are taking from them the honor they deserve. The honor they gave us when they called us friend.

When I die, I want there to be a huge party after my service, just as there was for all 3 of my friends who passed on. I do not want people to mourn my death but enjoy what part in their lives I had played. I do not want them to use it as an excuse to become one of those missing links; I want them to use it as an excuse to be a better link in the future. My love for my friends taught me a world, a lifetime of knowledge. Imagine how much I could have appreciated them had I known these lessons ahead of time. I hope that sharing my pain and my losses has mentally prepared at least one person for what they have to face. I hope it gives them the skills they need to go forward in honoring their lost loved ones, not backward in their lives and drowning in hopelessness. The easiest lessons we will ever learn in life are the ones we learn from one another's mistakes. The hardest ones are the ones we refuse to learn from when they are indeed, our very own mistakes.

# Epilogue

As I was writing this Hurricane Katrina struck the gulf coast. My heart goes out to those who find themselves questioning where their lives are headed or even their meaning in life. I have been there, time and time again and there is no feeling that causes more loss of your sense of self-worth than tragedies such as these. When these horrible things are televised, as they should be, even people who weren't in the direct line of fire begin to question things they normally don't find themselves pondering. Most of us are affected by national and international tragedies. The ones who are compassionate by nature tend to be effected the hardest. I know that since the day those images began making their way to the television, I have been an emotional mess. I have cried inwardly at all the images of the bodies so desecrated, lying in the streets, sometimes not even respectfully covered. I have been angered as the rest of the world has at the seemingly ignorant responses to the plight of these Americans, but mostly I have been worried about those left living and their emotional health, no matter where they are residing currently, it is what is in their hearts that matter. I have felt a bitter taste in my mouth each time these people have been referred to as refugees. They are Americans; they are our brothers and sisters regardless of the place on the map in which they were born. Children who have never had to confront death are seeing it in their daily lives over and over as the days go by. Teenagers who have been used to being comforted by their parents are now left to work some of these very serious issues out in their minds, by themselves. That is the scary part to me. A child that has been protected and sheltered by their parents, never having had to face a disaster of such phenomenal proportions, is now sitting in the eye of the storm, even though the literal storm has passed.

While emotions are high and people are so displaced things are still a little too hectic for them to be able to make the time to stop and consider the damage this may be doing to the delicate souls that are our children and young adults. One of the most hurtful things I have witnessed on the coverage of this

disaster is when a group of officers were talking to a reporter and were telling of a fellow officer who had been so worn out and worn down by the human suffering that they had ordered the officer to take a day off and get some rest. The officer retreated from the human horrors and committed suicide. The officers, friends to the one who had killed himself, were very distraught. They were blaming themselves for his death. I should have kept him with me I heard the officer in command say in so many words. It is ok to realize that in some circumstances, there is no relief for the self-blame. Although I wanted badly to talk to that man, and convince him that his fellow officers' death was not his fault, I also realized that at this point, with the pain so fresh, it might be entirely impossible to relieve him of the guilt he was feeling. I can't imagine the horrors an officer would have to witness, after having been an officer and seen some of the worst the world has to offer, that would cause him to want to end it all. Most important is the ability to empathize with this. No matter what he witnessed I still believe that suicide is a very selfish act. Now his brothers and sisters; related or not, are left wondering what they could have done differently. I don't feel that it is fair for them to dually suffer but now they are. Unfortunately I also empathize with the one who committed suicide. At that point I also realized that if a seasoned officer could have so quickly given up, what is going to happen to the more innocent souls who are witnessing this catastrophe? They are going to need help beyond food and water. They are going to need to learn some coping skills long before they get to the point of wanting to just be gone from the horrors they are witnessing. I am hoping that they get some grief counseling in the form of others who can empathize with them, or from someone who has an extra helping of faith they can share with these Americans that could use a shoulder to cry on. I can only hope for them that they have at least one friend who is willing to cover them as mine had done for me.

If I could publish this book for the sole purpose of sending half a million free copies to the Red Cross to be distributed to the survivors of this disaster, I surely would. More important, if I could be there to speak to the survivors and live with them side by side to help them through their misery, I would. Sometimes, indeed, misery does love company. In a case like this though, I believe misery just loves a friend who can be stronger for you, when you have no strength left. Those Americans in Louisiana, Mississippi and the other effected areas are my brothers and sisters in my heart. It is their souls that need comforting. I appreciate the efforts of every single individual who has played a part in lightening their pain and suffering.



The biggest lesson I wanted to teach in this book is one that I saved for last. I meant to put it in the peaceful moment's part until this disaster hit our country. In waiting I believe I have found an even better forum to introduce it. When you have lost a loved one, and you are in those moments of utter despair and hopelessness, you might tell yourself that you can't live through it. You will. After some time healing from it you will always regard those moments, those days so soon after your loss as some of the worst in your life. Understandably. Remembering one thing in these times will help you forever. Nothing, no time, no horrible moments will ever compare to those times. If you learn nothing from these words then learn just this one thing. Appreciation. You can appreciate about anything. After having lived through the losses I have suffered, losing a boyfriend pales in comparison. After burying two best friends and one of the strongest people I've ever known, crying over a broken figurine seems petty. Not that it is, not that I don't understand. But the pain of those moments just after the deaths of my loved ones seems to make a lot of other previously very important issues just insignificant. Now I appreciate the lessons I've learned. It took me years to do so, so don't expect miracles for yourself, but keep an eye open for them just the same. Sometimes I still get down, sometimes I still cry because I miss my friends. Sometimes I still silently pray that they didn't suffer, and sometimes I cry because for one second, I fear they did. I don't expect that to ever change. What has changed is that I have finally come to the realization that in order to honor, I have to appreciate. Right now I am deeply appreciative that I wasn't in the path of Katrina. Right now my heart pains me as if I have lost someone I loved, because I have seen the same looks on the faces of the survivors of that disaster. If you still feel that you don't have much to appreciate, then appreciate this.

One doctor reporting on the conditions of disaster victims stated that for those who were beyond saving, that they were rolling them into a makeshift morgue, so that they could die in peace. Appreciate that it wasn't your mother who had to die in such a way, appreciate that it wasn't your brother dying in a morgue, appreciate that you were lucky enough to have survived whatever your life has tossed at you, and that you are alive to honor the memories of those who weren't as fortunate. Then say a prayer, make a donation, write a greeting card and send to someone who is now suffering from the same pain that you thought you would die of. Some of them are. Empathize with those whose mothers and brothers did have to leave this world in that manner. Open your heart and realize that no matter how bad things may seem they could always be as bad as the day you suffered such a devastating loss.

Pick up your phone and admit your feelings for someone who may not know them. If you can't do it for yourself, then do it for these Americans who are wishing they had done the same and are soon to live through the same struggle I have endured for 10 years.

Pick up the phone and apologize for a wrong you may have done to someone. Maybe you were rude to the lady down the street. She might not even care to hear your apology. You aren't really doing it for her. It is your soul you are refilling with faith. Maybe you were mean to a certain kid in school ten years ago. Locate that person and tell them. You might be the reason they can begin healing as well. Do not wait until you hear about their tragic death to call their parents and offer the apology. Then it is guilt that drives you, no guilt driven apologies are as satisfying as cleansing your soul of wrongs you may feel you have been a part of long before remorse drives you to seek relief.

Write a letter that honors the memory of your lost loved one. Then call that persons mother or father, sister or brother and read it to them.

Go to a local animal shelter or refuge and do some volunteer work. Ask them ahead of time if you may be allowed, after volunteering your time, to make a shrine to your lost loved one in honor of their life. A hand carved brick or stone is a beautiful yet natural reminder of you honoring a personal passion of a lost loved one.

Go to the place you and your loved one visited so often and use some chalk to write their name on a tree nearby.

Go to a local cancer center and spend an hour talking to, or listening to someone who is suffering as your loved one did. Read to them. Ask them their favorite flower and have them delivered to them later on. Give it a few days, perhaps they will think you forgot them and then they will see someone bring flowers, the same ones you were talking about days before. Can you imagine how happy you would be? Therein lays the definition of honor. You can dish out your own powerful peace moments when and where you choose.

Be brave. The world is depending on you. You have an important task set before you. That task is to go on living, and doing so in a way that would honor your lost loved one in a way that would make them smile down upon you. Who knows? Maybe you will feel that smile. I have, many times. Being brave doesn't mean you can't cry if you want to. There are no laws against crying. The only people who would judge you for doing so, do not deserve a place in your life anyway. Make lasting links that will carry you through this journey of life and keep them close to you; you never know when you may

## *COVER ME*

need them to lean on. You never know when they may need to lean on you.

Most of all and the biggest lesson I had saved for last, appreciate, and say so. I personally stopped saying the words thank you long ago. Thank you is something I say to a stranger who holds a door open for me. It is something we teach our kids to say when someone gives them a piece of candy or a toy. Perhaps in my heart, thank you has now become one of those compliments that are lessened with overuse and the automation of it. Nowadays, when I feel thanks for something, for something someone has done for me I go the extra mile, I look at them directly in the eye and I say, "I appreciate it." That is simply because I do.



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