



## The 'Unimaginable' Loss



Grief is a path we all walk many times over the course of our lives. It is one of the most difficult human experiences, and also a normal part of life. No matter the nature of the relationship lost, the experience of grief is both universal and deeply personal.

But the death of a child is unique among losses. There may be no greater pain than a parent's grief over the death of their child. Whether newborn or a grown adult, the death of a child goes against the natural order of things and is wholly devastating to the parents.

Many parents wonder how they will survive the pain of losing their child- an inner pain so great that many experience physical manifestations of it.

They wonder whether their life will ever hold meaning for them again. They may blame themselves, be consumed with 'what ifs', or be racked with guilt at the thought of not adequately protecting their child.

Parents also grieve the loss of their hopes and dreams for the future, and the lost possibility of generations to come. The effects ripple out indefinitely.

This newsletter is dedicated to child loss. In these pages you will read stories written by mothers and fathers who have lost a child. There is also a story about miscarriage - a common and often underestimated form of child loss.

These parents have bravely shared about their loss and what has helped them to heal. We hope that their words will be of support to grieving parents, and offer a window of understanding to those who are supporting them.

Grieving parents often feel alone and isolated in their grief. Friends and family may be at a loss for words - uneasy in their inability to 'fix' the situation, and worried that they make it worse by saying the wrong thing.

With this in mind, here are some ways to offer support:

- Attend the memorial service. It shows that you are among those who intend to support them and remember their loss.
- Offer physical support: cook, clean, do errands, look after children, so that they can do the 'work' of grieving.

- Offer emotional support. This often comes in a quiet form. Being present and listening is often more valuable than words. Talk isn't necessary. Presence is vital.
- Expect the grief to increase, not decrease. Often the hardest and loneliest times come once the initial wave of support has subsided.
- Talk about the child. Every parent wants to know that their child is remembered.
- Remember special days - the child's birthday, anniversary of death and other important days are often difficult.
- Ask how they are feeling. Listen from your heart. Be comfortable with tears.

And to you, the grieving parent... know that healing will come through expression of your grief. Author Suki Forbes wrote that "we are marked by grief for life, yet if we are open to its gifts, we can be healed by it."

It is our hope that in time you will find these gifts and this healing.



"My child has died.  
I don't need advice.  
All I need is for you to  
open wide your heart,  
and walk with me  
until I can see in  
color again."

Angela Miller

## A Letter to Grieving Parents

By Tara McGuire



If you are reading this it's very likely that something terrible has happened. Something you never imagined when you thought of your life's path. Something you could never have prepared for. Chances are you are reeling. Reeling with shock, guilt, confusion, anger and a deep immeasurable sadness that never seems to leave you. It is there when you wake up each morning, carried with you all day long and still there when you finally rest your exhausted body each night.

Your beautiful child has gone. This was not supposed to happen. It should not have happened to you, it should not have happened to me and it definitely should not have happened to our children.

Our son Holden passed away suddenly in July 2015. It was an accidental drug and alcohol overdose that took his gorgeous soul from us. He was just 21.

It has been 7 months since that devastating day and the sadness has never left. Not once. In its unpredictability, my sadness has evolved, surged and loosened its grip a little at times but never disappeared. That has been the only predictable part of my sadness; it never leaves.

I have come to equate the size of the love I feel for my son with the physical size of the

sadness I am experiencing. How can the sadness ever end when my love is infinite?

This idea is exactly why I'm slowly learning to give myself permission to feel lighter on those rare occasions when the heavy darkness dissipates of its own accord. As it does, for no particular reason. A wise friend who lost her partner offered this little nugget one afternoon over tea and I have found it to be very helpful and completely true. "The sadness will always return."

If your heart should unclench ever so slightly one day, let it happen. Because the sadness will always return. Allow yourself to step out of the swamp for a short period of time. It does not mean you are 'over this' or that your child's passing means less. Please don't feel guilty for smiling at a sweet child skipping down the sidewalk or humming along with the radio while you drive. The sadness is part of your life now. Just as your child always will be. Trust that, and allow the unfamiliar warmth of happiness flood your aching bones. Just for a moment.

Another aspect that has become very clear to me is that choosing the dark can be the bravest and most honest response to this unthinkable tragedy. Some grief experts call it 'leaning in' to the pain. Only lately have I begun to

more fully internalize what that means. I now understand the need to endlessly ruminate on the stupid unfairness of what has happened, as a torturous and yet somehow rich endeavour.

I won't call this experience positive because it is not. Our loss will never be positive. Still, this sort of deepening or widening of my understanding of the human condition has been... interesting.

The bottom of the well is not a fun place to spend my days but in passing so much time there I have become much more compassionate, aware, patient and honest.

It has also become vitally important to realize that the way I voyage into the depths of sadness is a choice. Whether consciously or unconsciously every journey offers choice. Yes, I am completely unqualified to navigate this raging river with its unexpected perilous rapids, but I do have a paddle. A flimsy inadequate one, but a paddle nonetheless; my paddle is choice.

At times I choose not to resist while the anguish drags me over jagged submerged rocks. And sometimes, it's possible to gather the strength and momentum to push off the canyon walls avoiding the churning back eddies that try to suck me back under.

"The only thing I can try to do as I attempt to reorient myself in a life forever weighted with sadness, is to choose the light."

Whether I allow or resist the rapids of grief, both are my choice.

To accept that lunch offer when I'd rather hide in bed. To go outside when outside seems way too big. These small, directed choices are private, tiny victories that feel like silent declarations of healing. They feel good. Tiring, but good.

Daily, sometimes hourly I ask myself, "How do I live with this?"

Do I want to be a woman who is defined solely by the too soon loss of her son?"

For now there is only one topic of conversation, one item on the agenda, but I believe that over time, the rest of me will eventually be revealed.

The terrible truth is that something horrible has happened. Something we did not choose.

The only thing I can try to do as I attempt to reorient myself in a life forever weighted with sadness, is to choose the light. And on the days when that is simply too hard, I hope to find the strength to at least orient myself in that direction - and that is my hope for you too.

I am so deeply sorry for your loss.

You can read more of Tara's writing on her blog: [www.taramcguire.com](http://www.taramcguire.com)

## *I Don't Want to Talk To You* A Poem by Tara McGuire

*i don't want to talk to you  
if i talk to you it hurts too much  
stings and punches  
makes all of this real  
but oh, it must be real  
or you wouldn't be here  
at my door  
with flowers  
and that look in your eyes  
mournful and scared  
awkward yet brave in your very arrival  
you wouldn't wear that expression  
of twisted confusion  
and wretched anguish  
  
all the gushing feelings you can't  
possibly articulate  
right now  
maybe ever  
are there in your quivering chin  
pressed lips  
eyes damp with crimson  
you don't know what to say*

*and i don't either  
but you try  
bless you  
you try  
  
with cards and letters  
needed nourishment for body and soul  
feeding the troops who arrive embattled  
grappling offers of anything i can do  
you try  
to poke holes in the thick blackness  
cultivate a glimmer of light  
with calls not answered  
messages not returned  
you try  
with love  
to plaster the shattering cracks invisible  
bless you for it  
and forever thank you  
  
thank you  
because there is nothing else to do  
when the only thing i really want  
is impossible.*



Tara McGuire with her son—Holden, and her daughter and husband.

## A Bed for James By Philip Merchant



Building things is one of the central aspects of who I am. I have built a wide variety of things from an oak baptismal font for a church to a tail wing for an airplane. But the most profoundly important has been a coffin for my son.

For most of our lives my wife and I have been making things. Most of what surrounds us we have created with wool, wood, tile, cotton, glass, metal, leather, and love.

I was helping build a coffin when by strange coincidence, we learned that our eldest son James, 27 years old, had been hit and killed by a car on a dark rainy road in Quebec. At 2 am the police knocked at the door and our lives changed forever.

I knew that building James' final bed would be the right thing for me to do. A healing thing - working wood with my hands for my son was the first step towards survival at a time of such pain.

I have never felt such a clarity of focus and purpose. Dovetail corners were laid out and cut with a saw, chisel and mallet. In a cascade of love I focused on what he would like and at times felt his presence guiding the process. James' brothers, William and Andrew, helped.

We live in a world where paying other people to do things for us is standard and consequently I think we miss out on some life's most important experiences.

Working with my hands gave me time to think, to love, and to search for meaning.

We surrounded the coffin with an old worn rope. It became reminiscent of a lifeboat — as much to carry us into the future as to carry him. Inside, we placed a beaver skin, a little birch bark canoe, his favourite Ruffed Grouse pillow, a horse medallion won by my father long ago, and bundles of oats. A beautiful quilt in the colours of the natural world wraps him forever in his mother's love. Her hands also guided by her heart on those sad, final days.

*"Deep greens and blues are the colors I choose, won't you let me go down in my dreams? And rock-a-bye sweet baby James."*

*- James Taylor*

We put squares of sand paper in the pamphlets at his funeral for friends to sand the wood. This, too, became part of the process. In the church, the saddle on the coffin and oat bundles instead of flowers spoke of him as he would have wanted. James said he never met a horse he didn't like and learn something from.

For weeks we were delivered meals and showered with support by beloved friends. Many people sharing grief also share the load. Never is a community more important than at a time like this.

Lessons? There are many and they continue to be learned long after those terrible first days. Lives have meaning and their significance continues to be felt, creating positive change after their physical presence is gone.

My range of emotions went from shock to anger to sadness. Of course the sadness lingers and will always be part of me. But I know that the last thing he would have wanted was for us to suffer forever.

The love we share now in our family is more intense, and more appreciated. In a way, it is a gift from him. Through his short life he loved us and he knew that we loved him. That, in the end, is all that matters. It is this love that supports us and sets a trajectory for the future.

"In a cascade of love I focused on what he would like and at times felt his presence guiding the process."



# A Journey

By Manon Desforges

In life, we travel many roads. Sometimes it is a straight path with a grand view of mountains in the distance. Sometimes the road is twisty, bumpy and full of potholes. And sometimes there are detours or the road is simply closed.

The day when you find out you are carrying a new life is like starting on a journey down a new road. Suddenly there is a plan and a date - nine months from now - from which point on your life will change drastically.

Thirteen years ago I had a journey where my road closed unexpectedly; I got pregnant and then miscarried.

I already had a beautiful, healthy 4 year old boy, and we were surprised but excited to know that there would be an addition to our family. I was 33 years old, healthy and fit. The baby was due on August 22. I started planning my life - the next journey - around this date. It was a busy time; working, being a mom, volunteering and moving houses, but life was good.

I told a few of my closest friends but as per the social norm I waited until 12 weeks before telling others. But at 14 weeks I woke up one morning, bleeding. Days went by and I kept hoping that all would be fine. Then I miscarried. He was not very big, insignificant really, but I could see the small, small body.

How could this be, I wondered? I was healthy, and I had had a healthy baby before. Some enter their child-bearing years knowing that miscarriage is common, but I wasn't prepared for it. Suddenly my due date had no meaning. The road with its promise of the mountain and the beautiful view at the end had closed.

I was no longer part of the group of anticipating moms. It was like getting off the bus while my friends were moving on, looking through the window at me on the side of the road while the bus drove away.

So, how to continue? There were tears of course. Tears when I explained it to my four year old son who, now 17, still remembers that day so clearly. There were tears when people congratulated me on the pregnancy and then I had to tell them that I miscarried. And there were tears at night in bed, beside my sleeping husband. How could he sleep? I have forgiven him now, but he just didn't get it. It is not the same when you are carrying that life. Those tears were healing.

But sometimes closure comes when you least expect it. One healing moment for me was at a workshop 6 months after the miscarriage. During the workshop when I spoke about my miscarriage an unexpected

flood-gate of tears opened. The sadness I thought had passed was still there. I received a powerful group healing and felt a release and a new breath, like a force that helped me let go of my baby's soul that was still hanging on.

Another step in my healing was to bury the fetus. I did a little ceremony and had a private funeral, just my little unborn soul and me. I named him Milan and finally said good-bye.

Healing happens when the time is right. It isn't always planned, and it might not even be clear what will help and what won't, but it will happen eventually.

After this miscarriage I got pregnant and miscarried a second time. Starting over yet again was difficult; I felt the loss of time and feared that I might not have a second child. I finally got pregnant a third time and this time she stayed with us; Marina was born.

In the end, I needed to accept that it was nothing that I did right or wrong. It was not the right time, or was not meant to be. It was a detour in my journey and although it was not always clear in the moment, there was learning, growth and strength to be gained, as there is in all hardships, big or small. They shape the beautiful people we become.



"Healing happens  
when the time  
is right."

## Saying Goodbye Before Hello By Catherine O'Donovan



Four and a half years ago my husband and I were happily expecting our third child when, well into my third trimester I felt a kick so hard it brought tears to my eyes. A day passed before I realized I hadn't felt any movement since that kick... I didn't know then that it would be his last. At the ultrasound my husband and I watched and listened as they searched, and then we heard the words that changed our lives forever: "I'm sorry, I can't find a heartbeat."

The next hours were a blur as we planned for the birth. How do you prepare to meet your child after they're gone?

My body resisted labour; I was not ready to deliver. Finally, just before my child was born, calmness swept over me. My fear disappeared and it was peaceful and beautiful. He was beautiful. The nurses and doctors spoke about him as they would any newborn and we held him and took pictures—now some of my most precious treasures.

Family came to meet him and say goodbye. They held him wrapped in a baby blanket and gave him little gifts. We took imprints of his hands and feet—more treasures for us to hold. We held him with joy and pride; for those few precious hours we were typical parents. We fell asleep holding him. And then at some point in the early morning, I found the courage to let him go.

After he left our arms, grief set in. Vulnerable and fragile, I drew on the support from family and friends as a source of strength. They took care of my children so that I could grieve. Friends brought food. Little gifts of kindness were left at the door: distraction baskets for the family, gift cards for food stores. These simple acts meant everything.

The funeral home placed his remains inside a teddy bear, which I often sleep with. It is something to hold on to when emotions take a strong hold.

One of the biggest healers for me was the keepsake box that Hospice arranged. Inside the memory box was a feelie heart and a small feather. We added his hat and moccasins, as well as little gifts and notes people gave us. I opened this box daily at first, and now I retreat to it when I need to.

Writing has been a source of healing for me. At first I wrote for myself, recording thoughts about this loss, my son, and life. I went on to share my experience with others through writing and public speaking about grief, loss and survival.

When people are struggling to cope, they search for something that offers strength or reprieve. For my husband and I, and also our daughters, it was counseling at Hospice. Four years later I still occasionally go for counseling. It has given me tools to find myself,

to heal from this loss, and to let go of the blame I carried. At times the emotional pain felt like physical suffering. At these times Healing Touch at Hospice helped me to release the pain I was carrying.

I go to Lights of Life at Christmas to give myself an hour to think of him. Sometimes I retreat to look at his album and remember the precious moments I had with him. I wear a necklace with an angel wing to keep him close, and our family sets off balloons with messages to him on his birthday each year.

I always acknowledge my son when I'm asked how many kids I have. I say that I have had three kids: two daughters, and a son who we lost. I don't like to see the discomfort this brings for some people, but have realized that honouring his life is too important not to.

My biggest solace has been talking about him in any way I can. I also encourage my daughters to speak about him and to ask questions. Death is not a taboo subject in our house and neither is our son, Teague. Teague means "Little Poet" and it seems fitting.

*A butterfly lights beside us  
like a sunbeam  
And for a brief moment  
its glory and beauty  
belong to our world  
  
But then it flies again  
And though we wish  
it could have stayed...  
We feel lucky to have seen it.*

*Unknown*



## Hopes and Tears By Tara Hicks

No one wants or chooses to endure the deep pain of child loss. I always thought I wouldn't be able to go on if something ever happened, never imagining I might actually lose my own child one day. Well, it did happen, and that day was July 4, 2012.

Jaedyn was full of love, life and excitement. She was like a little mommy to her younger brother and made sure to treat others with kindness. We had a special connection; when we talked I often felt like I was talking to an old friend. One day she asked me if I was proud of her and without hesitation I told her I loved her and was so proud of her. I will cherish those words forever.

What started as a normal day in our little town of Watson Lake ended in tragedy beyond our comprehension. Jaedyn was playing with her pals when a portable soccer net was bumped and collapsed, hitting the back of her head and causing a fatal brain injury. Our family of 4 became 3 in the blink of an eye. Instantly, I felt hollow, with nothing to live for. Paul and I felt so helpless. We were angry, hurt, sad, and numb.

In the months following her death everything was difficult: thinking, talking, even breathing. I had to retrain myself in many aspects of living. I learned how to answer questions in a new way, and that it was ok to let others help me.

Initially, I believe my distractions were what saved me. Two short months after Jaedyn died I finished my education degree. It was an emotional journey but I was motivated knowing that Jaedyn would have wanted me to continue. It was all a blur, but a needed distraction from the loss.

Now nearly 4 years later, I am just starting to really *feel* the pain of losing her. Each birthday reminds me that we have one less child to make a cake for, buy a present for, or read to at night. Instead of being able to hold her or do her hair, here I am clinging to a stuffed animal filled with her ashes. The emotional scars of loss are so deep, I often wonder what they would look like if they were visible on the outside.

How do I go on? I don't want to forget my grief. I go on with Jaedyn in my heart. Working through this grief has been difficult and there have been times when I didn't think our family unit would survive. The pain was too great and we grieved so differently from one another that even talking was a challenge.

I have sought the help of counsellors, and have met some wonderful people along my journey. Compassionate Friends, a non-profit organization for families who have lost a child, has supported me in my grief. Through them I have met others with stories like mine, and have found comfort in knowing that

they have felt this pain but are managing to make it through the difficult times.

My son attends a grief group called Rainbows. He likes going because he can talk about his feelings and feel safe doing so.

I am grateful for the wonderful family and amazing group of friends I have in my life. They have walked beside us in our grief, offering support in one way or another.

I no longer focus on the nightmare, but instead on the dreams that come to me and bring comfort instead of upset. There is still deep sadness, but now there are also rays of sunshine when we can share a smile or a laugh and look back on wonderful memories. We have also added another member to our family, a little boy.

I miss everything about Jaedyn but am thankful for the unconditional love she gave to the people in her life in the short time she was here. I hope to honour her spirit by living my life to the fullest each day, full of love and positivity.

I hope my story will bring hope and understanding to grieving parents and families.

To fellow bereaved parents, we are not alone. We will make it through this deeply difficult journey, allowing ourselves all the time we need for healing.





## Hospice supports grieving families...

### Baby Boxes

For families who have lost a baby, we offer beautifully decorated wooden boxes containing a few comforting items and a special place to keep photos and other small mementos of their baby. These are available at Hospice House and the Maternity Ward of the WGH.

### Counselling

Meeting with a grief counselor can be very helpful for parents and siblings to 'check in' on their grief process. Our grief counselor can also meet with those supporting grieving families to talk about ways to offer appropriate, sustainable support.

### Healing Touch

This relaxing energy therapy can offer relief from the pain of grief that many parents experience. Clients lie, fully clothed, on a massage table and receive gentle, soothing touch.

### Grief Support Groups

These groups help grieving people find support and connection with others who are also experiencing loss. Groups such as the Walking Group and 'Loss and Creative Expressions' are offered several times per year.

### Living with Loss - An Introduction to Healthy Grieving

A free, 2-hr public education session to help you better understand the grieving experience. Offered four times per year.

### Library

Books available for loan on a wide range of topics relating to grief, death, different kinds of loss, wellness and much more.

*All of these programs are offered free of charge.*

*For more information, please call us... 867-667-7429 or email: [info@hospiceyukon.net](mailto:info@hospiceyukon.net)*

[www.hospiceyukon.net](http://www.hospiceyukon.net)

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