



THE
*Healing
Heart*

A SPECIAL FAMILY KEEPSAKE

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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The Healing Heart

When a heart breaks it breaks in two
and we are struck by what we feel.
But the very noblest thing a soul can do
is hear the beat of hearts as they heal.

So through a healing heart there flows
knowledge and strength, compassion and care.
And when from this life a dear loved one goes,
it is their love our healing hearts will bear.

- John Sydney Tighe

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Foreword

The Healing Heart is designed to offer an empathetic understanding of what we all go through as we grieve. Because all grief is individual we examine how it is altered by circumstance and by who it is that has passed away. Together we look at particular issues that might get in the way of healthy grieving just as we look at finding the strength to carry on even with the pain of our loss still raw. Sometimes grief is deeper than our tears, more penetrating even than the kindness and sympathy of friends. *The Healing Heart* is a keepsake volume intended to offer comfort, consolation and hope in those times when we feel most alone.

USING THE HEALING HEART

We have thus provided places in this volume to document the particulars of the funeral service as well as pages to record special memories that will continue to endear family members to each other. Filling in the Family Register and other journal areas will create a unique and loving family memoir for generations to come. Our volume is also a quick reference source for us to be able to reach out to helping professionals and volunteers available to us as we grieve. We need never hesitate to reach out for help. We hope that reading through the various sections on the grieving process and taking time with the personal meditations will make of *The Healing Heart* a cherished family keepsake. We also hope it might help you as you walk through the pain of your loss to a place of eventual peace, deeply changed, to be sure, but ever aware of the love that circulates among your family members and dear friends and that still resides in your heart for all of them and for that very special loved one who has passed away.

A close-up photograph of a tree trunk with a heart-shaped hole cut into the bark. The bark is light-colored and textured, with some peeling and damage visible. The background is a soft, out-of-focus natural setting.

A RECORD OF YOUR LOVE

In this section you are invited to remember your loved one in some very special ways. A record of the funeral service itself is provided for those who, in years to come, will see how, when and where you bade your loved one farewell. A place for a photograph of the deceased will, of course, become one of the family treasures you pass on. You will also find a place to list some very special friends who attended the funeral, friends who are always near and dear to you in difficult times. Special times with your loved ones are precious memories. Your recollections in the Favorite Memories section may someday provide for family members an inspirational keepsake unlike any other. Adding a reminiscence of your family life to this very personal documentation is a befitting testimonial to one you have loved and will remember always.

THE FUNERAL

THE FUNERAL SERVICE FOR

LOCATION

OFFICIATING

DATE

BURIAL

CEMETERY NAME

INTERMENT NAME

SECTION

LOT

INURNMENT

a Tribute

PLACE PICTURE HERE

A DEDICATED SERVANT

There are many kinds of service in which your loved one may have engaged: anything from military service to special community volunteer work; from membership in service oriented organizations to work as a fire fighter, police officer or any of a number of other civil service occupations. Here we offer a place to record such loving service.

MEMBERSHIP IN COMMUNITY SERVICE ORIENTED ORGANIZATIONS

ACTIVITIES ENGAGED IN _____

CIVIL SERVICE

TYPE _____ DATES OF SERVICE _____ TITLE _____

SPECIAL MEMORIES OF CIVIL SERVICE _____

SPECIAL VOLUNTEER WORK

WHAT IS A VETERAN?



The term “veteran” refers to an individual who has served in any of the country’s armed forces. The veteran serves for the good of the country and in defense of the nation. While others enjoy their freedoms, the veteran helps provide those freedoms. While others enjoy the comfort of their family, the veteran separates from his or her family to stand watch at home or in foreign lands. While others prosper, the veteran provides the security for that prosperity without financial gain. Yet the veteran is rewarded in ways that some others may not understand. Pride, Duty, Honor— these are the hallmarks of a veteran’s character. Pride in measuring up to the demands of service, dutifully carrying out assignments given, even if they place one in harm’s way, and the honor of representing the freedom for whom so many have given so much. This is a veteran.

MILITARY SERVICE

BRANCH _____ DATES OF SERVICE _____ HIGHEST RANK _____

SPECIAL MEMORIES OF MILITARY LIFE _____

“The true soldier fights not because he hates what is in front of him, but because he loves what is behind him.”

–G.K. Chesterton

WHAT IS A FIRST RESPONDER?



A First Responder refers to an individual who serves or who has served in any capacity a federal, state, county or municipal law enforcement agency, fire department or medical services entity that regularly responds to emergencies within the community. First Responders are often the unsung heroes of many of our citizens who have been involved in a medical or other kind of emergency. These are the men and women seen going into fires, running towards the fallen and often into harm's way, administering emergency first aid, calming escalating emotions and giving their all to preserve peace and treat the sick, to promote health and mitigate potential violence. A police officer, a sheriff's deputy, an emergency medical technician or paramedic, a state or county trooper, a fire officer as well as a number of other helping professionals serve our communities and our citizenry in unique and selfless ways. This service may either be on a volunteer basis or as an occupation. There may be no greater helpers to suffering individuals on a day to day basis in our communities than our First Responders. It takes something very special, a caring heart transformed by exacting training and the will to act in critical situations to carry out the duties of a First Responder.

SERVICE RECORD

TYPE OF UNIT ENGAGED IN FIRST RESPONDER ACTIVITIES _____

DESCRIPTION OF FIRST RESPONDER ACTIVITIES _____

RECOGNITIONS _____

A THANK YOU TO FIRST RESPONDER ORGANIZATIONS _____

SPECIAL FRIENDS IN ATTENDANCE

“Friendship improves happiness and abates misery, by the doubling of our joy and the dividing of our grief.”

-Cicero

Some friends are just always there for us, aren't they? What would we ever do without them? They have given us such joy in their presence, their humor, their forbearance. They have made the good times better and the bad times more bearable.

We list those friends here, those who brought food or spent time with us, those whose flowers we will always remember, those whose notes, even from out of town, touched us in special ways. We list the friends we know we can count on for comfort and for consolation, the ones who have been and will continue to be with us for life, for death and for all the in betweens.

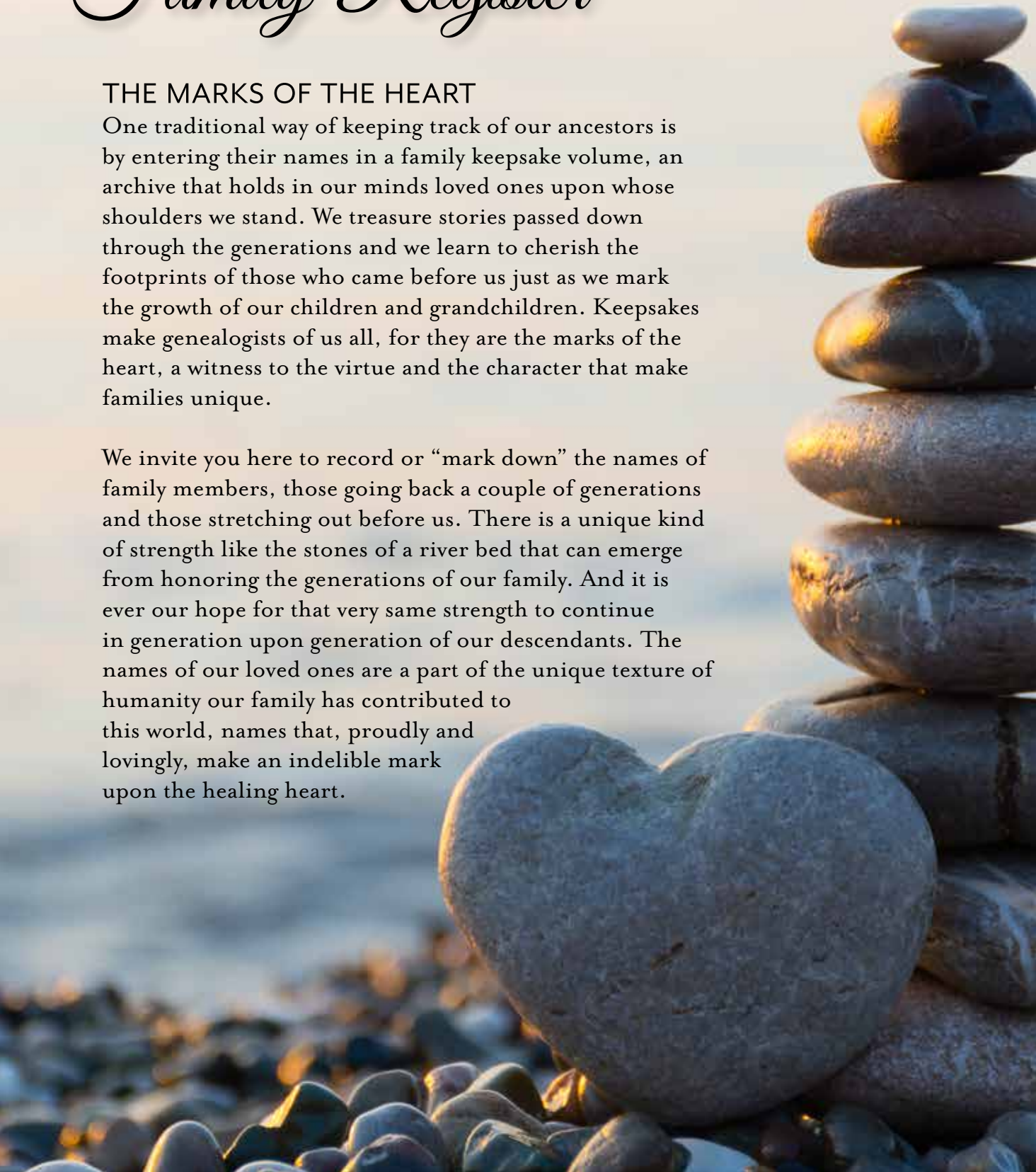
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Family Register

THE MARKS OF THE HEART

One traditional way of keeping track of our ancestors is by entering their names in a family keepsake volume, an archive that holds in our minds loved ones upon whose shoulders we stand. We treasure stories passed down through the generations and we learn to cherish the footprints of those who came before us just as we mark the growth of our children and grandchildren. Keepsakes make genealogists of us all, for they are the marks of the heart, a witness to the virtue and the character that make families unique.

We invite you here to record or “mark down” the names of family members, those going back a couple of generations and those stretching out before us. There is a unique kind of strength like the stones of a river bed that can emerge from honoring the generations of our family. And it is ever our hope for that very same strength to continue in generation upon generation of our descendants. The names of our loved ones are a part of the unique texture of humanity our family has contributed to this world, names that, proudly and lovingly, make an indelible mark upon the healing heart.



FAMILY REGISTER DESCENDANTS

YOUR DECEASED LOVED ONE
DATE OF BIRTH - DEATH

SPOUSE
DATE OF BIRTH - DEATH

SONS AND DAUGHTER OF THE DECEASED AND SPOUSES

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

OFFSPRING OF THE DECEASED	SPOUSE
BIRTH - DEATH	BIRTH - DEATH

GRANDCHILDREN OF THE DECEASED

FAMILY REGISTER ANCESTORS

YOUR DECEASED LOVED ONE		SPOUSE	
FATHER OF THE DECEASED	MOTHER OF THE DECEASED	FATHER OF THE DECEASED	MOTHER OF THE DECEASED
FATHER'S FATHER	MOTHER'S FATHER	FATHER'S FATHER	MOTHER'S FATHER
FATHER'S MOTHER	MOTHER'S MOTHER	FATHER'S MOTHER	MOTHER'S MOTHER

IMPORTANT NOTES

The Stream of Time



“TIME IS BUT THE STREAM
I GO A FISHING IN.”

-HENRY DAVID THOREAU

Thoreau, in his brief quote, described well the act of remembering. How wonderful the gift of memory can be when sweet recollections help heal our aching hearts. How therapeutic it can be to cast a line of memory into the stream of time and pull up hallowed moments. The remarkable endeavors, the prominent desires, the cherished dreams, fulfilled or not, are all the ingredients of an individual's life worth speaking of, worth citing for those left behind.

We have here provided pages for more of that journey back to a former time: a survey of a year or a snapshot of a moment, a description of a memorable event or a few written words as witness to a blessed history.

It is yours for the writing, your stream in which to drop a line.



DEFINING OUR GRIEF:

REASONS OF THE HEART

A great philosopher once said, “Life is not a problem to be solved but a mystery to be lived.” And so it is with our grieving. We learn to live in the mystery and to trust the heart’s reasons. Some try to fit grief into neat little boxes that make perfect sense of every emotion or every heartfelt question that arises from our loss. But reason always falls short. There are no experts or hard and fast formulas, no timeline of our grief or “inevitable” feelings we should or should not be experiencing. We simply look for the hope and strength that reside in the recesses of our own hearts.

Grief can leave us with hard questions: *What could I have done better? Why did we not spend more time together?* Self blame can be as natural as the grief itself; another part of the search. A death in the family may bring up old wounds or new doubts, long held beliefs or brand new speculation. Our questions do not so much call out for answers as they do expressions of the love we still feel for the deceased, the love that remains with us. Eventually we will accommodate our sorrow and loneliness with new and creative strategies for continuing life. In that process we search the hidden places of our hearts to reflect upon the mysteries we find there. And we come to know that our loss is something that lives in us and becomes an essential part of our humanity, an essential part of who we are.

“THE HEART HAS ITS REASONS, WHICH REASON DOES NOT KNOW.”

—BLAISE PASCAL



AN INDIVIDUAL EXPERIENCE

Each one of us is the author of our own grief. We will encounter our sorrow, anger and loneliness in absolutely individual ways. We will begin to learn, however, that others have experienced some aspects of grief in much the same way we have and that bond with others will come to mean something very special.

Platitudes, however, can be practically unbearable: “He’s in a much better place,” or “At least she’s not in any pain, now,” or “Go on and cry, it’s good for you!” etc. It is easy to resent the overextended good intentions of others but in most cases they just don’t really know what to say. It is usually the presence of a close friend or family member that helps us the most, not any particular thing said. Just being there is meaningful. Living our grief will teach us lessons, some painful, some tinged with a joy we would never have thought possible. Each day is a new day and each day some subtle wave of hope is to be found, even in the midst of ravaging sorrow. Courage comes in many forms and our grief will surely ask us to dig deep to find it. This is the inevitable work of our grieving. Each day we will be asked and each day, each and every day... we will answer the call in our own way.

**“HIS GRIEF HE WILL NOT FORGET; BUT IT WILL NOT
DARKEN HIS HEART, IT WILL TEACH HIM WISDOM.”**

-J.R.R. TOLKIEN

Defining Grief

GRIEF IS...

Grief Is... We know that grief is a natural response to loss. And that response is different for all of us. One way to look at our grieving is to do what the poets do and find images that appropriately symbolize what we are going through and what we may find as we walk with our loss.

GRIEF IS... A PATH.

Paths are for walking and so that's what we do, slowly and surely, we keep moving. Others may join us briefly but it is our path. We walk under the dark clouds of our sorrow with hints of blue sky in the distance; all the while the sea grasses blow at our side reminding us to walk on. It's a rocky way but we see green growth even in scattered outcroppings of stone. And we do know the sea lies ahead because we see it and hear it and smell it in the air...the beautifully grandiose and mysterious sea, life itself. We don't know what lies over the hill; our future is part of the mystery but this is the only path there is for now and we know others have trod it before us. And so we walk, utterly changed by the loss we endure, the pathway that is ours, the sometimes rugged pathway to the bright and beautiful sea.

GRIEF IS... A BRIDGE.

From one side of life to another, reflections of where we've been and where we're going are there in the stream we cross. Ripples, too, make tree limbs dance in a way that tells us things aren't always as they seem. Sunbeams filter through the leaves to illuminate our crossing and give us a warm measure of hope on our way. We come to realize that every moment of our lives is a bridging from infancy to childhood to adolescence to these mounting adult years, some over torrents, some quietly crossing into a glade. We stop at the rails and take in what serenity the forest and the stream offer. Then we cross this, our own terrible, lovely bridge, and in the blending of an earthly life gone and our own is a stillness. And the colorful palettes of sorrow and beauty meet like old friends.



GRIEF IS... A QUEST.

Our grief has given us questions we cannot answer. Why did this happen? How will my life change now? And where will my sorrow take me? Our hearts search for meaning and direction. Our compass is a lifesaver. It doesn't tell us where we will end or what's around the bend but rather it points to where the sun will set and where it will rise, again and again. And so we begin to journey a few feet into the mystery, maybe even a step at a time. We chart a course based upon belief, the compassion of friends and family, an instinctive bearing from a source deep inside, the memory of our loved one, a guidance, a trajectory that comes with the willingness to express what we feel, to grieve. It is a winding way with rocky outgrowths and undulating elevations. And so, even with the points of a compass, we know we must move forward with care and patience. We may even come to sense that our questions may not be answered at some ending place, some arrival point, but rather in the tack and the turn, the swerve and the sweep of the quest itself.





GRIEF IS... A REMEMBRANCE.

We carry our love with us wherever we go and it lives on in our hearts and in our minds. Our natures cry out for acts of remembrance and that's why funeral services and other memorials are so very important. We are meant to look back upon our history and retrieve from it those heartfelt gems of affection, sacrifice and unity that helped to define our relationships. We take out the scrapbooks; we read an old letter; we treasure some remembered item passed down to us and we take great joy in passing along other items to various friends and family members. We honor the continuity of life by the telling of stories, touching or humorous or both. We visit a gravesite and place our flowers; we imagine a conversation with our loved one or we have that conversation out loud. And whatever discord that may still linger, we can now chalk up to the inevitable foibles of all human interaction. We look to the good. Memories of the goodness of our deceased loved one become a working part of who we are. And we come to see just how sacred remembering can be.

GRIEF IS...A KEY.

There is a door to be opened in our grief. It is the door to a life without our loved one and we surely don't want to go through that door. It is a hard thing we are encountering. We don't know if we can do it. But certainty is not the important thing here. Taking a step, one step to the door is what is important. Turning the key is what is necessary. We have to continue to live. A key does not tell us what is on the other side of the door; it merely makes our progress possible. There will actually be beautiful things in our new life, though it's hard to imagine that now. But beauty is a key. Yearning to see purpose in life and death is a key. Because we walk through the door, however, does not mean we are locking away the image of our loved one. It remains in our hearts, there with us approaching each doorway, over each threshold. What we unlock is possibility, the possibility of beginning to live a new life, sadly at times but slowly and surely with a measure of the joy our loved one would want for us.





GRIEF IS... A STATEMENT.

Our grief says something. We neither hide it nor do we make a spectacle of it. We are simply responding in as natural a way as we know how to our heartbreaking loss. After the shock of it all when it's still hard to understand our loved one is gone, we come to see our need for others. And in that need we find solace. As we come to speak to others about our feelings we relate to how they have responded to their loss. The picture becomes bigger. The world of sorrow is a world we begin to think about. And out of our own needs we seek others who are going through similar circumstances. And then one day the astonishment comes when we find ourselves in the role of the comforter. We find ourselves reaching out to help another in pain. And in that sacred moment we have made a statement about humanity. In that sacred moment we have made a statement about care and compassion, about how broken hearts speak the same language and about how hearts come to heal.

We have walked a path and crossed a bridge. We have begun a personal quest and we have not forgotten to remember. We have put a key in a door and, moving forward, we have made a statement about the nature of suffering and of the love and compassion that accompany it. We are, in our living with our loss with dignity and generosity, coming to know the sound of a healing heart.



A-L-I-V-E

AN ACRONYM FOR COPING WITH GRIEF

GRIEVING

Life teaches us that to endure the inevitable trials and sufferings of our existence is to somehow transcend them. Rites of burial and funeral proceedings down through the ages have recognized the vital needs of the bereaved. But as cultures and societies change, so do some of our expressions of grief. In the fast pace of modern “mobile” society we sometimes forget how the comfort and closeness of family and friends and engagement in memorial observance united us in ways that made our suffering more bearable.

Our deceased loved ones remain in our hearts just as goodness dwells there, too. And behind each grief-stricken instinct is the knowledge that death is not in vain, but rather that our pangs of loss will find objective meaning in the time to come, specifically in our relationships with those around us.

THE PROCESS OF GRIEF

Here we will use an easy to remember acronym to describe in a general way what some individuals may go through as they grieve over the loss of a loved one. Our acronym is the word ALIVE, for grief reminds us all too much that we are indeed alive to the feelings of loss and alive to the journey that loss engenders. A is for the sometimes brutal AWARENESS that first confronts us as we realize the death has occurred. L is for the LOSS of direction great sorrow imposes upon us as the family returns to their homes and the flowers have offered their last hue of comfort. I is for an INTIMACY with the past that recalls and memorializes our relationship to the deceased. V is for the VITALITY, that is, the new life that slowly emerges in a personal pace a day at a time as we learn how to cope. And E is for the healing ENCOURAGEMENT we have received and subsequently begin to give others who are experiencing their own grief.



AWARENESS

Even if expected, death always comes as a shock. The awareness of what has happened jolts us. The realization that our loved one is gone and the thousand thoughts about what that may mean can overcome us. Our reactions are tempered by the culture we grew up in and the culture we now inhabit. Confusion or emotional swings and even anger are common and may well characterize our first days of grief.

In any case, we do react. Even if we seem stoic, that lack of outward expression is itself a profound response. However we react as we become aware of what has happened; this is a time for the support of family and friends as we bear the stunning sorrow that accompanies a loved one's death. It is a time for kindness from those around us, to be sure, but also from our own hearts, for it is incumbent upon us to be gentle with ourselves. There are hard but deeply meaningful times ahead, blunted lessons from the heart of love.

LOSS OF DIRECTION

In those first days of grieving, even day to day functioning can become tiresome and nearly suffocating. There is so much to do, with funeral arrangements and the social interplay with family and friends wanting to show they care. Our emotions may swing radically, one minute frozen in sadness the next trying to hold back tears from the depths of our being. We may be easily distracted and experience what counselors call separation anxiety, wanting to bring our loved one back and struggling with the finality and the loneliness. All this adds up to feeling like we have lost our direction.

And yet we may find strength and calm in unexpected places: an old friend we haven't heard from in some time, in the innocence of a child, in a seemingly mindless activity that, for some reason, brings comfort. In our sadness and loss of direction we somehow find our own personal compasses to lovingly guide us through the most difficult moments.



THE INTIMACY OF THE PAST

The act of remembering our deceased loved ones has always been a way to hold them in our minds. You will find keepsake pages in this volume for a reason. We remember with the aid of the images we have retained, the photographs and the mementos of a life we knew together. Though we yearn for our loved one's presence, the "things" of life, a shirt still with a husband's scent, a wedding album, a verse on a grave marker, a snapshot of Mom with her grandchildren or siblings playing in the snow, a roadside wreath, a birthday card, a gift passed down, are not to be undervalued in the grieving process. We are characters in a living history, a history to be honored. It has been said, "Look to the past, but never stare." It is in the looking to the past that we are able to lean on our cherished memories as we walk forward, a step at a time, never in the deepest part of the heart, completely alone.

VITALITY

Vitality comes from the Latin Vita, that is, "Life". But the choice to go on living with great loss is not that simple. Suddenly a remembrance or a feeling of presence, heart wrenching, bittersweet, humorous or even utterly disarming in its affectation, blindsides us. We see more clearly when the tears have dried and we come to understand how the memories of our loved one can become integrated into our life. To be vital is to walk through time expressing our own uniqueness, striving, as ever, and at whatever age or disposition, to become the person we really want to be.

We slowly begin to reconstruct our lives, to see old relationships in a new light, to fashion a course of new challenges, with the accompanying frustrations, difficulties, fulfillments and rewards. Though our loved ones are always with us in spirit, we are the ones who must step forward now, a little fragile but wiser, a bit worn but ready for the sunlight and the hope each small ray brings with it.



ENCOURAGEMENT

We are changed. We go about the normal paces of life a little differently. We are like soldiers returned from war living quietly with an experience many others don't understand. What were once great hazards now seem nearly meaningless trifles. We are more in touch with the bigger questions, with the bigger picture. And we are much more in tune with our fellow human beings, in particular, their woundedness. We understand in a fuller way the pain others feel when they suffer a loss, be it the death of a loved one or some other kind of loss.

And so we respond in ways we never knew we could or never had the inclination to before. We find people eager to share the pain of loss and, even though it may bring back a sadness, still we forge ahead with others and recognize in ourselves empathy, understanding, commiseration and compassion. With another we may see that we've gone down the road a bit further than they have and we encourage them to let them know there is a wider path to come and that relief and solace are not elusive forever.

In other words, we've a lot to give and now becomes the time to give it. And in the giving we find yet another manifestation of the love we once shared with the one who has died. We learn in a deeper way just how much love lives on. We feel our healing heart.



Special TIMES OF THE YEAR

Times of the year that are especially meaningful to us seem to echo through our lives. They are the birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, reunions... times that reflect our deepest affection and love for those near and dear. And as these occasions recur we are made aware, sometimes strikingly, of wounds that still exist, wounds that let us know our hearts are still alive and that our loved ones inhabit them. There is no easy way to make it through these special times. The emptiness wants to return and sometimes we are taken aback by the force of our recurring anguish. We thought we had made more progress or had ventured farther along the path of recovery and acceptance. But the power of the attachment to a loved one now gone becomes ever more evident when we come upon the special times that still have great meaning to us. We have come a long way; these powerful recollections and the emotions that come with them, are just another part of the journey.

When these times are upon us, do we not also revisit the goodness inherent in our relationship with the deceased, a closeness that we are better people for having been a part of? Many true celebrations of life are tinged with sadness. The great joy at the birth of a child in the family often causes us to reflect upon those not present. When we celebrate a holiday we also naturally think of those family members unable to be with us. Somehow, during these times, we learn to live with a joy flavored by the wistful longing for one who changed us and still has a unique and beautiful place in our hearts.

WHEN THE GRIEF LINGERS

Most of us will, in time, learn to assimilate our sorrow, sadness, loneliness and the many other deeply felt emotions connected to our grief. But for some the pain lingers on and can become debilitating for the one suffering through it.

Researchers call this Complicated Grief. Some have referred to it as Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). However we term it, we know a certain percentage of people will suffer with it. Experiencing Complicated Grief it is not a matter of refusing to call on our psychological strengths; we want to be able to live with our loss as much as anyone. It is a matter of retaining access to those strengths. Symptoms may include: inattentiveness, bitterness, psychological numbness, a lack of trust in others and an overall inability to make life adjustments to the death of the loved one. Sometimes even day to day functional impairment may be experienced and depression may also begin to play a large role in one's life.

We should never be afraid to reach out. Caring friends or family should abstain from judgment and encourage getting professional help. Complicated Grief is real, but when treated, it can open the door to recovery, a new sense of freedom and desire for life. Those in the helping fields, such as grief counselors and clergy will certainly be willing to help one learn more, as well. And, just as all grief is individual, so, too, is all healing. One of the glories of the human spirit is that it is always seeking to revitalize itself so that, even as our suffering lingers, hope may ever reign in a healing heart.





A WORD ABOUT A CHILD'S GRIEF

Children are naturally resilient, so much so that we may not fully comprehend the depth of their grief. Because children are so tactile, emotional stress or confusion often exhibits itself physically as in a lack of appetite or stomach problems. We might address this tactile element of their being by letting the children handle personal items of the deceased: Grandpa's sweater, Auntie's jewelry, a sibling's toy. Above all, we want to let our children know that they can talk about how they feel. Taking time for the common sense, loving answers to questions that arise from children who are grieving is a labor of love well worth our efforts.

A grieving child may also have nightmares, exhibit overtly aggressive behavior at school or play or even regress to behaviors typically associated with a younger age. The best thing we can do for children who are grieving is give them our time and our presence. Making things as simple as possible by providing daily structure may also help. We let them know it's O.K. to have feelings of anger and frustration. It is also common for children to blame themselves for the death in the family. We might consult a professional counselor who can help us navigate these delicate waters. Honoring our loved one in stories, prayers, scrapbooks and other memorials can be a moving and instructive way to teach children how to live with grief.

Finally, as we tend to our precious children, we become acutely aware of how their ability to live in the present and their knack for finding joy can teach us important lessons about the acceptance of our loved one's death. We are there to care for the children in their fear and their sorrow. They are there for us, too, in their courage, resilience and vitality.

Caretakers...

In the last stages of a loved one's earthly existence, there were most likely people who gave them compassionate and caring attention. Here we may find quiet, humble heroes whose service has been invaluable. Those who have played the role of caretaker may feel an especially deep sting at the moment of our loved one's passing. We may become keenly aware of the difficulties of the last days, months or years. Caretakers often understand deeply the mercy that allows for much warranted relief in knowing that a loved one no longer suffers.

The presence of loving caretakers, related or not, may be one of the greatest blessings a family can receive. It is often difficult to know how to extend our gratitude for such a personal offering of time and attention. If the caretaker is a professional person then they will have been compensated all along but still, special duty calls for special thanks. Because a professional caretaker is engaged in such personal duties, generally speaking, the more personal the display of gratitude, the more it is appreciated.

The passing of our loved one may take a heavy toll on a caretaker who is a family member and in sometimes unpredictable ways. As human beings we often bear up under pressure but when the crisis subsides and the pressure lessens, the body and the emotions may be vulnerable to illness or depression. Ironically, it may be our family caretaker(s) who will need our help, our presence and patience in the time to come.

To accompany a person on their last journey is a privilege and an honor. It may also be a burden borne out of love. These special people can become treasures of the family in their dedication, their kindness and their loyalty. And we are forever beholden to them for the very special role they have played in that unique and intimate part of life that encompasses death.

A THANK YOU TO OUR CARETAKERS...





We ARE A RIVER

Water washes over rock
and the hidden sediment
of our lives. Years flow by,
broken hearts soothed stone
by stone, beside the pines,
under a steadfast sky.

We are a river: rock, leafy
hue and watercourse. And
all we have loved are in
this moving canvass, alive
in memory, the unending
dance of the current: falling,
lunging, making its way.

They are with us in this place,
water washing over rock and
the hidden sediment of our lives...
we are a river.

Close TO OUR HEARTS... WHO IS GONE?

LOVE NEVER FAILS . . . ON THE DEATH OF A SPOUSE

In marriage we become “as one”. With the death of our spouse we lose part of ourselves. And only those widowed can know this particular loneliness, as tangible as our own flesh. From the tragic death of a young husband or wife to the merciful demise of a long time spouse suffering the toll of years, the one left feels their heart tearing apart and must look someplace for consolation and hope.

Sometimes there is no greater sacrifice than saying goodbye. The pain is palpable; living with us through the days and nights. There is no courage greater than that of the widowed spouse resisting the temptation to withdraw from life. Just to pick up the phone, to answer the door or to reply to a letter from a friend offering sympathy and support can take heroic effort. Acceptance of the death of a spouse and a subsequent new way of life does not just happen. It is crafted in faith, friendship and the invaluable help of those who understand and care.

Many widows and widowers have utilized those in the helping professions: counselors, clergy and others as well as from a growing number of special support groups. And many of those widowed have found strength in being of service to others who are going through what they have endured. Just as we were forever changed by our loved one so can we share the lessons of that great bond and by so doing let others know that not only does love never fail...it also never ends.



THE LONG BOND OF LOVE . . . ON THE DEATH OF A PARENT

Grief has a face, a face with a history inseparable from our own. Sometimes that history is a chronicle of fondness and emotional nourishment, of lessons well learned and decades of discovery. Sometimes, however, it is a history fraught with emotional distance or the unfinished business of the heart. We may find ourselves struggling with guilt or forgiveness or both. We confront an emptiness of spirit that longs for comfort. Regardless of the particularities of the relationship, we are significantly influenced by that face through our years and our perspective is bolstered and sometimes challenged by a well of bittersweet memory and the long bond of love.

There may be difficult times ahead, especially if a living parent is struggling to come to grips with being alone. There may be fiduciary responsibilities that prove burdensome; there may even be practical family issues that collide with the grieving process. We might also be surprised by a grief that comes upon us sometime long after the funeral, when we least expect to find a sea of emotion rising up from the depths.

Relationships as powerful as these do not end; like faces, they change over time. And in the changing they become more uniquely our own. We memorialize our parents with an ongoing attachment that may include family stories told to our children or the discovery of our own siblings in a new light. We face the reality of guilt through soul-searching honesty, heartfelt communication and in seeking the wisdom of others with whom we trust our saddened hearts. We open ourselves to forgiving and being forgiven. It is a time for gentleness and healing. And the providential care we yearn for is ever near and ready, like weathered faces peeking into our hearts.





OUR VERY OWN . . . ON THE DEATH OF A CHILD

What loss can be greater than that of a child? When any child dies we feel “diminished” as in no other way, for a child’s life is meant to stretch into the future and naturally progress in growth and maturity, a testament to hope and humanity. So how can it be that a child before us is now gone? The futile efforts of finite minds cannot but fall short of understanding. Just how are we to face life with a seemingly unbearable death?

We trudge through this great sorrow in slow motion, sometimes moment by moment. The rituals we have enacted for other deaths in the family, such as graveside visits or telling stories about the deceased are even more painful now, but no less necessary to the grieving process. Some families have found solace in the establishment of memorials that pertain to the life of young people, such as special school initiatives or funds for childhood diseases. Gestures of this kind are anything but empty. They can resonate for years to come in positive ways.

Love slowly embraces our torn hearts and begins the long and difficult road to acceptance. We may find ourselves avoiding children, to keep from breaking down. Our sorrow may be unimaginably intense. But we must hear with our hearts in this distressed time, for there are others who have experienced something akin to our pain and we may need to seek their presence if not their counsel. Healing most often happens through those around us and there is a growing awareness of the efficacy of support groups for those who have lost a child. In time, because a child’s spirit has become so deeply infused in ours, we are able to help someone else whose sorrow is overwhelming. And in that moment of charity our child has truly come to life in a new and unique way.



OUR FLESH AND BLOOD...ON THE DEATH OF A SIBLING

Sharing a childhood and a family creates a very special bond. Emotionally, we may, with the death of a sibling, return to the days of our childhood. We may feel a sense of unfairness when a younger brother or sister dies and with one older we may have a sense of loss similar to the death of a parent. This wound can affect the whole system of family relationships. One sibling may have been the peacemaker in the family; another, the main caretaker of our parents and, yet another, the comedian that lightened all our hearts. The death of a sibling can shake the foundation of established roles and yet new and helpful family alliances, sometimes from those we least expect, may emerge and serve to strengthen individual family members.

Some siblings have remained especially close over the years and these brothers and/or sisters may now have to look elsewhere for support and comfort. But it should not be surprising or considered in any way disloyal to seek counsel outside the family. And though the child inside of us yearns for comfort and reassurance it is the adult we have become who tends to those feelings. Therefore, we do so with care and with a respect for what once existed in the life of our family. And in this way, we truly honor the memory of dear brother or sister who has gone on.

OUR LIVING HISTORY...ON THE DEATH OF A GRANDPARENT

Coping with the death of a grandparent can bring added dimensions of sorrow to our grief. Aside from the unique character of that relationship, developed over a number of years and recalling very special experiences of our youth; a certain depth of sorrow can also emerge as a result of our culture's view of the elderly. The last years, months or weeks of an older person's life can present puzzling and sometimes complex medical decisions for families. There is a greater likelihood of an impersonal atmosphere surrounding the death of a loved one. These difficult situations can certainly affect the way in which we grieve.

Even in the best of circumstances when a grandparent passes away an era ends; a precious part of our living family history is gone. The wisdom imparted, the stories told, the way they made us laugh and the questions only they had the answers to are all now stilled. In the quiet we reflect upon this cherished person, central to our lives, as we also reflect upon their place in the life of our family. These reflections are in and of themselves a part of the grieving process and, if undertaken in earnest and with affection, they will lead us to a greater recognition of our own humanity. And with that recognition comes the impulse to be of service when others may need us. Perhaps we look differently at the seniors we encounter. We definitely understand a little more about our own aging process. We know that we will greatly appreciate the continuing influence our grandparent still has on us to this very day. And we come to understand that sweet memories are the rhythm of a healing heart.





A CAPTIVE HEART...ON THE DEATH OF A SPECIAL RELATIVE

We have all had those relatives who have captured our hearts over the years. It might have been an uncle who had a knack for entertaining kids, an aunt whose cookies and stories we will never forget or a cousin who was more like a sister or brother. There was just something special about our relationship that we both knew and felt: a kindred spirit, a similar outlook, a shared way of seeing things.

The void left when a special relative passes away is mightily felt and difficult to endure, as if alone, we stare silently out into still water. Few may understand how deep the connection had been, how strong the bond. So where do we go for comfort? With whom may we now speak of this special friendship? Does anyone understand? Perhaps only those who have now or had in the past the same kind of relationship with a special relative know the weight of our sorrow. Only they know how endearing a familial friendship can be. Sometimes we feel these relationships are few and far between, but perhaps there are more of them out there than we may have thought at first.

But the bottom line is that we will always have a special place in our hearts for these special relatives, and no coping mechanism will take that away. We now pay more attention to those others who have lost special relatives and just as we know their sorrow we also know that our special relative lives inside of us, their spirit helping animate us along our way, their memory forever cherished.



LIKE THE SHELTER OF A TREE...ON THE DEATH OF A CLOSE FRIEND

Experiences shared over the course of time, similar ideals and values as well as a kind of indescribable compatibility are all qualities characteristic of close friendships. Somewhere along the line we found a person who would be there for us when support or comfort or help of some kind was needed, like the shelter of a tree in the summer sun or when sudden showers fall. Close friends give of themselves because generosity is part of the defining characteristic of the relationship.

Very close friendships make for hard good-byes. This friend may have been a special link to childhood memories or a surprise companion of our later years. The friendship may have been there for decades or have just begun its development. It was sustained in love, a shared love that makes the demise of our friend so hard to take. And after all, it was so often this very friend who consoled us in difficult times. At some point, in the midst of our sorrow, we begin to truly understand what it was that made this particular friendship so special.

We may never find as good a friend, but perhaps deep and abiding friendships teach us something of the nature of love itself. We might find ourselves able to become a beacon for the lonely, for we know that once a special love showed up in a person to whom we became close. And we know that kind of love never ends, but is passed on... friend to friend.



Times AND CIRCUMSTANCES... HOW THEY PASSED

The manner in which our loved one died has an influence on how our subsequent grief is expressed. Although we know that our grief is uniquely personal still our individual expressions of it are similarly tempered by circumstance. The times and the circumstances have meaning. Here we look at the context of the death of a loved one. We look at how we may begin the process of walking through our grief and we search the threads of empathy that connect us all.

A LONG WALK

When longstanding illnesses grip the life of our family and friends, the cumulative emotional effect can be devastating. Our challenge is to stay the course and forbear. To witness a slow death of one over time can be practically unbearable. But somehow, we do it; our heads up, giving what aid we can, learning the hard way that death can be the height of mercy. A long illness may be financially overpowering for a family. These hardships can lead to further devastation if we do not proceed carefully and with help at each turn. Many times a financial advisor is necessary when the medical or nursing care bills are growing. There are an increasing number of professionals specializing in these areas today. Having someone to talk with during this time is essential: a professional such as a psychologist or other counselor; it may be a member of the clergy trained to help with human problems that manifest their spiritual nature or it may be a caring friend in whom we have great confidence. We remember and examine those special moments when our loved one taught us great lessons: a special gesture toward a child, a wise and memorable utterance about any number of events in the history of the family, a forgiving nod or a glance seemingly from another world. We learn to cherish the long walk, our vigil kept, the special duty that has informed us and will be with us for many years to come. We learn that, as difficult as suffering is, it truly does have meaning and will continue to be part of the foundation of goodness in our lives.



A SENSE OF DIGNITY

The progress of medicine in the last century has been astonishing. Unheard of advances have been made in the battling of many once debilitating and fatal diseases and our life spans have been extended considerably. These advances however, have brought with them the possibility of harrowing end-of-life issues. When once an older person might have died of what we called “natural causes,” most likely in their own home, today the hospital has become the common locale of death. Quite often last days are spent in a relatively painless but drug clouded haze of medical machinery in a coldly institutional atmosphere. This all too common set of circumstances makes it so much more important to bring to a loved one’s passing a sense of human dignity, a realization that even the pain of dying has redeeming qualities that live on in loved ones who remain. We look beyond the unnatural departure modern society has created for our dying and we give thanks for that long life. In that older loved one we may have witnessed a wisdom only time can engender. We might have seen joys and a sense of peace and understanding possible only in the golden years.

Our gratitude for the life of an older relative or friend and the recognition of their essential dignity will be noticed by the younger members of the family. To plant with a younger generation the seed that says cherish life in all its forms is an invaluable gift to appreciate, even in the midst of sorrow and grief. It might just be a treasured heirloom from our dearest older loved ones.

A SUDDEN BLOW

Death is many times expected but sometimes it comes as a complete shock: a young person in the prime of life or a senior looking to golden years suddenly being struck down by some heart wrenching event brings about a sorrow of inestimable proportion and wounds a family and its friends as deeply as one may be wounded. The completely disquieting effect is a part of the grieving process that may not be



present when death occurs another way. Questions are natural but answers are difficult to find and it all remains shrouded in mystery. For loved ones there is little to hold onto except each other. With this trauma it is most important for families to put aside differences and come together, using each other's strength as one of the few defenses against the pain of such a profound sorrow.

We search desperately for a way to cope. We search our hearts for some manner of expressing the void left in our life. Somehow we find a way hidden in the intricacies of our daily life. And we continue on. Painfully and slowly, we proceed. We begin a journal; we help a friend; we combat the sleeplessness with exercise. In other words, we go forward even when we don't want to move. What we cannot know right now is that our sad bewilderment and soul searching grief may someday help someone else cope with the selfsame tragedy. There is no way around heartbreak. But with the broken heart is a sense of what others have felt before us and what others will feel when a sudden blow strikes down a loved one. We may be their only refuge because we understand this special wound and we are willing to hold another's hand as they walk through it.

A GREAT WEIGHT

Sometimes the confounding circumstances surrounding the death of a loved one bring with them an added dose of heartache. Whether the death is controversial, a result of violence or despair or reflective of other unusual circumstances, the after effects can be extremely intense and emotionally unsettling. When a death carries this added weight, we carry that weight in our grief. The violence in our schoolyards; the stinging tears over a suicide or drug related death; the devastation Nature herself sometimes unleashes; the tragedy of disease as in an AIDS related death or one characterized by battles with cancer, Alzheimer's or other devastating illnesses; the pure, deep sadness associated with stillbirth, miscarriage, SIDS or other infant death; all of these special circumstances and more bring with them a burden beyond grief itself. With any number of special circumstances, we may be angry at society for its insensitivity to the situation, at friends for not understanding, at ourselves for what



we perceive we might have been able to do and even at the deceased for leaving us in such a fashion. These forms of anger may play a larger role in the grieving process when special circumstances are present. We may also imagine some solution we could have engendered but did not, when reason tells us that we are not in control of that. We find no readymade solutions. The human heart is embattled and we incur the wounds. This is a time, however, when helpful professionals may come to our aid, for the maze of sadness and confusion can lead to great depression. It is important to seek out help from the people we trust, and perhaps even from professionals who have dealt with these matters before. Support groups have been of great help to many in such difficult times. We know we must live this mystery, but we must also find a way to return to peace and even the joy we deserve as a member of the human family. We are gentle with ourselves, for it is a time of great care.

A FAR AWAY CALL

When one we care about is at death's door, we instinctively go to them. We try to be present for them and for the rest of our family and friends. And yet, there are times when situations prevent our being there. Perhaps we live across the country or overseas and cannot get to the bedside in time; perhaps the death is as a result of a sudden tragedy and we are unable to be with family and friends for the funeral; perhaps special circumstances call for the need to refrain from being there. The distance, for any reason, seems unbearable. There is an inability to make the sorrowful situation real. One feels disembodied, separated from that which is essential. Indeed, not being present goes against our instincts and wreaks havoc with us emotionally. We turn to those who can empathize with us. This need not be kept inside, for we feel isolated enough as it is. We cope by memorializing our loved one we could not be with. We remember our connection in our thoughts, in journals, in stories told to friends, and especially in acts of kindness to others. We might even communicate with those who were present at the funeral or bedside and share with them the same kinds of things we would have shared had we been able to have been there. We break the distance down, even a little, through communication and long distance care. We cherish the memory of our loved one because love and memory have no physical bounds; they travel the world and touch hearts with their far away call. Love shared is a distant light that may help those lost find their way.

Special Issues

THE SPECIAL ISSUES OF OUR GRIEF

Even though grief is truly individual we often share common human responses to our sorrow. Here we discuss some of the issues we may have to deal with in our grief and some healthy ways to think about them.

FEAR

Our fear may be expressed in a few simple questions. “What am I going to do now? How will we live and what will be different? How can I be alone after all these years? How will the family fare?” We may fear the family dynamic will change in such a way that members will drift apart now. There is also the fear of the unknown, the sense that the sky might just fall after all, for we are somehow no longer complete.

Some say the antidote to fear is knowledge, but sometimes knowledge, as Shakespeare said, “...maketh a bloody entrance.” Some lessons are hard lessons. And knowledge alone is not enough. Knowledge accompanied by faith and the light of hope is a much better defense against the stinging fear that can grip us in our grief. Along with our hard won knowledge we have faith that life will go on, that love once shared with the deceased will still bear fruit and that parts of the relationship with our loved one actually do stay with us even as we walk through our pain and sorrow, even as the beams of hope beckon us to a safe harbor, the harbor of a healing heart.



SELF-PITY

Self-pity is an emotion often ridiculed as indulgent. But sometimes we simply feel sorry for ourselves in the same way we might feel sorry for someone else. Self-pity may not be the demon some make it out to be; only when we become frozen in it is it counter productive to our healing. Some tend to get too clinical about grief as if there is only one way to walk through it. We lick our wounds in different ways. Our culture will find a thousand ways to try to deny the incisive wound of death. We do it with alcohol and other drugs just as we do it with psychological models that make human agony somehow unacceptable. Something bad has happened and it hurts; we see our own reflection in that pain; we feel for those who will not experience our loved one again and we feel for ourselves because we will miss our loved one and cherish their memory long after any self-pity has diminished.

GUILT

Guilt is another much maligned emotion in modern times. A healthy guilt can actually move us to take corrective action when we are on an erroneous path. If we have neglected someone this negative emotion may help us be more attentive to those we love. But we need not place an unjust burden upon our own shoulders. We all let each other down at times and many of us focus on those times while ignoring the particular joys we may have wrought or the genuine charity for which we may have been responsible. Humility moves us to accept and amend our shortcomings as well as to recognize our good qualities and cultivate them. We row our own boat.

Guilt, however, can also become shame, that is, the guilt for just being. After a death we may even feel guilty for being alive, but with help we come to understand that although we may never fully grasp the whys and wherefores of our loved one's passing, still our journey begins; we have a place in the world and we carry with us a little bit of our loved one wherever we go.



FORGETFULNESS

For many of us after a span of time has passed we begin to forget certain characteristics of our loved one. Accompanying this feeling can be a sense that we are abandoning them. We yearn for a clarity that will keep our recently deceased firmly envisioned in our mind's eye, a portrait enshrined in the heart for all of time, ripples of memory encircling our experience. In a lovely poem about the act of remembering, William Butler Yeats compared it to mountain grasses that retain the form of the animal that laid there once and has since risen. The gradual release of the image is Nature's way, yet memory holds on in fidelity:

*Because the mountain grass
Cannot but keep the form
Where the mountain hare has lain.*

Parts of our loved ones are always with us, even if not perfectly retained in the senses. We can rest assured that somewhere in our being our loved ones abide, perhaps in the way we have come to respond to our world. Here are our loved ones still encircling our thoughts, eloquently outlined in the mountain grasses, still warmly imprinted upon our healing hearts.



BETRAYAL

As strange as it sounds, at some point we may feel as if our loved one has betrayed us in dying so soon or even in the way it happened. We may feel betrayed simply because we are now alone. We may have yearned for more time with our loved one or we may even harbor ill feelings having to do with how they took care of themselves. There may be a hundred variations of circumstance that contribute to our feeling betrayed by the person who has died or by life itself.

On the other hand we may feel that we are the ones who have been the betrayers. We may sink into an abyss of shame and deride ourselves for having let our loved one down. Perhaps we weren't there or weren't devoted enough or weren't the caretaker we wanted to be or should have been. Betrayal is a lingering, tattered vessel, an odious kind of quality that festers and can ravage our hearts.

This is where the work of grief comes in. Not all that we grapple with is always good for us. Some twistings of the mind and heart can best be left to the shoreline, to mystery and be done with. Grief can be a temptress, calling out our worst fears and shining light on the traits we most abhor, in ourselves or in our loved ones. This is when we find the goodness that exists in every relationship and we bring our spirit to bear upon it. We pay homage to that goodness and we trust that embedded in it there is mercy and understanding. We trust that which is positive and, in death as in life, we give ourselves over to it. Slowly and surely, day by day, in our deepest thoughts as in our simplest acts, we give ourselves over to goodness.

THE UNRESOLVED

Loving bonds are tested over time. The old saying “the perfect is the enemy of the good” certainly holds true as we all try to govern our relations by the Golden Rule. At any given time in the history of a relationship there will be issues of the heart left unresolved, for the nature of love is to strive to be whole. It is in this striving that we find ourselves and learn that to live for another is to approach Truth, Goodness, Beauty and Unity.

No, relationships are never completely whole, but the little empty pockets, the small poverties of spirit only serve, even with the death of our loved one, to bring us closer, for if we understand, somewhere in the deepest recesses of our healing heart, this striving to love, then so, too, did our loved one. Love doesn't need resolution so much as promise. And, day by day, as we continue to walk our path...the promise is still being kept.



LONELINESS

It is not so much what a loved one does over time that creates the cohesiveness necessary for a long standing relationship, though our actions are definitely indicators of respect and positive regard. It is not what they say or how they say it, though words certainly do color our time together. It is not even always their physical presence that makes a banner of our love, rather, it is their presence in our hearts that makes the difference. It is presence itself that seals our love, just being there that gives us courage. Being present for someone is perhaps the greatest gift we can give. And if someone has given the gift of presence to us, we know somewhere in the deeper arenas of the spirit how precious that gift is. When a loved one has helped make us complete, we then feel incomplete when they are taken from us. The quiet pain of loneliness is perhaps the greatest cross we bear as human beings.

The blessing and the curse is that presence is not necessarily dependent upon physical location. One may feel the presence of a loved one who is far away and still miss them terribly. The blessing is that neither is our loved one completely gone. Their presence may dart about our mind and spirit with astounding poignancy and regularity, a leaf alighting in our soul. That felt presence can be a unique balm in the toughest days of our grief. Being with friends and family can remind us of the presence of the one we have lost. Perhaps our biggest job in life is to locate the presence of others and connect with it. That presence may be the cause of our deepest pain and the herald of our truest joy.





DESPAIR

We seldom talk about the hopeless state of being we refer to as despair, as if it were somehow inhuman to feel utterly despondent and confused. Yet it is a feeling that has been visited upon some of the strongest, most spiritual among us. And grieving the loss of a loved one can certainly call it to the fore. Feelings of despair can lead us to face the great issues of humanity: the will to live, the path to faith and trust, the notion of purpose in one's life. Experience teaches us that as we slowly become transformed by our sorrows and our suffering, that as we ever so cautiously rise above our deep pain, we demonstrate to others the human dignity that is a part of our essence. Victor Frankl, in his powerful story of life in a German concentration camp, spoke of working in the frozen fields early mornings and waiting for a distant farmhouse light to come on, for that light became his great symbol of faith and endurance. A simple farmhouse light became a quintessential sign of the existence of something greater than evil and pain and brokenness. He drew from that particular light and the layers of meaning light itself brought to him, a strength that became a great example of the resiliency and generosity of the human spirit. So too in our own quiet way, do we call forth the light we know lives within us. In the beams of this light, in the love that we continue to share with those around us, despair has little chance.

A sepia-toned photograph of a stone staircase crossing a river. The steps are made of large, flat stones and lead from the foreground into the water, receding into the distance. The water is slightly rippled, and the banks are covered in brush and trees. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

A DAY AT A TIME

Followers of Twelve Step programs have long held to the simple cliché, *One Day At A Time*. The brief maxim became so popular because something in it conforms to the various realities of human life, be it addiction or any other painful set of circumstances we find ourselves confronting. The alcoholic takes solace in the fact that he does not have to stop drinking forever; he must do it just today, one day at a time, until the days add up to a sober life. So, too, in our grief we sometimes find ourselves taking the situation a day, an hour, even a minute at a time. Indeed we are able to make it through this given day and the making it through is more forthrightly accomplished when we can keep our eyes on the present.

Of course, we may cherish moments of the past and even bring forth from it therapeutic strategies to employ in our grief. We may also make future plans or envision our lives in the fragile weeks ahead. We can see the steps ahead of us. The day-at-a-time perspective simply means that we don't dwell in the past when our loved one lived nor do we project ourselves into the future in some evasive daydream to avoid the present pain. We simply try to live today. We face the difficulties and we treasure the small gifts of relief that will appear as days become more days, the gifts our loved one would want us to receive, the gifts of life lived fully, one day at a time, one courageous step after another.

Eight Days...

The number eight has, since ancient times had religious and secular meaning. And its popular use as a symbol has continued: from the Jewish people's eight days of Hanukkah, where a sparse bit of lamp oil burned for an entire eight days, symbolizing God's abiding presence, to the various Christian interpretations symbolizing resurrection, the destruction of death and the casting off of sorrow and mourning. We see it in everything from the secular calendar's start of a new week symbolizing a new beginning to the Beatles' popular song *Eight Days a Week*, symbolizing undying love! The number eight remains, to this day, fraught with meaning. Here we throw it all together in eight days of meditations. Of course the number itself need not mean anything but a willingness to find a moment of quiet to contemplate a new life. Sometimes giving expression to our private thoughts can shed a light on them in a way that can help us walk the path our grief offers us. This is a time we may come to know ourselves in a deeper sense. We are vulnerable and sometimes fragile, but we are also perceptibly changed by our experience and our awareness of those changes will stand us in good stead for the days ahead. Perhaps we use the meditations day by day and then start them over or perhaps they will inspire us to create our own meditations for the time to come.



DAY ONE

The first days were not the worst because the numbness kept me from feeling what I knew was in my heart but couldn't quite get a handle on. Is this really true? Has this really happened? If it is, what am I going to do? I only want to sleep and dream of another time, a time when sadness was far from me and all those I love. But it is real... too real. Yet I don't feel the whole blow at once, I get it bits at a time; that's the only way I could handle all this! Though I know it will slowly sink in, I don't want it to. I just don't want to face this. But not wanting to face it doesn't mean I'm not facing it. I am. Slowly and surely I am walking through this pain, even though I have no idea right now what is on the other side of it. I am just trying to trust my heart, and the hearts of all those I have loved.

TODAY...I will take care to look into the hearts of those I love.

DAY TWO

There was food and there were flowers and funny stories from a long time ago. The family gathered and there were friends around and an unusual bustle of activity. As a matter of fact I couldn't seem to find more than a few moments to myself and even then my thoughts were scattered. They still are. Perhaps this is as it should be right now. So much memory and so much emotion to go with it! Even though the solitude is hard, I am beginning to collect myself. And I know my memory and my yearning will be sharpest in the small moments: the smell in an article of clothing, a breakfast routine, a television show we laughed at, a time of the day, in bed alone. Missing someone is a solitary kind of hurt and though I don't expect anyone else to understand, still I know some do. In my greatest pain, I'm still grateful to be human. As the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* said, "I know I have a heart because it is breaking."

TODAY... I will conjure up a humorous memory and let it bring a smile to my face.

DAY THREE

I saw so many people surrounding the funeral and I've heard so many expressions of concern for me! I really didn't know all these people were out there. Is it just courtesy or do they really care? There must be something in us that "respects" the process of grief and the presence of genuine sorrow and wants to help those going through it in some way. I know I have felt that very thing for other people before. Maybe that's why they call it "paying our respects." All the attention and concern was actually a tribute to the whole family and I cannot help but feel a sense of gratitude for that show of care and compassion. Friends and extended family mean more at a time like this. I guess I really do have people I can lean on. And I would do the same for them in a heartbeat because that's what love does...it gives.

TODAY... I will make it a point to thank someone who has been especially kind to me in recent weeks.

DAY FOUR

It is hardest when I go to bed. I want to block out the pain and loneliness then and I can't. It's a good time to let my thoughts wander a bit, to let go of the here and now just long enough to drift off. I made it today and I'll be stronger as times goes on, but the middle of the night thoughts can be heart wrenching to say the least. Sometimes, though, letting my mind wander is the only way to "get away" from the weight of my grief. I remember reading about the "grief of grief", that is, the fact that we, the bereaved, not only have to deal with the grief itself but also with the knowledge that tomorrow we know we are going to wake up with it again. Living with the burden is the only way to be relieved of it. These are the hard facts of my grief and though I call on a strength I didn't know I had, I still bear these feelings moment by moment.

TODAY...If my sleep is disturbed, I will try writing down a couple sentences describing my feelings.

DAY FIVE

The real world never goes away. There are decisions that have to be made and judgment calls that have to be dealt with. Finances and details associated with everyday life still have to be tended to. These matters call for a special kind of strength. I guess the hidden blessing is that I know I have that fortitude and it actually takes my mind off my loss, if but for a few hours or moments. The vagaries of the real world, however, seem so much less important now. Death brings such stark perspective. It is hard not to regret the fact that we all have spent so much time tending to seemingly unimportant details. The fact of the matter is many of those details were not unimportant. Getting my priorities better in line with my beliefs is simply the struggle of being human. I will stay in the struggle.

TODAY...I WILL stay in the struggle.

DAY SIX

There are a number of other people who are hurting from our loss. Some of them are easy to tend to; with some others, however, it is more difficult. Some I see as giving in to the self-pity, some as being so stoic that they are missing out on the genuine expression of loss that is important to experience. I cannot go through anyone's grief but my own, but I am accountable for my own. All in all, it is good to feel for others and to understand and appreciate that they too, in some form or fashion, experience the pangs of grief. I will continue to do what I can for them, giving my heart and my time, whatever I can, knowing it's the right thing to do.

TODAY...I will reach out in a small way to someone I know is hurting.

DAY SEVEN

What to do with free time? What others have said is true – free time, holidays, anniversaries, even weekends – they are all harder to deal with than the regular routine. Maybe I should structure those times a little bit more so that I can count on activities I know I'll be involved with. Certainty sure helps right now and certainty comes in the guise of routine and seemingly mundane activities. I have found these activities of late to be a gift, a refuge from painful self consciousness. I never thought I would welcome the same chores I used to dread but at least right now, simple, constructive action levels off the sorrow and hurt and offers some much needed relief from the heavy cloak my grief can sometimes be.

***TODAY...**I will make a TO DO list of some chores I've neglected. I may not do them today...but I WILL make the list!*

DAY EIGHT

I think a rest would be good; a respite from sorrow if that is even possible. Doing something fun eases the continuing sting of loss. Today is a new day. I suppose getting involved in some kind of healthy leisure activity on a regular basis would really be a good thing to do. I needn't feel guilty for taking care of myself. Smiles come as healing moments and laughter as a soothing balm. I am grateful for the people in my life who are ready and willing to help me embrace moments of joy. To know that laughter can actually be an essential part of the grief itself is to have acquired a kernel of wisdom. What solace to find the happiness in a memory just as in a present moment!

***TODAY...**I will not shut the door on my sorrow but I will remain open to a special kind of joy.*

A close-up photograph of a spiral-bound notebook with a silver metal spiral binding on the left side. A black pen lies horizontally across the top right of the notebook. The word "Dear" is written in a cursive script at the top of the page.

Dear

A Letter...

With the death of a loved one, many have found a lingering sense of the incomplete. As it is said, true love never ends. But we may come to a place where, in order to go on with our lives, we need some kind of completeness. As we have said earlier, love doesn't need resolution so much as promise. But in order to grasp the meaning of that promise, of our ongoing relationship with our loved one, it may be necessary to talk about some things. We may need to apologize for our neglect or perceived wrongdoings in the past. It may be just as necessary to forgive such transgressions in our loved one. Many in the helping professions have come to regard the writing of a letter to our deceased loved one as one way to bring about this sense of the completeness we seek.

This, of course, can be treacherous territory without help and guidance, which we should seek out either in a friend of the family, a clergyman or a professional. We let someone we trust know what we are doing and we ask them if, after it's done, they would mind if we read the letter to them. We have in mind ahead of time what we want to say and we finish in one sitting. To write out on paper, "I'm sorry for..." or "I forgive you for..." or simply, "This is how I feel..." succinctly and honestly, can be a healthy step towards taking out the emotional garbage and thus freeing us not only for a continuing relationship with our loved one but also for the new life we are now encountering. We may say goodbye in this letter... which means the end of this particular conversation but certainly not the end of our relationship!

A letter is a suggestion only and may not be for everyone. It is the same with journaling in general. Some people find solace in the writing of messages or the journaling of their feelings. For some, a journal by the bed becomes a companion on their road. Remembering that everyone's experience is individual, so is everyone's process of grieving. We are the authors of our grief. We rely upon our own strength and the love and compassion of others around us. And we come to find that we grieve as we live, with dignity and charity and the goodness that would surely bring a smile to our loved one's face.

"YOU KNOW YOU HAVE LOVED SOMEONE WHEN YOU GLIMPSED IN THEM THAT WHICH IS TOO BEAUTIFUL TO DIE."

-GABRIEL MARCEL



Hope AT HAND

The poet Emily Dickenson said, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in your soul.” Hope is hard to define. It is certainly more than wishing for better times; it is the intimation of those better times already on their way. It is surely more than a hunch about the future; it is rather faith that something positive will emerge from the rubble of present difficulty, faith that goodness will indeed reign. In other words, hope is not mere wishful thinking. Hope is more the actual coming of the solace we yearn for, an invitation to comfort, an espousal of receiving help. It emanates from experience and grows out of courage. By its very definition hope is never too far out of our reach. Indeed, if we believe in it, hope is ever at hand. And like the poet’s “thing with feathers” it is ready to offer its meaningfulness, its relief from the worst of our suffering ...its cautious but welcome flight into tomorrow.

HELP IS AVAILABLE

There has been a movement in recent years to break through the reluctance to talk about our sadness and sorrow with others. Whereas at one time we might have thought of such expression as either self-indulgent or too conspicuous, today there is a notion that at least a certain amount of self-expression is healthy and natural. The funeral wake and other rituals of old allowed mourners to express the sadness over their loved one’s passing. But as families began to become more mobile in the last century, with more distance separating them, it became harder to rely upon the united front of protection and sharing that came about naturally within the family, the circle of friends and the community. As a culture we almost unconsciously suppressed our grief upon the death of a loved one as we retreated to our own corners of life. The frenetic pace of our lives wouldn’t allow for the slow unfolding of personal grief. This cultural dynamic has led to the search for healthy ways to express our grief. And many positive things have happened as a result. We began to learn more about the elements of grief and more about what we need as humans to live with it and through it.

First we’ve learned how important our families can be and for some this may have meant a reconnecting to family. We have also learned how precious are the special relationships we have developed outside of our families and their mettle is certainly tested in adversity.



We have helped to establish within our own communities helping professionals who have learned how to respond to the psychological needs of the bereaved. We have adapted to the culture but our societies have refused to minimize the need to grieve, to walk through the deepest heartache with genuine feeling and integrity. So we are left with some new ways to deal with our grief. Though they are different than the ways of old, still they focus on the fact that memorializing the dead and responding to our own sorrow over their passing is a part of what we naturally do as humans. And finding the best way to do that need not be a solitary endeavor. Help is available.

IN THE FAMILY

As we live with our grief an overwhelming sense of loneliness can overtake us. The feeling of being isolated from even those we are normally close to is stark and very real. If we are to proceed through the other natural manifestations of our grief, at some point it could be of benefit to reach out to those around us who care about us. These caring people are often found within our family. Though sometimes family members can be too close to provide the right kind of comfort or consolation, quite often only a family member has an actual feeling for the depth and complexity of our emotion surrounding the death in the family. This empathy can be of great help if we can but open ourselves to it. It may take prying ourselves from self-induced solitude to merely be in the presence of one with whom we have a shared history and a measure of understanding. Sometimes help comes from a distant family member or one with whom we never formed a bond for some reason. All of a sudden we hear from people with whom we had felt little in common and now we find ourselves accepting an invitation to have coffee with them. Something in each one's heart reached out and found a sympathetic confidant. In a way, a new life of friendship begins to form in the very shadow of death. So each family comes together as it can, some cohering in a fiercely close bond, some keeping an emotionally remote distance, but still attempting to communicate warm and heartfelt regards. Whatever the form of familial relationships, somewhere in the mix of family is usually some hidden help in hard times. Why not tap this loving resource for the relief and support we all seek in the midst of our distress? It could be a very good idea.



OUTSIDE THE FAMILY

There are times, even in the closest of families, when it is more appropriate to seek guidance outside the family unit. At times the very closeness of the family can hinder an individual's expression of grief. The phrase "you can't see the forest for the trees" fits here. If you have grown up in an especially close family you know how sometimes an outsider, even a perfect stranger, might be a better suited person in whom to confide when deep distress and sorrow have engulfed the family.

Fortunately, today, many funeral homes, as well as social and private agencies, conduct bereavement groups. Here one may share personal grief with others who are going through it, but without the added complexity of familial relationships that can sometimes render the weight even heavier. Attending a group of this sort is in no way a denial of the important and meaningful role the family plays in comforting its own, nor is it a sign of an inability to foster the inner strength to face life's difficult times. Rather, attendance in a bereavement group can actually become a way in which bereaved individuals can demonstrate their compassion for fellow sufferers, and thereby tap into their individual wells of inspiration and generosity of spirit.

IN THE COMMUNITY

Outside the family and our own circle of friends and neighbors, we can find today many helping organizations that reach out to those suffering through grief. Many families have been involved with Hospice in the last days of their loved one's life. If we have received the services of Hospice or a hospice like organization, we know that sometimes our grief begins before death actually occurs and having caring people by our side is of great benefit then and later. Hospitals, churches and even civic organizations are all a part of the helping community that may be there to serve us in our time of need. Actually built into the structure of so many communities today is a network of aid ready to assist someone in need of services. We have but to ask. Indeed it is the asking that comes hardest for most people. Start with the hospital and governmental agencies within the community and work outward from there. Be it a church, a social agency, a private organization, a program connected to a place of employment or even the offshoot of a



fraternal organization, help is out there. These and other arenas of help are the good neighbors we all need in distressing times. And like any good neighbor, all we have to do ask.

THE HEALING WORD

As human beings, language is our primary means of communication. When we experience elation or fear or sadness or sympathy, we communicate these emotions through language, often the spoken word we use in much of our daily life. But we also encounter the utility and purposefulness of language in the written word. For some people readings of a spiritual nature are the truest comfort of their life. For some the stories of great authors fill a void that gives meaning to life. And for some casual reading helps them escape the daily tensions and the ups and downs of modern living. We read because we are communicating animals and we need the mental and spiritual nourishment that inspiring and insightful words can provide. When we read we are actively searching our imaginations to reach the author on some common ground of understanding and empathy. It is as if our very beings call us to this activity.

In our grieving too, the act of reading can play an important role. We read what others have experienced. We read of hope and the resiliency of the human spirit. We read about practical ways to cope with what has happened in our lives. And we read of a better time coming for us; we are able to see that time because someone good with the written word has agreed to help by creating a picture of a brighter tomorrow.

A local library or bookstore, as well as on-line book stores can give good descriptions of books that may be of great help in living with grief. Friends or family may also recommend titles that have meant something to them. To avail ourselves of the wisdom and comfort from the written word can be a component of the healing heart.

ON-LINE

Perhaps one of the most positive aspects of the great phenomenon known as the internet is its ability to assist those looking for specific kinds of help. A brief look at what websites



are available tells us that help is out there and especially in the area of grief recovery. There is a new awareness that grief can manifest itself in ways not always expected or foreseen. New information and new methods of getting to the essence of recovery are examined by any number of practitioners and others involved with helping those who have encountered loss. We instinctively know when information is not aligned with good common sense and it is wise to be cautious of anything that sounds out of the ordinary to us. But there is a plethora of information to be gleaned from countless internet websites. We pick one that seems to reflect our own values and speaks to our own temperament. And we begin to dig and learn and understand more and more about what is happening to us. This enormous highway of data just became for us a road to knowledge, understanding and perhaps, just perhaps, a peace we might not have found otherwise.

OTHER AVENUES

Other than the help available within our own communities and the help offered in the books we read, there are other avenues of help on the road to a healing heart. All those offering aid within the community have found sources of information that help them in turn help others. All the authors of all the books on bereavement have used sources of scholarship and the considerable insights of others before them as a foundation for their attempt to touch us in our grief. Many have used sources we have already mentioned to prepare them to administer to others, sources such as the literature of bereavement, the internet networking sources and helping organizations. Professional counselors have been used as consultants to many who want to offer help in a form useful for the bereaved. Perhaps the most underappreciated source is the aid and comfort given by close friends who have at one time or another been stricken with deep grief themselves and who live on with vitality, conviction and courage. These are the people we instinctively want to emulate. Whatever the source, it is important to be willing to reach out in our pain and at least try sharing with another the feelings that come down upon us, the weight we take on as a result of our loss. And in that reaching out, the heart begins to know something more than it knew. It knows there is a road ahead. It begins to find a new way. It begins to know a new rhythm and ever so slowly... it begins to heal.



Thank you for taking time with *The Healing Heart*. The volume is meant to bring comfort, consolation and hope to you and your family. Sponsors who have made the volume available hope these pages will help you find a way to live with the great loss you have experienced, a way for your heavy heart to begin to heal. Be sure to let these good folks know you received your volume.

During this difficult time there are shadows of sorrow and sadness all about. But there are also delicate and lovely blooms coming to life through the loving presence of family and friends. And in the process of healing you may come to see the many kindnesses shown you as a tribute to your loved one and an honor bestowed upon you and your family, an honor indicative of your special place in the hearts of others.

These relationships remind us all of the goodness that surely exists within the human family. It is our fervent hope and the hope of those listed in the front of this volume that yours will truly be...a healing heart.