

*Praise for Diana J. Ensign's **HEART GUIDE***

"In this book Diana Ensign gently holds space for individual stories of life, death, grief and love. She artfully gathers, frames, and displays each story as simultaneously unique and universal. HEART GUIDE proves to be an excellent grief journey companion." –Kelly Garry, LCSW, Counselor in grief, loss, change & transition

"Those whose lives have been shaped by the deaths of loved ones share the limits of loss that may isolate us from relief. Diana Ensign has listened carefully to people who are intimate with grief and encouraged them to share with others their process for recovery. If you are wrestling with grief, read this book for insightful lessons on returning to hope, joy, and laughter." –Elsa F. Kramer, editor, *Branches Magazine*

"My heart is in joyful gratitude and wonder! This is a gift to all who grieve, all who suffer a yet unattended grief, and all whose grief has been silently, secretly festering for years. I celebrate each personal story shared." –Louise Dunn, author, *Beyond Your Past*, www.HeartlandMiracles.com

"Diana Ensign's reverent approach to asking deep and stimulating questions about death opens a safe space to explore grief. In our positivistic culture, we are expected to carry our suffering alone, not burden others with it. These stories make clear that grief is a universal and profoundly human experience. It is in sharing our grief that we develop the capacity to be open to our suffering and to the suffering of others and to the reality of death as a human experience that needs community support." –Ingrid Sato M.S., LMFT, LCSW, Co-founder of *Friends of Awakening Sangha*

"In this fine collection of personal interviews, Diana Ensign gently and skillfully 'listens into speech' a variety of honest, heartfelt, and healing stories. Her compassionate, non-judgmental and attentive ear enables each grieving soul to find its voice and to give expression to both pain and resiliency. The result is a gift to us all, as we come to understand that the most deeply personal insight turns out

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also to be the most universal truth: love bears all things."
—Rev. Dr. Bruce Johnson, Unitarian Universalist Minister

"Few losses are as painful as the death of someone close. In this beautifully written book, compassionate guide Diana Ensign shines a light on the road through grief. For those who have experienced the loss of a loved one, here are strength and genuine words to inspire and comfort."

—Richard Brendan, M.A., Speaker, Counselor, Radio Host

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Website: www.dianaensign.com

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HEART GUIDE

True Stories of Grief and Healing

Diana J. Ensign, JD

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HEART GUIDE

In Loving Memory

(Alphabetical Order)
Anonymous (son)
Michael Dwayne Beasley Jr.
Fred and Phyllis Brown
Margaret (Libens) Brown and Willis Brown
Edith Harris Camp
James (Jim) Carey
Elizabeth Catharine Childs and Orlo Eckersley Childs
Florence (Edna) and Floyd Douglas
John Duren
Thomas Jay Eastwood
Doris Ettinger
Donald (Don) Bruce Fisher
Carl Marshall Grey
Gina Maria (Belissimo) Guerin
W. Edward (Ed) Harris
Terry Hudson
Rodman (Rod) Curtis Hughes
William and Dorothy Humphries
Moses Jenkins
Richard Steven Lane
Ellen Lovberg and Ralph Harvey Lovberg
Adam Maletta
Annette Marie (Bittner) Meier
Braden Miller
Jerry and Ruby Miller
Mary Monahan
Samuel (Sam) Xavier Motsay
Stephen Oberreich
Bruce Lennes Osborn
Gordon Robertson
Carol Ann Robinson
Aaron Kent Sims
George Siskind
Clifford (Cliff) Stockamp
Joan Veder and Dara Gail Veder
Dennis Walker
Lorna and Robert (Bob) Walter
Thomas (Tommy) Allen Weaver
Laura Kate Winterbottom

*"It is only with the heart that one can see
rightly;
what is essential is invisible to the eye."*

— ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

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INTRODUCTION

*“Those who have suffered understand suffering
and therefore extend their hand.”*

— PATTI SMITH (singer/songwriter)

A famous story in Buddhism, *The Parable of the Mustard Seed*, tells of a woman named Kisa Gotami whose only son has died. Carrying the child’s lifeless body from house to house, Kisa pleads with her neighbors for medicine to cure her son. The neighbors think she is crazy. Eventually, someone suggests that she visit the Buddha for help. Arriving at the Buddha’s home, she again asks for medicine to bring her child back to life. The Buddha instructs Kisa to go back to her village and gather for him a collection of mustard seeds obtained from each neighbor. However, she can only collect mustard seeds from those homes where no one has lost a child, spouse, relative, or friend to death. After seeking day and night for a home untouched by death, Kisa realizes that she is not alone in her suffering. Returning to the Buddha empty handed, she becomes his first female disciple.

The stories here also arise from travels to many households. They are the true accounts of people whose lives have been touched by death. In reading these narratives, we bear witness to the torrent of raw emotions that accompany the loss of a loved one, and we learn how individuals and couples manage to go forth in the world after loss. With each person’s story, we discover universal life experiences that make us human: our pain and sorrow, our heartfelt compassion, our capacity to care for one another, and our love.

For this book, I interviewed close to 50 people from across the United States. Their ages range from 19 to 89 years old. The amount of time since their loved one’s passing varies — from four months to four decades. I asked each person: *What helped with your grief? Do you have any suggestions for someone facing a similar loss?* I also inquired if they had any spiritual or religious practices that were helpful. My main objective, however, was simply to listen mindfully and give each person an opportunity to discuss what he or she felt was important for the reader to know about grief and healing. I spoke with people who are religious (Christian, Buddhist, Islamic, Jewish, Unitarian Universalist, Lucumi/Santeria, Pagan), people who are spiritual but not religious, and people who have no faith practices or religious beliefs. While the people interviewed differ in age, race, religion, gender, nationality, and geographic location, the common thread woven throughout their tales is an incredible resiliency in the face of anguish and a love that surpasses impermanence of the human condition.

My background for this project includes the death of my biological father in my 30s. He died in a drunk driving accident after leaving the bar with a friend. He and his friend

were both killed. Similar to the people interviewed, my intense awareness of suffering has led me along a life path I never could have imagined. I explored numerous spiritual teachings in my own healing process. Yet, this book is not written from the perspective (or advice) of an “expert.” The insights here arise from the individuals and couples *living* with loss. They share wisdom from the heart.

Those facing the death of a loved one remind us again and again, everyone grieves but often in different ways. As Justin (who lost her son) states, *“There’s absolutely no right or wrong way to grieve. Sometimes we say to ourselves, ‘Oh, am I allowed to be feeling this way? Should I not be feeling this way?’ No one else should tell you how to grieve. You get to grieve however you want!”* John (a farmer who lost his daughter) says, *“How do you cope with anything? You sit down and figure out what you can do. But this ole world, we’re not in charge of it. You just do the best you can.”*

Sadly, some individuals mentioned that their grief could not be discussed with friends (or in some cases with family members) because of the stigma associated with certain types of loss, such as deaths by suicide or drug overdose. The anguish felt at losing a loved one in a horribly violent way is not sugarcoated here. As a caring community, we need to learn how to listen with compassion — even when the stories are extraordinarily painful and raw. Our willingness to listen with an open heart is how we begin a true practice of loving kindness toward all who are suffering.

Barry (who lost both parents) notes, *“Human beings organize experience by telling stories. Speaking as one who studied folklore for years, I’m aware that it’s a prominent factor in orchestrating our relationships and also moving us on from one stage of life to the next. It seems to matter the kind of care you put into the story, trying to get it right and trying to honor those who figure in the story.”*

A few people also declined to be interviewed — not wanting to reopen old scabs over sensitive wounds. I want to thank these individuals, as well, for reminding us that sharing intimate details about the death of a loved one is not easy. As Michelle states in her interview, *“It’s a hard story to tell.”*

As you begin your own journey through these pages, please keep in mind that you are not just reading a book. You are gathering heart knowledge from the lives of real people. Pause as necessary, and be gentle with yourself. As a well-known quote reminds us, *“It’s okay if the only thing you did today was breathe.”*

Janet (who lost both parents) points out, *“You can read all the Buddhism in the world and all the gurus in the world, but there is something about walking through the journey and just experiencing it. You come out the other side so much more whole than when you went in. That’s the gift. It sounds hokey, but it’s true. It was also important for me to hear other people’s journeys while I was going through mine. ... I might find someone going through something worse or going through something similar and hear how that person handled it — not advice but just telling their stories. That’s valuable.”*

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When we courageously speak our truth or quietly listen with compassion, we are no longer strangers. We are friends. Perhaps, that is the greatest gift of all: learning to connect and care for one another in an authentic manner that transcends ordinary daily interactions. Sandra (who lost her daughter and her husband) says, *“When we gather as a family, we tell stories. We tell stories about Edith and Ed and anyone else who has passed. We think that telling their stories is a good thing to do, and it speaks to the fact that the people we love are still with us. It helps us to know that we’re not alone in missing them.”*

With tremendous gratitude, I offer this heart guide for grief and healing. May we *always* know the abundant love that surrounds us.

Diana J. Ensign, JD

Loving Kindness Meditation

Tibetan Buddhist Prayer

May I be at peace
May my heart remain open
May I know the beauty of my own true nature
May I be healed
May I be a source of healing in the world

May you be at peace
May your heart remain open
May you know the beauty of your own true nature
May you be healed
May you be a source of healing in the world

May we be at peace
May our hearts remain open
May we know the beauty of our own true nature
May we be healed
May we be a source of healing in the world

PROLOGUE

*“Guess now who holds thee?” —
“Death,” I said. But, there, The silver answer rang, —
“Not Death, but Love.”
— ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING*

May I be at peace ~

Kintsugi is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold. This repair makes the item more precious than before it was cracked. It is believed that when something (or someone) has suffered damage in this way, an exquisite beauty remains.

The art of healing also begins with the recognition that we are broken — often in ways we cannot easily articulate. We know our pieces will never fit together again in precisely the same way. Unlike pottery, we also recognize that our grief isn’t something to be “fixed.”

Healing the heart is a deeply personal process. Only WE know what brings peace to our soul. While undergoing this difficult work of healing grief, seek the support of others as needed. Stay open for guidance as you proceed. Place your hand over your heart, close your eyes, and slowly breathe.

It is deep within the heart that we find our gold: the love we hold for those who have traveled with us on this earth journey.

Vanessa Kathryn Hughes (brother, cancer)

“There’s no one magical key” — Vanessa is in her 30s. She has gorgeous, long red hair and works as an actress. She lost her brother Rodman (Rod) Hughes. He was 26 years old. (Her mother, Delynn Curtis, shares her reflections in Chapter Six).

We all came home for Thanksgiving: Rod, Jerry, and me. I’m the oldest, Rod is the middle child, and Jerry is my youngest brother. At that time, our mom was living in a rural area of Indiana, and I was living in Chicago. The day before Thanksgiving, Rod went into the emergency room. His stomach was hurting so bad he thought he had

appendicitis or food poisoning. He was having these sharp pains. The hospital did all the scans, and the results came back that he had a huge tumor in his stomach.

The cancer itself is called Leiomyosarcoma (LMS). It's a rare form of cancer, and the doctors don't know much about it or what causes it. The medical profession sometimes just doesn't know why things happen the way they do. This cancer type was one of the worst kinds. Rod passed away six months from when we found out. It was quick. Obviously, by the time he found out the cancer was in Stage 4. I don't know how long he was sick. Rod was the type of person, ever since he was a baby, where it would be an emergency before he would even speak up or say anything about it. He was always that way.

The doctors did crazy doses of chemo and radiation. Something insane like 20 treatments over a two-week period, but I don't remember exactly. It was incredibly rough, and he didn't make it through all that. It was too much on his body. I was traveling back and forth from Chicago because I still had to work and take care of things there.

The whole thing with the hospital was frustrating. I'm not a doctor; so I can't point to specific medical reasons for my concerns. But I watched how Rod reacted to the treatment and how the cancer itself reacted. I firmly believe that different cancers react to things differently. I am not sure regular chemo and radiation were the way to go. When you're in a situation like that, you try everything you can. That's all we — collectively as a community — know right now. We know this treatment has worked sometimes on some cancers. So, we try that. When you're faced with something very heavy and frightening, such as a cancer diagnoses, you do what you think is best. Sometimes, you try what you don't think is best but whatever will work.

The hospital was not a kind or nurturing environment. Hospitals, especially in rural areas, are not well-equipped to deal with family members of the person with the disease. We were in and out a lot and told one thing or another. It wasn't easy for anyone involved.

As Rod progressed through the cancer, I reached out to a friend who had become an oncologist and worked at a hospital in the city that does educational and experimental treatments with cancer. When the other hospital said there was nothing more they could do, we took Rod there. The doctors were making some progress before things turned for the worse. Even with all the research we did, it's difficult to know what to do.

I'm a little fuzzy on what all happened because it was such a blur. My understanding is that Rod started to react better to a particular medication. He was eating a little bit more. But it was like he was burned from the inside out from all the cancer treatments. Not that he actually was burned, but that's the way he felt inside. So, he was eating a lot of ice. Some of the liquids he was trying to digest got into his lungs, and it caused pneumonia. The doctors think he asphyxiated. That is what ultimately killed him. With terminal diseases, it's usually something else that actually causes someone to die.

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Before that point, Rod had said he wanted to die at home. He didn't want to die in a hospital. When we knew it was just a matter of time, we made the trip back home with Rod in the ambulance. The doctors were pretty convinced that he wasn't going to make the trip. We wanted to try anyway. He did make it home, and he was with us for just a couple of short days and then he passed.

What, if anything, helped you cope with your grief?

I don't know if I can honestly say I've gotten through all of that. (Crying.) I apologize if I get a little emotional over this. I made a promise to Rod before he passed and to myself since he passed. I know he wanted us to be happy. That was his biggest desire for us, especially toward the end. He said that he wanted us to be happy, love each other, and forgive each other. I took that very much to heart. In honor of Rod, I try to make decisions so those things happen.

I did go to counseling afterward to deal with the trauma of everything and the quickness of it. I don't know that I'll ever be over it, but I know that things get easier with time. A year and a half ago, I wouldn't even have been able to have this conversation. (She pauses to take a deep breath.) I can talk about it now. But it's still hard.

I'm not someone who necessarily turns to prayer, inner reflection, and faith like my mom does. For me, action is more healing. That is something I try to do on a daily basis. It might be something like making one decision to react in a different way. For example, when something upsets me with my boyfriend or a close friend, the choice I make is to take a moment and breathe. I'll ask myself: "What's the choice that is forgiveness? What's the choice that is love? What's the choice that is going to bring more calm to the situation?" I'm human, so it's not perfect. (Laughs.) However, it is in the forefront of my mind now when I react to people.

I try to act so that I'm making someone's life easier, better, or happier. To me, that is the best way to honor Rod.

Do you have a favorite memory of Rod?

I have lots of good memories of Rod. Some are memories of him being this incredibly chunky, little toddler — with rolls upon rolls of bright red hair — and him running around everywhere. Once for Halloween I did his makeup; he wanted to be one of the Batman characters. So, we did that together.

He threw up on me a lot when we were kids. (Laughing.) As a kid, he would get motion sickness really easily. One of my memories — he must have been around two

years old — was when my mom and dad were taking us up to a White Sox game. Rod had eaten, of all things, hot dogs! And he just unleashed it all over the sweater I was wearing as we were pulling into the parking lot. My parents didn't have the money to buy me anything there to wear, and so, they were trying to clean me up. I sat in this vomit sweater the entire game. (Laughs again.)

Also, Rod always had this amazing, energetic smile. The week before he passed, we had a good conversation about what he needed to do in his life if he got through this and how he would go about it. I guess it's just the sense of peace, calm, and happiness we had with each other before he left.

Do you have any religious or faith practices that helped with your healing?

I have some good memories of going to church with my family. As I grew older, though, church wasn't necessarily the right thing for me.

I resonate a little more with the Buddhist philosophy of meditation or just being quiet. But I don't have any particular thing I follow or practice. My one consistent belief is: "Doing, not saying."

There is a lot of rhetoric in religion. Some people don't follow through with actions, or they argue about everything. I always think: *Don't just talk about it; do it in small ways.* I've incorporated that belief into my life.

If you can show someone you care, that's more healing than words. If you can spread love somehow, then that's what you should do.

Is there anything you learned from Rod's passing that you want to share?

It's completely okay to not know how to deal with any of this. It's okay to do whatever you need to do to help you. There's no one right way for any person to react. There's no one magical key that will help you get through it. There's not. It's rough, and it's going hurt. But you can always make those choices to be as positive as you can, and you can talk about the things that are amazing about the person. Definitely reach out for support outside the circle of everything going on. Connect with people who are not immediately involved because sometimes your job is to be the strong person, even though you're falling apart inside.

It would not honor Rod to *not* get through this. I've had many successes of just doing normal things again. Allowing myself to laugh. Allowing myself to have joy is very healing for me. I've not healed an incredible amount, but the healing starts small, and it continues to happen.

It helped me to get back in the swing of things as soon as I could. If I couldn't get through a day, I honored that and took a day to stay home with my grief. I allowed myself

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to feel it, but I put a sort of limit on myself. Even though you're feeling the pain, you can't let it overtake you.

I try to focus on things I know will bring me joy. I didn't focus on the feeling of darkness that falls over you when all of this happens. You redirect yourself to remember: *What are the things that bring me happiness? What are the things that bring me joy?* Try to continue to do those and not pull away from normal life, as much as you possibly can

Cherish people. You don't know when they'll go. That's something on my mind now. You just never know. Don't wait to tell people you love them. Don't wait to live your own life and to do the things that are fulfilling and will make you happy.

CHAPTER ONE

AN UNEXPECTED JOLT

“What we have once enjoyed we can never lose.

All that we love deeply becomes a part of us.”

—HELEN KELLER

May my heart remain open ~

When our heart is struck by sudden grief, an aching gap remains — not unlike a tree scorched by lightning. The death of a loved one can be excruciating under any circumstance. But when such loss comes without advance warning, it can be particularly unnerving. In addition to the grief of losing the person, there may be unresolved issues: things left unsaid, missed opportunities, or longstanding conflicts. There may be confusion as the mind struggles to grasp — without prior preparation — news of a loved one who is gone forever (at least physically). Additionally, our sorrow may be further compounded when we think the death could have been prevented (such as in instances of medical mistakes, drug overdoses, or suicides).

The stories in this section touch on the shock aspects of grief. As the mother whose son committed suicide readily admits, *“The shock wasn’t just a week or a month. It carried with me for probably almost a year. Somebody might say that sounds weird, but that numb shock feeling is just now wearing off. I don’t know how to explain it to somebody who hasn’t been down that path. I’m still just trying to get by.”*

During such intense heartache, small rays of healing often arrive gradually and in unforeseen ways. For Michelle (who lost both parents to AIDS), quietly watching the sunset every evening is the heart medicine she applies to sooth her profound sorrow. For others in this section, beloved pets, dreams, music, prayers, nature, or meditation bring solace.

With stories of loss, our heart wounds become holy ground — needing tender care and deep reverence for all that resides there. As a famous Rumi quote states, “The wound is the place where the Light enters you.”

Medical Mishap

Michelle Qureshi (parents, AIDS)

“Only the love remains.” — Michelle is a musician and composer. She has dark, wavy hair and is in her mid-50s. Married to her husband, Anwar, she has a 12-year-old daughter, Layla. Michelle lost her parents, Jerry and Ruby Miller, to AIDS. Reserved and soft-spoken, Michelle invited me to her home for this interview in March (the anniversary month of both parents’ passing).

We lived in several cities while I was growing up. The moves essentially mirrored the economic growth of my dad’s work. We’d be in one type of home when he was in the steel mills, another home when he became a foreman, and then, with his own business as a steel broker, we shifted to a custom-built, suburban home. My mom was a homemaker. She loved to fix things up in the homes, not just decorating, but also changing flooring and tearing down walls! I have five siblings: four girls and a boy. I’m in the middle. When all of us were out of the house and in college, my mom began creating oil paintings on canvas. It was a new outlet for all her creative energy.

My father had heart surgery, and his recovery from the surgery overlapped the time of him shifting from work to retirement. During this period, my parents moved to Florida. They sought medical help in Florida because he wasn’t getting better. Everyone we knew who had that surgery had a new lease on life.

In the process of trying to get medical help, my parents encountered either really incompetent doctors or an ignorant system. The doctor in Florida never even requested my father’s medical records. It was not suggested that the blood transfusion could have been an extension of the problem. This was in 1985, and the blood transfusion should have raised a red flag in the medical community. At that time, hospitals were not legally bound to test blood for the HIV virus. So, they didn’t.

On Valentine’s Day in 1990, my father went into the hospital, and the doctors finally ran the AIDS test. That was indeed the problem. His blood transfusion had been tainted with HIV-infected blood, and AIDS had developed. He never got out of the hospital in Florida once he went in. He died a month later on March 19.

I had finished college and had just started my music career in New York City. With my father ill, I moved down to Florida thinking I would help take care of him. But everything happened so fast. Once I was in Florida, I remained there with my mom after my dad passed.

We realized then that our mother needed to be tested as well. My mom got tested, and she was positive. We sought some alternative medical help for my mother. However, her condition was not changeable by that time.

Eventually, the AIDs virus developed. The lesson my siblings and I learned from never getting my dad out of the hospital was that we all quickly congregated with my mother when she became ill. We had hospice come. A couple of different nurses checked on her and kept the pain at bay. She died March 28, 1993, three years after my dad.

I was 29 when my dad died and 32 when my mom passed.

Suing the hospital wouldn't change the outcome. So, my siblings and I didn't go that route. But my parents' deaths have impacted our lives tremendously; not just the loss itself but the *how* of it. Basically, with AIDS, the body is starved and there's nothing left. It's horribly dramatic.

At the time of my parents' deaths, I was not married. Consequently, my two younger siblings and I raised our children without grandparents or parents to help us figure out how to handle a family, a spouse, a child, and everything. (She sighs deeply.) Their loss has greatly affected all of us.

What is your favorite memory of your mom or dad while growing up?

It's the sweetest thing; I don't think I fully appreciated it until I was older. My sister is 15 months younger. When I was five or six, my mom helped us build these flower boxes so we could have something to put our flowers in. I have an old black and white photo of my sister and me sitting by our flower gardens. (She grows quiet and stops talking.)

What has helped heal your grief?

After my parents died, I stayed in Florida for a time. While there, I sat outside and watched the sun set every night, for months.

I'm still waiting for March to be a time where I can celebrate the life of my parents because it's always been a very tough month. As time goes on, my desire would be to get past this idea of, "Oh, this dark month of March," and quit burdening myself with what went wrong and unexpected in life. I'd prefer to embrace this entire new area of discovery I've had recently with Reiki (an alternative energy healing method) and understand what really happens with death.

I share stories of my parents with my daughter so she can at least imagine what her grandparents were like. I know, at my core, my parents aren't totally gone, as far as the energy. I've shared with my daughter many times that only the love remains. The people don't remain, but the love does.

Have you felt any connections with your parents since their passing?

I had an interesting experience that I was not ready to see at the time. After my mom died, I had gone to New York where we had a small wake with family and friends, and then I had to make that long drive back to Florida once again, alone. I wasn't planning on stopping; I would normally drive straight through, as I was wont to do in those earlier years. I was driving, and the weather was horrible. It was storming with torrential rains. I have no idea where I finally decided to briefly stop. I was in a deep state of grief, and I would preface this story with we weren't raised religiously. We were raised to know right from wrong and to be good people. But we weren't raised with any of what can be called the burdens or trappings of religion. We were a God-loving, not a God-threatening family.

Anyway, I was feeling a real loss of connection with people. I was leaving my siblings (after gathering for the wake), and I'd just said goodbye to my mother. I had no one intimately related to me to go to.

In this pouring rain, I just wanted to hear someone's voice. So I pulled over and telephoned a friend in Florida to let her know I was on my way back. I was in this telephone booth, which tells you how dated this story is. This friend answers the phone and asks, "Where are you?" I didn't even know. I had to be somewhere in the Southeast. I was looking around, trying to read anything to figure out where I was. The first sign I saw read: *Ruby's Church of Christ*. I just blurted that out without feeling the impact of what that meant. Then, I got back in my car and drove to Florida. (She pauses.) My mom's name is Ruby. I believe she was trying to reach me. The ways to connect with those who have passed feel coincidental to me, maybe because that's where I'm at right now. It's clearly up to me to remove that veil so I can see things more clearly.

After wrapping things up in Florida, I moved back to New York. It was a hard and very fragile time for me. My mother and father were both wonderful people and wonderful parents. I'm still in touch with my mom's best friend Peggy.

Do you have any religious or spiritual practices that help with the grief?

Prior to losing my parents, I had taken the Shahada, which is the formal step into the faith I had been studying. I was drawn to the mysticism of Sufism as well as to the people amidst this wide range of cultures that share the Islamic faith. I find strength in prayer and meditation.

Even though I considered myself a spiritual person before, this experience brought me even deeper into my spirituality. It has become an invitation to a more esoteric understanding of life and death. (She pauses reflectively while sipping her tea.)

HEART GUIDE

Music is my healing path. I've written several pieces in memory of my parents. The writing process is healing in itself, and I find the power of music to offer healing is a gift I am able to share with others.

Do you have any suggestions for someone going through something similar?

It's a hard story to tell. There's not anything that someone needs to say. People read stories, and it's heard on its own.

Sudden Crashes

Rev. Carla Golden (boyfriend, plane crash)

"Tell the people in your life that you love them; don't wait." — Carla is an ordained Unity minister. Born in Wichita, Kansas, she is married to Reverend Bob Uhlar, who is also a minister with Unity. She lost her first love, a boyfriend in college, who died in a plane crash.

The young man killed in the plane crash was John Duren. I was attending a retail merchandizing school for a year in Wichita, and I met John. We lived in the same athletic dorm. It had men's and women's sections, and he was attending Wichita State University. I was 19.

We met before school started in August. We went to a mixer — as they used to call them — and he asked me to dance. Then we started dating. I met him and fell in love.

John was a very spiritual person and had a deep faith. I really appreciated his values. He was President of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes on campus. We came from the same background. He was a Methodist, and so was I. He loved to dance and had a great smile. He was also on the football team. We only dated a few months, but we were together every day.

What is your favorite memory of John?

Two memories stand out. I wouldn't say they are favorite memories, but they are the memories that come back. The dorm we lived in was right across from the cemetery. We used to walk together in the cemetery because it was quiet and cool with the trees.

August was really hot in Kansas. I remember walking through the cemetery, and John came upon a grave with a headstone that had a picture of a young woman who was about our age. As we stood looking down at the grave, he said, "It seems so sad that she died at such a young age." That memory came back a lot after the plane crash.

The other memory is the night before he was killed. We would meet in the cafeteria for dinner after he got off football practice. That night, we got together for dinner as usual, and he was really excited. The coach had told John that he was going to be on the first string at the next game. John had always been the second string B team. So, he was thrilled that he'd be starting in the next game in Utah. The football team flew out in two different planes. They had a black plane and a gold plane. Being on the first string, he was going to be flying on the gold plane. He was very happy. Unfortunately, I was coming down with a cold or the flu, and I wasn't feeling too good. John wanted to spend more time together to celebrate, and I said, "I'm just not feeling that well tonight. I'm going to my room and going to bed early, and when you come back, we'll celebrate. You can tell me all about it." We parted kind of quickly.

The next day, I stayed home from school. My roommates came in after they got out of class and turned on the lights. I was still asleep. They told me one of the planes had crashed. Nobody knew at that point which plane it was. We quickly turned on the radio, and we began to listen. Eventually, it was reported that the gold plane had gone down. Actually it didn't go down; it flew into a mountain. The pilot took a different route. He was trying to give the players a scenic view of the mountains. The plane didn't have the altitude to fly over one of the mountains. It just didn't have the power to go up that fast.

That was the most horrendous day of my life. They announced that there were four or five survivors, but they didn't give their names. I remember just being glued to that radio in my room and waiting to hear who they were.

Later, when we went to the cafeteria, they announced who had been recovered and was now in the hospital. At first, they didn't read the names of those who died. There was still that sense of, "Well, we don't know. Maybe they're wandering in the forest or something." At some point, I found out John was not alive.

Did you have any religious or spiritual practices that helped with your grief?

I was really struggling with what I believed. My first reaction was to get angry with God, asking, "How could you do this?" John had wanted to be a minister. It was beyond my comprehension that God could allow this to happen. My parents didn't understand how I could be so close to someone in such a short time. I don't think they realized the depth of my grief or how much I cared. Eventually, I found my faith again. But it took a while.

I took transcendental meditation classes and went to see psychics. I wanted to communicate with John and find out if he was okay, and understand what was going on, and where he was, and if there really was a heaven. I was searching. One of the psychics said John had not been able to fully transition to his next plane of existence; he felt too tied because of my grief and the sense of not having a chance to say goodbye or reassure me.

I also felt guilt. Mainly, it was because of that last night where I wasn't in the now moment with him. I didn't celebrate with him. I felt like I was very self-centered, focusing on my own illness and not being there fully for him. That took a long time to work through and release the guilt.

Later, I realized what an impact John had on my life because of his faith. I prayed. I began to feel supported, and I had this sense of not being alone.

Is there anything else that helped with your healing process?

Initially, I did a lot of distracting myself, keeping busy. Everybody goes through a certain amount of that. Let's face it, the grieving process is painful, and we want to avoid feeling that pain.

John loved to make tie-dyed shirts. He would create them. And he always said, "I'm going to give you one of my tie-dyed shirts and make a special one for you." After the plane crash, his roommate saw me in the cafeteria and said, "I don't know if you want it or not, but I found one of John's tie-dyed shirts that he made a week or two before the plane crash." I said, "Yes, I'd like to have that." It was red, and that was my favorite color. It seemed like a message: That shirt was supposed to be mine.

Afterward, I went out on dates with people who didn't mean that much to me. Here again, trying to escape the feelings. I don't remember counselors back then.

Every time we would go to the cafeteria, there was an area where the football players would all sit. And they weren't there anymore. The few who survived were in the hospital or at home recovering. Almost the whole A team or first string was wiped out. It was about 36 players, along with the coach and his wife and various other people, and the supporters of the team who were on the plane.

Eventually, the school had a memorial service for all the players. It was an incredible experience. So many people there were grieving with such sadness. It was very cathartic. The people coming together for that memorial service helped with the grieving. It was like someone took a thumb out of a dyke, and it just flowed. It was definitely a community grief.

What prompted you to go to seminary?

It's a calling. I met Bob, and we had similar spiritual beliefs. We got married and traveled around doing workshops at various Unity churches. We visited over 200 congregations around the United States and Canada and really enjoyed teaching the spiritual principles. So, we both applied to seminary.

During my chaplain training, I worked in a hospital in Kansas City. A woman there shared with me about her daughter coming back. She described her daughter and what her daughter was wearing. At first, I thought she was talking about her daughter visiting her in the hospital. Then, she shared with me that her daughter had died two years ago. Before that, we didn't really think this woman was going to die. But I contacted her brother and let him know that he needed to come soon. The next morning, she was on a ventilator and sedated.

When my father was about to die, we had a conversation about dying. I reassured him that people who were in the process of transitioning had people from the other side come to welcome them and help them transition. He said, "Well, I hope it's my mother." His mother had died when he was four years old. On the day he died, he said, "Momma." I knew his mother had been there to greet him and welcome him over.

So many people are afraid of death. I know my mother was afraid of dying because she thought she hadn't been a good enough person. It was very hard to reassure her. We brought in a Baptist minister and a Methodist minister, and that persuaded her a bit. But she still didn't want to close her eyes. She was afraid she wouldn't wake up. Because of my experiences, I no longer fear death.

Do you have any suggestions for others?

My suggestion for grief is to feel the feelings. Don't try to distract yourself. Spend time alone in meditation, and don't rush yourself through the process. It takes as long as it takes. Go through the grieving process. I always hate when someone tells someone to "Get over it. It's been over a year now. Move on." I don't think anyone can tell someone exactly how to grieve. The important thing is not to avoid it.

Another thing that helped me that I didn't mention earlier, if you have regrets or feel guilty about something, write that person a letter. Express your feelings. The other regret I had was that I never told John I loved him. In writing that letter, you can just empty yourself of all these unsaid words, thoughts, and feelings. It's an important thing to do. You feel a lot lighter afterward. Grieving helps you bring closure so you can move on to another relationship or experiences in life.

Also, appreciate the now moment. Tell the people in your life that you love them; don't wait.

Kindra L. Renninger (grandparents, car accident)

“Make sure you’re surrounded by people who are positive influences.” — Kindra and her husband Isaac have two small children. She lost her grandparents, William and Dorothy Humphries, in a car accident caused by a driver on methamphetamine. Kindra was 23 years old at the time of her grandparents’ deaths.

My grandparents lived in Jasper, Alabama. I always called them Grammy and Grampy. The accident was at 9 o’clock in the morning. It was Labor Day weekend, and they were traveling back home from their lake property. A guy crossed the centerline and hit them head on.

I was babysitting for a friend that morning. My cousin telephoned me and asked for my mom’s cell phone number. We never really talked on the phone; he stayed in touch via Facebook. He didn’t want to tell me what happened because they wanted to let my mom know first. I had to pull it out of him. He said my grandparents had been in a bad accident, and they needed to get ahold of my mom. I said, “Okay, my mom’s at work.” He told me that Grampy was at the hospital, but they couldn’t find Grammy. That’s all I was left with.

I remember thinking, “Please Jesus, let them be okay.” But all I could spit out was, “Jesus!” I thought I was going to pass out. I called the mom of the child I was babysitting and said, through tears, “Your son is okay, but I need you to come home.” She sent my roommate to take over watching the child. I sat with my roommate on the couch, and she was praying for me. I was in shock and couldn’t talk. We were just praying they would find Grammy, and we would know more details soon.

One of my other friends came and picked me up. Then my mom and dad met me in Anderson, Indiana, and we drove down to Kentucky. My aunt and uncle from Tennessee drove up to Kentucky as we were driving there. We dropped my mom off with my aunt and uncle. They continued on to Alabama. Then, my dad and I headed back north. It was pretty much just a waiting game.

The family didn’t know where my Grammy was because the accident happened in a different county from the Birmingham hospital where they had flown Grampy. Because my Grammy had instantly passed, they had taken her to the coroner’s office in the county of the wreck. The next of kin they located was my Grampy’s brother, who is older than him and not in good health. So, he was very confused. He contacted my aunt. When my aunt got to the hospital, she was asking about my Grammy, and nobody knew anything. It was many hours later before we heard the news about Grammy.

Grampy never regained consciousness after the wreck. He died early Saturday morning.

After Grampy passed, my dad and my brothers came to Anderson. I have twin brothers. One brother had started at DePauw and the other was starting at Indiana Wesleyan, and it was move-in day. We all met at my house and started driving down to Alabama. We got there Saturday evening. We had the funeral on Sunday and then drove back Monday.

I had spoken to my grandparents the morning of the wreck. I was the last person to talk to them. I had called that morning to tell Grammy I had a job interview on Tuesday. She was really excited for me and said she'd be right there with me.

I went to my interview and got the job. But after I started working, I felt homesick. I told my mom I wanted to move back home. I was afraid of losing my parents. It took a while for me not to be so paranoid when I couldn't get ahold of them. You can reach people immediately by cell phone, and it would scare me when I couldn't reach them right away. But I kept working and didn't move back home. That was just part of the grieving.

Is there anything that has helped with your grieving process?

I'm a big fan of Jeremy Camp's music. He's a Christian artist. I went to the concert with friends and started attending a church where I got plugged into a Bible study with college kids my age. The first night I went, I opened up and shared the story about my grandparents. They were very supportive. I knew they were praying for me. I could call them up, and we could go hang out. I spent a lot of time with my church friends. It's important to surround yourself with Christian friends and turn to God because even though you feel like he's turned His back on you, He hasn't. Sometimes, it is just part of life. It can get ugly and messy.

Do you have religious or faith practices that helped with your grief?

Faith was definitely very important to me and to my grandparents. I grew up in the Quaker church, and at the time of the accident, I was Quaker. My Grammy would always say, "Where's your heart? Do you know Jesus? Do you know He loves you?" I am not sure how people get through such a time without having God to turn to.

I spent a lot of time talking to God, not necessarily asking why but more about asking for help to get me through this day and get me past this hour. I knew God was ultimately the only one who could pull me through and comfort me. I also had my family. And I prayed a lot and had my devotional book. I had no doubt in my mind that my

grandparents were both in heaven; that wasn't a question. But they were so abruptly taken from us that we didn't have time to prepare for losing them.

God felt the need to call my grandparents home.

They were both very healthy for their age. The morning of the accident, Grammy wanted to get off the phone so she could go help Grampy in the yard. They were always working on a house or working outside. However, she had told my mom several times that she didn't want to get to the age where she had to be put in a nursing home or where she had to worry about someone taking care of her. My grandparents always wanted to die together. They got their wish.

Do you have a favorite memory of your grandparents?

Every year, our family would spend a week in the summer with my grandparents. It was usually around my birthday, and we would celebrate my birthday all week long. One year, they had been working on their house, and Grampy had some extra siding. He cut out a big heart from it and then painted: "Happy 16 Birthday. We love you." He had it hanging from their porch when we arrived.

They would come visit us in the fall for a week. They would bring fish they caught on the lake, and we would have a fish fry. Grammy would make hushpuppies. She was always baking and making food. There was never a moment I remember her out of the kitchen. (Laughs.)

Do you have any suggestions for someone going through something similar?

I would say to pray and try to find people who have similar experiences who can relate. Talk it out and don't shut yourself off. Make sure you're surrounded by people who are positive influences.

I was very angry, and it took me quite a while to forgive the man who killed my grandparents. Quite honestly, I don't know that I've fully forgiven him because if I think about it long enough, I still have very ill feelings toward him.

The guy who hit my grandparents was under the influence of meth. He had been arrested and had been in trouble with the law. He walked away from the accident with minor injuries. The trial was two years later. We were there for the whole trial, and it was a trying part of the grief process. Just being back in Alabama without my grandparents was very painful.

It was also the first time that I saw the man who killed my grandparents, and lots of feelings came back that I thought were gone. It was difficult seeing him and not wanting to ... (Trails off.) I remember just glaring at him and wishing my glare could hurt him somehow. Hearing the defense attorney defend this man almost brought me

back to square one. I had to get past those thoughts and know it wasn't the Christian thing to do, and it wasn't going to bring my grandparents back.

He wasn't convicted of murder but of manslaughter, which is enough to put him away for a while. We wrote letters to the judge about the sentencing. I wrote a letter explaining how close I was with my grandparents, and how I couldn't just call them up and tell them about my day, and see how they were doing, and how that was all ripped away from us. The trial brought closure. But at the same time, it brought back the grief.

There are still times when it's really hard. My grandparents didn't get to meet my husband because I didn't know him yet. They don't get to meet my sons. Sometimes I get frustrated and wish they were here for life-changing events.

My Grampy's name is William, and we named our son after him. I know Grampy and Grammy are in heaven, and they approve.

Dangerous Addictions

Anonymous Mother (son, suicide)

“The death snapped me into the decision that I have to live.” — In our culture, there is still stigma associated with mental health issues, addictions, and suicide. As a result, family members facing this type of loss do not always disclose a relative's cause of death. Because some family members do not have all the details regarding her son's death, this mother asked that her name, her child's name, and their location not be used. In this story, her son is called John (not his real name).

My son John was in his 20s when he died. I can't give you more details because his father and I are divorced, and his dad hasn't told anyone it was suicide. Our son cut his throat.

John did well in high school. But he got into a fight his senior year, and broke some bones in his hands. They had him on painkillers, and he found out he really liked them — a little too much. That's when this whole thing started to snowball.

He went into the Air Force after he graduated. In the military, he was drinking. That's what they did. The military put him through rehab, but he couldn't stay sober. After two years, he was given a general discharge.

John's a musician. He played guitar. He loved his guitar! He was also a people person, wanting to meet people and wanting them to listen to his music. He wrote music;

he wrote songs. He joined a band, but the band fell apart because he had a drug and alcohol problem. He came to live with me to help him get his life straight. He was my child, and I was going to do the best I could by him. I took him to a psychiatrist, who found John had bipolar disorder. He was okay for about a month and really had a desire to change his life. I don't know what triggered him to relapse. One day he left a message on my voicemail. He told me he was going to get a job working for a music producer in a different state, and he left.

He was gone for about two weeks when he called and said everyone took off and left him with no money or food and the water was turned off. I said, "Son, leave." He refused to leave. I said, "I don't understand. Is this really what you want to do with your life? Is this worth it?" And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Okay, then why are we having this conversation?" He got real quiet. The conversation ended. I didn't talk to him for about a year.

When he called again, I had moved to another state. He said he was clean and was starting over. He said he bought his own place, a condo. He sounded like he was doing well. I bought him a guitar online because he had lost everything. The store made a mistake and sent him two guitars. He called and told me that they sent him two, and I said, "Son, one of them has to go back." What he failed to tell me was that he took both guitars to the pawnshop. He had lied. He wasn't clean. He was using. Both guitars were gone, and they were expensive guitars.

It was probably about another year before I heard from him again. I got a call from my daughter telling me that John was freaking out and saying all kinds of weird things about aliens. I said, "Tell him to call me." She said, "He's mad at you. He won't call you." And I said, "Well, there's nothing I can do if he won't talk to me."

When he finally called two weeks later, he sounded like a mess. He was talking about things that didn't exist, and he was saying bizarre stuff about people trying to kill him and how he was going to protect himself. I didn't know what he was capable of doing. He was living far away. I had to call the police to check on him and on the people he had mentioned.

He got into legal trouble. He was driving in a vehicle and got pulled over. They found heroin and brought him up on charges.

After that, John called me and said he wanted to go to rehab. I was thrilled. He said he wanted to go, but he didn't know how he was going to get there. I said, "I'll take you." I drove to his place and spent three days with him before he went into rehab. He completed the two-week program. But he ended up relapsing, and he violated his probation.

Then things got real bad.

I knew he relapsed. He had gotten arrested. I knew he was in trouble. Now, he was looking at four years in prison. He fired his lawyer. His anger was out of control. His mental health condition was in overdrive, and it just took over his life.

He wanted me to pick him up and take him out of state to avoid the legal problems. I said, “No, you have an obligation, and you’re an adult. Those are choices you made. Maybe you didn’t realize the full implications, but that’s what you are faced with now. I’m not going to help you evade your legal responsibilities.” He got very upset with me, telling me: “I’m doing really good. I thought you wanted to be a part of my life.” He tried to turn that around on me. I did feel bad. I’m not a cold-hearted person. But I had to stick to my guns. I’m not going to help my child or anybody else skirt their legal obligations. I’m just not going to do it.

I had his probation officer’s number in my hand. I thought, “Should I call and say that I think he’s using and say that they may need to drug test him at home?” But I was torn. If I call, it might create even more problems for him. But if I don’t call, can I live with myself? I ended up not calling. I decided to let the law do what it does and not create any more problems for him.

My son always had a connection to cardinals. Whenever a cardinal would come around, I would think of John. He could go a full year without talking to me. Then, I’d see a cardinal, and I’d think, “Okay, here comes John. I know it.” And it would always happen that way. And that’s what happened when I learned he had died.

I was driving when a cardinal flew past my windshield. The speed it was flying startled me. I’ve never seen a bird fly that fast in my life, and I’m a bird person.

Within the hour I got a call from my daughter, and she was crying. I said, “What’s going on?” and my daughter said, “John’s dead.” I said, “What do you mean he’s dead?” And she said, “There’s an obituary online.” So, I got on my cell phone and typed in my son’s name, and sure enough, his picture popped up. (Crying.) I was in shock. I couldn’t believe it. (Sobbing.) Even though he had spiraled out of control, I still couldn’t believe it.

I called the police department, and I explained to them that I’m out of state; I just learned my son is dead. I said, “What’s going on?” They said, “We can’t tell you anything over the phone. You just have to get here.” I said, “You can’t tell me anything? I have an 11-hour drive ahead of me, my son is dead, and you can’t tell me anything?” They said, “All we can tell you is that you need to get here.”

I called the medical examiner. When he heard I was 11 hours away, he told me it was a suicide. I asked, “How did it happen?” He said it was a puncture to the carotid artery in the neck. And I said, “Who does that to themselves?” He said, “I’m just telling you what the results were ma’am.” So, I got in the car and drove all night to the police department. The investigator said it definitely was a suicide. My son had been in the

bathroom and had used a razor knife to cut his throat. He was in there for five days before he was found.

It's been hard. I still cry every day about it. I have his urn on my ancestor shrine. I have a candle for him, and I talk to him. I try not to talk to him too much because it hasn't been a lot of time. According to my belief system, when somebody passes away, it takes a minimum of just over a year to cross over because it's a process. I don't want to bring his spirit back. I want him to continue on his journey. Right now, I try to strengthen his peace and bring light to his spirit and send prayers to my ancestors to help him. As time goes on, I will talk to him more directly, and I'll have better dialogue with his spirit from heaven.

Do you have any religious or spiritual practices that have helped you?

My spiritual or religious practices are known as Lucumi. It's a Cuban form of Santeria. It's an African nature-based religious philosophy that came to the islands with the slave trade. It blended with Catholicism. I met a Santero (priest) when my son was just a baby. We talked a lot about the Orishas, which are spirits, nature spirits, divinities, deities, and saints because it's blended with Catholicism. I have my Orisha here at the house. I have a shrine to them, and I pray to them. I don't proceed with my day until I go to my ancestor shrine and honor them and ask for blessings.

After John's passing, I had a nine-day litany for the dead. Nine days of prayers specifically for him. According to my belief, a person doesn't pass away and then immediately go to heaven. He may need help to move along. I don't believe in hell or the devil. There's good and evil, sure, and darkness. But there's always a way out of the darkness.

What else have you found helpful with your healing and grief process?

Talking about it helps me so much, but here's the problem I'm faced with. No one will talk to me about it. That has been the hardest thing for me. My friend said it's because people can't handle it or don't know how to handle it. In my mind, it's my son, and I'm handling it! Even my own family, they can't handle talking about it. I talk to a few friends who are there for me and who will listen.

Being alone in nature also helps. Some people may say someone who just lost a son shouldn't be alone. But for me, sitting quietly in nature and listening to birds and watching my cats helps. As simple as that sounds, watching their antics and getting a smile out of that helps me cope and heal.

Before my son died, there were a lot of things in my life that I could have said were tragic. After my son died, something inside of me snapped. But it wasn't in a

negative direction. The death snapped me into the decision that I have to live. Not that I was suicidal, but it snapped me out of a depressed state. It snapped me into the belief that I have to do things differently. I have to be positive. I have to look at life as a gift, and I have to be a better person for myself, for my surviving child, and even for my son who has passed away. Energy doesn't die. It just transforms. He's still here. I don't know where. I won't know until I die. It's a mystery. But I'm still his mother, and I'm always going to be his mother. He still needs me to help. His father and I created his energy, and he still needs us.

My ex-husband, who is Catholic, doesn't view it that way. Some in his faith may be thinking his son went to hell. I don't know. Suicide is very bad in the Catholic faith. But according to my beliefs, I created my son, and he's still somewhere, and he needs light, and he needs help. If Catholics want to call it purgatory, okay, that's fine. But in the Lucumi tradition, we see a way for everything. If he is in some sort of darkness, we can find a way through the Orisha and through the ancestors to bring light to his spirit and help him on his way to heaven, which is where all of us go, the ancestor world. There are many different names for it. My son still needs me.

What's your favorite memory of your son?

My favorite memories are camping with my son. We loved sitting around the bonfire and also going swimming. One time, we were sitting in the sand along the coast. He was playing his guitar and singing me a song he had written. It was a beautiful moment. A glorious sunset. I wish I had the lyrics to the song, but I don't. I just remember being moved to tears. That was five years ago now. Seems like it was yesterday. (She pauses.) Thank you for listening.

Did he get any help for the mental health disorders?

I believe he started to exhibit signs when he was in the military. Of course, I don't have any way to know for sure what happened. But he told me he had a problem with drinking, and they sent him to rehab. Then, they put him on a mild antidepressant. He started drinking again. The military might have known there was some mental health issue there, but maybe they just didn't want to deal with it. I really don't know.

He didn't get any help with the bipolar until he came to live with me. I took him to see a doctor who gave him medication. John flushed it all down the toilet. He said he didn't like the way it made him feel. I can't speak for him, but maybe he felt like it was taking away his creativity. For days and days, he would write and play music. But when he took the medicine, he just kind of sat there. He didn't give it enough time to get into his system and level off. He was like an angry person on his medication, and he didn't

play his guitar. So, he flushed it down the toilet and said, "I'm never taking that again." But he spun out of control, and he's gone.

He was smart, handsome, creative, musical, and lyrical. He had so many great qualities. He was like sunshine. But I guess we never know what a person thinks or feels. Inside, he had a lot of twisted up emotions. But for somebody to cut his own throat! I asked my doctor: "From the time of the act to the time of unconsciousness, what is that time period?" She said 20 seconds. That's a long time to know that there's no turning back. She told me what he did is *very* painful. It hurts. But you can't change it.

I regret that my last conversation with him was not a good one. I don't regret the tough love part. I regret that I'll never see my son again in this life.

Have you felt any other connection to him since he left?

I had two dreams. The first dream was shortly after he passed away. I dreamed I went to his condo and the whole place was white. He was sleeping on a mat on a floor, next to a puzzle half put together. I could see that the puzzle was dolphins in the ocean, leaping out of the water. His Orisha was Yemaya, the great spirit of the ocean. I said, "Son, I have to use your bathroom." And he said, "Okay," and he pointed down the hall. He was in that groggy state of trying to wake up. I thought what is the significance of that? Maybe I called him away from something he's trying to transition to, and he's trying to put together the pieces of this puzzle.

In the other dream I was outside. I see my son, and he is a child. He had his hands cuffed. I remember being shocked. I said, "What are you doing here?" And he was just smiling. I was yelling, "Are you okay?" He opened up his hands, and a male cardinal flew out, into the bush. I felt like he's telling me that he's okay.

The first dream was unsettling and the second one was letting me know things were okay. I haven't had any dreams since then, and his spirit doesn't feel close to me right now. I want him to continue on his journey. When he needs me, I'll be here for him. After he gets where he needs to be, then I will be able to call on him, and he will be here when I need him.

Do you have any suggestions for someone going through a similar experience of grief?

I might not be able to answer that question right now. It wasn't too long ago that the shock wore off. The shock wasn't just a week or a month. It carried with me for probably almost a year. Somebody might say that sounds weird, but that numb shock feeling is just now wearing off. I don't know how to explain it to somebody who hasn't

been down that path. I'm still just trying to get by. I know he's gone from this world, and his energy is not dead. But I'm not there yet as far as the healing.

Are you doing any self-care to help with your grieving?

No. I live in a rural community, and they don't have social services here. I don't have help with grief counseling or anything like that. My dogs saved me, initially and still to this day. I have German Shepherds and a Doberman. I train them and work with them. We have a routine every day. If I hadn't had that routine, I may have fallen into a depression. They give me a reason to get up and keep moving and tend to their needs.

I keep myself busy. I try not to have too much time to get sad. Even though I'm a person who is strong in my faith, I'm still a human being. I'm still a mother, and I'm a mother who lost her child in a very terrible way. I try to be as normal as I can be. I'm not working every minute until I drop. I don't drink. I don't take drugs. I don't smoke cigarettes. I just try to live a good, healthy life to the best of my ability, surviving the loss of a child to suicide. It's not easy.

I always ask myself, "What good could ever come out of something like that? It's brutal. It's sad." I don't know. If anything positive can come out of it, I hope it does. That would be a good thing.

Justin Phillips (son, overdose)

"It's figuring out how not to get swallowed up by grief." — Justin Phillips is the mother of three children: Aaron Kent Sims (who died from a heroin overdose at age 20), an older son who is 23, and a younger daughter who is 14. Justin also has two stepchildren (adult daughters) with her current spouse, Nate Phillips. We met at the one-year anniversary of Aaron's death. When I expressed concern that it might be too soon in the grieving process for our interview, Justin adamantly explained that talking about Aaron is helpful. She spoke with me at the public library, just as the last glints of the October evening sun beamed brightly through a large overhead window.

Aaron was a good kid. He had a heart of gold and was incredibly selfless. He was also naturally talented athletically. He played everything, but football was his love. His junior year in high school, he had a very bad concussion — and probably had more that we

didn't know about. He dropped out of school, within six months of his concussion. He did get his GED the same year he should have graduated.

I know Aaron had been an off and on pot smoker. We did a lot for the marijuana thing. We took him to treatment. I did drug testing at home. He may have been doing prescription drugs that his high school friends shared amongst each other, but I don't know any of those details. After he dropped out of high school, he started using heroin and went to treatment. He relapsed once and then was clean for maybe a year. During this time, he wasn't living with me, so I'm not sure when he starting using again. He was living at his dad's house. His dad and I are divorced. Aaron lived with me until he was 18. Then, he wanted to "be a man." He said I "treated him like a baby." I didn't treat him like a baby, but that's the way he saw it.

In October, he overdosed on heroin. When Aaron overdosed, his dad found him, thank goodness. (Pauses.) I don't have any reason to believe it wasn't accidental. It's so easy to overdose on heroin. It's wreaking havoc on that age group.

What's your favorite memory of Aaron?

My favorite memory is of us singing in the car. When he was young, we would sing the Mamas & the Papas song, *Make Your Own Kind Of Music*, really loud together. (Smiles.)

When he was in elementary school, he was big into skateboarding. He pegged his own pants, sewing them with a needle and thread and then pinning them so they would be tight to his calf. (Laughs.)

He did typical teen things. He played video games. He was also a talented writer and had some artistic ability. Aaron was a big-hearted soul with intuitive insight. We had such a challenge because I was trying to keep him from smoking pot and ruining his life. We butted heads a lot, especially when I was disciplining him. We were so much alike. He knew me probably better than anyone. (Crying.)

What, if anything, helps with your grieving process?

I have done *a lot!* When Aaron died, I was in the middle of a mindfulness stress reduction course. I finished the class and went on a one-day silent retreat. I've since gone on a two-day silent retreat and taken another mindfulness course.

Getting Botox didn't really help. I went to Pilates right away. It helped, but nothing *really* helps. I did a lot of fixing the outside thinking that somehow it would make it better, on the inside. It did keep me busy and distracted. Going to Pilates, getting the Botox, buying more shoes than I needed. I have a new car, a mini convertible. Riding it in is one of the only things that make me feel better. But still, all outside stuff.

I started a parent support group for people who have been affected from deaths by overdose. Because of the stigma, it's different from other ways our children might die. That group has been extremely helpful. Much like the 12-step fellowship, which is where I learned it: "If I help others, then I feel better about me."

I spoke with people who consider themselves mediums and had some experiences early on where I felt like Aaron was present. One friend and I were scheduled to speak on the telephone the day after Aaron died. When my friend called, I said, "Oh, I'm sorry Fred, but I can't talk today." And he replied, "I know, I have a message from Aaron." He said, "Aaron came to me in a vision." I trust Fred. The common theme I heard from him was how sensitive Aaron was, and he couldn't handle it. I know that to be true. Aaron was truly empathic. Things you wouldn't think would hurt someone's feelings hurt Aaron's feelings. Fred also relayed that Aaron was sorry, and that it wasn't my fault. Aaron had no idea how much I loved him.

Do you have any religious or spiritual practices that help?

Symbolism and rituals are helpful for me. I have not been angry with God. I have a Buddha Board that I sit with in the morning and write on. Lately, I've just been writing: *Dear God.*

The day Aaron was found — before I knew about his death — I wrote: *I'm scared.* I knew somehow.

I'm also journaling. I'm doing Reiki (energy healing) on myself. And I pray. Then, I have readings I do from different books. I usually pull a soul collage card. Throughout the day, I try to see what God's plan is: "What is it that we're here for? Why me?" Not "Why me?" as in "Poor me." But more, "What the hell? Why? And okay, what am I supposed to do with this?"

I go to the cemetery and lie down on a blanket and talk to Aaron. I take food for the squirrels and birds and leave it there. Today I was thinking morbidly. When you're pregnant, you think, "Oh, I wonder what my baby looks like this month." Well I was thinking, "What does your baby look like who has been dead a year?" Crazy thoughts.

I write to Aaron every day, in my morning journal. My therapist told me: "Don't write to him for too long or you'll be stuck in your grief." I don't agree. But I don't know. I didn't know this first year was going to take me by surprise the way that it did.

Aaron was a huge clotheshorse. I took many of his clothes to a homeless shelter because I know that's what he would have wanted me to do with them. I also have a tattoo on my wrist. Toward the end of his life, Aaron was doing graffiti. His tag is: Apex, Pentacle of the best you can be, along with his initials. I did the tattoo early on. Impulsive. I'd probably do it a little differently now.

My daughter did a report for school on traumatic brain injury for football players. There have been a lot of players with concussions who committed suicide or got involved in drugs. I texted the coroner and asked her if there was any of Aaron's brain still around; you can't diagnose the concussion impact until the person is dead. She said, "No, Justin, we put that back." (Sighs.) You grasp at straws to somehow make sense of it.

Is there anything else that helped you with the healing process?

I'm not the same person anymore, and I don't get to be the same person. Each morning I think: "What would Aaron want me to do?" Aaron would not want me to go down the rabbit hole and never come out, which is oftentimes what I feel like doing. It's hard not to want to hide from the reality of how much his loss has shaken the whole family. Aaron and my dad were close, and I can see that it has aged my father and taken something from him.

It's figuring out how not to get swallowed up by grief.

Aaron's dog Cain was just a puppy when Aaron died. If anything happens to Cain it's going to be really difficult because I feel like there's a part of Aaron there.

I try to believe Aaron is in a better place. I do believe he's in a better place to the degree that he's not suffering. But it's *not* comforting when people say, "You'll see him again."

When people don't know what to say, I tell them: "It's okay. There isn't anything you need to say." Saying, "I'm sorry for your loss" is enough. Saying, "I'm here for you." Show up for the person. I was incredibly impressed by my daughter's school. They explained to the kids that it's important to not ignore her, but rather to embrace her.

Do you have any suggestions for someone going through something similar?

Everyone deals with grief differently. I talked about Aaron a lot in the beginning, and I still want to talk about Aaron. I don't want him to disappear.

It's important to have the support of people who understand: people who have lost what you have lost. Only they get it to the depth that you experience it.

Returning to work was also one of the better things I did. It gives you something to keep your mind on.

Find ways to take care of yourself, and don't set expectations for yourself. There's absolutely no right or wrong way to grieve. Sometimes we say to ourselves: "Oh, am I allowed to be feeling this way? Should I *not* be feeling this way?" No one else should tell you how to grieve. You get to grieve however you want.
