



The Stories of Love are Stronger than Death

by Nan Zastrow

A Storyteller's Creed

I believe that imagination is stronger than knowledge -

That myth is more potent than history.

I believe that dreams are more powerful than facts -

That hope always triumphs over experience -

That laughter is the only cure for grief.

And I believe that love is stronger than death.

Robert Fulghum

Recently, the neighborhood children asked if they could explore the forest behind our house. When they didn't return in about a half hour, my husband, Gary, got concerned and went to look for them. He located them by the sound of excitement in their voices. They made a great discovery—candles, remains of a burned down hunting shack, a shoe, a soda can and more. As they accumulated the items in a pile, they talked about how "old" the things were. They decided the items "must have been there before there was electricity." Gary let them weave their story and imagine the details of what might have been.

In reality, these items are all connected to our son, Chad. Gary could have interrupted the kid's fantasy and told them the real story of how the "boys" burned down the hunting shack when an unguarded candle fell on the floor while they partied around a campfire. The story behind these artifacts happened less than 15 years ago—but to the kids it could have been fifty! The discovery the kids made and the story they imagined brought back rich memories of a happier times when Chad enjoyed his own adventure. And, evoking such a memory was priceless!

When Gary told me what happened, I thought about the significance of all the stories I've told about Chad over the past ten years while writing the Wings magazine. I believe that stories are the greatest healing balm available for the bereaved soul. Stories give untold meaning to pain. Stories bear witness to frustration, fear, and triumph. Stories console the heart with memories of "better days". Stories relive the experiences of "life" and gently uncover the lessons learned. And, telling the stories of life weaves the threads of memory that bind us to our loved ones.

Recalling the stories of Chad's life are continued testimony to me that "his life mattered". Chad's life enriched me; many stories are legends of great joy. His death challenged me and made me acutely aware that our paths are never certain. I am who I am today because of Chad's death. I am a reflection of my journey and a reflection of the love I

have for Chad not only when he died but continuing through eternity. If I can get through this traumatic journey by hanging onto my memories; then, I encourage others to try it too. There is a purpose for “telling the story” in our journey to healing and sometimes that means facing the pain, feeling the tragedy, and etching the scars with triumph.

Telling the story makes it real

Acceptance is a major hurdle when we are faced with sudden death. Over the years, Gary and I have told the story of Chad’s life as it unfolded before his death: a member of the Army National Guard, a student in EMT, a volunteer for a village fire/ambulance/rescue team, holding a full time job, and engaged to be married. Chad was living a life that was full and purposeful. It’s hard to imagine “death by choice”. It took me over three years to accept that this “really” happened.

A traumatic loss challenges our belief system and the core of life’s assumptions. We immediately wonder, “How will I survive? What purpose is there to living? What next?” Telling the story is supposed to help make sense out of the senseless. I still have some trouble making sense out of what happened. But it has given me time to think of all the possibilities and believe that Chad’s death was a surprise to both of us. Accepting the reality of my own story has made me more compassionate and understanding to others facing all kinds of life’s tragedies. I don’t have to completely “walk in their shoes” to know their sorrow. I can follow in their shadow and absorb the incapacitation of their loss.

Telling the story and living with “why?”

Chad’s story has helped me live without the answer to why. When we have been hurt by life, it is normal and natural to want to know why. I once wrote, “I can live without the answer to “why” now. It doesn’t matter what occurred or how terrible the event that took place because I remind myself, I can’t change a thing. My spirituality comforts me in the quiet moments by knowing “Chad is okay.” And my intuitive self whispers, If I really knew “why” would it make me any happier?”

Stories help us survive life’s challenges

Some of the stories I told or wrote were on good days when I was full of hope. In all grief experiences, there are good days and bad days. We want to believe that eventually the “good days” outweigh the “bad days.” This is called “hope.”

When we tell our story after great life challenges, we begin to rewrite history. We turn our turbulent grief, our self-pity, our broken hearts, and our indecision into action. We take control over the events that consumed us and create a chapter of survival.

Telling our story is a witness to our growing spirit

Moving through grief, our lives unfold. We are changed by our experiences. If we can see beyond the pain and grasp the foundations of faith, our journey is cushioned with God’s promises. I once wrote: “Chad has given me a valuable gift—the gift of Easter every day. Because I am a Christian, the Easter message has special significance to me. If you are a Christian, I respect that your faith in God offers you similar assurance. It

is the assurance that there is “life after death.” And such a hope guides my life’s plan. I know that Chad dwells with our Heavenly Father who is fair and loving. I know that we will meet again someday. It is this Easter message that lives with me everyday and gives me purpose.”

Stories may not bring closure. Our stories go on.

Once the story of our loved one’s death is told, the story continues. Over the months and years that follow, we repeat our experiences to an interested listener. And the story never ends. Though our loved one’s life is stopped in time, the stories are timeless.

People look for a cue from us that we have found closure. What truly is “closure”? Is it a time when we no longer grieve outwardly? Is it a time when we quit telling the stories and speaking our loved one’s name? Others may assume that we have “accepted”, found peace, and have left this event behind us as we move forward in our lives. The truth is: we never leave grief behind. We never forget. Our loved one becomes a part of who we are today. And our stories are nestled in our heart safe and secure in the knowledge that life and love are eternal.

My story will go on.

Mine is a story of love. Not just the love of a parent for a child, but the love of every dream a parent has for a child. Mine is a story of survival when it would have been easier to succumb. Mine is a story of cherished memories that never will die. We all have a story. Chad’s life and death story have taught me so many things. They have bound me to his heart and soul. Every fiber of my being remembers.

If you are bereaved, gather your stories. Find opportunities to open your heart and let the memories pour out. Allow others into your lives to explore the forests and find the remnants of a beautiful life that once was. Chuckle over the good times. Say a silent prayer when painful memories surface. Rekindle joy by igniting the flame of faith, and hope. And, believe that the stories of love are stronger than death.