

The ministry of Wings is: *Honoring the Past and Rebuilding the Future.*

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## SUICIDE GRIEF: Exploring Your Feelings of Loss

*By Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director Center for Loss and Life Transition*

The following article is excerpted from Dr. Wolfelt's latest book, *Understanding your Suicide Grief*. Portions of this topic will be presented at the Spring 2010 Understanding Grief Seminar, Wausau, WI, May 4th.

The suicide death of a friend or family member is not our choice, yet we are faced with the need to confront our raw and life-changing grief. Yet, for a number of reasons, we may not know how or where or if we should express the pain that comes with this profound loss. As a result of fear and misunderstanding many of us are left alone and in silence when we desperately need unconditional support and compassion.

As a suicide survivor, I discovered firsthand that we suffer in a variety of ways: one, because we need to mourn the loss of someone significant to the meaning of our life; two, because we have experienced a sudden, usually unexpected traumatic death; and three, because we are often shunned by a society unwilling to enter into the pain of our grief. What we need and deserve is unconditional love, not shame or judgment, either for our feelings or the decision made by our loved one.

When you are impacted so deeply by a suicide death, part of you may want to shut down your feelings and try to go around them, inhibit them, or deny them the attention they demand. The death of someone to suicide pries open your heart even if it wants to stay closed. Now, as hard as it is to do, you must open your heart, which has been engaged against its will, and muster the courage to encounter a wide range of feelings.

Suicide grief creates profound disruption in almost all areas of your life. It challenges all you know about yourself and the world around you. This journey rocks the complete foundation of your entire being. Suicide is synonymous with disruption, chaos, and change—all of which bring a multitude of overwhelming emotions. Taking ownership of your emotions is the only way to eventually re-orient and survive this life-changing experience.

The healing of the wounds of suicide grief starts with an awareness of your feelings. Feelings are certainly not punishment, they are information. Don't think of your feelings as negative, instead think of them as necessary. If you perceive some of your feelings, such as anger, sadness, and anxiety, as negative, you will not gain anything helpful from them. To ultimately heal, you will be required to drop any conditioning or judgments that your emotions are negative. Rest assured that whatever your thoughts and feelings, while in one sense they are completely unique to you, they are also usually a common human response to a suicide death.

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## EDITOR'S JOURNAL

# Who is your hero today?



NAN ZASTROW  
Co-Founder,  
Wings-A Grief Education Ministry

The Super Bowl is over and there are new heroes in town! Oh, let those Saints come marching in!

I've never been much of a football fan, but this year, I was compelled to watch Super Bowl XLIV. I even had a small Super Bowl party with others just as much a casual watcher as me. It was a great event! I was cheering for the Saints as soon as I heard they were contenders for the title. Knowing little about their team or their place in history, all I had was a gut feeling that this team had nothing to lose and everything to win! They deserved the title against all odds.

Our son's interest in football is probably the closet I ever got to the game. Chad, played football in high school; and we watched his games with hearty bravos for his team. But Chad's passion for football never spilled over into my life that much. He became a pure, through-and-through Vikings fan. So we humored him with a little Packer rivalry, for the fun of it. When Chad died, we had a teddy bear made with a Viking t-shirt, because it just felt right. Next to his Marlboro hat it was probably his favorite

piece of clothing. He stuck to his love of the Vikings; and this was supported by his Uncle Tom who lived in Minnesota, and got him tickets for a Vikings game. For a period of time, the Vikings were his heroes.

I think a lot of people would concur after the Saints won this Super Bowl: whether you cheered for the Colts or the Saints, when it was all over, you had to have a soft place in your heart for what this victory meant to New Orleans. It wasn't about a ring or a trophy. It was about victory and triumph over something greater than a football game. This was their moment in time to achieve, to be recognized, and to accept that millions of people were amazed at the "come-back" they and the people of Louisiana had achieved. Each of us could rewind the mental pictures of the devastation caused by Katrina, and feel sorrow for all the grieving that occurred. Lives were changed almost instantly. Out of that disaster came heroes, the kind that repair and rebuild lives, and make the news.

I believe that our heroes in life change from time to time. On a talk show, awhile ago, the show host asked his guest who his role model or heroes were in his life. For a moment he hesitated, trying to decide how to answer that question. He went on to name a few childhood super heroes—mostly cowboys and a couple fictional characters. Then he commented that he acknowledged that his heroes in his life changed as he grew older...to be more realistic people, his dad, and uncle.

When he became a dad, his heroes changed again as he tried to model himself after people he thought were super-dads.

I believe this is true. Our heroes do change. A few stay forever constant. Some of our heroes are living and some may have died. Characteristically, true heroes are those who have achieved against incredible odds or influenced our lives in positive ways. We want to believe in someone who seems to have figured out life. We also want to identify with real people who have the courage to endure anything and everything.

Then there are the heroes who take their spot in our lives for a period of time. They may walk quietly into our lives and gently fade away. Perhaps he or she is the athlete, the philanthropist, military leader, the actor, or the role model (to name a few). We follow their public lives, their careers, and their successes. We connect with their goals or achievements and visualize what it must feel like to be in their shoes.

There is also the hero who is the unlikely hero, but something he or she does captures our attention; and we enthusiastically yell hurrah! The unlikely hero doesn't ask to be a hero and probably prefers anonymity. He or she may seem like the underdog, the forgotten, or the impromptu hero that was in the right place at the right time. His or her choice to do something resulted in a heroic event.

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## Who is your hero today ...

*Continued from page 2*

And finally there is the hero who affects one's life personally, for whatever reason. That hero may not have done anything that receives attention or deserves public recognition. It's a heart and soul connection. There is a tie that sings to your soul and captures your love. He or she is the hero that motivates, inspires, and changes lives. He or she is the hero that becomes the "wind beneath my wings."

My son, Chad, is that kind of hero to me. It will be 17 years this spring since his death, and his death changed me. It's not about how he died or why he chose to take his life, it's about the impact it created in its aftermath. I know he didn't mean to hurt us. Nor did he desire to end life so abruptly. But it happened. The sacrifice of losing him has taken away precious dreams, but ironically given us so much.

If Chad were here today, sitting next to me on that couch watching Super Bowl XLIV, he would have laughed heartily while watching his mom. And, somewhere in the great beyond, I know he was brimming from ear to ear. It took an unlikely win in a football game to get me to watch. And, I bet if I could see him, he would have replaced his Viking jersey with one of the Saints (if only for the day)!



Because he lived,  
I will remember,

Because I  
remember,  
he will never die.

*December 4, 1971—April 16, 1993*

*Chad E. Zastrow*

## I Asked God

author unknown

I asked God for strength,  
that I might achieve,

I was made weak,  
that I might learn humbly to obey;

I asked for health,  
that I might do greater things,

I was given infirmity,  
that I might do better things;

I asked for riches,  
that I might be happy,

I was given poverty,  
that I might be wise;

I asked for power,  
that I might have the praise of man,

I was given weakness,  
that I might feel the need of God;

I asked for all things,  
that I might enjoy life,

I was given life,  
that I might enjoy things;

I got nothing that I asked for -  
but everything I had hoped for,

Almost despite myself,  
my unspoken prayers were answered,

I am among all men,  
most richly blessed.

# Daddy's Empty Chair

## *Inspirational Story*

A man's daughter asked the local minister to come and pray with her father.

When the minister arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows. An empty chair sat beside his bed.

The minister assumed the old fellow was informed that he would be visiting. "I guess you were expecting me," he said. "No, who are you?" said the man.

The minister told him his name and then remarked, "I saw the empty chair and I figured you knew I was going to come and visit."

"Oh, yeah. The chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?"

Puzzled, the minister shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this...not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church, I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it went right over my head. I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day, four years ago, my best friend said to me, 'Johnny, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus.'"

"This is what I suggest. Sit down in a chair and place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith—see Jesus sitting in that chair." "It's not spooky because he promised, 'I will be with you always.' Then, just speak to him in the same way you are doing to me right now."

"So, I tried it. And I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful though.

If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she would either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The minister was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the man to continue his journey. Then he prayed with him, anointed him with oil, and returned to the church.

Two nights later, the daughter called to tell the minister that her father died that afternoon. "Did he die in peace?" the minister questioned.

"Yes, she said. When I left the house about two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me he loved me, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange about his death. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on the chair beside the bed. What do you make of that?"

The minister wiped a tear from his eye and said, "I wish I could go like that."



### **SOMETHING YOU WISH TO SHARE?**

Do you have a favorite poem, something you wrote; an inspirational story or something else you would like published in our electronic edition of Wings? Please let me know.

#### **Send your information to:**

Nan at [wings1@charter.net](mailto:wings1@charter.net) or mail to  
Wings-a Grief Education Ministry, P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401

## Twelve Gifts of Hope—a Continuing Tradition

In December 2009, we presented THE RESULTS program to our community on How A Fortune Cookie Can Heal Holiday Grief. We shared stories received over the past year from those who recognized that they were given a Gift of Hope and how meaningful it was to them. We also showed our group how they could give the 12 Gifts of Hope to themselves as part of their healing grief work. Only this weekend, while I was in a local store, a woman came to me and said, "I want you to know, I'm using your 12 Gift of Hope program to help me heal my grief. My friend lost her husband, too; and we are doing it together."

In this column we continue sharing stories of the 12 Gifts of Hope. You will have the privilege to read what others have submitted. Please consider sending us your story. For a complete summary of stories we chose to share, visit our website at [www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org).

*The Gift of Hope is... to take care of "me" day.  
Treat myself to something that feels good.*

*(What this means: Treat yourself to something that makes you feel good—just because! Make this day about you.*

*To appreciate how someone has helped you:  
THINK: How has someone suggested something that would make me feel good? Did I do what they suggested or did they share this with me?)*

A stranger encouraged my husband and me to renew our relationship after the death of our child. We had lost sight of ourselves as a couple and put aside dinner at a nice restaurant, and spending time together

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### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Find A New Place To Go Or  
Someone To Go With

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Honor My Wish List On A Special  
Day Or Holiday

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Honor A Grief Burst—A Happy  
Memory Of The Way It Used To Be

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Have A Take Care Of "Me" Day—  
Treat Myself To Something That Feels  
Good

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Recall A Cherished Memory That  
Makes Me Smile Or Laugh

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Take Time-Out To Enjoy  
A Hobby, Sporting Event, Or  
Something My Loved One Liked To  
Do

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To give and receive Love and Support in  
unexpected ways

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Heal My Pain Through Laughter,  
Music, Or Spirituality

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Find A New Friend, A New Support  
Group Or Social Activity To Expand My  
Circle Of Life

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Learn More About Grief Through  
Books, People, Classes Or Groups

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Count My Blessings and Focus on  
What I Still Have, Not What I Have Lost

### ***The Gift Of Hope Is...***

To Give The Gift Of Hope To Someone  
Else In Need

## Twelve Gifts of Hope

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*Continued from page 5*

because there wasn't money left (after the hospital bills) for such luxuries. A few weeks after our son's death, a Visiting Nurse who had helped us with our son's illness, appeared at our door. She told us a friend of hers had heard about our son's death and wanted to do something nice for us. The stranger purchased a gift certificate for dinner at one of our favorite restaurants and included child care for our other son, so we could go out for the evening. The friend wanted to remain anonymous. It was so great to put aside our grief for one evening. (Debbi Northrop-Wicks, Nebraska)

A friend phoned me and said, "What can I do for you today? I'll do anything you need help with." She was ready at the moment she called. It wasn't the usual greeting of saying "call me if you need help sometime." (Kathy Fink-Bednorski, Wausau)

### Be Good to Yourself — A Care Tip

#### FIND A POSITIVE ADDICTION

Grief and mourning create a negative dip in our spirit and stamina at any time, but during the cloudy months of winter, it may be even more of a problem (for those in such climates.)

Find a positive addiction—something you get crazy about that can capture your attention and lift your spirits for a number of weeks, months, or even longer.

Begin an exercise program. Take up yoga or meditation.

Bury your nose in a good book. Join a support group.



Begin a journal and record your memories, stories, and immediate thoughts. Finish that memory scrapbook you always meant to start. Learn a new hobby or sport.

You will find as you devote time and energy to something that brings you personal satisfaction, your obsession with the feelings of loss and grief will gradually fade, and spring will brighten your days ahead.



## Suicide Grief...

*Continued from page 1*

Some suicide survivors have taught me that intense feelings of embarrassment are a big part of their journey through grief. Embarrassment, a close cousin to shame, may result from imagined (and sometimes actual) gossip about the suicide among neighbors, faith groups, colleagues, and other social circles. What are others saying, wondering or surmising about the person who died and the circumstances of death—and how does that make you feel? Harbored embarrassment may make you feel that you owe an explanation to the curious who want to know what went wrong. You may feel that stories are being twisted and untruths told. You do not owe anyone an explanation, but you can set the tone for others by talking as openly and honestly as you can about the death. Keep in mind that they may simply be wondering what happened and how they can help you.



As you explore the feelings related to your journey, remember that what you are doing is a vital part of your eventual healing. Keep in mind that although you may not have experienced some of the thoughts and feelings described in my book, you may in the future. In addition, these dimensions of potential feelings may be part of your experience, but they don't always unfold neatly in an orderly and predictable way.

### Here are the potential dimensions and feelings of suicide grief:

- Shock, numbness, denial, disbelief
- Disorganization, confusion, searching, yearning
- Anxiety, fear, panic
- Explosive emotions
- Guilt, regret, self-blame, shame, embarrassment
- Sadness, depression, loneliness, vulnerability
- Relief, release
- Integration, reconciliation

For purposes of this article, I will not be going into each of these dimensions specifically, I invite you to read my book *Understanding Your Suicide Grief—Ten Essential Touchstones for Finding Hope and Healing in Your Heart*, published in 2009. It is a comprehensive guide to learn about grief that comes with being a survivor of suicide. It will help you understand the language associated with suicide death and give you a safe place to embrace what you uniquely think and feel without the fear of being judged.

Movement toward your healing can be very draining and exhausting. As difficult as it might be, seek out people who give you hope for your healing. Realistically, even though you have hope for your healing, you should not expect it to happen overnight. Many grieving people think that it should and, as a result experience a loss of self-confidence and self-esteem that leaves them questioning their capacity to heal. You can't control death or ignore your human need to mourn when it impacts your life. You do, however, have the choice to help yourself heal. Embracing the pain of your grief is probably one of the hardest jobs you will ever do. As you do this work, surround yourself with compassionate, loving people who are willing to walk with you.

*Excerpts from Understanding Your Suicide Grief, ISBN 978-1-879651-58-6, printed with permission.*

# Understanding Grief Spring 2010 Seminar

Presented by Wings - a Grief Education Ministry



## Dr. Alan Wolfelt

A community seminar for grieving families

### Protect Them or Teach Them?

Understanding How Children and Teens Mourn

Monday, May 3, 2010  7:00 - 9:00 p.m.

Free of charge and open to the public

Grief is an experience shared by both adults and children. When a parent, sibling, friend, or relative dies, children feel the overwhelming loss of someone who helped shape their fragile self-identities. Children at different ages respond to grief in unique ways. Recognize the signs of grief needing attention and honor grief expressed. Adults have a responsibility to help young people understand both the joy and the pain that comes from caring deeply for others. A variety of subtopics will be explored in an effort to help participants learn how to artfully "companion" children and teens impacted by death loss.

### Providing Extraordinary Grief Support for Families with Sudden, Violent or Suicide Deaths

Tuesday, May 4, 2010  9:00 am – 12:00 noon

Cost: \$40

Intense grief experiences raise a sense of helplessness and despair. There is an instinctive need to understand "why did this happen" and the doubt of "how will I survive this reality if it did happen." Some create social stigmas. Some create mysteries, but all require giving attention to the special needs for healing. Learn how to help families intentionally mourn the death and help them believe in their capacity to heal. Help them to not only survive, but to truly live, again. This informative seminar will help members of the caregiving community who want to further develop their knowledge and skills on helping people mourn sudden, violent or suicide deaths.

Both seminars will be held at

#### The Plaza Hotel & Suites

201 North 17th Avenue,  
Wausau, WI



For information or a  
program brochure contact:

Nan Zastrow 715.845.4159

or

Amy Kitsemel 715.847.2703

#### CEUs approved for both programs:

- WI Department of Regulation and Licensing
- IACET (International Association for Continued Education)

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