



Honoring the Past and
Rebuilding the Future

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published by Nan Zastrow

ELetter

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Holiday Sorrows and Precious Gifts

by Thomas Attig

I am sure that I am not alone in approaching Thanksgiving, Christmas, Hanukkah, and New Years with sorrow in my heart over the death of a loved one. I hope these reflections will provide guidance for reaching through the sorrows of loss in the coming season.

During the holidays, the pain of separation from loved ones who have died can become acute and preoccupying. Many will feel especially distant from others when the world is caught up in material consumption and merriment. It's hard not to resent life in the world around us going on as if nothing has happened when loss has brought profound change in the world of our experience. Others can be, or at least seem, so joyful when we are so far from being so, our grief so not in the spirit of the season.

Many of my own dear friends and a close relative have died this year, but the loss of my best friend of over sixty years has been the most challenging for me. Bill was born only three days before me, and we grew up living but two short blocks apart. We met and played together even before we entered kindergarten. We attended the same schools, were best friends in high school (through times of serious illness for him), and edited our yearbook together. We maintained contact through the years as we went our own ways into marriages and academic careers. I never tired of telling stories of his remarkable academic and public accomplishments and of our early days together.

Bill and I became close again about twelve years ago when we both moved to the San Francisco Bay area. We teamed again on another book project, *Catching Your Breath in Grief...and grace will lead you home*, a gift book for the bereaved featuring my writing and his uncannily matched nature photographs. It seemed to us as if a special grace brought us together on the project, as we breathed deeply again into our friendship and talked regularly about things that really matter.

Then, one morning in late May, Bill's housekeeper found him dead in his bed. My heartache was made worse by growing awareness of how very alone he was in the last days and years of his life. In all likelihood, I was the last person to speak with him. Looking ahead to the holidays, I appreciate in my bones how dissonance with the season can feed alienation, resentment, and intense sadness.

I have long held that at its heart grief challenges us to move from loving in presence to loving in separation. As we grieve, we relearn the world of our experience, one filled with things, places, events, other people, and aspects of our selves that painfully remind us of separation from those we mourn. We struggle to relearn how to be "at home" in the world again (soul work) and to reshape our daily lives and stretch into new and unexpected chapters of our life stories (spirit work).

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EDITOR'S JOURNAL

I AM WHO I AM—after Grief



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

The High School Class Reunion. Isn't it a time to reunite with dozens of friends and acquaintances from many years past and socialize one more time? Doesn't it also demand that you "reveal" how life has treated you? That's the most likely scenario of such a gathering that I can think of. For some, this is highly anticipated; for others, it can bring anxiety. I admit to being one of those in the latter category. But, a promise is a promise so I decided to go. I was pleasantly surprised by the lessons I learned about the gifts that grief can give you that pass the test of time.

I haven't gone to a class reunion since the death of our son twenty years ago. Life had irreversibly changed, and I didn't want to fess up to almost strangers, acquaintances, and long-ago friends. I was sure I could predict how the scene would play out and how uncomfortable I would be. With leery anticipation, I primed myself for the inevitable question. "How many children do you have?"

I joked about this with my husband, Gary, before we went. "Remember that bus trip we went on right after Chad died?

We went because we wanted to "get away" from grief, mingle with new people, and find some moments of joy in something new and distant from home". It turned out that of the 20+ couples on the bus; all but one couple were strangers. Of course, their conversations began with one of four things: (1) "Do you know what the weather report is for today?" (2) "Where do you live?" (3) "What do you do for a living?" (4) "How many children do you have?...and, in the same breath, "Where do they live?"

Even though it's been 20 years, that open-ended question about children always demands a direct response. I also was dreading conversations about grandchildren..."How would I respond without a tear?" My loss of dreams regarding that aspect of life was still a sensitive issue with me.

It's our nature as humans to be curious about the lives of others. We especially want to know if life is treating them good; if they are healthy, and decidedly happy. Perhaps that was the reason I stayed away for so long. Some feelings were still very personal, and I didn't want to discuss how unexpected events had changed the life and experiences I anticipated when we were younger.

So why did I even consider going? It was a promise to a dear friend and classmate. Months before she died, I promised I would attend the reunion this year. Never expecting that she would die, I was secure that

there was one person there who understood my discomfort with the "twenty question" game about life. But, a promise is a promise...so I went.

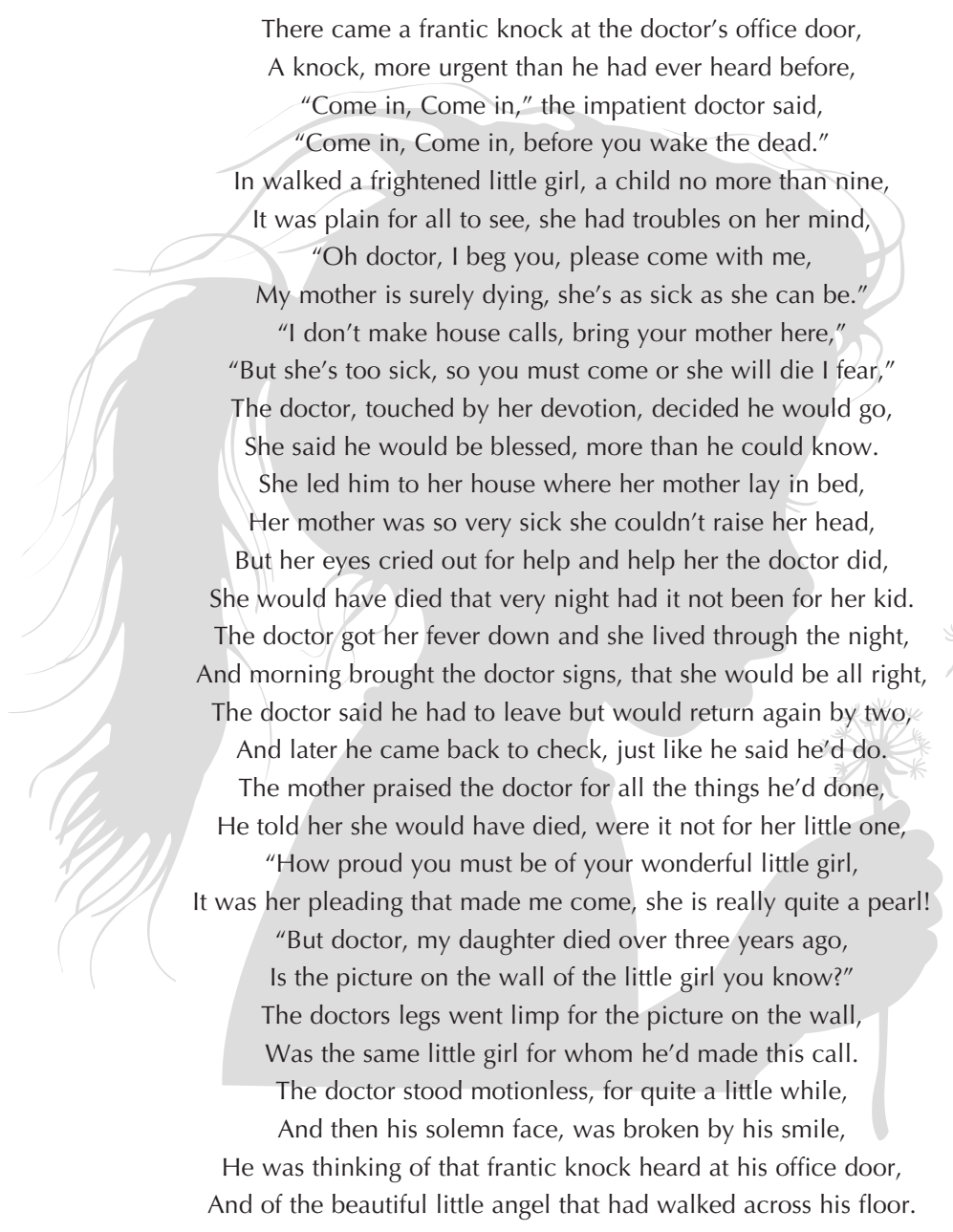
It surprised me as I greeted long-ago friends. Our conversations didn't center on the expected. Perhaps as we aged, it didn't make a difference any more where you worked or what you accomplished in life. The conversations centered more about what each was doing in their personal lives now. Few people focused on their health or over-emphasized their success (though there were several Porsche, Audi, and Mercedes in the parking lot.) And most just mentioned how great it was to be a grandparent or retired and finally enjoying a less stressful life. Travel/vacations, relocation, joyous life events, and the joy of grandchildren without asking your opinion were common topics of discussion. The evenings were filled with laughter, happiness, memories, stories, and youthful expressions mimicked by our older selves. It was a relief to know that the "twenty question" game was suspended with time.

Later, at home, I realized that over the span of years most everyone had their own "griefs" of one kind or another. And the class reunion was not the time or place to focus on the ups and downs in life. Of course a large number of classmates did not attend, for reasons unknown. Maybe, like me, they were hesitant to expose the events in

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Wonderful Little Girl

Author Unknown, Source Unknown



There came a frantic knock at the doctor's office door,
A knock, more urgent than he had ever heard before,
"Come in, Come in," the impatient doctor said,
"Come in, Come in, before you wake the dead."
In walked a frightened little girl, a child no more than nine,
It was plain for all to see, she had troubles on her mind,
"Oh doctor, I beg you, please come with me,
My mother is surely dying, she's as sick as she can be."
"I don't make house calls, bring your mother here,"
"But she's too sick, so you must come or she will die I fear,"
The doctor, touched by her devotion, decided he would go,
She said he would be blessed, more than he could know.
She led him to her house where her mother lay in bed,
Her mother was so very sick she couldn't raise her head,
But her eyes cried out for help and help her the doctor did,
She would have died that very night had it not been for her kid.
The doctor got her fever down and she lived through the night,
And morning brought the doctor signs, that she would be all right,
The doctor said he had to leave but would return again by two,
And later he came back to check, just like he said he'd do.
The mother praised the doctor for all the things he'd done,
He told her she would have died, were it not for her little one,
"How proud you must be of your wonderful little girl,
It was her pleading that made me come, she is really quite a pearl!"
"But doctor, my daughter died over three years ago,
Is the picture on the wall of the little girl you know?"
The doctor's legs went limp for the picture on the wall,
Was the same little girl for whom he'd made this call.
The doctor stood motionless, for quite a little while,
And then his solemn face, was broken by his smile,
He was thinking of that frantic knock heard at his office door,
And of the beautiful little angel that had walked across his floor.

Would you like to share your story or poem?

If you would like to submit a short story, poem, or article, we welcome it. The material does not need to be original, but if it isn't, please include the author or credits that can be printed along with the material.

We are looking for articles that inspire the bereaved, teach, and offer hope which is the focus of our ministry of Wings-a Grief Education Ministry. Poems or material may be submitted **In Memory** of your special loved one.

I Am Who I Am ...

Continued from page 2

their lives. Perhaps they were struggling with new “griefs” at that very moment. We all have lost loved ones. We all have had disappointments. We all have had setbacks.

The definition of “grief” is the loss of something valued. Grief is normal. Grief is natural. Grief is universal. Everyone grieves something at some time. It would also be nice to be able to put grief on hold on special days and events when one didn’t want it to interfere.

Grief (or loss of any kind) has several valuable assets that nothing else in life can give you. You transition into a new and improved person. Your self-worth shines with healing along your journey. Your perspectives in life become abundantly clear. You learn quite quickly who you really are—deep inside.

Life is full of losses...and whether a person at the reunion was grieving the death of a loved one or the loss of another kind of a relationship, it’s made an impact on who he or she is today. Some may have had or were currently experiencing health or

disability issues that they didn’t want to disclose. Some may have had children that didn’t live up to their expectations and felt the loss of parenthood-pride they so desired. Some got lost along the way and found something richer than they previously imagined. (And I’m sure a few got lost and never found their way back.) Some may have struggled with their waning youth and aging physical appearance. Heck, not one of us was getting any younger! And maybe some grieved for lost opportunities in life or in their careers. I have to admit I could never have accomplished all the goals I set for myself—but then I wasn’t realistic in time or talent. Life has a knack of derailing the best laid plans.

The most awesome discovery of all was the sense of “I am who I am”. Each of us was proud to be there...to be alive...when many classmates have already passed. There was no wimping about “if I could only live my life over.” This was an event about being there to celebrate life—at whatever stage of maturity we were at. And the “griefs”

we experienced were written in the lines in our faces, the kinks in our joints, and the color of or the absence of hair. Our successes or our under-achievements didn’t need to be discussed. We all lived life in the “fast lane” and coped with the issues one at a time, making choices about what we thought was best! Today, we were celebrating a different kind of success...we were celebrating self-confidence that comes with “been there...done that” and our unique selves.

I’m sure there were stories of great sorrow, stories of unimaginable pain or fear, and sad stories that could turn your personal “grief” story into just a bad day. But there were also stories of great accomplishments, fortunes found, lasting friendships and renewed friendships, knowledge acquired and shared, sacrifice, volunteerism from giving hearts, and love overflowing that were never mentioned. This was not the day to grieve or gloat. It was just a time to “BE” whoever we were at the moment and breathe in and out with the rhythms of life.

How To Connect With Wings:

- Email: wings1@charter.net
- Postal: P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401
- Phone: 715-845-4159
- Follow the EVENTS calendar posted at the website
- Subscribe to the free online ELetter sent quarterly.
- Visit our website: www.wingsgrief.org
- Order a Free copy of Grief Digest at www.centeringcorp.com
- Visit Wings on Facebook



Holiday Sorrows & Precious Gifts ...

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A key to reaching through this sorrow and doing the hard work of grieving is realizing that we often miss our loved ones most in encounters with exactly the same aspects of our world where we can, potentially, feel most connected with them. We need only shift our attention away from the pain of separation and see that connection. Kahlil Gibran said it well when he wrote, "When you are sorrowful, look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight." We meet not only sorrow but our loved ones' souls and spirits in the things, places, food and music, and social settings they have touched and left behind. And we meet them in aspects of ourselves that are like, or have been influenced by, them – our motivations, dispositions, desires, interests, preferences, values, behaviors, habits, souls, and spirits.

In C. S. Lewis's journal, *A Grief Observed*, written after his wife had died, he at first blames God for his agony. Going to God in prayer, he senses "a slammed door" when he needs God most. Later, he realizes that his own desperate longing for his wife's return was the source of his agony. Still later, he writes, "Something quite unexpected has happened. It came this morning early. For various reasons....My heart was lighter than it had been for many weeks.... And suddenly at the very moment when, so far, I mourned H. least, I remembered her best.... It was as if the lifting of the sorrow removed a barrier." After this experience, Lewis no longer meets the locked door when he turns to God. Instead, he sees God as having given him life, opened his heart to his wife's love late in life, and enabled him to love her still, even in separation. At the very end of his journal, he chooses praising God and his wife – God, the giver, and she the gift - as a way of tempering the pain of missing her. He says, "Praise is the mode of love which always has some element of joy in it.... Don't we in praise somehow enjoy what we praise, however far we are from it?"

Instead of attending to the pain of separation, we can attend to and appreciate the lives of the loved ones we mourn as irreplaceable gifts. Though they have died, the realities and meanings of their lives have not been cancelled. We can

cherish those we love and their legacies only if we acknowledge them through memory. As we bring aspects of the past into present experience, remembering and sharing memories with others enrich present living. We reconnect with some of the best in life, recognize and cherish legacies, and feel the warmth of loving them and being loved in return. Like Lewis, we can meet and hold them in places of praise, gratitude, and joy in our hearts.

Knowing and loving our loved ones and being known and loved by them have made indelible differences in us and how we live. They may have given us *practical legacies*, including material goods, biological inheritances, obligations and responsibilities, advice and counsel, knacks for doing things, interests, and, in some cases, vocations. They may have left us *soulful legacies*, including our roots in individual, family and community traditions, histories and characters as well as ways of caring for and about and loving things, places, food and music, our selves, others, and our families and communities. And they may have given us *spiritual legacies*, including ways of soaring in peak experiences, striving to improve our life circumstances, becoming the best we can be – changing and growing, overcoming adversity (including sorrow), and searching for understanding and meaning.

We can reach through our sorrows to remember the lives, souls, and spirits of those we mourn in the holiday season; exchange memories with others in our families and friendship circles; and make our loved ones' legacies our own. Surely these gifts are among the most precious things we have ever been given, far more precious than any material gifts that we or others might exchange! And there can be no better time of the year to appreciate and express gratitude for such gifts.

My own experience with Bill's death this year has been putting these ideas to the test. And they have been serving me well. My sorrow at missing Bill will always be with me, but I know now that it doesn't need to dominate my experience in bereavement. I realize that it was not within my power to prevent Bill's dying in isolation from others, though this, too, will always sadden me.

Holiday Sorrows & Precious Gifts ...

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I have been able to reach through these sorrows to reclaim and cherish the many legacies that Bill has left me, including the stories about him that I will no doubt continue to delight in and tell until I die, a remarkable mosaic he made as a teen that sits framed on an easel in my home, his incredible photos and the soul and spirit in them that I am able to share with readers of my new book, and the indelible differences he made in me through the years of our knowing one another. No doubt, I will hold these gifts dear through this year's holidays and in the years to come.

I seem to have found my way to grieve in part in terms of this passage from *Catching Your Breath in Grief...and grace will lead you home*:

Being grateful

You breathe most deeply into life when you accept heartache as the price of love. You would not hurt so much had you not been given a unique place in the great web of life, a life to live, soul and spirit with which to live it, and the privilege of loving and being loved by the one you grieve. The pain of missing him or her is an inevitable companion to the joy of his or her sharing life with you.

Avoiding love out of fear of sorrow would have cost you all you miss. And allowing fear to control you as you enter the next chapters of life would cost you all you still have.

When you realize your good fortune in having your loved one in your life, an amazing grace assures you that courage, hope, and joy outweigh fear, despair, and sorrow. You live more fully when you are grateful.

In the holiday season ahead, may each of you reach through the sorrow of missing your loved ones who have died, remember them well, and embrace their most precious gifts in gratitude.

December 2012

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Catching Your Breath in Grief, mentioned in the piece is available at Amazon.



Be Good to Yourself - A Care Tip



Faith during grief can be challenging for many. Some are angry at God for the tragedy that has changed life. It's a time of chaos, uncertainty, and sometimes, unpopular decisions about worship, prayer, and "having faith." A bereaved person may not feel comfortable with prayer, if you offer to companion them that way. If you are companioning a bereaved person, ask before assuming that faith and prayer are needed at that very moment. Let them tell you, if they wish to join you in a spiritual request. If you are a bereaved person feeling challenged by your loss of confidence in God, prayer and the church, be assured that this is typically temporary as you regain your trust.

(Read the article at our website Faith is Like Insurance. **www.wingsgrief.org**)

Grief is a journey that doesn't invite you to desirable destinations. Instead, it challenges you to bypass the regrets, overcome the obstacles, and take consolation in your amazing resilience. Nan Zastrow

From the Archives

Stories worth repeating...



What Do You Think?

Our readers share their thoughts on Healing Grief in 2013

FALL IS A TIME OF YEAR THAT BRINGS CHANGE. We are reminded that the leaves turn, wither and fall from the trees. It's often a time of sadness before the cool winter breeze sets in. But it is also a time of transition as you prepare for the season of change and the holidays ahead. What will you do differently this fall or this holiday to remember your loved one who died?

My husband of 35 years died from cancer within 16 days. We didn't have time to adjust to the word cancer and then he was gone. I remember many things about him that I try to incorporate into my life in honor of him: Bob's calmness and love of life. He was also faithful, respected his peers, and tried to help troubled youth. Taken too soon, November 17th 1952 to August 14th, 2011.

Sally Christian and son, Luke Christian

Reaching out to others has helped me tremendously. This Fall is the first time I am doing a fundraiser to provide free service dogs for disabled veterans. We will raise thousands and thousands of dollars. I plan on having a special part of the event to honor the veterans present. In memory of my son, Darren, for his birthday, I am having dinner in San Diego with his friends that live in that city.

*Maxine Russell
California*

When my son, Nathan, was alive I always planted tomatoes at the cabin. In recent years the trees have grown so there is now limited sunshine. I refuse to cut the trees for the sun. Land-O-Lakes developed a community garden in town. My sister and I invested in one plot to plant tomatoes. It is like a rebirth of an activity Nate and I did on a smaller scale at the cabin. It is refreshing to be doing something that I believed he and I enjoyed. My daughter saw the garden

and said, "Where are the sunflowers?" She reminded me that Nate liked sunflowers. Next year, we'll be planting sunflowers as a family affair.

*John Alt
Minnesota*

Everyone has to try their own way of coping. For many, a "different way" of doing things works best as the old traditions are far too difficult to handle. For others, of course, hanging on to the old traditions brings a sense of order, comfort and some semblance of peace. Honoring our loved ones, either by trying to live in a new way or by hanging on to the ways we have always lived, is a very personal choice. For me, I tried for the most part to hang onto the old ways. Tradition has always brought me comfort and still does, to this day.

*Bunny
Florida*

My husband and I lost our 16 year-old son to suicide this past November. We did not want to leave him out of Christmas, so we replaced his red stocking with a special white one.

*Susan Baker
Whiteland, Indiana*

From the Archives ...

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In Australia where I live, winter is just ending. This winter we planted a rose garden with bulbs all in my father-in-laws favorite colors. We worked on 5 photo collages – one for each of the grandchildren and one for my husband. It hasn't been a year yet. I can see that the cold weather and darkness affected our memories more. My husband also wrote some of the stories and memories of his dad. I sent a voice recorder to my mother-in-law for her to tell her feelings and her stories.

*KIM Kimball
Australia*

At Christmas, I put the same small, unopened, wrapped present out in memory of my hubby, Bob. He died unexpectedly in October 1999 and some of our family members had already purchased Christmas gifts for him before he died. (The idea came from one of Nan's When the Holidays Hurt workshops.)

In October, on the anniversary of Bob's death, every year I set aside that day to write in a journal, to tell him everything that happened during the year. I return to my favorite place every year at Rib Mt.

*Diane Nowak
Wausau, WI*

I began this on the anniversary of Jon's birthday when I sent him wishes in heaven in 2011. I purchase baby boy clothes and deliver them to Langlade Memorial Hospital where he was born.

*Tara Warwick
Antigo, WI*

A collection of responses by a support group from Chippewa Falls, WI

- Still write cards from both my spouse and I, include her name still on gift tags. It's a gift for me to see her name and the person receiving the gift is honored that she wasn't left out. Gift giving was her favorite thing to do.
- We set an empty chair up to the table on her favorite holiday, Thanksgiving.
- Light a candle when we gather as a family (funeral home candle) to include him always.
- Don't accept every invitation to parties or gatherings the first year as I was too tired and exhausted and felt all alone in a room full of people that were happy. I had to act (pretend) and that was difficult.
- Just tell others that I don't know what I want or how I want to celebrate the firsts. Thank them for caring and be honest letting them know I will call if I need them and then do it!
- Do her favorite thing and drive around looking at lights because she would do this. Bring a friend or grandchild instead to reminisce and have the support.
- Change where we celebrate the holidays as the memories are too painful.
- Journal more or write a letter after the celebrating to tell him what we did and how I did on that day missing him.
- Bake the favorite cookies, serve the favorite meal or dish, use the same bowl she would.

The Never Ending Pain

by Wendy Miller



A pain within ones heart
Is like a newly sharpened dart
Gouging,
thrusting,
piercing
with each devouring movement
slowly,
carelessly,
painfully
driving you to burst
yelling,
screaming,
crying,
As your the agony is killing you inside
Then the pain is
weakened,
faded,
subsided
Then living settles down
Until all the frustrations resurface
destructive,
explosive,
massive

The you remember its not the time or place so you hold it all in
Till comes again
And you wonder will this pain ever end?

Wings-a Grief Ministry Calendar

September 14, 2013

✦ Out of Darkness Walk-Marathon Park,
Wausau, WI

September 17,24, and Oct. 1,8,15,22

✦ Getting Back to Life After Loss-
Education/support Group Series

September 28, 2013

✦ Fox Cities Suicide Prevention Seminar-
Nan & Gary, Keynote Speakers

October 9, 2013

✦ Wisconsin Hospital Association Partners,
Speaker

December 3, 2013

✦ When the Holidays Hurt workshop,
Wausau, WI

The 2014 Schedule of Events will be published soon. Check our website for details.
For more information about any of these events, contact Nan at wings1@charter.net.