

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

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## A Collection of Stories From Hospice

*Amy Kitsemel, Bereavement Coordinator, Wausau, WI*

Hospice calls the soul to work. Most folks who work in the field of end-of-life care speak of being 'called' to this kind of work. As a bereavement coordinator, I have never known more loving and compassionate people. Doing good work in hospice requires an ability to be present to another's journey as they cross from this world to the next. Here are a few stories of the amazing presence they witness as patients and families prepare for the end of life. (Names have been removed or changed to provide anonymity.)

**Telling the stories:** Once a family chooses end of life care for a family member who has battled disease, they are introduced to a new phase of comfort care that can be relieving, saddening, exhausting, and yet, a rewarding experience. One family found emotions running very high when imminent death was certain; and they struggled about 'how to be' with this woman they loved. The family kept a vigil at their grandma/mom's bedside, and wrapped her with a prayer shawl and adorned the room with her favorite photos. They proceeded in sharing stories of times together. She would try to join in as if to try to finish or alter the story, which was true to character, as she often was the storyteller. These stories helped her pass comfortably on her journey home.

**An angel named Michael:** Ray always was a bit cantankerous when folks came by to visit. After a few weeks of one CNA coming in to visit, he started to warm up to her. They struck up several conversations along the way as his disease progressed. One Saturday she was in for a visit and he exclaimed, 'I will be dead in two weeks'. She inquired why he felt that; and he explained he had a dream the night before in which a large dark angel visited him. He had been praying for an answer as to when he would die. Ray further told this large angel's name was Michael. He was so large he had to duck down to come into the room through the door. Ray asked him, "How much longer?" The angel told him two weeks. The CNA was amazed at his clarity of recollection of this and was concerned for him if he lived beyond this prediction. She wondered what that might do for his comfort. It was fourteen days until the time of his dream when Ray died.

**A rainbow bear:** A young mother died in her early forties leaving 6 children under the age of 17 to be raised by her mom. We only knew this mother for three days before her death, but her spirit touched each who know her and cared for her. The bereavement coordinator met with the children, never knowing the mom before. The children seemed so wise and well-rounded, especially the littlest one. When she received a stuffed animal from the Grief Center, she remarked, "Oh look at the beautiful colors on my bear. A rainbow bear. .... I will always see this and remember the love my mom gave me. I will remember her love in the rainbow." These children learned love, patience and spiritual intelligence through the teachings of their mom. With the support of our chaplain, their mom's memorial service consisted of the children's writings and a service that honored her spiritual grace that she passed on to her beautiful children.

## IN THE PRESENCE OF ANGELS!



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

In 1995, I wrote an article for Wings, and I said. "I can't say I've ever seen an angel. But I do believe they have intervened in my life, without showing me their presence. Angels are everything I want them to be, whether they are the heavenly or real-life kind. I can see visions of angels in the bright morning light, in the essence of my dreams,

and in the realities of life's experiences. But, I admit to knowing some real-life angels too."

That article still intrigues me because it was written at a time when angels brought me lots of hope. I collected Seraphim angels. I created an angelic Christmas tree. I felt comforted by the thought that these heavenly beings existed and brought goodness, protection, and peace into the souls of grieving people.

On more than one occasion, I was also reminded about the real-life angels and the messages they sometimes brought to us when we really needed them. Some brought messages that comforted me after Chad died—because I missed him so much. There were messages like this that I wrote about:

On a misty autumn day, I visited Chad's grave to say a prayer. I needed a place to go to be all alone. Just a short time to gather my thoughts and strengthen my sense of hope. Some place where I felt close to God. Planted in the wet soil, near the stone, were two fresh carnations, tied with a bow. A message on a card read, "I miss you, Chad." The young woman (I'm assuming a woman) who left this thoughtful gift is still a mystery to me. But, she brightened my day with a ray of hope. She still missed Chad, just like me. It was nice to know that even people I didn't know missed him.

Only a few days later, I received a phone call from one of Chad's friends. I missed his friends. Someone was always at the house getting ready for the next hunting trip; gathering camping equipment; raiding the refrigerator; or watching movies sprawled on the floor. The first year after his death (1993), it was common to see one of them at the door or on the phone, but as the years went by, life got busy..

and in the natural sequence of things; we didn't see his friends any more. But on this particular day, the phone call was the message reminding me how often they thought about Chad.

Lately, I've been especially intrigued by angels of the earthly kind—those that happen into our lives, just because. These angels can touch, feel, see, and get to know us. We bond with them. We experience life with them. There is no question about their existence.

I've met a lot of special angels during my journey through grief. Many of them I've met through our grief work and called them "friends." Like me, they were people struggling to make sense out of this turn of events in their lives that changed who they were and what their purpose was.

During this holiday season, I want to acknowledge all my angels. I can't name you by name because the list would be too long. And, more than one of you would protest saying you don't feel worthy of your name being on a List of Angels. That's what makes you so special. You don't have to feel like an angel to be one. But, in my heart, I believe you are.

You were there when I needed you. You were there when the day wasn't as bright as I wanted to be. You were there when the news I received wasn't as good as I wanted it to be. You were there when I didn't feel as good as I thought I should. You were there to pat me on the shoulder with a sincere pat that meant, "it's okay". You were there in tragedy and triumph. You were there.

You may have come to me in your own grief and allowed me to feel your pain. I felt humbled by the raw emotion, I thought I could forget. You graciously allowed me to share my stories about Chad—and witness to life's transition. We shared the burden of buried grief. You allowed me to teach you about grief, and support you on your own journey. What you didn't realize was that listening to you continually heals my own spirit. In those times, we are angels ministering to each other bearing witness to life changed by loss.

Even on great days, you were there. You gave me accolades on something I wrote. You flattered me

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## In the presence of angels ...

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when I shouldn't have been flattered. You were there to laugh with me. You even found fun in laughing at me for my comical blunders. You were there to enjoy good times, fun times...great events. You shared old memories and created new ones.

You are family. You are a friend. You are a relative. You are my spouse. You are a neighbor. You are a casual acquaintance. You are a co-worker. You are someone I've recently met or someone I've known forever. You know who you are...but you don't know that you are an angel.

Let your light continue to shine. Let your goodness continue to bless those around you. You are special. You are appreciated. You are loved. You'll always be my angel. I'm honored to live in the presence of angels. God Bless Them Everyone!

### *Christmas in Heaven*

*by Unknown*

'Tis Christmas in Heaven  
What a beautiful sight!  
It's my first one here;  
Everything is all right.  
The crib is adorned  
With the brilliance of stars,  
Wisemen have come  
From Venus and Mars.  
I've met all our dear ones  
Who preceded us here;  
The reunion was lovely,  
An event full of cheer.  
And tonight we'll all gather,  
In reverence we'll kneel,  
For the Babe in the cradle  
Up in Heaven is Real.  
I think of my family  
that I left behind  
And I pray that your Christmas  
Is as blessed as mine  
Please shed no more tears,  
For my soul is at rest,  
Just love one another;  
Live life to its best.  
Yes, It's Christmas In Heaven,  
So I've heard them say,  
Yet, Christmas In Heaven  
Happens every day.

## The Child That is Not There

It's Christmas time,  
the gifts are wrapped,  
And piled beneath the tree,  
Yet every year there's an absence,  
That is only felt by me.

I prepare the table for the feast,  
And bow my head in prayer,  
I try my best to hide my grief,  
For the child that is not there.

We raise our glasses for a toast,  
To family and to friends,  
But all that I am wishing for,  
Is to hold you once again.  
So amidst the Christmas joy,  
Is an emptiness I bear,  
An ever present heartache  
For the child that is not there.

And when I see my children laugh,  
With that twinkle in their eyes,  
I cannot help but wonder,  
If you think of me sometimes.

And when the day comes to an end,  
No grief can quite compare,  
To another Christmas yearning  
For the child that is not there.

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# Santa & Sarah

## *Inspirational Story*

Three years ago, a little boy and his grandmother came to see Santa at the Mayfair Mall in Wisconsin. The child climbed up on his lap, holding a picture of a little girl. "Who is this?" asked Santa, smiling.

"Your friend? Your sister?" "Yes, Santa," he replied. "My sister, Sarah, who is very sick," he said sadly.

Santa glanced over at the grandmother who was waiting nearby, and saw her dabbing her eyes with a tissue. "She wanted to come with me to see you, oh, so very much, Santa!" the child exclaimed.

"She misses you," he added softly.

Santa tried to be cheerful and encouraged a smile to the boy's face, asking him what he wanted Santa to bring him for Christmas. When they finished their visit, the Grandmother came over to help the child off his lap, and started to say something to Santa, but halted.

"What is it?" Santa asked warmly.

"Well, I know it's really too much to ask you, Santa, but ..." the old woman began, shooing her grandson over to one of Santa's elves to collect the little gift which Santa gave all his young visitors.. "The girl in the photograph... my granddaughter well, you see ... she has leukemia and isn't expected to make it even through the holidays," she said through tear-filled eyes.

"Is there any way, Santa . any possible way that you could come see Sarah? That's all she's asked for, for Christmas, is to see Santa."

Santa blinked and swallowed hard and told the woman to leave information with his elves as to where Sarah was, and he would see what he could do. Santa thought of little else the rest of that afternoon.

He knew what he had to do. "What if it were MY child lying in that hospital bed, dying," he thought with a sinking heart, "This is the least I can do."

When Santa finished visiting with all the boys and girls that evening, he retrieved from his helper the

name of the hospital where Sarah was staying. He asked the assistant location manager how to get to Children's Hospital.

"Why?" Rick asked, with a puzzled look on his face.

Santa relayed to him the conversation with Sarah's grandmother earlier that day.

"C'mon.....I'll take you there." Rick said softly.

Rick drove them to the hospital and came inside with Santa. They found out which room Sarah was in. A pale Rick said he would wait out in the hall.

Santa quietly peeked into the room through the half-closed door and saw little Sarah on the bed.

The room was full of what appeared to be her family; there was the Grandmother and the girl's brother he had met earlier that day. A woman whom he guessed was Sarah's mother stood by the bed, gently pushing Sarah's thin hair off her forehead. And another woman who he discovered later was Sarah's aunt, sat in a chair near the bed with a weary, sad look on her face. They were talking quietly, and Santa could sense the warmth and closeness of the family, and their love and concern for Sarah.

Taking a deep breath, and forcing a smile on his face, Santa entered the room, bellowing a hearty, "Ho, ho, ho!"

"Santa!" shrieked little Sarah weakly, as she tried to escape her bed to run to him, IV tubes intact. Santa rushed to her side and gave her a warm hug. A child the tender age of his own son -- 9 years old -- gazed up at him with wonder and excitement.

Her skin was pale and her short tresses bore telltale bald patches from the effects of chemotherapy. But all he saw when he looked at her was a pair of huge, blue eyes. His heart melted, and he had to force himself to choke back tears.

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# Twelve Gifts of Hope—a Continuing Tradition

This project began in 2008 as a result of our holiday program How A Fortune Cookie Can Heal Holiday Grief. We began collecting stories from people about how others have given them the gift of hope during their grief journeys. Additionally, we challenged the bereaved to give themselves a gift of hope in one or more of the 12 ways. Our follow-up program in 2009 continues the tradition and tells of some of its successes.

In this column, you will have the privilege to read what others have submitted about receiving their own Gifts of Hope. Please consider sending us your story. In December 2009, we will begin posting these stories at our website [www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org).



## *The Gift of Hope is... to Honor a Grief Burst—A Happy Memory of the Way it Used to Be.*

My sister-in-law sent me a picture of my son sitting on a log eating chicken from a bucket many years ago. My brother asked my son to come there to help him with something and fish (which was one of my son's favorite sports). I don't remember ever seeing the picture before—and didn't even recall the event. It was a heart-warming memory that someone chose to share with me about their time with my son. (Wausau)

One day in Walgreens (about a year after my father died) I was having a great day. I just finished what I needed to do when my eyes zoomed in on a greeting card that read, "Happy Birthday to the Best Father Ever." The tears just came and I was hoping no one would notice me. I put on my sunglasses and pretended to still be looking around. Other things have caused grief bursts too: a special song, spring with the yard work and flowers. These were things my father loved to do. (Betty D.-Wausau)

## ***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

## Santa & Sarah

*Continued from page 4*

Though his eyes were riveted upon Sarah's face, he could hear the gasps and quiet sobbing of the women in the room. As he and Sarah began talking, the family crept quietly to the bedside one by one, squeezing Santa's shoulder or his hand gratefully, whispering "Thank you" as they gazed sincerely at him with shining eyes.

Santa and Sarah talked and talked, and she told him excitedly all the toys she wanted for Christmas, assuring him she'd been a very good girl that year.

As their time together dwindled, Santa felt led in his spirit to pray for Sarah, and asked for permission from the girl's mother. She nodded in agreement and the entire family circled around Sarah's bed, holding hands.

Santa looked intensely at Sarah and asked her if she believed in angels. "Oh, yes, Santa.... I do!" she exclaimed.

"Well, I'm going to ask that angels watch over you." he said. Laying one hand on the child's head, Santa closed his eyes and prayed. He asked that God touch little Sarah, and heal her body from this disease.

He asked that angels minister to her, watch and keep her. And when he finished praying, still with eyes closed, he started singing, softly, "Silent Night, Holy Night.... all is calm, all is bright..."

"The family joined in, still holding hands, smiling at Sarah, and crying tears of hope, tears of joy for this moment, as Sarah beamed at them all.

When the song ended, Santa sat on the side of the bed again and held Sarah's frail, small hands in his own. "Now, Sarah," he said authoritatively, "you have a job to do, and that is to concentrate on getting well. I want you to have fun playing with your friends this summer, and I expect to see you at my house at Mayfair Mall this time next year!"

He knew it was risky proclaiming that to this little girl who had terminal cancer, but he "had" to. He had to give her the greatest gift he could -- not dolls or games or toys -- but the gift of HOPE.

"Yes, Santa!" Sarah exclaimed, her eyes bright. He leaned down and kissed her on the forehead and left the room. Out in the hall, the minute Santa's

eyes met Rick's, a look passed between them and they wept unashamed.

Sarah's mother and grandmother slipped out of the room quickly and rushed to Santa's side to thank him.

"My only child is the same age as Sarah," he explained quietly. "This is the least I could do." They nodded with understanding and hugged him.

One year later, Santa Mark was again back on the set in Milwaukee for his six-week, seasonal job which he so loves to do. Several weeks went by and then one day a child came up to sit on his lap.

"Hi, Santa! Remember me?!" "Of course, I do," Santa proclaimed (as he always does), smiling down at her. After all, the secret to being a "good" Santa is to always make each child feel as if they are the "only" child in the world at that moment.

You came to see me in the hospital last year!" Santa's jaw dropped. Tears immediately sprang in his eyes, and he grabbed this little miracle and held her to his chest. "Sarah!" he exclaimed. He scarcely recognized her, for her hair was long and silky and her cheeks were rosy -- much different from the little girl he had visited just a year before.

He looked over and saw Sarah's mother and grandmother in the sidelines smiling and waving and wiping their eyes. That was the best Christmas ever for Santa Claus.

He had witnessed -- and been blessed to be instrumental in bringing about -- this miracle of hope. This precious little child was healed. Cancer-free. Alive and well. He silently looked up to Heaven and humbly whispered, "Thank you, Father. 'Tis a very, Merry Christmas!"

### 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 or mail to Wings-a Grief Education Ministry, P.O. Box 1051, Wausau, WI 54401.

## *Be Good to Yourself — A Care Tip*

### THE CHRISTMAS ORNAMENT

I learned a lesson of love from my youngest son, Scotty, after TJ died. I didn't feel like celebrating anything, let alone putting Christmas decorations up. But TJ wasn't my only child. Scotty was 5 years old when TJ died, and although he missed his little brother, he was excited about getting the Christmas tree decorated for the holidays.

Always before, I found so much joy in carefully hanging each ornament on the tree, recalling the special meaning of each and every one. Each clothespin reindeer Scott had constructed, each felt ornament that my mom had lovingly sewn. The lacy crocheted snowflakes from Grandma's treasures and the Hallmark yearly ornaments purchased for the boys, reflecting some memory frozen in time.

But this year, the memories would surely be too painful for me to handle. I couldn't bear to think about TJ not being with us this year. But there was Scotty dancing around the tree, waiting with anticipation in his eyes as I opened the boxes of decorations that I knew would tear my emotional wounds wide open again.

Carefully, I unwrapped each ornament, handing them to Scotty to place on the tree. Out came the clothespin reindeer, the snowflakes and the ceramic ornaments. Then I unwrapped the beautiful glass ball announcing "Baby's First Christmas, 1978", celebrating the arrival of Scott, our first born. Scotty placed it on the tree, right

in the front. Reaching for the next ornament and unwrapping it, I looked down at the ornament that said, "Baby's First Christmas, 1980" on it. I felt a crushing pain where my heart had been. There would be no more Christmas's for TJ. He had lived only three short years. With tears running down my cheeks, I hastily wrapped the paper back around the ornament. Scotty reached over with his small hands and stopped me.

"What are you doing, Mommy? That's TJ's ball!" I looked into his eyes and wondered how I would explain. In his infinite child's wisdom, he wrapped his little arms around me and hugged me. "It's okay Mommy. I miss TJ too." "I want to put his ball on the tree next to mine so I will always remember him when I look at it". "I don't want to forget him, I want to REMEMBER him!", he said emphatically.

I looked down and realized that I could not forget my pain or cover it up by avoiding the things that held my memories of TJ. It may take some time to be able to look on these treasures and feel the joy again, but it would come. I learned from a small boy that remembering, not trying to forget, held the key to hope and healing for my heart. And today, 25 years later, we still put TJ's ornaments on our tree, and I smile and remember the joy.

*Debbi Northrop-Wicks, Lincoln, Nebraska*

## **Holiday Message**

I said a Christmas Prayer for you because the season's near. I didn't ask for riches but for gifts so much more dear. I asked for joyful gatherings with you family all around, and for the carols to inspire you with their old familiar sound. I asked for quiet moments in your heart on Christmas morn, for a special time to celebrate the Savior who was born. I asked for friends to send their best that you might know they care. I asked for peace, and love and hope, and I know God heard my prayer.

***Merry Christmas and Happy New Year from Wings—a Grief Education Ministry***  
Nan and Gary Zastrow

*Winter 2009 ELetter: Wings--A Grief Education Ministry*  
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