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## The Spiritual Path to Healing

by Alan Wolfelt, Fort Collins, Colorado

After the death of someone loved, you are “torn apart” and have some very unique needs. Among these needs is to nurture yourself in five important areas: physically, emotionally, cognitively, socially and spiritually. In the coming months, this column will focus on nurturing yourself in the spiritual realm. When someone we love dies, it is like a deep hole implodes inside of us. It's as if the hole penetrates us and leaves us gasping for air. I have always said we mourn life losses from the inside out. In my experience, it is only when we are spiritually nurtured (inside and outside) that we discover the courage to mourn openly and honestly. To integrate spiritual practices into your life demands a reminder that:

- Spirituality invites you to slow down and turn inward.
- Spirituality invites you to feel deeply and to believe passionately.
- Spirituality invites you to get to know your authentic self.
- Spirituality invites you to celebrate diversity.
- Spirituality invites you to be open to the mystery.

To practice spiritual self-care doesn't mean you are feeling sorry for yourself. Rather, it means you are allowing yourself to have the courage to pay attention to your special needs. For it is in spiritually nurturing ourselves, in allowing ourselves the time and loving attention we need to journey

through our grief, that we find meaning in our continued living. That is why, if I could, I would encourage all of us when we are in the midst of grief to put down “Nurture my spirit” first on our daily to-do lists.

Perhaps you have noticed that our world has gotten much smaller religiously in the last fifty years. Eastern religions and spiritual practices arrived in the United States and Canada a little more than 150 years ago. Then, in the 1960s, we saw books, lectures, and workshops from folks like Thich Nhat Hanh and Ram Dass, who invited us Westerners to explore Eastern spiritual practices. This influx of Eastern traditions and practices created new life to spirituality in North America. While our differences still define us, our potential to borrow meaningful spiritual practices from each other unites us. The great equalizer-death-invites us to be enriched by learning from each other.

As you read this article, while I encourage you to nurture yourself spiritually, I recognize that spirituality and religiosity are not synonymous. In some people's lives they overlap completely; their religious life is their spiritual life. Other people have a rich spiritual life with few or no ties to an organized religion. Obviously, each of us needs to define our own spirituality in the depths of our own hearts and minds. The paths we choose will be our own, discovered through self-examination, reflection, and spiritual transformation. When grief and

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## EDITOR'S JOURNAL



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

# *To Have or to Hold —Letting Go of Rummage and Grief*

It's rummage sale time of the year again in our township. This is more than just a weekend de-cluttering project...it's an EVENT! Big time! Our entire township hosts the event every year at the same time and it's become notorious for bargains, socializing, and clutter control. Hundreds and hundreds of people swarm the streets for 2-3 days and bargain for every imaginable item. It's about repurposing someone's obsolete items into something perfectly useful for another period of time in someone else's home.

Little did I realize before we moved to this part of our city how important this ritual is in consolidating baggage and neutralizing regrets. And especially, how it parallels to another important "event" in my life....healing my grief. For years, I've stored items with once-important memories and hung on to the things I bought in a weak moment and later regretted buying. Keeping them was my way of not facing the loss. Now focusing on putting these things in a rummage sale has been a primary lesson in "letting go." I didn't understand this important ritual at first, but when I got caught up in its redeeming factors, I wrote an article confessing my lessons learned (FOR SALE: Madness, Memories, and Maybes.)

We are a culture who prizes our possessions. Some gather toys—both big and small. Some hoard favorite collectibles for value, whimsy, prestige, or estimated resale. And some possess...just because they can. After the death of a loved one, family members are often charged with distribution of these prized possessions and may be seriously challenged by making appropriate decisions that would satisfy the deceased, if he or she had a say.

We are often asked in our grief groups, "What do we do about the stuff—the personal belongings of our loved one who died?" That's where the pain comes in...that's when the grief bursts hit home. It can be a daunting task of realizing you have to deal with your loved one's personal items. The first thing I tell everyone is "You have to be ready to let go of each item. If you aren't, DON'T! There will be a time later when it won't be so painful." I remember a few years after Chad's death, I was going to go through a trunk of many baby clothes that belonged to Chad. I was ready to pass them on until I opened a very small shoe box and inside were a pair of baby booties that reduced me to sobbing beyond control. Of all the things in the trunk, I'm not sure why this item made an intimidating connection. I closed the trunk and instinctively knew, I wasn't ready yet. Years later, I resolved to open it again... knowing the booties were still in there, but prepared to make my decisions about distribution at that time. This time I was ready with

my emotions and my resolve. It was okay.

Other items of Chad received random distribution over the years, mostly to friends who would appreciate specific items like his patriotic quilt, some military T-shirts, fishing gear, and sporting goods. His precious Army boots I wrote about were the latest items of significance I parted with. But I still have 2 tubs of Chad's simply identified as "can't get rid of these things yet". Such items in the tubs include his leather baseball glove, military insignia, school diploma, pictures, Rubik's cube that he mastered, and small toys. It's okay to keep items which are "linking objects" that relate to significant memories. They feed my need for feel, touch and warmth—relating to the good times. I may never choose to part with them for as long as I live.

"What about all those things I "saved" for my loved one...and now I have no one to give them to?" This question is a valid follow-up to the first one from bereaved people in our groups. This one was for me my emotional meltdown. For years, I "saved" special items (keepsakes) I wanted to give to Chad. Things like furniture, paper documents, jewelry that had a "legacy" story to go with them and belonged to deceased parents and grandparents. My husband, Gary, always reminded me—"Don't save things for the wrong reasons. Maybe he (Chad) won't have any desire to have the items when he is an adult and settles down." But

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# Magnolias

## An Inspirational Story

\*I was getting ready for my daughter June's wedding which was taking place in a church about forty miles away, and felt loaded with responsibilities as I watched my budget dwindle..... So many details, so many bills, and so little time.

My son Jack said he would walk his younger sister down the aisle, taking the place of his dad who had died a few years before. He teased Patsy, saying he'd wanted to give her away since she was about three years old!

To save money, I gathered blossoms from several friends who had large magnolia trees. Their luscious, creamy-white blooms and slick green leaves would make beautiful arrangements against the rich dark wood inside the church.

The big day arrived - the busiest day of my life - and while her bridesmaids helped Patsy to dress, her fiancé, Tim, walked with me to the sanctuary to do a final check. When we opened the door and felt a rush of hot air, I almost fainted; and then I saw them - all the beautiful white flowers were black. Funeral black. An electrical storm during the night had knocked out the air conditioning system, and on that hot summer day, the



flowers had wilted and died.

I panicked, knowing I didn't have time to drive back to our hometown, gather more flowers, and return in time for the wedding and I certainly didn't have extra money to buy a new set from the florist in town.

Tim turned to me. 'Edna, can you get more flowers? I'll throw away these dead ones and put fresh flowers in these arrangements.' I mumbled, 'Sure,' as he be-bopped down the hall to put on his cuff links.

Alone in the large sanctuary, I looked up at the dark wooden beams in the arched ceiling. 'Lord,' I prayed, 'please help me. I don't know anyone in this town. Help me find someone willing to give me flowers - in a hurry!' I scurried out praying for the blessing of white magnolias.

As I left the church, I saw magnolia trees in the distance. I approached a house.... no dog in sight.... knocked on the door and an older man answered. So far so good. No shotgun. When I stated my plea the man beamed and said.... 'I'd be happy to!'

He climbed a stepladder and cut large boughs and handed them down to me. Minutes later, as I lifted the last armload into my car trunk, I said, 'Sir, you've made the mother of a bride happy today.'

No, Ma'am,' he said. 'You don't understand what's happening here.'

'What?' I asked.

'You see, my wife of sixty-seven years died on Monday. On Tuesday I received friends at the funeral home, and on Wednesday..... He paused. I saw tears welling up in his eyes. 'On Wednesday I buried her.' He looked away. 'On Thursday most of my out-of-town relatives went back home, and on Friday - yesterday - my children left.'

I nodded.

'This morning,' he continued, 'I was sitting in my den crying out loud. I miss her so much. For the last sixteen years, as

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### 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.

## To Have or to Hold ...

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for me, it seemed like a logical thing to do.

Who wouldn't want those keepsakes? Perhaps I was raised in a family where such items had more meaning. Many of today's youth aren't quite as attached to the significant heirloom items. But to me they were treasures meant to be "passed on."

When Chad died, and the other relatives seemed uninterested in these prized possessions, I realize Gary was probably right. So each year, I slowly reassess the value of such treasures and either pass one or two on or sell them at my rummage sale to someone else who would appreciate them. Additionally, some family heirlooms have gone to the historical society; some to persons unknown; and some to caring family/friends who expressed interest. I realize the legacy I value most is not the item but rather the richness of the story that surrounds the item. Letting go of the item does not negate the memories and having the physical item isn't that important any more.

Most things in my rummage sale, (especially since it has been a few years and I've removed excess baggage), are items that deserve to be there. They've out served their purpose; have been replaced with more up-to-date counterparts; are duplicates and

not needed; or simply, haven't been used or looked at in the past year or two. Just taking them off the shelves creates a euphoria within. It's all about making that decision to "let go."

I remember relevant stages in my grief that related to "letting go." After I made the choice, I felt "free" and less distracted by something that had a strange hold over me. For example:

When I let go of my anger...I accepted that I could not control all things in life.

When I let go of my pride...I accepted that suicide is not a taboo; it's just "death" by another name.

When I let go of my shudda, wudda, cuddas, I accepted that I probably couldn't have changed the outcome of this event anyhow.

When I let go of my regrets...I accepted that I really had nothing to regret. We loved each other unconditionally.

Yes, after all the work, all the decisions, and all the preparation, rummage sales are purposeful. I'll do one this year, and probably next...just because. I ended my one article with this observation:

Rummage sales don't just weed out the unwanted. They open the

closet door to the forgotten and the discarded. They persuade us to unclutter our lives, live more simply, and be grateful for the treasures of the past. They allow us to grieve what we have lost, choose to remember what was important and commit to valuing what we have left.

Don't grief and rummage sale then have similar intrinsic values?

- To discard your regrets
- To confirm that you have lived.
- To savor what you have loved.
- To have enjoyed and to have shared.
- To have brightened lives with cherished memories.
- To ultimately give meaning and purpose to someone else because of your experience.

\*\*\*\*\*

*(My articles FOR SALE: Madness, Memories, and Maybes ..and Your Legacy is Probably Not a Box of Stuff can be found on the website: [www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org) and are also in my book Hitch Your Hope to a Star.)*

## The Spiritual Path ...

*Continued from page 1*

loss have touched my life, I have discovered that my own personal source of spirituality anchors me, allowing me to put my life into perspective.

For me, spirituality involves a sense of connection to all things in nature, God, and the world at large. Someone with some wisdom once observed, "Spirituality is like a switch. Everybody has one; it's just that not everyone has it turned on." Sometimes, experiences of grief and loss can turn off our switch. We are human and sometimes our switches feel stuck, or worse yet, nonexistent. Our "divine spark"—that which gives life meaning and purpose—feels like it has been muted. My switch is turned on when I live from a desire to see a loving God in the everyday. In the midst of grief, I can still befriend hope, and the most ordinary moment can feed my soul.

Spirituality is anchored in faith, which is expecting goodness even in the worst of times. It is not about fear, which is expecting the worst even in the best of times.

Spirituality reminds you to understand that you can and will integrate losses into your life, see the goodness in others, and know that there are many pathways to Heaven. If you have doubt about your capacity to connect with God and the world around you, try to approach the world with the openness of a child. Embrace the pleasure that comes from the simple sights, smells and sounds that greet your senses. I truly believe that acknowledging that your heart is broken is the beginning of your healing. As you experience the pain of your loss—gently opening, acknowledging and allowing—the suffering it has wrought diminishes but never

completely vanishes. In fact, the resistance to the pain can potentially be more painful than the pain itself. As difficult as it is, we must relinquish ourselves to the pain of grief.

As Helen Keller said, "The only way to the other side is through." Yet, going through the pain of loss is not in and of itself the goal in our grief journey. Instead, it is rediscovering life in ways that give us reason to get our feet out of bed and to make life matter. I'm certain you realize that the death of someone precious to you is not something you will ever "overcome" or "let go of." The death of someone we have given love to and received love from doesn't call out to be "resolved" or "explained," but to be experienced. I grew up in a traditional faith community; I watched and learned from a variety of people whose "switches" appeared to be in the on position. I have come to appreciate what some might term more "traditional" practices, as well as some "non-traditional" practices. I have observed the simple yet lovely ways different people connect with the Divine. I have tried to integrate into my daily life those practices that seem to really connect for me. As you explore the practices in search of those that might be helpful to you in your grief journey, ask yourself: what broadens my perspective and deepens my faith? What brings me some peace and calms my fears? What deepens my connection with other people, to God, to the world, and to my essential self?

*Printed with permission from Dr. Alan Wolfelt, Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition. This is part 1 of a series published in Grief Digest magazine, Vol. 9, Issue #3.*

### **How To Connect With Wings:**

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## Magnolias

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her health got worse, she needed me. But now nobody needs me. This morning I cried, 'Who needs an eighty-six-year-old wore-out man? Nobody!' I began to cry louder. 'Nobody needs me!'

About that time, you knocked, and said, 'Sir, I need you.'

I stood with my mouth open. He asked, 'Are you an angel? I assured him I was no angel.'

He smiled. 'Do you know what I was thinking when I handed you those magnolias?'

'No.'

'I decided I'm needed. My flowers are needed. Why, I might have a flower ministry! I could give them to everyone! Some caskets at the funeral home have no flowers. People need flowers at times like that and I have lots of them. They're all over the backyard! I can give them to hospitals, churches - all sorts of places. You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to serve the Lord until the day He calls me home!'

I drove back to the church, filled with wonder. On Patsy's wedding day, if anyone had asked me

to encourage someone who was hurting, I would have said, 'Forget it! It's my only daughter's wedding, for goodness' sake! There is no way I can minister to anyone today.'

But God found a way. Through dead flowers. 'Life is not the way it's supposed to be. It's the way it is.'

The way you cope with it is what makes the difference.'



### *Be Good to Yourself - A Care Tip*



## How to Enjoy the Summer Holidays When You are Grieving

Summer holidays bring with them family reunions, graduations, weddings, gatherings at favorite vacation spots, picnics, travel, and a time to suspend. Each of these summer events can bring painful reminders of how things have changed and quickly dampen the energy and enthusiasm necessary to mingle socially with family and friends. You owe it to yourself to enjoy the peace and serenity of warm summer days.

Holidays and special days happen all year long...not just in October, November, and December. Every single year for the rest of your life, you will be faced with these repeated events. So, how do you honor your loss, but continue to participate in events when you are still grieving? It's good to have a plan (at least initially) to do something that keeps you active. Your plan may include a ritual of remembrance that honors your loved one first. It's okay to have fun! Here are a few ideas of what you can do for a brief ritual. In honor of your loved one:

- \* Post a flag at the cemetery.
- \* Watch a marching band at the parade.
- \* Grill a just-perfect hamburger.
- \* Chuckle during a water balloon fight.
- \* Skate across a busy boulevard.
- \* Bike a difficult trail.
- \* Walk an extra mile.
- \* Eat a ripe, red strawberry covered with chocolate.
- \* Eat watermelon until you feel you could bust.
- \* Dive into a pool of cool blue water.
- \* Ride the roller coaster at a theme park.
- \* Catch a colorful dragonfly.
- \* Swing at the park.
- \* Walk your dog on a wooded trail.
- \* Pack a picnic and eat it with friends.
- \* Wear flip flops to a summer concert.
- \* Slather on sunblock and consider it a hug.
- \* See a funny movie on a rainy day.
- \* Plant a perennial or tree and watch it grow as your grief matures.
- \* Tell memories and stories around a campfire.

Before each ritual say your loved one's name. This can create a sense of peace and a connection.

Remember that you are never truly without those you love. They are a part of your heart and mind, even after death. It's okay to enjoy the present moments with family and friends. Living after loss is the goal of grieving well. Catch a tear. Whisper his or her name and SMILE! (Your loved one is smiling too!)

## From the Archives

*Stories worth repeating...*



### What Do You Think?

*Our readers share their thoughts on Healing Grief in 2013*

*In the archived issues of Wings™, we asked our readers a question that allowed them to share their feelings and experiences during grief. This was a popular column in our magazine, and we hope to continue it (with reader's input. **What special trait did your loved one have that you appreciated and would like incorporate into your life to add to who you are today (after your loss)?***

*Each of us remembers our loved one for some special personality trait, a simple philosophy about life, or a strong vision of something they wish to accomplish...*

*Thank you to all of those who responded to the What Do You Think question. Here is a sampling of responses:*

My husband, Bob, was full of little tricks and surprises to make you smile such as putting baby carrots in my shoes. I try to do the same for those around me, family and friends.

My brother, Randy, lived life to the fullest. He was totally involved and enjoyed so many things, from his many hours spent fishing...to his love of Star Wars. His children were young when he died and when I see characteristics in them that remind me of their Dad - I always share it with them.

*Diane Nowak, Wausau, WI*

My son, Zack, at the age of 16 had his first epileptic seizure. Instead of saying, "Why me?" Zack made the best of his situation each time. After the seizure, the neurologist ordered a CT scan,

so he wrote an English essay about that experience. Instead of sulking about his broken leg, he showed up at the high school soccer games to cheer his team on from the sidelines while he leaned on his crutches. And then he went on to fully engage himself in school spirit during the basketball season by showing up at the games dressed up in costumes such as Superman, Spiderman, Eyore and Tigger. Because of his exuberance, he was then honored in the high school centennial yearbook (posthumously) as one of Roseville High School's most spirited students, and they included a picture of him in his Tigger costume wearing a knight's helmet on his senior homecoming float. The sign on the float said, "A Knight to Remember." Zack was truly someone people remembered! What I learned from Zack was that he faced his trials head on. He didn't retreat into a dark corner and wait for things to get better... he went out and made things better not only for himself but for others as well.

*Chris Harder, Roseville, CA*

My beautiful son Seth was only a young 14 year old boy when he left us brokenhearted. He had a kind-hearted loving personality with a special bond with his baby sister who was 6. He was my sweet lovable child who loved to sing in the shower and loved country music, especially Garth Brooks. His favorite song was "The River". He was not a show off or arrogant or disobedient. That's how I remember him!

*Sue Straub, WI Rapids, WI*

I actually have two people that were special in my life. My mother-in-law, Marion (Ruf) Olbrantz, and my dad, Russell A. Peterson. Marion was a wonderful mother-in-law. She did not judge people at all. She was a warm and loving person, and easy to talk to. Russell was a great dad. He worked very hard. He had a difficult child hood, and wanted for both of my brothers and myself to have a better life, than what he had had. We had a wonderful childhood!

*Peggy L. (Peterson) Olbrantz*

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## From the Archives ...

*Continued from page 7*

My son, Brandon, was always kind to others that were less fortunate. He was only 13 when he died, but he always wanted to put money in the pot for the bell ringers at Christmas time or made friends with everyone at school, no matter what they looked like or if they were rich or poor. In his memory, I try to be kind to everyone, even those individuals that people tend to turn away from because they are different.

*Patty Pippenger, Wausau, WI*

My mother was tender hearted and sent get-well cards to anyone she knew who was sick.

*Cindy, Wausau, WI*

This is a wonderful idea. Darren had a tremendous sense of humor. He also wanted to make a positive difference in the world and reached out to help others since he was seven years of age. He wasn't about pretense and wore his heart on his sleeve.

*Maxine Russell, CA*

Our son, Andy, lived life to the fullest, making the most of every minute he could.

*Ron & Barb Hitt, Wausau, WI*

Our daughter, Lacey, was helpful, nice and sweet when no one was watching.

*Steve Meinel, Wausau, WI*

Pam was very tactful and was most diplomatic when addressing something unpleasant with another individual. But her best personal trait was when she was talking with someone, anyone, be it child or adult, she could always make them feel special--giving them her undivided attention and giving those extra few minutes to let them know what they were saying, was important.

This is something I "try" to practice as I am always in a hurry--for no reason-- and my attention is often on other things and not focused on the person I am with.

*Gale Gilge, Wausau, WI*

## *Wings-a Grief Ministry Calendar*

### **June 13, 2013**

- ✦ Nan & Gary invited speakers for: WADVS (Wisconsin Association of Directors of Volunteer Services) Annual Conference, Stevens Point, WI

### **September 14, 2013**

- ✦ Out of Darkness Walk (Suicide) Marathon Park, Wausau, WI

### **September 17 & 24 and Oct. 1,8,15,22**

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

### **September 28, 2013**

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

### **October 9, 2013**

- ✦ Wisconsin Hospital Association Partners Nan & Gary, Speakers Wisconsin Dells, WI

### **December 3, 2013**

- ✦ When the Holidays Hurt Workshop Holiday Inn & Suites, Mosinee, WI

For more information about any of these events, contact Nan at [wings1@charter.net](mailto:wings1@charter.net).

# My Dad is a Good Dude

## An Inspirational Story

This story was told to Maria Vernachio from Beachwood, New Jersey, by a child who thought their dad was the most amazing man and wanted to share the impact his dad made on his life. He felt Maria could express those thoughts into words for him.

\*\*\*\*\*

My mother left when I was 8. We ate a lot of spaghetti and steak – sometimes my dad would switch it up and we would have both. I still don't like spaghetti. But it was just him and me and he made it work. It was good. He went to all my games, he was there for me whenever I needed him. When I was 14 he met someone and when I was 16 they got married. She and her two girls moved into our house. It was weird for me, I didn't know what to do with it. She changed everything in my life, our routines and our traditions, it just happened. At the time, I didn't know how to put words to it, I just knew that I wasn't happy. I knew my dad was in love with her but I did not like how things were and became rebellious. I never said anything because I didn't really know what to say, I just acted out. It felt like my whole life was slipping away and I didn't even belong in that house anymore. I hated my life then, but I didn't know what to do.

One day I was on my way downstairs when I heard my dad and his wife talking in the living room. I stopped in my tracks, sat on the stairs and listened. She was talking to him about

me, I was all ears. What I heard did not surprise me. She was talking about my bad behavior and what a problem I was. She was saying "we need to send him away to a school, he can't



live here anymore". I sat there motionless and it started going through my mind about where they would send me because I just knew that was how it would end up. I knew what I was doing and in a way I knew I wasn't acting right. I knew my dad would agree with her and do what she thought he should do because he always seemed to follow what she wanted. She told him "it's either him or me". I waited breathlessly, sure that I knew how it would turn out. It was hard for me not to blow my cover and run down the stairs and yell out to stop it all, but I knew that I couldn't. I heard

him begin to answer and he said "okay, well", here it comes I thought, where will I go? And then I heard him say "there is the door, don't let it hit you in the butt". I couldn't believe it. And just like that, she was gone.

I sat there with a look of utter disbelief on my face, my mouth was hanging open with shock. I often thought back to that moment and wished someone could have taken a picture of my face right then. I could not believe what had just happened. And before I knew it, she and her girls and all their stuff were gone. And even though I was only 16, I knew what my dad had given up to stick up for me. I knew how much he loved her, how much he wanted a family again and how he loved being with her. And later, when she took him to court, he ended up losing his home and he had to move. He had a whole different lifestyle. I've always known what it cost him. It changed his whole life that conversation.

But what he did for me changed mine. Radically. It was one of the greatest moments of my life. There was never a minute that I did not hold that day in my heart when I thought of my dad. I knew the sacrifices he had made for me but mostly that day listening on the stairs I knew the depth of his love for me. It took me years to really understand it all, but what I came to in the end was the legacy of unconditional love that he passed on to me that day and the days after.

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## My Dad is a Good Dude

*Continued from page 9*

When he got sick in recent months I was able to be there for him in the way he had taught me to love. He came to stay with me during the hurricane – later I would know that this time together was a gift, but at the time I didn't know how things would end up. I gave him my bed and control of my TV, he lay in bed watching movies, loving my FIOS and I loved being with him and just hanging out together. I wanted to do all I could to make him comfortable. The things he asked for were so small, yet I couldn't do them fast enough. I wanted him to have the best, it was what he deserved.

One day he woke up and told me he was dreaming of a meatball sub. When he fell asleep again I ran out to get it and when he woke up I asked him if he was hungry and what he had been dreaming of. He said "oh yeah a meatball sub, I'd love one". I said "Pop, it's right on the counter". It didn't seem like much, but it was what I could do to show him how much I cared.

And now as I sign the paperwork for my dad to go into hospice, it is so important for me to let people know the man of character my father really is. In quiet strength he is leaving a legacy of love with me. Showing me always in his actions what it is to be a father. My dad is a good dude.

## A Reader Writes

*This column is reserved for reflections of our readers on their grief experience.*

### Grieving Makes You Stronger

*By Brea Behn, Montello, WI*

Since my twin brother's death in May of 1999 I have learned that grieving is the hardest thing I will ever do. Grieving is work. Grieving is also very important work.

I learned this the hard way, by avoiding it in every possible way for eight years. Mostly by staying as busy as possible. For eight years I suffered from horrible nightmares, flashbacks and ground my teeth horribly. When I was finally ready to slow down and face my grief I was a bit of a mess. I was diagnosed with depression, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and a ton of health problems.

Through a series of decisions and tough changes, I learned how to properly handle my grief in easy to manage pieces instead of avoiding it until I couldn't anymore and then having it flood me all at once. Over time, I got my PTSD and depression under control. With more time, I healed physically as well.

It will be fourteen years since my twin brother died from an accident with a handgun. This year I have written a book about my grieving and healing journey in hopes to share my story and help others to learn how to grieve properly and heal.

In my book, *Death Sucks, Life Doesn't Have To*, I talk about grief being hard work that will never go away. It is not something we "get over". Instead, it is a lot like lifting a heavy weight. At first it is extremely difficult and exhausting to lift a weight beyond our capacity to lift. Much like a loss is always so much more of a burden than we ever thought possible. Over time, however, by lifting that weight for certain increments and resting in between or by grieving properly and finding joy and happiness in between, you get stronger! You build your "grief muscle" and although that weight is still there and always will be, over time it seems a lot lighter because you are stronger.

Find a way to let your grief out a little at a time in a healthy way. Do something in honor of your loved one. Cry. Join a grief support group online. Listen to music that reminds you of them. Whatever it takes to pick up that weight once and awhile. Then balance that with something that makes you happy. Watch a funny movie. Read a book that makes you laugh. Spend time with those who make you feel good about yourself.

Before you know it you will be strong enough to learn from your loss and GET to share your story and share your loved one with the world. Just like I have with my twin.