

# Pain is Inevitable;

# Suffering is Optional

By Nan Zastrow

Wausau, WI 54401

[www.wingsgrief.org](http://www.wingsgrief.org) [wings1@charter.net](mailto:wings1@charter.net)



“Does time heal all wounds?” If you are a griever, you have no doubt heard this cliché more than once. On April 16, it will be fifteen years since the death of our beloved son, Chad. People who know us have quit asking, “Do you ever get over it?” They know what our response will be: “A parent never forgets the loss of a child. The loss will always be fresh in our minds, but in an instant, we can have a flashback to the exact moment we received the news. It’s a moment frozen in time.”

Grief hurts. We felt the essence of pain in all we did. Pain cannot be hidden. We expected pain, and we felt pain. We, like others, chose to suffer when our son died.

Suffering seemed to give some value to the pain we felt. Initially, and for many years, we remembered every detail as if it had happened yesterday. All events forward are chronologically marked by this date. Life—going forward—is divided by “before Chad died” or “after Chad died.” For countless years, we referenced our existence by these before and after phases of life. Our world was altered. We found our definition of joy was changed. Holidays, birthdays, dreams and family events were all changed by this death. We added a new date to our memory bank: the date of Chad’s death.

It’s easy to become absorbed by one’s grief and stuck in the event that caused us pain. We are human. We want others to know we hurt...and we are determined not to “let go.” We become obsessed with the injustice of life and draw others into our misery. Such negative energy consumes us and weakens us physically, mentally and spiritually. Soon friends and family drift away because our confused attitude wears thin the hope they are struggling to give us. They may believe we are unreachable; and they hope that “time” might heal the wounds that have scarred us.

During intense grief, we exist superficially. The world seems unreal. I often think of the movie *Sleepless in Seattle* when Sam Baldwin (played by Tom Hanks) lost his wife to cancer. His young son, Jonah, convinced him to call a radio talk show for therapy. Reluctantly, Sam finds himself talking to the host describing how he is coping with his wife’s death. He describes his existence as, “I’m breathing in and breathing out.” Sam, like most grievers, was existing in the moment of grief, suspended in time.

*If we honestly look at ourselves in the mirror, we realize that grieving doesn’t just go away, and existing in a nothing-less life is totally exhausting. We see others living life around us; and we secretly want to be like them.*

I don't believe that time heals all wounds. Time simply goes by us. Time becomes one year, five years, ten years, and now, in our case, fifteen years. Time passes and our lives continue day-after-day, whether we want them to or not. What time does do is give us the space to process our thoughts and choose to heal. If we honestly look at ourselves in the mirror, we realize that grieving doesn't just go away, and existing in a nothing-less life is totally exhausting. We see others living life around us; and we secretly want to be like them. We choose to step from the emptiness to something half-way normal again. We re-invest in life.

## *The signs of reinvesting in life*

What I know to be true is intense grief does change, if we allow ourselves to find our place in the world that still exists. Time softens the harsh feelings of those wounds—like an incision after surgery. With proper care, the incision begins to heal. The scar loses its sensitivity, and through the natural healing process, the painful memory softens.

Although the grieving process is complex, there are a few simple signs that signal “it's time to let go and move forward.” We began telling the stories of Chad's life—many times with a chuckle and a smile. We began to encourage family relationships recognizing that “family” is a precious possession. We connected with God in new ways that were personal and fulfilling. One sure sign of reinvesting in life is the search for meaning. What is my life's purpose? What is my life plan? Is God still watching over me? We looked for signs that it was acceptable to live again.

Another good sign was that when we awoke in the morning, our first thoughts weren't about Chad or the misery of our grief. We awoke with energy to see the day and discover new possibilities. We appreciated the little miracles everyday.

And, a very positive sign that life is moving forward in the best possible direction is when you are willing to share your journey positively or do anything to help others enrich their lives. We instinctively became more compassionate. We could understand the “pain” that people feel in their lives in a new way. Though each of us is different with different challenges, life changes become the compass that directs our paths. Sometimes our paths are very different than ever imagined.

What heals the wounds is what we do with our grief and with our lives as a result of the trauma or loss that caused us great pain. When we observe others who have “overcome” obstacles in life, we mentally compare our situation to theirs. We may look at them and wonder. “I can't imagine how they did it.” What is their secret?

What heals the wounds, is finding the courage to step over the pain and reach out for something we can appreciate. It's called HOPE. Grab it! Hang on to it! And breathe in and out, knowing life goes on and so can you.

## *Who am I now?*

We become proponents of change, because we recognize that to live fully we must honor the obstacles we've overcome. During the early presidential debates, all the candidates boasted the subject of CHANGE. It became the buzz word of the debates, the primaries, and going forward to the big election day. Change is required, not only in politics, but in our real lives with or without life-altering events. We live in a world of change. Think back a generation or two and recall all the change that has occurred in technology, life styles, clothing, women's rights, and disease management. We are constantly affected by change. When we cease to accept change, we are stuck.

Significant loss and grief typically result in significant change in our lives. I feel blessed to have gotten through intense grief and to have learned to embrace the results. I feel blessed to be able to look back and remember, as awful as it was, and recognize that the flashbacks to that pain are temporary. I can quickly return to the present world of the living. I will never forget Chad, who was such a wonderful part of our lives. His story still reinforces great lessons of human nature, humility, sacrifice and unending love.

There is no doubt that I am not the same person I was fifteen years ago. On the outside, I've definitely aged. But on the inside, that's where I'm really different. I've learned that the surprises of life make me as vulnerable to challenge as the next guy. I have “forgotten dreams” replaced with “maybe moments.” I've put my regrets (“I wish I would have, could have”) behind and focus only on the sanctity of happy memories. Loving family and friends have shared my sorrow; listened to my story; and helped me honor the past. Our slogan at Wings is “Remembering the Past and Rebuilding the Future.” I've learned this is the core of what good grief is all about.

On the inside, I understand the word “friend,” and I'm fortunate to have made many new ones. I value my commitments and have learned to say “No.” I adjust my priorities, sometimes after tense moments of fighting the inner ego that says “you have to” or “you need to.” I am more true to myself. In the need to create continuity in life, I try to build bridges where there once were many gaps. Although it seems as if I'm often unprepared for a single event, I'm more prepared for the grander event of all.

I'm still the mom who lost a child. I still feel sad dreaming dreams that will never come true, but I move on. Time has healed the deepest wounds, but a shadow of the scars will always remain. They are battle scars; medals of honor. They signify Courage, Wisdom, and Strength. They create limitless stories of Hope. They are marks in time, lessons of love, and I wear them proudly. They pay homage to this anonymous quote; “Pain is inevitable; suffering is optional.” I chose to heal the pain and replace the suffering with hope.

## *Courage, Wisdom & Strength*