



The Compassionate Friends

Eastern Jackson County Chapter

Supporting Family After a Child Dies

Jan-Feb 2019

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Tracks in the Snow

It had been at least three days since the last snowfall, when I realized I had to head into town for groceries and out to the cemetery for one of my weekly visits. I cursed the snow often for covering up all the life I saw in the summer and spring. Everything was just a frozen blanket of white, a barren ice land, when the snow fell. The fact that my daughter, Kyla Louise, was buried underneath that thick coating of ice in the cemetery, made me dislike the snow even more.

So, on this day, I grumbled as I scraped my van windows in preparation for the long haul into town. My wheels crunched ice and slid as I pulled slowly out of the driveway. I let my mind wander into thoughts of a warm spring on the drive into town. I dreamed of flowers and birds, not frozen ponds and lifeless skies. I wondered if I would even be able to get into the cemetery to visit my darling's grave. Curse this snow!

After grocery shopping, I headed out to the cemetery feeling depressed and hopeless. Why had my daughter died at the tender age of four from a brain tumor? Why was I having to visit her grave covered in snow, and out of my warm arms? What was the point of it all? I shivered as I neared the cemetery. It looked like not many people had been out since the last snowfall because the ground was still a flat solid sheet of snow. Or was it?

As I let the van quietly creep into the cemetery, my eyes gazed at the snow, and a small laugh escaped my

lips. Across the rows and rows of frozen graves were animal tracks going every which way. Birds, rabbits, deer and who knows what other types of creatures had found a quiet, safe place to play. The tracks told of deer leaping over headstones, romping in the snow. There were tracks of rabbits darting in and out of the bushes between the headstones. Bird tracks gently dotted the snow until they vanished where a winged one had taken flight.

I parked the van and stepped out into the glistening snow. As I walked towards my daughter's grave, I saw that a bird had visited her earlier, and that a rabbit had made a resting place under the bushes near her grave. A set of tracks even went back and forth between a pinwheel Kyla's grandma had left at the grave and a bush. What a wondrous sight!

My little angel even had visitors when I could not be there! As I stood quietly pondering this change in my point of view, something caught my eye a few rows up. I looked and there were two small deer running after each other. They stopped and looked at me, and I at them. Tears sprung to my eyes, and my heart soared. What majesty! They stood there still for a second, and then they bounded off and over the fence.

I pressed my hands into the snow on my sweet Kyla's grave, leaving my handprints. Then I drew a heart with my finger. As I walked away, I looked back and saw my own tracks, proof that I had been there, proof of my love. It was then that I realized what a gift the snow was. It had shown me how full of life the cemetery and the world really are,

even though we think it is frozen and desolate.

On my drive back home, I looked around at the shimmering white land before me. I saw that the snow protected and preserved the land beneath it like a warm blanket, until the land could once again rise anew.

--Juliet Freitag



When darkness seems
overwhelming, light a candle in
someone's life and see how it
makes the darkness in your own
and the other person's life flee.

--Rabbi Harold S. Kushner

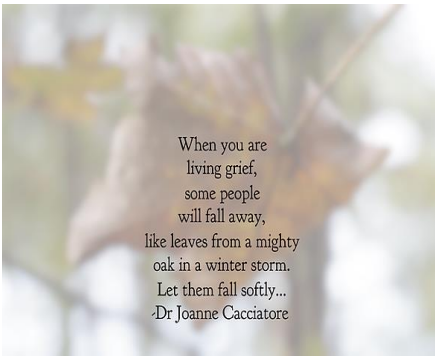
Time is the passing of moments lived one at a time. Our recovery depends on what we do with each moment. We cannot sit back and say, "TIME will heal me."

TIME is merely the movement of the clock. Our successful return to comfortable living is what we do while the clock is moving. We have to look at the beauty left us in life instead of what we no longer have.

We must find reasons to go on.

—Margaret Gerner, St. Louis MO

An Open Letter to Bereaved Parents and Others



Special thanks to Ben's mom who inspired this by asking for what she needed from me.

If your child has died, I am so sorry.

I am not "so sorry" in the politely cliché or automatic way: I am so sorry in an unspeakable and "there really aren't words for this" way.

In the beginning after catastrophic loss, many will show up in ways that feel hopeful. They will send flowers and cards, meals and hugs. We may not remember much about this part. Our system has endured a tremendous shock. Nothing inside us wants to stay where it is: not our hearts or our minds or our bodies. It's too painful, too terrifying to live in a world where something so very precious can die. We may get glimpses of the hospital, funeral, or food train but those memories may feel unreal, intangible, and so understandably- the 'thank you' cards collect dust on our desks.

Days and weeks and months may pass where large swathes of time are unrecollectable. Our entire existence has shifted. Even the image in the mirror is unfamiliar. Our own sensory experiences of the world change- sound, taste, touch, sight, proprioception feel altered - time has a completely different and irrelevant quality. We may feel as if we're living in a liminal space between the living and the dead, an alternate reality from which there is no escape. And yet in quiet moments when we notice our own irregular breathing and contemplate all we've irretrievably lost, it's simply too much grief to bear and too little mercy to spare for our shattered open hearts.

Mostly, there is this fog of disbelief that lingers as we move in and out of

consciousness wondering if this is a nightmare from which we can awaken.

Day by day - sometimes minute by minute- the grief will strike and bring us to our knees. It will surprise us in grocery stores and libraries, at work and at public events. Our minds may begin to tell stories that might or might not belong to us: stories about our goodness as a parent or person or about what we could've or should've or would've done differently. We may feel the relentless sting of shame, guilt, and regret. Our minds may start to question whether we loved our child enough or it may ask if he or she knew that love. Some days we will feel frenetic, desperately discursive and ungrounded. Other days we may resign ourselves to the lethargy and complacency of this unsolvable tragedy.

Our bodies hurt. Our brains stop working. Our hearts feel heavy, laden with the weight of loss. Few things, if any, matter anymore, not the mortgage or the rotting leftovers or the pool algae or the missed calls and texts. Every relationship in our lives changes, for better or not, and every relationship to inanimate objects and the universe and animals and trees and our past and future will change too. This unsteadiness will puzzle others.

And a visually specific "what the hell happened?" film will loop through our minds, it's irremediable ending is the unsatisfactory same, over and over, until it feels like we've descended into madness. Yet every bit of this enactment - all this emotional rising and falling- is *normal*. The only wrongness, the only madness or pathology, is that our beloved died.

Months will pass and ever-so-slowly our memories may begin to re-emerge with shreds of trauma and terror and disappointment and hopelessness. The imperfectly beautiful life that was once ours doesn't exist in the same way, and we try to find steady ground from which to be reborn.

Just around this time, when the permanence of our child's absence begins sinking into our marrow, other people, because they've been taught this myth, will think it is time for us to move on - to get over it- to reconcile the irreconcilable. Fundamentally, these directives don't make sense because they are nonsensical. The intimation that our child's death is akin

to the loss of something replaceable, something to be healed with a iodine and a band aid or a prayer and prescription, feels even more isolating. Our hearts, then, may begin to question its own inherent wisdom: "Should I move on?" "What does 'moving on' even mean?" "Am I grieving too much? Too little? Too openly? Too privately? Am I crazy?"

But others don't know, even when they are well-meaning. They *cannot* know this bottomless grief. Still, their expectations may cause us to mistrust our own wise hearts, our own authentic emotions. And because everything in our world has drastically changed and has been unapologetically stolen from us, there is now no poverty of doubt, fear, and suffering for us. Only at this point, the experience may feel even more like solitary confinement.

Because of this, some will abandon us. In the aisle between the Cheerios and applesauce, they turn and run. Some will try, clumsily perhaps, to abbreviate our grief with their platitudes: "All things happen for a reason," "You're young, you can have more," "At least he's not in pain," "God has a plan," "She'd want you to just be happy," "Just let go," and "Time heals all wounds."

And some, thankfully, will show up with their unassuming hearts open and climb with us into the abyss. Those are the best kind and we will soon learn who is safe and who is reckless with our fragile hearts.

And this is where it gets tricky because the mind sometimes internalizes toxic cultural fiction about grief that is dangerous.

Sycophantic messages from within a culture that avoids and pathologizes grief - within medicine, religion, education, and social life- will urge us to question ourselves and our righteous emotional experiences after loss. Some of those messages will even confront and challenge our desire to remain connected to our child. Abandoning grief, they say, is necessary for the promise of being happy again.

These same sideline speculators will assert that grief is to be loathed and avoided because it comes with ugly machinations that scare us and others. Understandably, there is a draw to resist the spiral into this darkest night of our

soul, and the resistance comes with - often unconscious- distractions. Distracting temptations to avoid our grief are cleverly disguised and endless: work, food, television, gambling, drugs, alcohol- anything that takes us away from our grief feels like relief.

No doubt these may be a welcome respite from the pain, even if only momentarily. But these short-lived and superficial attempts to palliate grief simply prolong the inevitable. Grief will come, one way or another, even if it is forced to change and hide its real form.

The tempter's promise is a trap that will fragment and chronically constrict our entire world. The only way to stop feeling grief is to *stop feeling*.

Right in the center of our very wise hearts is the realization that we feel extraordinary grief because of extraordinary love. If we can become still enough, if we can listen to our hearts, it knows that grief is not the enemy. The sagacious heart knows that grief is just an innocent outcome of a most unnatural loss. What we really hate, the real enemy, is that our beloved died. That is what we wish we could conquer, undo, overcome, beat, negotiate, and avoid. Grief is a clean and honest product of the worse day of our lives.

Even as years pass, some will say that it's unhealthy to remember. Some will castigate us for re-grieving. Some will say to choose happiness instead of grief. But happiness and grief are not competitors. That is a myth perpetrated by a culture that is foolishly obsessed with pursuing one and dangerously avoiding the other.

Yes, years later, decades later, we will still carry with us this consummate grief. We will carry it as long as we are alive and willing to live honestly and fully. And when the tsunamis of grief crash down upon us, we become more adept at navigating them. We trust the process. We trust ourselves.

So, the invitation for us - from the genesis of loss - will be to mourn openly with our fists raised high, standing strong against those who would try to, again, take what is justifiably ours.

Haven't we already lost enough? Need we lose our truth, too?

This is the one thing we can control; we do have power here.

With the compassionate support of safe people, when we are ready, we can rise up, holding our grief in one fist and our love in the other: *"This is mine, and you have no right to take it!"*

We can reclaim our power in grief, taking back what is ours. And we can fight to keep safe what has been and will always be the most holy parts of us: our beloved ones who died and for whom we will grieve as long as we are separated.

And we should all know there will likely be peripheral losses along the way.

Many of us will have to make hard decisions. We may be stuck in a meaningless job. Losing our beloved one certainly augments our perspective. Our faith communities may not meet our needs, and we may choose to worship elsewhere. And relationships may crack under the stress of death's fallout. The question: *"Is this relationship worth saving?"* may be one we often visit.

Because when we are living grief honestly, some people will fall away, like leaves from a mighty oak in a winter storm. They are not ready. Perhaps, they don't have the capaciousness for our reluctant and painful transformation.

Let them fall softly.

Shed the judging stories that are not our own and that do not serve us.

We can immerse ourselves, instead, in the sacred grief shared by others across space and through history who know and who, too, raise their fists and stand tall in their truth.

It may take time to find our tribe but when we do, there will be mutual recognition and wordless knowing in the others' eyes. Few things are as simultaneously comforting and painful as this meeting.

We can learn when to rest our weary bodies and put down the weight of grief for a while, always returning to it, or allow someone else to help us bear the unbearable until we're strong enough. We can turn toward it when it asks to be seen. It *will* call us, and if we don't answer for a very long time, it will come in the side door and bring other, even undesirable, guests who aren't connected to our truth.

We can reach deep into the center of our core and summon the courage to live in this truth: Our grief is part of us now.

This path will make our lives bigger not smaller.

We can practice fully inhabited grief, letting it move cellularly through our being. It will transform us for sure. Remember that we are already being warily transformed, no matter how much we resist. Things will change; it's a matter of direction and tenor now. Grief, especially when traumatic, can shut us down and disconnect us or it can shatter our hearts into a million pieces of fierce compassion in the world. One way or another, *we change*.

We can remind ourselves that even on days when it doesn't feel like it, there is strength in weakness and there is power in surrender.

The energy of grief is endowed with more vital force than the destructive energy of avoidance. And that force will, one day, be the very movement that saves our own lives and maybe the very worthy lives of many others.

And no matter what, no one and nothing can take from us what is ours, once we trust it.

We will not cease to exist if we grieve our truth.

We will cease to exist if we do not.

It's So Cold

It's so cold.

I went to the cemetery today.

50-below wind-chill.

After two and a half years

I thought I was more used to this,
But I wasn't as "healed" as I thought.

Your little place in the cemetery
So alone...So cold

I wanted to stretch out on your grave,

Cover you with my body,

Protect you from the cold.

I could almost imagine
what your voice would sound like,
"I'm so cold, mama."

Nothing I can do to protect you.

Helpless, hopeless, despair.

Logically, I tell myself this is foolish,
you feel no cold.

Motherly, I ache to protect you.

It's so cold today.

I'm sorry Catie, I'm sorry.

--Mary VanBockern, TCF, Sioux Falls

Can-do's for the New Year

The problems with New Year's resolutions are many, of course. They seldom last more than a few weeks, and they often seem like more of a burden than a blessing. Ever wondered why? Well, here's a guess: People make too many New Year's resolutions, and they make them too difficult.

So, let's do things differently this year. Let's just make a few medium-easy resolutions—and let's decide to stick with them, say, only through Valentine's Day. For us grievers, even such a mellow arrangement is no small task. What can we come up with that's (1) worth thinking and planning about and (2) worth dedicating an effort to? How about some soft and easy things? (Don't get hung up on the notion that worthwhile tasks HAVE to be difficult.)

The first resolution has to do with the child or children you have lost to death. Have a conversation with your dead child, not about things or other people, but about yourself, your feelings, your problems, questions about yourself. Just focus on a question such as "Why do I need to blame myself?" and wait. Your mind or your heart will find your child's answer more comforting and less confusing than many answers you have been given so far. Such a conversation often takes some time—you may have to ask a question more than once. But then, you do that anyway, don't you?

Secondly, resolve to balance your grief with gentle, even happy memories. We have always conceded that pretending to feel good when we actually don't feel good is counterproductive. So, if you come to those painful moments of aching emptiness, let them be there, don't brush them aside or feel guilty for being so sad. Grief is a reality, no less than life and love and the weather—and of course you know that nothing is ever improved by pretending it isn't there. But when grief comes your way, and after you have held it in your mind for a while, add to it just one bright memory of something you shared with your child—how long ago. You'll probably shed an extra tear, but you'll also be surprised by an extra smile. Such is the power of love and remembering.

Well, two resolutions may be enough for this year—we said that we don't want too many, and we don't want to make them too difficult. Try this new approach to New Year's resolutions.

Who knows, you may even make a healing habit out of one or the other.

Gentle New Year, everybody. Sascha

*The New Year comes when
all the world is ready for changes,
resolutions—great beginnings.*

*For us to whom that
stroke of midnight means
a missing child remembered,
for us the new year comes
more like another darkness.*

*But let us not forget
that this may be the year
when love and hope and courage
find each other somewhere
in the darkness
to lift their voices and speak:
Let there be light.*

*From "The Sorrow and the Light,"
by Sascha*

Feel to heal.

It takes an enormous amount of energy to remain stuck in chronic grief...or sadness. Often, we try to resist these emotions by keeping a stiff upper lip or a cheerful demeanor when we're really seething inside. This is especially true during the times of the year when...difficult emotions [are most likely to] surface, such as the anniversary of a death or birthday.

What we resist persists. Instead of trying to talk yourself out of how you feel, harness the courage to acknowledge uncomfortable emotions. Accept your regrets, anger and sadness without remorse. Just let them be. Then [eventually, you will be able to] let it go. Not only will your energy resurface, but you also [may] find sensible solutions to many of the dilemmas in your life. Your discomfort [can] evaporate like mist in the sun

Look for the positive. Every thought in our heads is accompanied by a cascade of biochemicals called neurotransmitters. In general, thoughts that are optimistic, grateful and loving result in "feel good" neurotransmitters called endorphins. The same "feel good" chemicals are produced during exercise, love making and meditation. By contrast, thoughts that are fearful, angry or hopeless increase levels of stress hormones, which make us feel tired, anxious and irritable.

Learning to focus on the positive can-do wonders for energy levels as well as improve health and longevity. Research by Dr. Becca Levy of Yale University shows that positive thoughts energize the body to walk faster. Furthermore, Levy found that an upbeat attitude toward aging extends life expectancy. It can provide the same kind of benefit as exercise, not smoking and having a healthy blood pressure, cholesterol and weight. Other research suggests that when people train themselves to feel love and gratitude regularly, their blood pressure normalizes, their heart function stabilizes, and they have more energy.

One way to practice a positive attitude is by keeping a "gratitude journal": Every day, write down three to five things for which you are grateful. Another strategy is simply to take notice when you fall into a "poor me" or martyred state of mind. Then do all you can to turn those thoughts around.

--Christiane Northrup, M.D.



There Is No Word

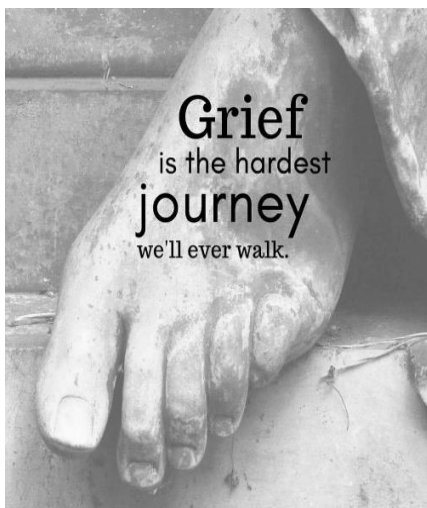
They call a man a widower
when he has lost his wife,
The woman is a widow
when her man does lose his life.
And orphan is the word perhaps
for the most of us one day,
For it is normal losing Mom and Dad
along the way.
But you can look both high and low
and then look far and wide
And never find a word for one
who's had a child who died.
So, is it then so rare a find for lexicography?
And, like some unfound jungle plant,
there's yet no name for me?
Or could it be a word
that's just too difficult to choose,
And, God forbid, a nightmare curse,
too horrible to use?
So, at a loss to tell our loss,
we call ourselves bereaved,
For there's no word to tell of pain
that cannot be believed. —Ken Falk,
Northwestern Connecticut TCF

Winter

Winter can be the cruelest season of the year, cold and dreary, depressing and long. This can also be true of your grief's winter: the air feels raw, days grow tedious, nights go on forever. The shock and numbness that first shielded you have worn away. Now you must face head-on what lies all around you: all that you miss and all that you fear, all your sorrow and all your dread. There can be a piercing loneliness to winter grief. Not only are you separated from the one who died, you can also feel isolated from those around you, perhaps even alienated from yourself. People who do not understand how plodding grief can be, may not be ready to bear all of your moods or all of your moans. And your world can appear so different, so silent, so stark, so empty. This is exactly the world you need.

The winter of your grief is a time to do what is best for you: a time to *be*, just to be. A part of you may wish to push ahead. Winter says, "Take your time." A part of you may wish to get this over with as quickly as possible. Winter says, "Be patient." Some-thing within you may want to escape. Winter says, "This is what you need right now." This time offers an opportunity to do what you may not often do: sit and be quiet, walk and be aware, write or talk and be reflective. You can spend time with yourself and make a close, close friend. You can immerse yourself in the stillness and let it inform you. You can open your eyes to the starkness that is around you and find unusual beauty. You can use this time of barrenness to begin healing.

--James E. Miller, *Winter Grief, Summer Grace*



Taking Stock

We made it through the holidays! Some of us didn't think we could make it—at all. But we did. How many of you realize that the anticipation was far greater than the actual stress we imagined it would be? Did you stick to the old and familiar program or try new things?

When we are hurting, and so terribly depressed, it is hard to see any good in our new year. We **MUST** try. First of all, we must hold on tightly to the idea that we will not always be this miserable, that we will someday feel good again. This is almost impossible to believe, but even if we don't believe it, we must tell ourselves—over and over again--that it is true, because **IT IS**. Many parents whose children have died some years in the past will attest to this. Remember also, no one can suffer indefinitely as you are suffering right now.

Secondly, we must face the new year with the knowledge that this offers a choice. We must remind ourselves that if we choose to be on our way to healing by the following year we must work to get there and that work entails allowing ourselves to go through our grief, to cry, to be angry, to do whatever is necessary to move towards healing.

Thirdly, we must look for good in our lives, and find reasons to go on, and accept the fact that our continued suffering will not bring our child back. Most of us have other children (and grandchildren) and a spouse for whom we must go on. Most importantly we have our own life that must be lived. Most of us know that our dead children would want us to go on.

No, this coming year may not be a happy one, but it can be a constructive one. Through our grief we can grow and become more understanding, more loving and more compassionate, and aware of the real values of life. Let us, therefore, not waste this new year.

--Fort Smith, Arkansas, TCF

**In our sleep,
pain that cannot forget
falls drop by drop
upon the heart,
and in our despair,
against our will,
comes wisdom
through the awful
grace of God.**



COMFORT, ACCEPTANCE, PEACE

As I have lived my life, I've known some losses and some wins I'm very proud of times I've won but bad times need not dim my mind, my outlook, how I see my life and what I've learned Because you see, each time I lose the lesson's my concern

I've known deep love and I have felt the cares both from and for the many people I have met They've helped my spirit soar! Throughout the times that I've been hurt

I've also come to know what life is really all about the reason for my soul

I've found and lost so much that I held dear and deeply loved but blessings always seem to come to help me rise above I'm glad that I'm alive today I'm happy with my fate and I am finding that I know my future will be great

I know God's love will always show up all around, it beams bright as the sun in people I've encountered as I glean rewards and lessons from my life I'm just so glad to know that I am here to learn and grow and I am doing so

by Jenny Donaldson

These days are the
Winter of the soul.
But spring comes
and brings new life and beauty,
because of the growth...

of roots in the dark.

--Iris Bolton, Atlanta, GA

Ceaseless Rain

Pit of darkness,
dissolving self,
dark hallway of the soul.

Tear-filled prison,
doing time there.
How to come out halfway whole?

Feeling crazy,
filled with fear
that the pain will never cease.

How to know
this time so hopeless
is in truth part of release.

Let the tears come,
and the blackness.
Wallow in life's cruellest pain.

Know that sunshine
brings the growing
out of all the winter's rain.

--Genesse Boudreau Gentry
Stars in the Deepest Night

SEASONS OF THE HEART

Your special days are unchanging
Seasons of the heart I celebrate.
Your birth, forever spring,
Tender memories relate,
New and green, a dream
From which too soon I awake.

The summer of your life was bright
Laughter needed no reason,
Seemingly endless days of sharing.
Sixteen summers. Short in season.

Your death brought winter without
warning,
What sense in all this can be found?
Summer dreams replaced with
mourning.
Where is hope now?

But the heart knows what
The mind cannot accept
That when all is lost,
It is love that is left.
Love knows no barriers
Time or distance recognize.
Love does not diminish,
But is constant in our lives.
And like a summer breeze
Uplifts and inspires us
With healing memories.

Peggy Walls
TCF Alexander City, AL
In Memory of my son, Eddie



Little White Blanket

Little white blanket... first snow on the grave since you left. How can it be? Just yesterday you were here. You left in summer's humid heat. Cicadas sang your eulogy over fresh-turned soil. Now snow's first appearance covers your smooth, flawless sleeping ground.

Little white blanket covers and cares for you when I no longer can. I care for you now with prayers and memories and by framing photo-graphs of times gone by. Photos of you and me. When I look at us, I can still feel you sitting next to me, breathing, smiling, living your life with me.

Then I feel you gone from here, from me. I never knew before how to feel what's not there. Feeling the aching void where many times you sat. Feeling the not-me-ness of me, with-out you.

Little white blanket, tuck in my loved one. Cover her gently, make her comfortable, send her my love. When spring comes and the little white blanket disappears, let the crocuses I planted bloom their first blooms, counting every first since you left. First morning without you, first week alone, first month bereft, first Halloween and Thanksgiving and Christmas, first New Year... a strange year with-out you. With the passing of time, I fear I'll forget you, so I hold onto my grief, as I once held onto you.

Little white blanket, first snow on the grave, assure me she's cared for, that she won't forget me, that we are still us, that I am still me, that some-where in

spirit she is still here.

First snow, nature's wise sur-round for my departed. Little white blanket, teach me how to mend the hole ripped in the fabric of my life, christen the ground, baptize me in understanding the cycles of life... living, loving and letting go. --Living with Loss Magazine, Bereavement Publications

My Grief Is Like a River

My grief is like a river—
I have to let it flow,
But I myself determine
Just where the banks will go.
Some days the current take me
In waves of guilt and pain,
But there are always quiet pools
Where I can rest again.

I crash on rocks of anger—
My faith seems faint indeed,
But there are other swimmers
Who know that what I need
Are loving hands to hold me
When the waters are too swift,
And someone kind to listen
When I just seem to drift.
Grief's river is a process
Of relinquishing the past.
By swimming in hope's channels
I'll reach the shore at last.

--Cynthia G. Kelley

Love Gifts

Thank you for the generous donation from Stella Williams in memory of her daughter, Dawn's 50th birthday.

Please help us help others. Make a LOVE GIFT today. Tax deductible Love Gifts may be sent to: TCF C/O Theresa Phillips 6200 Kentucky Ave, Raytown, MO 64133

For Remembrance dates please visit our website at

www.easternjacksoncountytcf.org

Find us on Facebook at

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1582699755290182>

We have several volunteers who write remembrance cards to families on birthdays and death dates. Just a reminder if you have an address change please email phillipsplace@aol.com or mail a note to TCF, C/O Theresa Phillips 6200 Kentucky Raytown, MO 64133 so the roster can be updated.

Please remember that you can give to The Compassionate Friends through your United Way pledge at work or as a single gift, but you MUST WRITE IT IN.