



# *The Compassionate Friends*

*Eastern Jackson County Chapter*

Supporting Family After a Child Dies

Nov-Dec 2016

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## **The Empty Chair**

There's an empty chair in our house and I am not sure what to do with it. It's been empty a long time, and though we've moved more than a few times since it became empty, we still haul it around with us. It's not a particularly classic chair or even a very pretty one, and it is empty all the time. Whenever we move, I never really know which room to put it in, but once it has found its place, I've noticed that it simply stays there. No one moves it, no one suggests putting it away. No one sits in it. It's just an empty chair.

We have been a military family for many generations, and we are used to having members of the family off in faraway places for what often turns out to be long periods of time. My father would sometimes be gone for up to a year, or even two. His chair was often empty at the table. My husband's military career took him away for many months at a time, and his chair was often empty. Then, when our daughter was commissioned in the military, we knew her chair would also be empty sometimes. So empty chairs at our house are not an uncommon thing, but this chair...this chair should never have been empty.

As the holidays approach, I am always faced with the task of deciding what to do with our empty chair. Should we put it away for the season? Should we decorate it or should we just ignore it? One year we did decide to put it away, but even though it was an empty chair, it left an even bigger empty space when we moved it to another, less occupied place. How can that be? How can something that is empty leave a

bigger empty space when it's gone?!

We've tried to ignore it, but its emptiness is very loud, and it is hard to miss an empty chair in a room filled with people sitting in all the other chairs. And even when we could manage to ignore it, others could not, and they always commented on it. An empty chair is not invisible.

Then, one year, we decided to simply include it in our holiday decorating scheme and that was the cause of some interesting discussions. Should we put a special holiday pillow in it? What about tossing a colorful quilt or afghan over the back! Should we put something in the chair so it wasn't empty! Now that was a novel idea! But nothing we tried could fill the emptiness of that chair. It just sat silent like a sentinel, waiting for something...or someone.

It took us many years of living with that empty chair, day in and day out, to finally figure out what to do with it. When we serve our meals, those chairs that would have been occupied by the assigned person (yes, we do assigned seating at our house) can be filled by other family members or guests. You get to use the sterling silver napkin ring with that person's name on it, and if you are lucky, that person has not lost a knife or fork or spoon over the years, so you will have a complete place setting of silverware. You must endure listening to tales about the person whose chair you are occupying.

It makes for some lively conversations and that way, even though you may not be with us for this occasion, your presence is still in our life. That works for our empty chair as well. It is a military custom to always set a place at the table for those who are not with us at this time, but whose lives are still within

our hearts. So, we have a place setting, complete with silverware (all 6 pieces), dishes, crystal goblet and napkin ring. Our empty chair is pulled up to the table and a single rose is placed on the plate, a symbol of everlasting love. We join hands in thanksgiving, completing the circle with the empty chair within our family circle, for even though death may have come, love never goes away. That empty chair now represents all of us who ate not with us for this occasion but who live within our hearts forever. It is not a sad sight, because we know that empty chair represents a love we have known and shared, and with that gift, our family is forever blessed.

So, if your holiday table will have an empty chair this year, remember that it is not truly an empty space. That place is still occupied by the love and joy of the one who sat in it. Don't hide that chair away. You may not wish to bring it to the table as we do, but take time this holiday season to remember the laughter, the joy, the love, the light of those who are no longer within hug's reach, but whose love still fills us with gratitude. Join hands around your table, however small, and say a prayer of thanksgiving...for the love you have known and still hold deep within your heart. You are rich beyond measure for having had a chair fulfilled. Don't let death rob you of the heart space that love keeps.

No one has sat in our little empty chair for twenty-five years...until this season. The table is still set with a place for all of those who are not with us on this occasion, but the empty chair at our house has been filled with the tiny spirit of a new life as she found that chair to be, "just the right size, Grandma." We are a family circle, some chairs filled and others not, broken by death, but mended by love.

Darcie Sims

## When Words Become Gifts

On Thanksgiving Day, 1994, two of my three young adult sons, Erik and David, were killed in a freak car accident. Years after the accident, my husband and I were at David's college alma mater for a holiday event. I was in the dessert line when a woman came up to me and said, "I saw your name tag—are you David Aasen's mom?" After doing a double take (it had been some time since I had been asked what used to be a rather common question), I replied with much appreciation, "Yes, I am!" With those three, almost magical, words this person gave me five gifts.

Her first gift was saying David's name. Instead of just thinking to herself, Hmmm, I bet that's David Aasen's mom but I better not say anything, she said something. Her second gift was sharing a story with me about how her daughter, a classmate of David's, still treasures the friendship she and David shared. Acknowledging that I'm still a mom was her all-important third gift. While my sons' deaths have resulted in my becoming a bereaved mother, death cannot take away the fact that I am, and always will be, Erik and David's mom.

The fourth gift was permission to share a bit of my grief journey with her. Since their deaths, I explained, there haven't been any truly easy, carefree, feeling-on-top-of-the-world days, but taking each day as it comes has been the most "doable" way for me to go on. Her questions and manner did not make me feel obligated to cover up my grief and was the fifth gift. I felt valued for my honesty and my integrity remained intact.

The warmth of those five gifts has lingered on in my heart and has comforted me. As I reflect on the experience, I marvel at how just a few simple words had such an impact. I have come to the conclusion that most bereaved parents want nothing more than the opportunity to talk comfortably with

others about their children. Just being able to share stories about our sons and daughters in a safe place, along with the permission to mourn in our own way and for as long as we need to, even for a lifetime, is what matters most to us.

The real treasure comes when others introduce our children's names and stories into an everyday conversation. Knowing our sons and daughters are remembered and live on in the hearts and lives of others is a measure of the meaningful legacy that our sons and daughters have left to us and to the world.  
~Nita Aasen in memory of my sons, Erik and David Aasen St. Peter, Minnesota~



## Heavenly Snow

I thought you might like to know  
And I have it on good authority,  
That in heaven there is snow.  
God, Himself, ordered it to be.

Snow swept by gentle winds,  
That drifts by the stirring,  
Of gossamer angels' wings,  
That sound like kittens purring.

Snow forever crystal clean,  
Just waiting to be molded  
By little angel hands unseen  
By those whose arms they once  
enfolded.

Snow angels are a common sight  
And snowmen of every size...  
They're all there beyond the light,  
Where nothing ever dies.

Where our angels play,  
There is no pain or tears.  
Only joy fills their days,  
Only laughter fills their ears.

High above the azure skies  
A glorious wonderland gleams.  
This beautiful Heavenly spot...  
Created to fulfill our angels' dreams.  
--Jacquelyn M. Comeaux  
In Memory of My Angels...Michelle,  
Jerry & Danny

## Frost

On a cold winter's day,  
Frost etches a beautiful artistry  
On everything it touches, every blade of  
grass  
It glitters and sparkles, and for moments  
Before the sun comes out and the  
master piece evaporates before our  
eyes, we stand memorized cherishing  
the wondrous sight.  
Like frost, our children were only here  
for a brief moment  
But, while they were here  
Whether it was moments in the womb  
Days, months or many years  
They etched their beautiful artistry of  
love  
On our hearts and lives and all of those  
They touched.  
Unlike frost, what they etched is forever,  
It is something that we can cherish and  
hold onto always.

We stand here tonight lighting a candle  
to remember children we will never  
forget.  
Their light, their spirits, their artistry lives  
on and like the flame of the candle gives  
warmth on a cold winter's night  
And light in the darkness  
The love our children gave us still  
remains.  
It keeps us warm when the cold winds of  
grief blow.  
It lights our way through the darkness  
and loneliness  
That we feel,  
And it gives us hope!

--Julie Short Southeastern TCF



### Looking for Your Gift

Bereaved families often face the holidays with fear and trepidation. Just the fact, holidays continue to go on, can cause outrage. Our sadness is monumental, and causes our bodies to resist moving on. We need to be gentle with ourselves; we are going through an emotional rehabilitation. Holidays often renew our grief, even if we are a distance from fresh grief.

We need to selectively choose what traditions are important to our family. If we over commit, we set ourselves up for a letdown when we cannot meet our goals. If you have some traditions that are very important and you are not physically up to doing them, you will find friends and extended family will feel honored if you ask for their help. Most people want to help you get through the holidays, but don't know what to do. Give them the opportunity to feel they are helpful in your healing.

Grieving cannot be put on the shelf until the holidays are over. We need to take time to feel our grief, and express our sadness. We also need to take time to try and put a bit of normality in our lives. We must remember it is not disrespectful to laugh. I'm sure our loved one would want us to surround ourselves with caring people who can help us through the holidays. A caring supportive person is one who encourages us to be the best we can be, not one

who expects us to be as we used to be.

Our healing will eventually cause our pain to move out and make room for our loved one's memories. We learn to make a new life for ourselves. Holidays get better and we learn how to live again.

We tend to think of life's richest moments as being the joyous, fun filled, carefree days prior to losing our children and siblings. But, as I search for the most meaningful things that have given me strength and a real appreciation for life, they certainly do include the pain, overcoming my despair, losing my son, grandson, and six siblings. We cherish the friendships that doesn't always demand a smiling face, and those with the warm touch that says, "share your pain, let me be a part of your grief, don't worry about making us uneasy with tears, we have all been there." Much healing can take place through sharing as we learn to be very honest and courageous with our feelings, which helps us to find hope. Hope helps to restore our love for life, and gives us the strength to survive.

This holiday we will all miss our loved ones, who are no longer with us. Though it has been through much pain, you probably have never been so close to your child or sibling, or shared such a large part of your life with them. We hope the memories that ache with pain, can also bring you thoughts of love. For those of us who are further removed from our early grief, who can look back and appreciate the strength for our struggle, the compassion from seeing other's pain, wanting to become functional human beings again so we can contribute to making a better world, are gifts our children and siblings have given to us for our survival. These gifts are greater than any fancy bow tied box can contain. Look for your gifts and cherish them.

Marie Hofmocker  
TCF Valley Forge, PA

*At times our own light goes out  
and is rekindled by a spark from another person.*



*Each of us has cause  
to think with deep gratitude*

*of those who have lighted the flame within us.*



The  
Compassionate  
Friends  
Supporting Family After a Child Dies

*~ Albert Schweitzer*

### Winter Memories

The days are getting colder,  
and the first snow's not too far off.

It used to be so pretty  
gently falling from aloft.  
But the snow won't be as pretty,  
as it gathers on the ground,  
'cause there'll be a snowman  
missing,  
my son is not around.

The playing children's laughter,  
used to be a special song,  
but this year will be different,  
without my son to sing along.  
The song has lost its music,  
and it'll be just another day,  
as I gaze down from my window  
and watch the children play.

But the snow will again be pretty,  
in a far off distant time,  
and we'll build snowmen together  
and we'll never look behind.  
For now, I'll remain with memories,  
and the melting snow will fade,  
but he builds snowmen to his heart's  
content,  
because he now lives where snow is  
made.

Jeremiah Sundown  
TCF Nashville, TN

## Candles in the Night

Candles flame in darkness,  
flicker, steadily glow,  
bringing light from shadows  
and help to soothe me so.  
My daughter, like the candles,  
gave my life true light.  
I use the candle's beacon  
to connect us in the night.  
As I light the candles,  
my wish and my request  
is that she'll see my signal  
and know my love's expressed.  
As her light joins my lights,  
our worlds touch and flame.  
As I snuff out the candles,  
I softly say her name.

--Genesse Bourdeau Gentry

## Lights of Love

Can you see our candles  
Burning in the night?  
Lights of love we send you  
Rays of purest white

Children we remember  
Though missing from our sight  
In honor and remembrance  
We light candles in the night

All across the big blue marble  
Spinning out in space  
Can you see the candles burning  
From this human place?

Oh, angels gone before us  
Who taught us perfect love  
This night the world lights candles  
That you may see them from  
above

Tonight the globe is lit by love  
Of those who know great sorrow,  
But as we remember our  
yesterdays  
Let's light one candle for tomorrow

We will not forget,  
And every year in deep December  
On Earth we will light candles  
As.....we remember

Jacqueline Brown  
TCF Peace Valley, PA

## Thanksgiving in Heaven

*This Thanksgiving morning while at  
the cemetery  
In my grief, I looked up to the sky  
And saw a massive white cloud  
Acting so strangely I wondered why*

*Within this cloud opened a great  
window  
Having a beautiful and glorious  
white frame  
Accented with great rays of light  
Beaming up and down left and right*

*Within this frame I saw motion  
So silky, radiant, and all aglow  
Against a backdrop of the deepest  
blue  
And holding beautiful colors of every  
hue*

*Overwhelmed, I seemed to soar  
straight above  
Hoping to draw nearer for a better  
view*

*Whence I saw a sight beyond  
imagination*

*It was Thanksgiving in Heaven, I  
knew*

*I stood upon a little cloud  
Drifting nearer to see what was  
going on*

*While viewing a great peacefulness  
Such as I have never known*

*Then entered Our Lord Jesus  
He sat in the middle of familiar faces  
And now I was engulfed in total awe  
As my loved ones took their places*

*The table was full of people I've  
known*

*Who've gone on to the City Four  
Square*

*I can now see them all together  
Having a great feast up there*

*The table was "Longer than forever"  
Continually growing, it made a  
"Never ending circle"*

*Next to Jesus sat, our precious  
angels, Loral and Macy  
And next to them sat Kessie and  
Bessie*

*Framed with softly glowing halos  
Snow white wings and beautiful  
gowns of silk*

*Oh so beautiful, happy and peaceful*

*Our precious angels Macy and Loral*

*Look over there from Tennessee  
Sits my Great Uncle Cloy and my dear  
Aunt Edna*

*Telling tales with Pappy Bickley, and  
my charming Aunt Minnie  
My goodness, there's my favorite Uncle  
Henry*

*Food was piled on the table so high  
The heavenly aroma really tempting my  
senses*

*And a choir of ten thousand angels  
softly singing  
Clearly and heavenly, in my ears still  
ringing*

*While slowly drifting back to the  
cemetery*

*With the picture of paradise, I'd just  
been shown*

*I realize this day of Thanksgiving  
Is going to be the best I've ever known*

*PawPaw  
Donald Moyers  
TCF Galveston County, TX  
In Memory of Macy and Loral*

*For Remembrance dates please visit our  
website at [www.easternjacksoncountytcf.org](http://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](mailto:phillipsplace@aol.com) or mail a note to  
TCF, P.O. Box 2204, Independence, MO  
64055 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.*

*TCF asks for donations in memory of our  
children who have died. Our activities  
support the grief work of many families. We  
also work to educate members of our  
community about the grief process & how  
they can support bereaved parents.*

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