Magical Thinking ...not!

Bereaved Parents Share Stories of Loss, Hope & Life after Life

Andrea Courey, M Ed.

Magical Thinking
...not!

Conversations about Death
&
Life after Life

by
Andrea Courey

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'Mom, live a total life. Live totally.
Not mundane. Not average. Total.'
—Justine

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Introduction

My name is Andrea. In addition to being an author, speaker and coach to young entrepreneurs, I'm a bereaved mom. My daughter Chloe passed in 2016. She was 28. I searched for life stories from other mothers, hoping to find some kind of lifeline from this group of moms who'd all joined a club they never wanted to be a part of. Several things transpired:

– Researching this topic was gut-wrenching and I had to proceed slowly;
– I realized that losing a child is a lot more common than I had thought;
– I decided to write the book I wish I could have read.

I began with the simple question 'How are you?' – that most mundane of social niceties that we all answer automatically without any kind of personal reveal. This time was different. The mothers knew I really did want to know how they were, how they were coping with the grief and the loss and how their lives – their new lives – are unfolding.

Here is the list of the people you'll meet in this book. Some chapters end in mid-story, to be picked up later. Some are complete accounts as parents share their journeys with candor and authenticity.

Andrea – daughter Chloe, 28, cancer
Charlene – daughter Madeleine, 21, car accident
Patti – son Adam, 17, car accident
Jacqueline – daughter Andrea, 27, son Séan, 19, daughter Justine, 17, car accident
Christa – daughter Léa, 20, complications from anorexia
Merri – son Martin, 37, cancer
Shannon – daughter Dominique, 23, car accident
Joanne – son Matthew, 27, accidental
Pauline – son Jordan, 37, cancer
Terry – daughter Jaclyn, 17, car accident
Sharon – son Gabriel, 27, accidental
Marie-Helene – son Felix, 19 months, illness
Daniel – son Ward, 27, mauled by a bear

Leigh – son Shawn, 37, illness
Sally – son Josh, 4, car accident
Cyndi – son Luke, 17, accidental
Eric and Sue – son, sudden illness

I have omitted family names and specific dates where possible. This is everyone's story, both personal and impersonal. Why just moms? It simply happened that way. They were more accessible, and more open to talk. However, there is one dad in this book. You'll meet him in chapter sixteen. My wish is to honor our children and the parent's journeys, and to offer this work as a support to new parents trying to wade through this reality that has become a part of their lives. There are tears and laughter. There is authentic and frank conversation. There is hope. Where all those elements come together there is deep love. Love for each other, for this human experience and most especially, for our children.

Thank you Patti for opening your home and to all the parents who shared their journeys of love and loss – Patti, Charlene, Jacqueline, Merri, Christa, Shannon, Joanne, Sharon, Pauline, Terry, Marie-Hélène, Daniel, Leigh, Sally, Cyndi, Eric and Sue. Thank you Anita who proofread my work, brewed tea, mixed the occasional scotch and has generally been a loving, guiding hand. Thank you Paul for supporting my work, for all the laughs and for being there in the moments that matter. Thank you Grandma 'Sito' Rose for your encouragement, Daniel for your technical help, Chloe for continuing to show so much love, Stephen for your masterly design. Thank you Carole, Sandra, Busta, Lucille and Armand for your friendship and encouragement and most especially thanks Mom, who despite much evidence to the contrary, always made me feel like I was unique and valuable and had unlimited potential.

1
Reefs and Rambunctious Kids

Six bereaved mothers sit around a dining room table. As I explain this project, there are tears and a unanimous, 'Yes!' They want to talk of their loss, to honor their children and to share stories of their children's lives. They are 'all in.' Charlene describes how she felt her heart expanding as I explained this project. Her daughter Madeleine was killed driving home one night. Charlene opens the conversation.

> *Charlene – Maddie was 21, in her third year at Trent University. She had planned to go on a field trip to the Bahamas to do marine biology research. Trent was collaborating with Carleton University for the trip. Maddie and Nigel, the Carleton U professor organizing the trip, exchanged many emails. Her enthusiasm touched him profoundly*

Maddie

and he came to Maddie's funeral. She died in March. The trip was planned for December, nine months away. Nigel expressed a desire to put something of Maddie's in the coral reef on their upcoming field trip so that she'd feel a part of the trip and a part of the coral reef as well.

After some thought, we had a ceramic heart made with some of her ashes in it. Her name and Dr. Seuss's 'Don't Cry' saying were engraved on it with a slight modification. 'Don't cry because it's over, smile because she happened.'

That December he placed the heart in the coral reef. He returns every year to continue his research and takes photos of the heart. The first couple of years, it looked like a heart. He kept cleaning it. The coral would be bleached everywhere else but around her heart the coral was alive and healthy and he couldn't explain why.

On their third year visiting the reef, the boat sank and the trip to the reef was aborted. The following year, Nigel returned to the reef and couldn't find the heart. He emailed me, distressed. 'I can't find Maddie.' Later he found 'her' and sent another email. 'Guess what, I found Maddie! The coral reef has completely grown over the heart. And the reef, in that spot, is healthy! There are fish eating off of it. You can't see the heart but you can see the spot where it was placed. Nothing around it has changed. It's still bleached. But in that spot, the reef is healthy and growing.' He still couldn't explain the phenomenon.

I ask "Maddie, did you really have to sink the boat so that the coral reef would have two years to grow?" We all laugh. Charlene continues.

There's a research facility on that island of Eleuthra and they want to tell people about Maddie's reef. It's now part of the island's story. Nigel told us that he did this act of love for Maddie because she had so much passion for the environment, for the ocean, for learning. He'd never met a student like that before and he wanted to share her legacy with his current students so that Maddie's story inspires other students. It means so much to us that Nigel does this. And he's never even met her.

This strikes each one of us around the table – an act of service and love for a young woman he has never met and will never meet. I contact Nigel and he writes me back, talking about their efforts to save the reef, Maddie's legacy and about his stepson, Jonas, killed just months ago while cycling, by a driver who ran a red light.

Maddie's life was all about the environment and learning what's in our oceans, rivers and lakes. It was also about helping animals in need. She had adopted her three legged cat Boo from the Ottawa Humane Society. People kept asking how they could help, what they could do to honor Maddie so we encouraged them to donate to the Humane

Society. We also did a fundraiser for them. There's a plaque inside the Ottawa Humane Society that reads –

In loving memory of Maddie
"Remember me and smile,
for it's better to forget than
to remember me and cry."
—Dr. Seuss

She loved Dr. Seuss. That plaque makes me happy. We were all happy to give back to them. I needed to do that. I needed concrete ways to remember Maddie. I still do.

Charlene takes a long breath, sighs deeply and stops talking. I too need to do concrete acts to remember Chloe who passed after a battle with cancer. I bake banana loaves or buy mini cupcakes and take them to the hospital where she received such great care. Two years later, I still go by a couple of times a year – on her birth date and death date. It's an act of love for one I love and a reminder to staff that their kindness does matter.

On the first anniversary of Chloe's death, I took a 3500 kilometer solo road trip. I needed that. The following year, I spend the anniversary in self-imposed solitary confinement at home. I needed that. I needed to honor how I felt, without anyone's judgment or criticism. I still do.

Patti, whose son Adam was driving a car when killed over a decade ago, begins to speak.

Patti – Adam is my youngest.

We all speak of our children in both the present and the past tense. This strikes me as wonderful. Some aspects of them are still present. Others are not.

We started The Adam May CHEO (Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario) Endowment Fund. It will be a forever fund that goes toward helping children at CHEO. I volunteered there in the ER for over 17 years, my volunteering inspired by a desire to give back. We were there often with Adam. Adam was a regular in the ER.

One incident I'll never forget was when Adam was involved in a head-on collision. His head was split wide open and I could see his skull. I was terrified he was going to die but the plastic surgeon stitched him back together. He had a huge scar all his life. I also brought him in for poking his eye, eating a night light, breaking his arm, suffering a concussion and more – way more. I was so grateful it was there for us that I started volunteering. When Adam passed in 2006, in lieu of flowers we created the fund, requesting that donations go to Adam's fund. The fund has grown to over $100,000.

This article entitled 'A Heart That Beats On,' features Adam on the cover of the CHEO newsletter. It really fills our hearts. Also, a TV segment/commercial on Adam's foundation was produced.

FOREVERCHEO

Your gift keeps on giving: Forever.

WHAT IS FOREVER CHEO?

IT IS A WAY TO ENSURE THAT CHEO WILL ALWAYS BE HERE TO PROVIDE LIFE-SAVING RESEARCH AND INVALUABLE SUPPORT TO CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

When you leave a gift in your will to CHEO you have the option of designating it to the Forever CHEO endowment fund. This fund preserves the full amount of your gift and disperses the interest to CHEO annually for its most immediate priorities. This allows your gift to live on in perpetuity and continue to help and support future generations of children and families.

A HEART THAT BEATS ON

GIVING LIFE AND HOPE TO PATIENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES

The first CHEO endowment fund was created from the estate of Weldon Cochrane, a former CHEO Foundation Board Member. Thanks to his generosity and forward thinking he left a significant amount of money to CHEO with instructions that it be preserved in an future generations was vitally important to him. Today his initial gift lives in a fund where the capital is permanently preserved, meaning the original money is still there. Over the last 30 years more than $4 million in interest has been generated by this fund and directed to urgent needs at CHEO.

"A CHEO endowment fund is like a heart that beats on in perpetuity."

Since that inaugural bequest, there are many others who have lovingly created a CHEO endowment fund; some have established it in memory of a loved one or in their own names, some directing funds to urgent needs and some directing to specific programs and departments. When John and Patti May's son, Adam died in 2006, they created a fund in his memory. "Our priority has always been kids, so CHEO was a natural choice," says John. They continue to find great comfort in the fact that Adam's memory lives on through his fund

I recently had a reading with a medium and she told me that I said to Adam when he was born 'You're finally here. I've been waiting for you.' It was true! As soon as his feet hit the ground he was off and running. I read something about spirit warriors and how they have all this energy that they don't know what to do with. That was Adam. He had more energy than anybody else – almost hyperactive. A fireball. A free spirit. Very intelligent. If something was dull or boring, he would stir it up. In his school, all the teachers knew Adam and they always sat him up at the front of the class to keep an eye on him. He had a lot of friends and was full of mischief. He was a master at getting into trouble and talking himself and his friends out of trouble.

In grade 5, Adam had a really scary teacher – Mrs. W. Even the parents were afraid of her. One time, as she was badgering one of Adam's classmates, he called her out. 'Stop that!' he said. 'You're ruining her self-esteem.' All of 10 years old and he was standing up against an adult bully.

Another time Adam brought a Furbie toy to school. It's a toy that talks by itself and you can't shut the thing off. The teacher got upset and went hunting through all the knapsacks to find it.

When she did, she confiscated it. As students were lining up to be dismissed, one of Adam's friends, a quiet boy named Zak, saw the Furbie, quickly snatched it back and handed it to Adam. Moments later Mrs. W was livid. Just inches from Adam's face, she demanded to know the whereabouts of the Furbie. Adam looked her square in the face and said, 'That is classified information.' Zak was stressed and nervous for a week but Adam never did tell on his friend. Right into high school there were always shenanigans going on. Adventure, mischief, but never anything really bad. We got a lot of calls from the principal – like just about every day.

I remember an end-of-year party at school called the 'Tequila Sunrise.' Isn't that nice, I thought. Talk about naïve! When his sister Stephanie heard he had gone, she told me, 'Mom, it's bad news. The kids party all night, drink too much tequila, get into trouble.' Well, Adam came home that night with stitches and a bandaged arm. He'd had too much to drink and had punched a window at his school, cutting his hand and wrist. The doctor had stitched him up and Adam was supposed to go back to have the stitches removed. Instead, he took them out himself. 'Adam', I said, 'Dr. Hubby is going to be so upset with you that you did that.' Back we go to the doctor who took one look and said, 'Nice job Adam!'

We laugh. It feels really, really good to laugh. Laughing doesn't mean we aren't

grieving. It means we're using humor as a way to heal. Laughter brings a bit of oxygen into the constricted spaces of a grieving self.

> *Adam had broken a $300 window at his school. Off we went to speak to the principal and make things right. On the way there he asked, 'Mom, can we tell the principal this is my idea?' Adam owned the whole thing, admitted his act, apologized, agreed to pay for the window. And it happened again. Mr. Murphy extended his hand and said, 'Adam, I respect you so much for this.' He set the whole thing right, paid for the window, and came through 'smelling like a rose.'*
>
> *This was 'Life with Adam.' It was a big, fast life. I couldn't keep up with him. He'd get himself into trouble, out of trouble and I'd hear about it when it was done. Adam was the center of my life. We always had 'Adam stories' to tell. He was always a little mischievous, a bit of a troublemaker, yet he'd get himself out of it in the end. Once after returning with my husband from a trip, Stephanie whispered in my ear 'Mom, you can't tell Adam I told you, but he drove your car to the village.' He was 13 years old! I had to address this with Adam without letting him know Stephanie told me. So I said, 'Adam, you were spotted driving down the street.' 'Who told you?' he asked. 'Classified information', I said.*

More laughter!

> *At the dinner table, he commanded everyone's attention. He wasn't into team sports like he was into family and friends. When he got his license at 16 and was allowed to take the car...*

…more laughter….

> *...he would drive his friends around to where they wanted to go. After he passed, I found out just how big a life he lived. Everyone had a story about Adam. There were over 1,000 people at his funeral and the principals, who knew him well* (more laughter) *were there.*
>
> *One of the vice principals approached me. She wanted to share a story about Adam. Oh no, I thought, what's she going to tell me now... She had had a stroke and had just returned to work. Her coordination wasn't up to par and one day, as she walked down the hall, she was dropping things along the way. She got to her office and sat down, exhausted. Adam came in behind her with all her things and a hot coffee too. That was her last memory of Adam. A handful with a heart of gold. That was 'Life with Adam.'*

2
Reflections

One of the toughest things is going to a family function after our child's death and no one mentions them. As if they are afraid to upset us. What upsets us is being told things like 'You'll get over it,' 'It's time to move on,' or 'You still have another child.'

There is nothing to 'get over.' There is grief to move through and live. Grief isn't just one emotion. Whether you call it sadness, regret, loneliness, grief is a process with many emotions. This process gets triggered at different moments, sometimes at the grocery store or while walking or driving. It is unique for each individual and the process is different for each of our losses. Like us, the process of grief changes and evolves.

If ever you're wondering how to make a difference in someone else's loss, remember the death date. That date traumatizes us – more in the early years and less so as time softens the hard edges of the grief process. Send a brief note. Make a phone call to say 'Thinking of you today and remembering Chloe or Maddie or….' Please, say their name!

Loved ones in spirit often express regret over some unresolved issue and regret creates the burden of unfinished business. The irony is that many conversations too

difficult to have across a kitchen table can now be had across the veil. Issues can be 'laid to rest' by forgiveness and atonement. Yes, unfinished business can be finished even after the transition called death. But why wait?

One aspect of the funeral/visitation ritual that is so important to us is the stories people share with us. We often find out things about our loved one that we didn't know, and those stories matter to us. Anecdotes about our kids are like precious, small windows bringing in light. They bring us closer to our loved one and we love to hear those stories. So please, don't be shy to share!

I visit one of my favorite places, the library. The old Dewey Decimal system is still going strong and I notice #155.92: LONELINESS, #155.93: DEATH. It strikes me that perhaps they should be the other way around.

3
Jacqueline's Story

Jacqueline – I remember that I was wearing a lovely green winter jacket that winter. It was one of my preferred colors and it was my favorite warm jacket. My eldest Andrea loved green too. We both have that Irish coloring that looks good with green. So, I'm wearing the jacket a short time after their funeral and a friend tells me a comment she received 'How heartbroken can she be – look at the color of the jacket she's wearing?'

That comment cut deeply into me. I was doing nothing but living in a fog of grief but I didn't want others or even myself to think I had room for anything else. So, for many reasons, some I still don't understand, I gave up all color and wore mostly black for about a decade. All those lovely pinks and greens – didn't touch them. I didn't want to be judged as not grieving and I decided that I needed to show even myself that all joy, all color, all fun had left my life. Wearing black reflected to the world and to me just how heartbroken I was.

One December night, Jacqueline's three children, Andrea 27, Séan 19, and their sister Justine 17, were on their way three hours east to attend their grandmother's funeral in northwestern Ontario. The area is remote, sparsely populated. The night was stormy. The roads were slippery and snow covered. No one knows exactly what happened but their vehicle collided with a truck. All three children died. The driver of the other vehicle survived. Jacqueline still managed to attend her mother's funeral the next day. She spent the next decade engulfed in a haze of grief.

I remember the policeman coming to the door. 27 years old, he was just a kid himself. All the birthdays are hard but next week is Andrea's 40th birthday and it's freaking me out. Her 30th birthday freaked me out too because she only made it to 27.

Jacqueline and I recently spent a day attending an all-day 'joy' workshop with social activist Dr. Patch Adams. It was a lovely day and she participated with enthusiasm.

Jacqueline is both normal and superhuman.

Andrea kind of took over the room, like Adam. She kept track of all her friends. That last summer, after finishing a special education course, she spent money earmarked to pay off her student loan, to go visit as many of her friends as she could. I remember being angry with her for doing that but, she wanted each one to know how special they were to her. Months later, she was killed. Now I see her travels as her way of saying 'goodbye,' and I'm so happy that she did what she had wanted to do.

Séan was a born athlete, preferring the golf course to anywhere else. When he was a baby his grandmother gave him a toy that was like a rolling thing on a stick. It played music when it was rolled and Séan used it like a golf club. He couldn't walk yet but would hit the ball and crawl to it and hit it again. He could hit a ball across the street to the neighbor's house with a Fisher Price T ball set by the age of three. He was the kid that came home every day and said, 'Okay Mom, here's the plan. We're going over to Dean's, then to Randy's and then drop everyone off there,' and on and on. He always had a plan. I remember asking, 'Could the plan be that we're just going to sit here?' Life as a single working Mom was tiring.

L to R – Andrea, Justine, Séan, Jacqueline seated

More than one of us can relate. It's like they lived fully and totally and that is what we celebrate as we reminisce. It's not about what they missed but what they lived.

> *Even his friends, after the accident, felt like there was no longer a plan. They still all connect with me but they don't necessarily connect with each other in the same way. He was the one who called everybody. Séan connected with all different kids. He was the glue. Andrea was like that too.*
>
> *Justine had many friends too but she was the quieter one. I wonder if there was a side to her I didn't know? She was the third child and I felt overwhelmed from the day she was born. As a single mother it was overwhelming. Andrea helped me raise them and was almost eight when Séan was born, seeing herself as their second mother. I even heard her say to someone once that 'we' were raising them. And I needed her help. Séan and Justine were like twins, even though they were born nineteen months apart. I remember one time Justine at 13 went to sleep at a friends' and Séan, who was 15, asked 'Mom, why did you let her go? I'm lonely here without her.'*

Jacqueline confides that the passing of her three children together gave her some comfort. She couldn't imagine them being separated from each other and took comfort that the eldest, Andrea, was with them.

> *That last summer, Séan and Justine camped out overnight to get tickets to see their favorite band at the time, City and Colour. I was worried about Justine because she was only 17 but I trusted Séan to look after her. After a sleepless night wondering how they were, I got up at 6:00 am, picked up breakfast for them and their friends – just a pretext really to check up on them – and went to find them on the sidewalk. They had an awesome time together at that last concert.*

I happen to be at a golf course as I'm transcribing these words and I send Jacqueline a short text to ask which was Séan's favorite song. She sends me back a couple of choices and I search for 'Hello, I'm in Delaware' without even knowing the lyrics. As I listen with my eyes closed, I feel totally transported to the tops of the trees swaying in the wind nearby. It is a magical, rich moment.

Hello, I'm in Delaware
By Dallas Green (aka City and Colour)

'So there goes my life
Passing by with every exit sign
It's been so long
Sometimes I wonder how I will stay strong

No sleep tonight
I'll keep on driving these dark highway lines
And as the moon fades
One more night gone only twenty more days
But I will see you again
I will see you again a long time from now
And there goes my life
Passing by with every departing flight
And it's been so hard
So much time so far apart
And she walks the night
How many hearts will die tonight
And when things have changed
I guess I'll find out seventeen days
But I will see you again
I will...'

A few days later, for Andrea's 27th birthday, she and I went to Toronto for the weekend. We had passes to the film festival. We had our hair done, went for Caribbean food, saw some films and went to a U2 concert. At the end of the weekend, Andrea said it was the best mother/daughter weekend ever. I have to agree. It was an awesome weekend. Those are some special memories of our last summer/autumn together. I thought there would be many more.

When Andrea went off to college, the dynamic changed. We three became really close. Then Andrea returned and tried to still treat them like she was the mother, only that didn't fly any more. I sat her down and said, 'You have to pick. You can be either the sister or the mother but not both.' So she gave up mothering and the house became really harmonious. We were happy.

This picture was taken just five days before the accident. Two days later was my birthday and we had a wonderful family dinner. We were the four of us as well as Séan's girlfriend, Justine's boyfriend, and my niece's boyfriend. After dinner they joined their friends and went bowling. One friend commented 'Wouldn't your Mom like to come since it's her birthday?' I was happy to stay home, knowing they were all together. My gift was knowing we had come full circle and were a close family once again. They had that great time together and then five days later, they were gone.

You can't know everything about your child's life even though you may want to. I actually felt like I was supposed to know everything even though that's impossible. I hated the idea that there may be a story out there that I didn't know. I had a hunger to hear all the stories about

them and it made me wonder how many more stories about them might be out there without me knowing.

After their funeral I learnt this one. Once, Séan was in a car with his friend. His friend's father was driving. The dad got into an accident and got the two kids to go to court and say, under oath, that the friend had been driving not the father. I didn't even know that he had gone to court.

Patti recognizes Séan's integrity for never saying a word.

He never said a word to me. I was so horrified that he lied that I wondered what else he might have done.

Here's where the dynamics of a group chat are so valuable. We all launch into an analysis of Séan's integrity for not telling on the father, the father's audacity for asking the boys to lie for him in court – the ethics and morals of the issue and the pressure placed on the boys. We work it out. We talk and listen and acknowledge each other's resilience. Resilience is so much more than bouncing back from adversity. It's about being able to step forward into an even bigger life, one that learns from the past without placing unrealistic expectations on the future. It's about respecting grief in all its sneakiness. And grief is sneaky….

4
The Next Mummy

Jacqueline – The accident has defined every moment that came after it. It's the 'elephant in the room' that needs to be acknowledged. From the beginning, I was comforting others as I told them the news and I just had to get away from my small town where everyone knew about the accident.

She left her Northern Ontario home and decided to try and heal in a beautiful spot, moving to the Bahamas shortly before the first anniversary of the accident. Two years later, she found herself in a depression, ignoring her basic, personal hygiene and spending days lying on the couch, blind to the beautiful scenery just outside her window.

I clearly remember. It was almost two years after the accident. One day, while lying on the couch, I told myself, 'Go home or die here on this couch.' I went home. When I got home I went straight to the mausoleum to talk to my children. Thoughts of my Auntie Clare came to me as I was sitting there. She had been like a second mother to me and my sisters, and had lived with our family for 40 years. She had no children of her own but loved and cared for us as if we were hers. All of a sudden it came to me (I believe from my children) that I would be like her. I would love and care for other children and that would help me to heal.

Later that evening I received a call from the Bahamian friend I had been living with to say that a family would be moving in next door. The mother had just died in childbirth and they needed someone to care for the baby. The baby, a boy named McGarvey, would be living with his father, his grandmother, and his 9 year old brother Brandon. I knew immediately that I needed to go back to help this family. His aunt placed the baby in my arms for the first time when he was only 11 days

old. McGarvey and his big brother saved my life.

We try to digest the story Jacqueline has just told us, the synchronicities, the tragedies and the human suffering. Jacqueline goes home to Canada thinking she needs to care for others or she'll die. That very same night she receives a call that a woman died in childbirth and a family needs help.

> *McGarvey's grandmother called me his 'next Mummy.' I became the 'next Mummy' to Brandon as well. Then eight months later, the father took the two boys to live in the United States. Once again, from one day to the next, children that I loved disappeared from my life. I sank back into a deep depression and grieved the loss of two more children.*
>
> *All my life, all I wanted to be was a mother. All I wanted was to be like my mother, growing old and grey, surrounded by children and grandchildren. I realize now that I'm getting my wish, only not with my own children. I'm actually the 'next Mummy' for many children. The beautiful part is loving them. The painful part is having to accept to let them go.*

5
A Short Story

Christa is the mother of two lovely daughters. I meet Christa one-on-one and am briefly introduced to the life and death of her daughter, Léa. How to describe the juxtaposition of grief, rage and guilt barely contained in Christa's slim wisp of a body? She looks me straight in the eye and declares:

> *Christa – I felt so guilty. How come we couldn't save her? I wanted to kill myself. And then, I had lunch with my daughter and realized how painful it is to lose someone you love. Case closed.*

Léa's obituary is the shortest one I've ever seen. It's as if there are no words. The circumstances of her death are so frustrating.

Léa was a delightful, inquisitive child. Funny, generous, super smart, into fashion. I remember she sent me a text on her first day of class in CEGEP. She looked around the room to see everyone in sweatpants and T-shirts and said, 'Mom, I'm giving them all a yellow card.' Everyone looked like they'd just come off the soccer field and their fashion sense was at risk of total breakdown. She was clever.

Shortly after her death, Léa's friends and family channeled their grief and organized a fundraiser for the eating disorders clinic at the Douglas Hospital. They raised awareness and thousands of dollars to help educate staff and public alike. Once a year, Léa's friends gather at Christa's to reminisce and to honor their friend.

I see these wonderful young people moving on with their lives and wonder.... Léa had style and loved clothes, jewelry, makeup. She began modeling at 17. She died just after her 20 th birthday, from complications due to anorexia. For four years, she battled the disease, looking for treatment, wanting to be normal, anxiously waiting for one of the rare spaces available for adult in-patient treatment. Her health was rapidly declining. She was hospitalized while waiting for a space in the in-patient treatment centre and for days, food trays came and went, untouched, from her room.

The body, when its protein has been used up, looks to its most vital organ, the heart, for nourishment. This can lead to cardiac arrest. On New Year's Eve, Léa put her head on her father's shoulder, told him how tired she was, closed her eyes and was gone. She died of cardiac arrest. The medical team in emergency, led by Dr. Patricia McMillan worked almost 15 hours trying to revive her.

I think of Chloe, receiving the lifesaving TPN (total parentenal nutrition) for two months in hospital to build her up so that she could have colon cancer surgery. TPN gives a person complete daily nutrition. It bypasses the stomach, feeding a person intravenously but is not used if someone has an intact gastrointestinal (GI) tract. Since Chloe had a bowel obstruction, she was a good candidate. But Léa? Her blockage was in the brain, not in the GI tract. Although it would be impossible to see, it was not difficult to detect.

Christa shows me pictures of her daughter's wedding. Oh, the paradox of beginnings and endings and trying to show up for both.

It was a lovely civil ceremony and we did the whole routine. The hairdresser and makeup artist came to the house. For days before, I felt detached, listless, unable to focus. How to have a happy family moment without Léa present? Then I rallied. No yellow card for me. I knew it's what both my girls would want.

6
Putting the 'Fun' Back in Funeral

Merri – Martin didn't want to talk about his illness. He flat out refused to talk about it with his father and me. His younger brother Max was the person he confided in. Max, in his final year at university, had the tough task of researching the prescribed experimental drugs. He also provided real, solid emotional support for Martin. He took care of completing Martin's power of attorney and his will. Martin's best friend and his wife played an important role too. They were that neutral place he needed and we were grateful that he had them to go to. They were the kind of support that he needed at that time.

Merri's poise is striking. She brings up an important point about the needs of the dying. They are exhausted a lot of the time if slowly dying from an illness. They can't take visits, talking, conversation. Silent presence in the room is often what they need.

He didn't want to talk about funerals or anything about dying but the reality was there. We knew that was going to happen. Once, he let me go with him to the oncologist who told him 'Martin, we're going to try everything we can try. It's not going to save your life but it will give you some time.' The one time when he was prepared to talk about it, he said he wanted his body sent to a body farm.

A what? A body farm is a research facility where decomposition can be studied in a variety of settings. Anthropologist Dr. William Bass, of the University of Tennessee

in Knoxville, Tennessee, created the first body farm in 1987 to aid in developing techniques for extracting information such as the timing and circumstances of death from human remains. By placing bodies outside to face the elements, forensic professionals are able to better understand the changes the body undergoes. This research is then used for medical, legal and educational purposes.

> *I knew nothing about body farms. They don't exist in Canada but there are seven in the United States and one in Australia. When someone's body goes to a body farm, it's to help in the advancement of science. The body is put out on the land to deteriorate naturally. They analyze the soil samples, they look at insect and wild animal life. All this so that when they find someone who has gone missing and who dies out in nature, they can better analyze and determine how long the body has been there etc. It seems quite grim but it's a science, actually. And they learn so much from all those observations. The only problem was getting his body across the border seemed so complicated. It had to be shipped there immediately after his death, so Martin came up with a Plan B.*

It strikes me that we are one resilient bunch of mothers. Here we are munching on sandwiches, sipping tea and talking about body farms. There is something inherently healthy about this.

> *He wanted to be shot from a trebuchet.*

A what? Merri explains it's an ancient defense mechanism and I immediately

envision his body being launched somewhere…wrong!

> *As in launching cannonballs to knock down a castle. Martin mentioned he knew a boy scout leader and apparently this man had made them for fun for the boy scouts. They'd launch things and learn about ancient defensive tactics. So, after Martin died I went to see this man and he said, 'Oh yeah, I already told your son, if you want a trebuchet, we'll make sure you get a trebuchet.' As if it was the most normal request.*
>
> *We had Martin's event in our home. Martin was not in any way persuaded that he would have any part of anything religious. That was hard for me because I'm a church person but it wasn't about me, it was about him. We had laminated bookmarks made with his writing on both sides. No birth or death dates. Just his pictures from theatre school because that was a really happy time in his life.*
>
> *We didn't quite know what to do. We have a ravine in the back of our property and one of his friends suggested we freeze his ashes in water and shoot them as snowballs. And so we did!*

No way! More laughter!

Knowing the wishes of the dying is important. Note to self – putting your wishes down on paper is important. 100% of us are going to die. We should prepare beforehand for it.

THERE IS A BUS TO CATCH
NO ONE KNOWS WHEN IT COMES,
NOT TO BE WAITED FOR AT A STOP;
BUT BE SURE TO MAKE IT ON TIME.
BETTER TO BE ON THE BUS
THAN HIT BY IT.
TICKETS PLEASE.

—SMartinL

TONIGHT -
THE MOON SHALL CHANGE HER FACE.
DARKNESS WILL PASS
AND LEAVE A BRAND NEW LIGHT
IT WILL SHINE
LOVE AND HOPE
HOPE AND LOVE
AND TOGETHER
WITH HER WILL
WE WILL BE TOGETHER.

—SMartinL

Martin's high school students were coming and they all wanted to shoot something out of the trebuchet. So we decided to supply them with apples to shoot that would also feed the wildlife. Family members shot the ashes and his students shot the apples. We also had a celebration for his friends in Toronto. I had mentioned the trebuchet and when we gathered at his friend's cottage by the water, they too had built a trebuchet!

Now we're getting curious. We want details. How big exactly is a trebuchet? Shannon (another mother) is the only one who knows what a trebuchet is. She admits to watching too many Viking movies….

The one that came to our house came on a truck. It was 6' tall x 5' wide. Martin's friend built one a bit smaller. Turns out, he's a grade 8 teacher and ancient fighting equipment – trebuchets included – are part of the school curriculum. So he built one and off we went, onto the lake, to launch more of Martin's ashes.

I have three boys. My son Hung, who lives in Victoria, B.C. also wanted to try his hand at building a trebuchet for his brother. So he built one too! Eventually, he'll take his to the ocean and they'll launch some ashes into the sea on the Pacific coast at Tofino where Martin spent time with his brother. Martin was not your 'usual' thinker and he pushed others to think outside the box too.

This speaks also to Charlene's observation that everyone wants to do something, to contribute something, to show through concrete acts the love they have for the one who's passed on. All that cutting, sawing and building – all an act of love for Martin.

So Martin got his trebuchet. Three of them, actually.

The room falls silent as we contemplate the importance of honoring the wishes of those we love and Martin's wish to put some fun into the celebration of his life.

7
Connecting

Jacqueline tells us about her youngest daughter, Justine.

> *Jacqueline – I was invited to a friend's house for my 50th birthday and planned to stay the night so I could have some wine. Séan had some friends over to our house that night and at one point Justine calls me. 'Mom', she said, 'Séan's friends are out of hand and I'm calling the police!' And she did. She was 15.*
>
> *I couldn't drive home because I had had a couple of drinks so the next morning, I drove home, expecting the worst. The house was spotless. Justine has cleaned it top to bottom. She was sensible. She had integrity and she wasn't intimidated by the older boys.*

We all process how teenage parties can get out of hand, how a parent is responsible for under aged drinking in their home even if they aren't home.

> *I was really shocked that she had called the police but now, looking back, I realize she was protecting him too by breaking up the party. It's only when I talk like this that I can really remember them because I've pushed it so far back. It's been thirteen years. It's still so painful yet I love to talk about them. Now I see them as sort of one unit, a group. It's really nice to be able to talk about each one as an individual.*

Merri too echoes the same sentiment that talking about her son Martin is powerful. It 'makes him real again' and helps her heal.

> *Justine's high school guidance counselor came to the funeral. It wasn't till a few years later that he told me, 'Your daughter came to see me every morning in my office. She'd sit, have a sucker and chat away. She always had a big smile on her face and do you know what that told me?' 'What?' I asked. 'I knew she came from a happy home,' he said. As*

a divorced mother of three, trying to balance working and raising them and having such a hectic life, that meant everything to me. Another tidbit of her life I knew nothing about.

Again, we analyze with Jacqueline how this guidance counselor acted as a surrogate Dad for Justine, the difficulty of trying to do it all and the impossibility of succeeding.

Patti – Some bereavement groups have psychologists present to console grieving families. Our group, Helping Parents Heal, has all that but we recognize that our kids are still alive and with us in spirit. We receive so many signs from them confirming that. Also, they want us to talk about them.

Merri – People are afraid to talk about my son. It's as if Martin didn't exist. Today happens to be my birthday and so many friends wanted to take me out for lunch. But I chose to do what I really want to do and that's to be here. I explained to my friends that this is a group of people who know exactly how I feel and I need to be there more than I need to go out for lunch.

Patti – You know Merri, your son Martin is right here with you today, on your birthday. I have evidence in my pictures of a big brilliant orb right beside me. People try to edit the orb out and I tell them, don't touch that. It's the best part! My husband, who doesn't believe in any of this, is now at the point where he too expects to see an orb in a picture and he now calls to our son Adam to get in the shot. Sure enough, the orb is there.

On my birthday last year, a video was being taken of everyone singing me 'Happy Birthday.' You can see an orb flying around the table. My daughter Stephanie always buys me a gift from Adam and that year she bought me a heart necklace from him. On the video we saw how the orb flew around the waiter and straight into the heart necklace. That was an amazing sign from Adam.

Orbs are balls of energy. They move, float and can be different colors and shapes. Often not visible to the naked eye, orbs can be captured on camera and are more visible to cats than to humans. They are fascinating manifestations of energy that defy scientific explanation. Notice three orbs in this picture – the largest one centered right on Jacqueline.

Jacqueline – Also, it's so nice that she thinks to give you a present from Adam.

Patti – I love it too. So Merri, take pictures today.

I've experienced that the orbs will show up in the picture depending on the

Jacqueline in Ireland with a huge orb at her solar plexus and two smaller orbs nearby. |They were not visible to the naked eye but were picked up on camera.

vibration of the person taking the picture.

> *Patti – I've seen them on people. I see the blue flash across your mouth as you speak. I don't always tell people but I do see them quite often.*

We all agree Patti is our designated orb photographer.

> *Merri – My boy was an actor. He was always kind of off the wall. That's just his personality.*

Merri too moves from past to present tense. She's interrupted as the door opens and another mother, Shannon walks in. We comment on Shannon's beautiful boots. Sometimes, you just need to focus on inconsequential things. Shannon's fragile. And yet, in her frailty, there's resilience too. She's here, just back from attending her son Tristan's military parade. She showed up and she's talking about her lovely daughter, Dominique, who died in a car accident just months ago. She's wearing a blouse that Dom would love.

Shannon talks about her recent reading with a medium and how her daughter Dominique is learning how to communicate.

> *Shannon – Dominique and Tristan her brother were really close. He had a rough day today. I wore this today because of Dominique. She was so bohemian in her style.*

Shannon is tiptoeing around her grief. It is raw and real and very close to the surface. She's just back from a family trip with her son before school starts.

> *My husband and I want to go back to Monterey, where she was born, and spread some of her ashes. We didn't go there this time....*

Receiving proof of life after life by an evidential medium can bring great relief. Yes, their consciousness lives on. No, they are not in pain. Yes, they are okay, well looked after, well surrounded and guided. So much of their transition depends on their beliefs about death.

Our relationship with a transitioned loved one is ongoing. It is just different. It has changed to a nonphysical one. They know what is happening in our lives. They visit us often and will usually come when we ask as long as we don't ask them too often. They too are getting on with their lives.

We all speak to our loved ones daily. It's an ongoing monologue. Hearing their answers requires developing listening skills, being calm, removing doubt. Luckily, there is no time frame. No 'best before' date when the relationship ends. It never

ends and spirit is patient. When we are ready, they will be ready too.

Shannon – It was hard, this first time going away as a family. I wanted Tristan to think of something besides his mother being so sad. I had a reading some time ago and the medium commented how I looked like Dominique's sister not her mother. Just recently, I had another reading and wanted to fix myself properly for her.

Jacqueline – While the policeman was standing in front of me, telling me about the accident, I heard Andrea's voice saying, 'Mom, we don't want your life to be mundane.' Before coming today, I actually said to my kids, 'I guess you'll all be hanging out together too.'

Patti – I was told by Thomas J., a well-known medium, that when we have our meeting the kids have their meeting. I'm a medium too and I've got pretty high expectations for real evidence when someone gives me a reading. I was having a reading and the medium asked if I have someone in spirit. A young male, about 17. I said yes. She asked if he had a big scar across his forehead? He did. He was in a car accident and it's like a Harry Potter scar across his forehead. And then she told me 'Your son is saying, Mom, it's not a scar anymore. It's full of light. God changed it and now it's shimmering light shining out from my forehead. There's no more scar.' As soon as she said that, I knew she had him. That was amazing evidence. This was a phone reading so she couldn't see me. Then she asked me, 'Are your roots really long and your hair really dirty?' I looked and sure enough, the answer was yes. Your son Adam is telling me 'Mum, you really need to look after yourself.' Can't even hide anything from the kids anymore. They see everything! And their expectations are up there. They want us to be taking good care of ourselves.

Charlene – Medium Laura T. gave me a reading. 'Your daughter's telling me you need to go shopping and buy some new clothes. Buy something purple.'

Reminds me of what happened just 5 days before Chloe passed. On my way to the hospital that morning I stopped at the mall for some retail therapy. I bought a sweater, unloaded my grief on an unsuspecting young salesgirl and then, feeling better, made my way to the hospital. As I walked into her room, Chloe turned to look at me, a task that required a lot of effort, smiled ever so slightly and said 'Nice sweater Mom.' It was as if that small act showed her I'd be okay. It meant something to both of us. Despite the grief, I would not neglect myself.

Our kids on the other side of the veil want us to know they're just fine and want us to be fine as well. They want us to take care of ourselves, not sink into despair and self-neglect.

It has been told to me often that they are with us on our birthdays, as well as

Chloe

during special family gatherings. They love to be invited and will attend!

Magical Thinking – Not! (Magical thinking is a term used in psychology to denote a supposed delusion that our thoughts affect our outer world – that the inner influences the outer. We know, of course, that this is true, not false, not magic and certainly not delusional.)

Here is an excerpt from Jacqueline's 'mental status examination' done for insurance purposes two years after the accident –

"Although Ms. M. does report hearing the voices of her children, there is no evidence of her experiencing hallucinatory behavior within the context of this interview. There is no evidence of other psychotic phenomena. Cognitively, Ms. M. appears to be of above average intelligence with reasonably good insight and adequate judgment. Her judgment, however, is to some degree, impaired by a certain level of magical thinking, such as her belief that her children continue to be involved with her and protect her…."

8
Public Grief

Charlene – I remember going into a store right after Maddie passed. I had such anxiety, I fell apart. I had to walk right out of there. I couldn't do it. I couldn't be out in public.

Shannon – I rarely go into stores either. But when I do, all I want to buy is something that reminds me of Dominique. I was in a store recently and I saw this sweater – lace, cream and pink, with fringes, a long sweater past the knees. It was so beautiful that I just bought it. It was so her. So Dominique.

We talk about the overwhelming nature of grief and how it hits at different times. Go into a store and something triggers you. You're so overcome that you can't talk to anyone, can't function.

Jacqueline – The grocery store did that to me. I just kept thinking of all the things they would want me to buy and that I would never buy again. Pizza pops (we laugh) *and things like that. I remember telling that to one of Séan's friends. 'Buy them', he said, 'and I'll come over and eat them!'*

Jacqueline is blessed with having maintained close ties with several of her children's friends. She's invited to weddings, included at family celebrations and is off next weekend to attend a pre-wedding party for one of Justine's close friends.

Jacqueline – They kept me going when so many things became really hard for me. I became a hermit for a really long time. I remember the first time I went to the grocery store, it felt like the end of the world.

Charlene – True. Just going outside was rough. I couldn't even go for a walk by myself. My husband literally had to hold me up. I couldn't be outside of the house. I became full of anxiety. I was afraid of meeting up with somebody because then I would have to talk. And I

didn't want to talk.

The room gets really quiet as if we all acknowledge that need for silence and solitude. Sometimes grief goes so beyond words, one just needs total silence and darkness.

Patti – How long did that last?

Charlene – At least three or four months. It was always him literally holding me up.

I ask Charlene how he dealt with Maddie's death?

Charlene – He cried a lot. He also did absolutely everything in his power to help me survive. It was as if me being okay meant that he'd be okay too. It was the same with my two sons. If Mum wasn't okay, they wouldn't be okay. Eventually, they wanted to move out. They had to leave because I just couldn't get it together. My husband was very emotional. He let it out and was very honest with his grief. What kept me together was his routine. While it drives me nuts, it's also what helped me survive.

Patti – Something normal.

Charlene – Something normal.

Patti – Glenn is okay if you're okay. So he directs his energy to helping you.

Charlene – As much as he drives me insane (we laugh) *the only reason I'm here is because of him.*

We all take a moment to digest that. Having been through all the difficult moments alone, I can't imagine what it would be like to have another human being support me so completely.

Patti – You should tell him that.

Charlene – I have.

Another long pause in the room.

Patti – I never knew how different my husband and I are psychologically. John's a businessman. Very Cartesian. He would say, 'I'll do whatever you want me to do so that you're okay. I'll drive you to New York City to see George Anderson, just don't drag me into this stuff.'

Charlene – That's what Glenn would do. 'Whatever you need just don't try to get me to believe.'

Jacqueline – I went to a meeting of Helping Parents Heal in Phoenix. There were 500 people there and I saw many couples. I always thought couples can't survive this ordeal but that's not what I saw. I spoke to some of them and many were there because the wife wanted to go. The husband didn't really believe but by the end of the conference,

after receiving readings and getting evidence, many did believe.

Patti – A reading with a great medium can really help a parent. I'll often go and visit the medium before recommending them to a parent. If I sense someone wants more knowledge, I may suggest a book to read before they go see the medium. Sometimes a medium has trouble with the messaging. They have their own filters and their own ego which creates a bias to the way they interpret the information.

Charlene – I had a reading once where the medium actually said 'You need to let go.' I was just taken aback by those words because I will never, ever let go. As I was listening to her, I was almost getting angry. She told me I needed to journal, I needed to write down my thoughts. I don't need anything. I'm never going to be good with what happened but it has. Yes, I have now moved on to a different relationship with my daughter. I would love to have her back but that's not going to happen. The medium actually contacted me the next day and explained, 'I have a strong connection to your daughter. Last night I could see her clearly but couldn't recall her name. (Her own daughter is called Maddie.) I was completely blocked and then overwhelmed with panic at the thought of forgetting her name. It was more than just the normal recall issue. It was being blocked. I didn't fully understand the exchange until I sat more fully with it later. Part of what you are moving through is the fear of forgetting her and the belief that moving through your grief and possibly finding a sense of peace or even joy in your life will mean betraying her memory and making the loss less significant somehow. She wants you to know that letting go is not the same as forgetting her and she is always with you putting Band-aids where you need them. I'm not sure if this resonates but I hope this helps.'

The discussion becomes one of language and being told to 'move on' or 'let go.' The language of loss, like the language of love, is complex. Words matter.

Patti – I've been told so many times that I have to 'let go' that it doesn't even bother me. I'm never going to let go. 'Move on' is just as bad as 'let go.'

Jacqueline – I can live with 'move forward' but I can't live with 'move on.' But after thirteen years, I can't remember the sounds of their voices. That really breaks my heart. I knew I wouldn't forget them but I thought that to be okay I had to find a way to forget them. And then I figured out that that's not the case. But in the beginning I thought I had to shut all this thinking down and then maybe I'd be okay.

Patti – I lost Adam around the same time as you and I can't remember his voice either. He had such a big, booming voice. Then, a few weeks ago, I was in a store and was talking to him, telling him 'I

can't even remember your voice Adam.' I was looking for a brooch of the letter A. I was about to cry. At that very moment, I heard someone in the store say in a loud, booming voice 'OH MY GOD. ADAM, ADAM, ADAM.' It was like his voice and then someone calling his name out.' That was a gift.

Jacqueline – A girlfriend of mine tells me she still hears Andrea's laugh but I just can't. One day I had the thought that maybe it was blocked because I had to recover and really wasn't doing well. I had to somehow get above it. I had to let some memories go.

Patti – I too have gaps in my memories of the past. So, the part we have to 'let go' of is the old relationship. Now, when I feel Adam around me, I get this heart activation. It's almost like palpitations but it's a very big feeling of expansion in my heart. I know Adam's right there.

Charlene – I get that too.

Jacqueline – Actually I wanted to talk to you about having a reading because I haven't had one in a long time.

Merri – I've never had one because I was too afraid that it might be someone who wasn't authentic.

Patti – You should go to someone who others have had really good readings with. I went to a wonderful medium recently. Right away she said 'Adam darling, come, come.' She didn't know me and she was bang on with everything.

Charlene – I went to see the same one and she didn't get that I'd lost a daughter. Eventually she came through but she brought my father through and it was more about him....

Patti – There are many great mediums. A reading is just as powerful on-line as it is if we're in the same room. Everything is energy and a great medium can work from anywhere. A phone reading can work really well since they're not looking at you or getting distracted. I recommend phone readings.

Jacqueline – The first reading I had was with a woman in England. I was in the Bahamas. It was a really good reading.

Patti – Merri, there are many great mediums and I would bet Martin really wants to come through. Adam is really loud. He comes through with his name first. If they were quiet and shy when they were in a body, they'll still be quiet and shy in spirit. If he's a quieter type, a one-on-one reading would be better than a group reading.

Jacqueline – Andrea's birthday is next week and I keep thinking I have to do something big for her birthday. Justine's birthday is January 6th. They're all four months apart so it's like I get a little reprieve because for about a month before each birthday there's anxiety. I'm wondering what I'm going to do, am I going to be by myself or am I

going to have somebody around? And then I have to do that 3 times a year and then also on the date of the accident in December.

We discuss the death day. What do we do? How do we handle it? Honoring the death date honors their legacy and allows for a concrete act of remembering. Even if it's simply wearing their favorite scarf or eating their favorite food. One thing I know for sure, they know every effort and act, every thought and word that is expressed to honor their lives.

Patti – It's so important. I call it the 'angel date.' At the beginning I'd make it into the biggest celebration. We'd have all Adam's friends over, have a party, a cake. I really overdid it. We'd have fireworks, do something really big. I actually found it exhausting. We had a pool at that time and all his friends would come over. It was like a big reunion for them all. But, I'd be totally exhausted afterwards. Then the next year, I'd be anticipating what could we do for it to be as fantastic as the previous year. Now, we just save our energy. We go for a family dinner to Adam's favorite restaurant, order nachos and toast to him.

Charlene – I like to be away. I usually need to be away. Maddie died at Easter time so I always have to be away at Easter but this coming year, I won't be away because we're selling our house and building a house. I just know Maddie's helping me. I struggled with leaving our home but it's time. My mother will have her room in our new home. The house isn't what it used to be. Lots of memories there. I hate walking by that dining room window. I just hate walking by that window. And that feeling doesn't go away.

I ask Charlene to elaborate on that memory.

Charlene – She was supposed to be home at 9:30 pm. When she wasn't home at exactly 9:30 I panicked. I stood at that dining room window, staring down the road, begging God not to take her.

Patti – So you knew on some level?

Charlene – At 9:30 I called the hospitals. And then I called the OPP (Ontario Provincial Police). When they didn't blow me off... They met us at the hospital. So, I can't walk by that dining room window without....

Patti – It's a trigger.

Charlene – I stood at that window begging God.

Jacqueline – I was in my mother's house. I called the OPP and they came. I had a lot of trouble going to that house for a long time afterwards. They asked me to sit down and I couldn't go near that chair for a long time afterwards.

Patti – When they take their hats off....

Charlene – They took their hats off and I just wanted to run away. I didn't want them to tell me. And I just fell to the pavement.

Patti – They didn't ask you to sit down?

Charlene – We were outside of the hospital. I fell to the ground, the concrete.

Patti – They didn't tell me to sit down. They came to the front door. I was standing at the door. Did they tell you to sit down?

Jacqueline – When I saw them, I wanted to run. I just wanted to get out of there as if the news wouldn't be true if I didn't hear it. One officer actually came up to me, put his two hands on my shoulders and said, 'Could you sit down? I have the worst possible news.' He actually touched me and made me sit down.

Charlene – They didn't tell me to sit down but they both held me and hugged me.

Patti – Two police officers came to the door and asked, 'Are you Adam's mother?' and I said, 'Yes.'

Charlene – And you had no clue?

Patti – I was in the best mood ever. I had no clue. I thought I was so connected to Adam that I would have sensed something. They came to the door. It was so weird. They said, 'We're really sorry there's been a bad accident.' And I said, 'Oh, I hope nobody's been hurt.' And then he said, 'Adam didn't survive his injuries.' He didn't say 'Adam's been killed.'

I said, 'Oh, no, you must be mistaken. It can't be Adam.' I definitely didn't believe it. I really thought they made some mistake. And then, like you both said, I wanted to unzip my body and just run for my life. I said, 'Let me tell my husband.' But I just couldn't deliver to him the worst news of his life so the police officer told him. I remember it was 10:00 am. They both had taken their hats off and covered their hearts. I felt like jumping out of my life, like there was no way I could bear this. I wanted to run out of my life. We all broke down, sobbed and cried. And then little by little it began to sink it.

Charlene – I just kept repeating, 'What am I going to do now? What am I going to do now?'

Jacqueline – I just kept saying that to the poor officer too. 'What am I supposed to do now? What am I supposed to do now? I was supposed to be their mother.' He just stood there and never said a word. I still feel for him.

Patti comments how talking helps. Talking moved her toward healing. It's easier now that over ten years has passed.

Charlene – Funny, Patti, you talk about talking about it. I was just

talking to my sister Grace this morning and for us, the opposite was true. For both of us, it was not talking about it that helped. We had nobody giving us their stupid advice. No advice. We put ourselves in a box and I say 'we' because she literally slept with me for the first week. She would put me in the bath. Grace was as devastated as I was. We connected in our grief. My other two sisters were much older than I was and I didn't feel they could relate to me the same way. So, I pushed them away for months. I didn't want to hear from them. I didn't want to hear from anyone. My husband Glen would answer the phone. He'd answer my emails. We put ourselves in a box and we protected ourselves.

Jacqueline – I couldn't speak on the phone for years. I didn't want to be the one who was always crying and I knew I would be. I still prefer to text or email. Texting is much easier – can't cry in the text. I can cry while I'm typing but you won't know.

Jacqueline recently expressed how she had a direct conversation with a family member about her children and how, for once, the topic was not the elephant in the room.

Jacqueline – A cousin came to visit me three years ago. We were really close. This is what he told me –

'There was point in time when I didn't say anything because I didn't know what to say. Then there was a point in time when I was too embarrassed that I hadn't said anything and I really didn't know what to say. And then I knew I had to come visit you.'

I told him it was okay. Because, had he come before, I would have been lying on the sofa with a blanket wrapped around me, unable to speak. At least then, ten years later, I was still crying but we could speak. Then, just last week, his brother came to visit. I hadn't seen him in 22 years. The last time we saw each other, our kids were playing together. He looked me in the face and said, 'I don't know what to say. I don't know how you got through this and I'm so glad you did.' I told him, 'I want you to go back and tell your brother that I'm doing better. I'm not crying all the time. As I started to say that, I started to cry.'

It felt so good that he actually said something about it. Most people will pretend that it never happened. I always felt, even from the beginning, that I had to give people permission to talk about the accident. So, I started giving people that permission because I didn't want my kids to be forgotten. I knew that if I didn't give permission, no one would talk about them.

Patti – And that creates tension in the room. That's your job Jacquie, to talk about them and to give other people permission to do the same.

Instantly, a warm feeling envelops the room and we all feel it. I sense our kids telling us, 'That's your job, Moms, to keep talking about us.'

Patti – It brings us a lot of joy to share these stories.

It brings pain too. All this time, Shannon is up pacing around the house and not able to join us at the table. Dominique's transition is recent. She likes to talk about Dom through the tattoo she has on her arm that represents different elements of her daughter's life.

Shannon – This was my first tattoo ever. It honors my Dom and captures her as a lacrosse dominator, basketball magician, yellow rose of Texas (her happy place), warrior princess eagle feather, my pickle with wings, VW van (my bohemian beauty) and jewels to represent her priceless love & soul.

Patti – It creates tension when people don't talk about our children. Like you said Merri, people don't talk about Martin. How long has it been?

Merri – Four years. My two closest girlfriends understood. But I've had people say 'He died four years ago. Are you not over it already?' I just say, if I live to be 100, I'll never be over it. That's where I'm at.

Charlene – If someone said that to me they wouldn't be a part of my life.

Sometimes people just don't know what to say. They just don't know what to say. Patti makes the point with a role reversal.

Patti – A friend of mine had lost his wife and his child. He came to my door and I didn't know what to say. I was beating myself up about that and then he came to my door again a little while later and he said to me, 'You heard, didn't you?' 'Yes,' I said. 'I got a chance to say goodbye to them in the emergency room,' he said. 'I liked your wife and your child and I'm so sorry.' I felt like the tension was broken and that he had given me permission to talk about it. So, I know what you mean Jacquie. He gave me permission. After I lost Adam, I gave people

permission. I brought it up first. Some people changed the subject. They just couldn't handle it.

Merri – And sometimes beautiful things happen. Martin was very close to my godchild Brittany who is many years younger than him. She loved him. If anyone had a broken heart nearly like mine when he died, it would have been her. I have a lovely memory of the two of them in the kitchen one night, exchanging verbal one-upmanship, and laughing so hard they were crying. After Martin died she asked to say a few words at his memorial. Brittany is blind and she wrote a beautiful tribute to Martin in Braille. Also a brilliant musician, she later wrote a composition for two voices using the words of one of Martin's poems.

Once, after Martin died, we were driving in a downpour. I pointed out to her that there was a rainbow just outside her car window. Then I realized it was in fact, a double rainbow. 'I know,' she said. 'Martin said to me 'You like that rainbow? I'll give you two.' She felt him close by. And she smiled.

9
Healing Happens

A Braille tribute. We're all touched by that and embark on a conversation about how we pay tribute to our children.

I honor Chloe's memory by returning to the hospital that cared for her and bringing baked goods. Those who knew her appreciate that small gesture of gratitude for their care. Those who didn't are somewhat perplexed. I honor her memory in both small and big ways, some private, some shared. We donated a tea wagon and lovely silver service tea set. Once a week, volunteers wheel it through the hospital's palliative ward, offering afternoon tea to patients and families.

During Chloe's hospital palliative care stay, there was healing, but it was of a different nature to other wards. It was healing of the relationship, acceptance of the inevitable, time that gave us a chance to say 'I love you' and 'Goodbye' without theatrics or hysterics. It was loving accompaniment. A quiet time with little conversation. Interestingly, many people live longer than expected in palliative care because the care is so good. It is pain management as well as whole family comfort and care. That's it. That's enough. No more trying to fix, change or cure.

This experience is so different from accidental sudden death. When a loved one dies in an accident, we wish we could have said goodbye. When they linger and linger, slowly fading from a terminal illness, their suffering is intolerable to us and we wish it could be over.

Some level of acceptance, some level of knowing that all is as it should be, helps to weather grief.

Knowing that they hear us, that they are still very close-by right after death offers a blessed moment to say goodbye. If we are witness to a long decline, we can assist by allowing them the space and peace to leave without guilt. We can assist them to move toward the light, to take the hand of a loved one on the other side. We can even sing to them or play soft music to make their detaching less traumatic.

We all have a few minutes of zoo therapy as Patti's dogs demand feeding. It

reminds me of the zoo therapy that Chloe experienced for the last year of her life. I bought her a kitten, Mia, who stayed with Chloe day and night, spending her time draped right over the tumor on Chloe's abdomen.

We talk about different transformative experiences we've witnessed. One morning, years ago, I experienced a phenomenon that simply awed me and lifted me into a state of grace. I actually caught a glimpse of heaven.

I had gone out for a jog and had sat down on a park bench to meditate for a few minutes at the end of my run. When I opened my eyes, the whole world looked totally different. It was the planet on steroids! All the colors were deeper and more luxurious. All the flowers were huge, the grass was a deep emerald green, lush and brilliant. In my head I heard, 'This is what heaven looks like.' I closed my eyes, wondering if the altered reality would still be there when I reopened them and it was! Then I was taken to a spot where I could see children playing. I was separated from them by an acrylic wall and I knew, instantly, that they had all crossed over. I was struck by how happy they were and how they were playing and having so much fun. I was then told I'd seen enough for one day and the experience ended. I recall every detail of that vision vividly and share this with the women around the table.

> *Charlene – I'm glad you brought that up because years ago, my Mum and Dad lost their daughter. She died at 9 years old – before I was born. Back in those days, you didn't talk about death. My Mum still to this day does not talk about Maddie or about her daughter Yvonne. She took all their pictures down and yet, there's one thing I remember my Mum saying about Yvonne. In a dream, she saw Yvonne playing with a whole bunch of children on the other side of a clear wall. Yvonne stopped, looked at my Mum, said, 'Hi Mom,' and went back to playing. That was good enough for my Mom. She knew Yvonne was okay.*
>
> *Patti – Someone told me Adam is working on energy. Makes total sense. Adam is teaching something about energy. I thought, Oh God, what is Adam up to now?*

More laughter.

They recover, they heal and then they work on the stuff they love. Chloe told me she was working on flowers and color combinations. I remember her having boxes of flower essences, taking courses about essential oils and reading books about nature. They work on the stuff they love. They also work on solving the problems we face and when they master the solution, they find a way to download it to us, whether in a dream, a happy coincidence, a seeming error – as in the petri dish left out over the weekend. Magic indeed.

> *Charlene – I've heard that. I've heard that not just once but many times.*
>
> *Patti – I've been told that Adam is helping kids who die in car*

crashes.

That too is very common. Having had the experience, they can better assist others. In Adam's case, he knows how a car crash victim feels totally disoriented and is in shock to learn that their body can no longer house them.

> *Patti – One night my husband John, who doesn't believe any of this, woke up crying. 'What is it?' I asked. He said, 'I had this dream. I had just had a shower and the bathroom was all steamy. I walked in and Adam was washing his hands. His pants were baggy. He looked at me and said, 'Dad.' He put his arms around me and gave me a big hug. I could smell him. I could feel him. I was holding him. 'Dad, I'm okay. I'm working for a cop on the other side and we're helping kids who die in car crashes.' And then John said, 'I've gotta get your Mom' and it was over.*

We can have vivid encounters with our loved one when we're asleep and when we're awake. We can actually see their materialized body in front of us. It may seem solid and physical or may look as if it is made of brilliant points of light. If they passed when they were older and frail, we may see them younger, fit, filled with vitality and smiling broadly. This is so startling that our brain has trouble accepting the phenomenon and has a moment of disbelief and shock. Rather than stay gazing at our loved one, we may turn away in a slight panic, looking for a reality we are familiar with. A split second later, we turn back toward our loved one, hoping to still see them but alas, they're gone.

Now that we know this, we can be prepared. If this great gift happens, we won't look away in panic and lose that precious glimpse too soon.

> *Merri – We adopted Martin three weeks after his birth. His birth family named him Shaune Martin. In my kindergarten classes that year I had five boys named Sean and it was hard to imagine another Sean so we kept Martin and added another middle name. He always knew his original name, and believed he had Welsh background but we didn't get enough information to be able to verify that. Fast forward to high school and I kept getting calls for a Sean, always telling the caller that no Sean lived here. Martin overheard me on the phone one day, looked at me and said, 'They're calling for me. I decided to go by the name my birth mother gave me.' That was perfectly fine with me. He was coming up to his 18th birthday and I told him that if he really wanted that to be his name, he could see a lawyer and have it legally changed. And he did.*
>
> *It was one of that young lawyer's first ever cases. He phoned me to say, 'I had your son in my office this morning and the name he wants is so long, it'll never fit on any business card. Are you okay with that?*

Does that bother you?' 'Not at all', I replied. In choosing what would now be his legal name, Shaune Martin had also added a Welsh name. Martin never wanted to look for his biological family but we always said, 'If you want to find them, we'll do everything to help.' It was up to him. If he did look for them, we don't know about it, but he always knew it was fine with us.

Patti – I just got the shivers. He really knew you loved him.

Merri – We were not expecting to adopt a baby. We were open to any young child needing a family, especially one who might have a disability.

I can hear Martin saying in my head 'That's why I chose them. They were willing to adopt a disabled child. I wanted them.'

Patti – Well, children do choose their parents.

Shannon – I just read that people are saying they feel their grandchild is their child reborn. That helps explain why grandchildren are so close to their grandparents, maybe even more so than their parents.

Jacqueline – My niece has a 7-year old girl. From when she was born, my sister always said she reminded her of Andrea. A few months ago, a friend came to visit and met her. She thought she was a perfect combination of Andrea and Justine. She acts like Andrea and she has Justine's coloring. I feel a strong bond but I had never really put that together. Now that you're saying that, maybe that is what's going on....

Patti – About five years ago, I went to see Lisa Williams and she was talking about that. Adam came through her, nice and loud. Is Dominique loud?

Shannon – I haven't had a problem receiving communication from her.

Patti – It's been only four or five months. That's pretty early so she's a good communicator.

In his book, Talking to Heaven, James Van Praagh writes 'Even though they have passed over, it does not mean they immediately know the mechanics of spirit communication.' (p. 170). Once on the other side, spirit has to learn how to modulate their energy, how to adapt to our denser atmosphere and to speak clearly and calmly so that the medium can understand them.

Shannon – I had great readings except for one. She names the medium. *I actually felt hurt by it. It felt like he was just making stuff up. I feel he should have been honest and said 'This isn't working.'*

Patti – I had a great reading with him but I know, Charlene, you didn't.

Charlene – Maddie would not come through him. She just would not.

Patti – Maybe Dominique just didn't like him and wouldn't come through him.

Shannon – I believe that. They won't come through a medium that they don't like. So now, I'm picky about who I go see. I pick who I think DJ will like. That's really important to me.

DJ is short for Dominique Jasmine. I found this big book where I'd written a few things about my kids. Dom had played lacrosse on the boys' team. She played with boys older than her. They wore helmets and kidney pads and she wasn't afraid of contact. One day she came home and said, unapologetically, 'Mom, he lifted his arms so I hit him.' She was a basketball whiz and earned the nickname "Dominator" from her all-male lacrosse team. She was the only girl to play in the Senior Male Lacrosse Division at Texas A&M. Out there getting hit, loving the competition, playing all kinds of sports. Tough and feminine at the same time.

She played inner city basketball and was the only white person on the team. They called her 'marshmallow' to try and break her concentration. I remember this one game. This girl on the opposing team was just huge. Dom went into her and I asked her afterwards 'Didn't that hurt?' 'Oh no, Mum', she said, 'she was all soft and mushy.' She would set up the plays, work the ball down the court till she was right under the basket and then she'd pass the ball. She was our princess warrior. I've been told by a medium that she's helping girls on the other side who've been hurt and abused. Dominique always chose to see the potential in people so sometimes she ended up with people who didn't treat her properly.

I feel Dominique with us and she's explaining to me that not only did she choose to see the potential in all people, she felt that by being with them it would lift them up. She wanted to lift them up but in so doing, put herself in harm's way sometimes. She's telling me that was her lesson to learn. Yes, to help others and to see the potential in all, but to set her own boundaries and not put herself in harm's way.

Shannon – I know she helped a lot of people. I remember being with her in the car and she's on the phone the whole time, virtually talking this girl off the ledge. She had another friend that she was talking to who was in another city. She was worried about him and called the police. The parents said she saved his life.

She was a social butterfly and was so pretty that she was picked on by other girls. She'd bring critters home. One time she was in the

hospital and a friend came to visit her. I thought, 'Gee, Dom has the same sweater, pants and socks.' Her friend looked at me and said, 'They're her clothes. She is so generous. She gave them to me.'

I talk to her all the time. I've had signs that made me drop to my knees. I am so proud of my sweet girl. She has taught me so much and continues to teach me so much. She is so full of love, wisdom and generosity – my powerful Bohemian Princess Warrior. Her giggle was infectious, my husband called her 'Rigoleuse.' So smart, she could whip out an essay in an hour that would bring me to tears or have me laugh until it hurt. She loved nature, animals, bugs, dancing, laughing and true friendships. She had no time for insincerity or pretention and was the first to fiercely protect her family. A social butterfly, she helped us make friends during our multiple military moves.

It happened this past spring. I awoke in the middle of the night and just knew. All day we made desperate attempts to reach her. Nothing. Finally, at 6pm that evening, the police knocked at the door. A car accident.

I feel like I got some signs right away. Songs, feathers, dragonflies, birds. From little yellow birds playing tag to beautiful hawks and majestic eagles to butterflies flying into me. I also got dimes, pennies, lights flickering, strangers hugging and consoling me.

One day I thanked her for the signs, calling her "Dom the Bomb". Later that night, there was a notification on my laptop of a Dom the Bom video of 3 kids performing back in like 2014. WHAT!? Another time I received a notice from DJ saying, 'Grasp your reality, then mash it up and chase it again. Take wisdom – not greed.' This girl could be so deep, a wise old soul. Her last post was, 'Love a person for their soul; not their beauty.'

She had told me as a young teen that she would pass at 21 years of age and I later found out she said a similar thing to a friend of hers later on. She actually was 23. I've had huge whiffs of her perfume as I was curled in bed and my computer randomly played a song, 'Missing you....' She has visited me in dreams to thank me and to hug me. At times, I can feel the warmth of her breath on my ear. I feel her rubbing my new tattoo, letting me know she approves. My husband has had dreams too. In his dreams, DJ had glowing aqua hair and he got to squeeze her knee like he used to do.

I did my best to keep exercising, inspired by my crazy good athlete Dom. During my first run I was remembering how she had, without knowing it, run over a snake with her bicycle as a little girl in the Mohave Desert. Not two minutes later, a snake slithered across in front of me – very uncommon in this climate! Another time, during a run in

my all French neighborhood, I heard someone loudly saying, 'I LOVE YOU,' followed by a song 'Why don't you just meet me in the middle? I am losing my mind just a little.'

Yes, my dear girl, I am trying. I want nothing more. On another run, after asking for a sign of how she was doing, I found a random card on the ground. It played music and sang the song 'I feel good.' During one reading I was told that something would happen in six days and I feel it did. My husband, son and I were at a theatre, struggling through a movie and I was asking her for a sign. Well, the power went out and we ended up getting 23 free movie coupons – her age at the time of transition. And we love movies! I think it was her way of encouraging me to get out of the house.

My husband and I went into a church in Quebec City to light a candle for Dom and to send her prayers and love. We looked up at the statue. 'Dominique' was carved into it. Not a common spelling for male clergy! Another time, I accompanied my husband on a business trip to Texas (otherwise, I'm a hermit). A raccoon played games with us and we saw 13 eagles on our run – her sports number. The eagles formed like a stairway to heaven. Beautiful! Strangers ask about my tattoo and give me incredible hugs. I've received so many signs. People call me brave but I don't see myself as brave. I do know that all these messages of love mean a lot to me.

10
Living Lightly

Jackie, Jaclyn, Muffin, where to start? You were the angel, the golden child, the new and improved version of your parents who uplifted everyone. You were 17, just four months' shy of your 18th birthday.

The owner of the funeral home said it was his largest funeral ever. Three schools closed with students, parents and teachers bussed in to attend. The grief counselor was a great help. Your mum Terry did wish to die. But even stronger was her wish to be present to honor you.

You transitioned on an early September day, just as you and your classmates were starting college. A professional actress, studying your lines in the van, you were on your way to the studio. A broken neck. You left your body instantly. You had many friends and many of them didn't return to classes that fall. Instead of completing their college studies in two years, they took two-and-a-half. The college staffed a room with grief therapists and psychologists, showing compassion in action. Teenagers need help. We all need help navigating death.

Today, I had a conversation with your mother, Terry. It was mostly a monologue. Your Mum, warm, open, authentic, loves to talk! Not just about you. But especially about you. She also talks about your sister, your brother, her grandsons. She talks of life before the accident and life after. She talks of her mother, her sisters and about your Dad. They met in high school. All the girls swooned over him and he dated them all. Turned out that he would spend the date talking about Terry. They had ups, some downs. He was the neighborhood Dad who piled all the kids in his car, who was hands-on generous and loving.

Sudden death changes us. For your Dad, the loss of you slowly pushed him inside, far inside and away. Away from love, away from the people he loved, away from his life. In this case, he lost you and then tried to forget his whole life. Another loss for your Mum.

Your Mom is whole again. Yes, she still grieves. It's different after thirteen

years. Just look at the word 'whole.' It contains the word hole. Like your Mum, we can be whole again while carrying within us a gaping hole, a loss. We can do this. We can find wholeness.

Terry is a successful interior decorator. After you died, she tells her clients she expects to die soon. A stroke or a heart attack. She does not think she will go on living. She tells all her clients to find another decorator. She will not be working ever again.

Because the Jewish tradition of mourning involves seven days of visitation at home, her clients meet each other. They decide to visit the grief counselor together, where they learn that your Mum will work again. Just not yet. She will laugh again. Just not yet. She will get back to the land of the living. Just not yet.

They concoct a plan to contact her very casually a few months after your death. Five months later, her client Rochelle has deliberately messed up the living room Terry decorated. She invites Terry over just to take a look at another room that needs attention, maybe have a coffee...very noncommittal.

Terry walks in and her sense of style, function and form kicks in. 'What happened to this room?' she asks. For two hours she rearranges furniture. Then she realizes she had passed two blessed hours when she wasn't thinking only of the loss of you. Work brings her peace. She goes back to work.

Several years after you transitioned, your Mum was accompanying a cousin at the end of her life and was introduced to end-of-life palliative care. The care and kindness she received and witnessed reflected the true principles of whole family care. Vowing to give back when she could, Terry began volunteering in the palliative care ward. There were two sections. The long-term patients with three or more months to live, and the short-term patients with three months or less. The staff recommended she work in the long-term area. Not your Mum. She knew she wanted to help those who were dying alone. Without consciously realizing it, she was healing her regret of not being there for you when you died, by being there to accompany those dying alone. It brought her peace.

Jackie, listening to your Mum is about bearing witness to authentic, raw stories. She doesn't lose her train of thought, weaving one real life tale into another. And she doesn't spare herself either, sharing her journey, warts and all. I've never spent six hours having one conversation.

Your Mum calls you an appropriate child. 'Jackie was always appropriate,' she says. 'Appropriate?' Terry explains that you were an actress and would audition for parts. Some you would get, some you wouldn't. 'She was balanced,' Terry said. 'She handled rejection with grace, never overreacting if she didn't get a part. Always gracious. Never competitive. She was appropriate.'

Your clothes have become quilts. Your friends are having babies. Your Mum attends their weddings, holds their babies and continues to process her grief. And slowly life brings healing. It's one day at a time, and this too is appropriate.

I meet Joanne, Matthew's mother, late one afternoon, at a local café. She's dressed for her 6:00 pm spinning class and apologizes for the casualness of her attire. 'Forget the apology, I wish I was joining you,' I say.

Immediately upon hearing of this project to gather oral histories of losing and finding, of death and grief, Joanne is in. She wants to help other parents navigate their mountains of loss by sharing some of her story. She also wants to talk about her son.

> *Joanne – People think they shouldn't talk about Matthew or bring up his name to me. In fact, the opposite is true. It helps so much to talk about him. I bumped into an old friend who was shy to talk. She was stammering a bit and finally came out with the reason. 'I have Matthew's picture on my fridge and I talk to him often,' she said. I told her how that just made my day. To know that Matthew is still treasured by others, is still spoken to and still matters. To know his memory is kept alive by others helps me feel closer to him.*

I ask Joanne if she feels Matthew close by.

> *Yes, I talk to him often. We still have a strong relationship and to me, he still lives. He's just in another form. How I cope today six years later, and how I coped six years ago has evolved. Don't tell me time heals. It doesn't. Don't tell me this is the new normal. It isn't. There's nothing normal about this and the pain doesn't heal. I am better at managing the triggers and I am better at honoring how I feel.*
>
> *The night Matthew died, he was out with friends for dinner. He'd had a few drinks but was able to divvy up the tab for the whole table and pay his bill. He put his coat on and declared he would be outside getting some air while the designated driver said their goodbyes. Moments later, his ride came out and Matthew was nowhere to be found.*
>
> *It was a frigidly cold Saturday night in December. Matthew's body was found 2 days later in a nearby canal. He had frozen to death. He was 27 years old.*
>
> *No answers. No explanations. No goodbyes. A young man, who, as a young boy, had been the cautious one. The one who made sure the railing was secure before taking the stairs. Unlike his younger brother Brandon, Matthew was not prone to taking risks. He was a level headed, intelligent listener, a tennis pro, a golfer, a whiz at basketball.*

And then he was gone.

We suspected foul play at first but later determined that there was no evidence to support that. He had decided to take a stroll and had ventured out onto thin ice. Perhaps he had slipped. Perhaps, perhaps... there were many questions and no answers.

How to make peace with this new reality? How to function and eventually find joy once again in life? Joanne talks about the value of shared experience with others. Her therapy group consists of mothers who have been dealing with the loss of a child for some time.

It's a safe space that's become a bit of a social space as well. We used to be open to new mothers but listening to their accounts just brought all that raw grief back into our hearts. It was exhausting. So, after some discussion, we decided to close the group to newcomers. There's no judgment, no advice giving. It helps.

Self-awareness is essential. I want to feel my emotions and deal with them, not bury or cover them up. The group is a safe place for us all. But I know I continuously need to quiet the chatter in my mind, so I do a lot of my own work. I try to deal with my feelings when they come up and rather than avoid the emotions, I explore them. I'm good at knowing what I need and if it means staying in bed all day (which rarely happens now) I do it.

The worst that can happen happened to me twice. 28 years ago, Matthew's younger brother Michael, just 6 weeks old, died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in his crib. So I'm no stranger to loss. I knew this grief. After that happened, I used to tell my three children 'Stay safe. I don't think I could survive this again.' And then it happened again. It happened again. My children watched me closely to see how I would react. I was advised to take medication but I didn't want to numb myself out with meds. Actually, the first year, I was kind of numb. The loss really hit me the second year. In fact, the second year was tougher than the first. I realized there is no way of controlling life. There is only the option of making my way through it. Travelling helps.

More than one mother mentions that the second year is tougher than the first.

When we're travelling, everything is new. All senses are engaged in processing what's out and about and around us. We are less absorbed in our thoughts and much more enthralled with the outer world. This move away from the self is like taking a holiday from our own minds. It is refreshing and life affirming. Even just a stroll to an unknown part of our own city can provide that kind of altered focus.

Cliff, my husband, grieves differently than me, using his work to keep him focused. I stopped working a year ago. Work felt like a distraction to

me and fortunately, I was able to stop. It was important to acknowledge that we are different and that we grieve differently. I even see this with my two children. My daughter Lindsay speaks of her emotions, talks constantly about her brother. My son Brandon wants to protect me from being burdened with his sadness. He's taken on the role of my protector.

I had a very unusual relationship with my eldest son. He was very protective over me and I think his brother has taken on some of that role, wanting to protect me and not let me see him sad. I'm honest with my feelings and not afraid to cry in front of my kids. And yes, we do talk about Matthew all the time.

Two years ago, my father was nearing the end of his life. I had the great fortune to be with him and to care for him. When he finally went into the hospital palliative care ward, we were at peace. All had been said. He died six hours later. I not only cherish that care-giving time I spent with him, I know the value of leaving nothing left unsaid. I've gotten good at realizing life is short and I'm trying to make it the best life that I can. I've learned to live life lighter.

For years, my husband wanted me to go up in a hot air balloon with him, but I refused. I was always afraid of something bad happening. It was as if I carried around the burden of needing to control things out of fear of some unexpected harm. After Matthew died, I realized I didn't control my children's safety, nor the events of their lives. I do feel defined by this tragedy but I didn't want that for my two surviving children. So, I learnt to accept that I can't control their wellbeing and that I can still find ways to live joyously. I know that's what Matthew would want for me.

I did finally go with my husband in a hot air balloon over the Serengeti desert, watching as herds of wild animals roamed below us. And yes, it was exhilarating!

Joanne takes a sip of her herbal tea, checks her phone and nods that it's time to go. I watch her leave the café, a powerhouse of strength, courage and fragility finding her way in that mix of anger, grief and sorrow, allowing space for self-care, for sadness and yes, even for joy as she does her best to live life lightly.

11
What is Mediumship?

Having a reading with a medium; hearing evidence of the continuation of life; what to expect if you're a sitter; the medium's perspective – mediumship is complex. The purpose of this chapter is to lay some of it out, answer a few questions about what a medium does, how they can and do increase their skills and the subtle nature of conversing with spirit.

Once again, we're at Patti's house. Only this month, a medium has been invited to bridge the divide and there are twelve bereaved mothers present. The medium makes it clear that she does not want her work turned into a spectacle, is there out of love for the children and respect for the mothers' journeys. No taping. No names. No note-taking. No fee charged.

The phenomenon of her abilities is something I never tire of witnessing. The formal term is psychotronic energy. From the medium's point of view, this is delicate work. Subtle, fine energies speak to different senses. Picking it all up means becoming still, emptying the mind, being open but not expecting anything in particular. It means connecting to trusted, higher energies. One can receive feelings and emotions, thoughts, sounds, pictures, short movies, smells, tastes, words, fully formed sentences, physical body sensations. Once you receive, you give whatever you get with the least amount of interpretation and filtering. For a sitter a good reading can, in an instant, change their beliefs about the nature of reality. For the medium, it is blessed, divine work to be that bridge. On this day, the medium provides almost two hours of messages, opening hearts and providing solace to all the mothers in room.

I've been on both sides of the table, as a medium and as a sitter. As a sitter I am skeptical but also marvel at the minutia and often mundane details delivered in the goal of proving life after life. The medium 'sees' the blue rocks in my car and approves. She asks if I just bought myself a red rose (yes, I had the previous day), telling me Chloe urged me to buy that rose. I receive a verbal acknowledgement and

elaboration of something I've been thinking. She mentions a small ritual I do with my grandmother's wedding band and is spot on. Every act, thought and word is known.

Each medium operates in their own unique way with the energies of spirit. This medium is very proficient with names. She calls out names of deceased children, other family members, even accommodating the deceased mother of a neighbor three doors down who wants to tell her daughter that she's wonderfully fine and very much alive.

My daughter Chloe comes through and talks about this book. Then the medium says 'Daniel.' Chloe has a message for her brother Daniel. The medium says 'Rose.' I know it's my grandmother Rose who proceeds to confirm my thoughts about how I will use roses in this book. Then she says 'Emily.' My other grandmother. She repeats my grandfather's name several times but for some reason, I don't realize it's him coming through and wanting acknowledgement. I'm still thinking of Chloe and processing information from my two grandmothers. The medium persists in repeating his name. Spirit will do this if a message is not acknowledged. They are persistent and that's a really good thing because we don't always interpret messages properly when we're a sitter. It can also be frustrating when you deliver a message and the sitter doesn't take ownership of it. In that case, the medium simply requests that the sitter remember the information. Perhaps clarity will come later. In this case, I neglected to affirm my grandfather's presence. I was only 6 when he died and didn't remember him well. Two days later I realize she was calling out his name.

The messages keep coming. Often a medium's delivery will begin to speed up as spirit communication becomes well established. All the children want to speak! The move that's being planned, clarification of what happened the night of the accident, the color of the sheets a mother just bought, a recent conversation, confirmation that – yes, such and such was a sign from spirit, the new eyeglasses another mother just bought, what was said just before they transitioned. The sublime and the divine working in tandem to bring loved ones together.

The work I love to do as a medium is what begins once a sitter accepts the continuation of life and knows that consciousness lives on. Then they are ready for communication with spirit that can guide and inspire them toward greater personal awareness, expansion and joy. No two sessions are the same.

My mediumship skills are sometimes acute, sometimes difficult to tap into as my rational mind gets in the way. Self-confidence and practice will help my abilities grow. These skills can, like any skill, be developed with dedication and the goal to continuously improve. Mastery in connecting to spirit requires the three 'P's, like mastering any other skill – practice, patience and perseverance. It also requires the complete letting go of doubt.

An example – I'm in an intensive seven-day mediumship development course and all we do, all day long, is 'sit in the power' and work with spirit. The energy in the room is charged. I feel very in-tune to spirit and my abilities are sharp after being there just a few days. We are practicing one-on-one, each taking a turn as

sitter or medium. A stranger sits down with me to act as a sitter. I see a young girl in spirit standing beside her. (In fact, I 'saw' this young girl with me a few hours before this exercise and that has me really, truly amazed.) The sitter has no idea who this young girl is. I give a more detailed description of the child. Long blond curls, angelic face, gentle smile, slightly disheveled looking. Still the sitter draws a blank. The young girl describes the kindness of the sitter's mother. She gave her cookies. This young girl would stuff the cookies at the bottom of her bed, using her finger to retrieve bits of sugar to comfort her. All of a sudden, the sitter realizes who it is and becomes agitated. 'Oh my God', she says. 'That was fifty years ago.' Now the little girl is excited because finally, the sitter knows who she is. The whole story tumbles out and they begin to communicate rapidly with each other. The sitter was seventeen when the tragedy happened. Her boyfriend abused and then murdered this little girl. (I have a momentary repulsion to this information but keep going.) The girl is telling her to let go of the guilt. It's true, the sitter carried guilt for a long time, wondering how she could not have known who he really was and what he was capable of. They both cry. A healing fifty years in the making. The session ends. The sitter is emotional, unable to now trade places and give me a reading. I'm humbled and amazed by what just transpired.

That week at the Arthur Findlay College in England, immersed for twelve hours a day learning and practicing mediumship with mediums from around the world, was one of the happiest, most demanding and absolutely thrilling experiences of my life. Once I returned home, that level of immersion in spirit wasn't maintained and my skills dropped. That taught me the value of raising the energy, of increasing my vibration in order to connect and led me to develop the meditation and sound vibration work I currently do.

Mediums work to develop their skills like any other professional. They invest in studying and continue to refine their skills through classroom time and other means. Interestingly, sitters sometimes feel that to work with spirit is a gift from the divine and therefore should not be exchanged for a fee. Yet, if someone has a God given gift of a singing voice or the ability to bake delicious cakes, it is acceptable for them to receive an exchange for their service. Prosperity consciousness comes into play here. The concept of balance also comes into the equation. If one gives and gives and doesn't receive a fair unit in return, the whole exchange is out of balance. The abundance mindset is shaken and consciousness shifts from one of prosperity to one of lack. Understanding that led me to support mediums charging for their services.

Weekly Mediumship Classes

The purpose of a weekly mediumship class is to assist attendees to develop their skills. Our teacher Busta, has devoted almost two decades to this task. He is kindly yet demanding, a man of few words unless he's on his feet giving a message from spirit.

Everyone sits in a circle. After a group meditation and several exercises, we

each are called to get up and give messages to one or more people in the circle. While I'm seated I have no messages to share, nothing. As soon as I begin walking around the room, the messages begin to come. I approach someone. If I know their name, I address them by name. If not, I ask them their name and then ask their permission to give them a message. They can accept or refuse. If they accept, I allow the words to begin to flow and the message then builds. It's as if spirit requires we make the first, bold move and then they take over.

Sometimes, when giving messages in a spirit circle, I feel myself gone from the room. I am unsure what or who delivers the message but I know it isn't me. I remember bits of the message but not the bulk of it. It's as if I lend my vocal chords and my mental capacity to another being that then transmits whatever they wish. So that all transmissions are for the recipient's highest and best good, a prayer is made at the beginning of the session to ensure we are dealing with the highest divine energy that the room is able to meet with. It is important, therefore, to raise the energy of the room before beginning. This is done by meditating to music. It can also be done with drumming, playing crystal bowls, singing, chanting, movement and other rituals such as burning of a substance. That could be incense, tobacco, white sage or palo santo, a sacred wood. Different traditions burn different substances to call in spirit and clear the room of negative energies. The use of essential oils also enhances the experience.

Armed with my faith in the process yet having absolutely nothing to say, I get up and almost instantly feel drawn to a participant. A woman I don't know. I'll call her Abby. I see a female in spirit. I describe a farmhouse. Big rocks. No electricity. The woman would love to have company but the nearest neighbor is very far away. She looks at her hands and wishes they could be lovelier but they are wrecked from hard work. Abby is nodding her head. This lady is Abby's aunt in spirit. I feel her aunt's loneliness, her sad, hard life, her regrets. I sympathize completely with this woman and would like to give her a hug. I ask Abby if her aunt can hug her. This is touchy because it opens up the question of proper and improper boundaries. Abby can accept or refuse. She accepts and as 'I' hug her, I feel all her aunt's love and sadness and wishes for Abby to have her dreams come true physically channel through me to Abby. It is powerful.

The image changes. Another woman is with Abby. She is older but her hair had stayed quite black. Abby' s grandmother. Abby confirms this. Her grandmother offers her words of wisdom and comfort. The image changes again. I see Abby flinging her closet open, wrapping a pink boa around her neck and heading out dancing. I talk about what is in Abby's heart and she later tells me, it was like having her inner self exposed. I realize that it can be touchy for people to go for readings if they have secrets to hide. Abby has no secrets, just a sheltered life that she now wants to shed. She has since moved away but keeps in touch from time to time for a reading.

We also do blindfold reading exercises in class. Half the class sits facing a wall,

acting as the medium and wearing a blindfold. The other half stands behind each medium, not speaking. I am blindfolded. A light touch on the shoulder with their fingertips to make an energetic connection and the session begins. I must tell them three things that are truly relevant to their lives. Statements like 'you like being in nature or 'you like the color blue' are too general and not acceptable. One squeeze to the shoulder tells me I'm wrong. Two squeezes tell me I'm correct.

> Blindfold session #1 – I feel the touch on my shoulders and the connection is made. I relax, breathe deeply, ask to sit in the power, let go of the expectation to perform and begin to see things in my mind's eye.
> – I see an elephant. I see Africa. 2 squeezes.
> – I see a woman with a magic wand who magically touches the elephant and tames it. A metaphor for someone who can diffuse any situation. 2 squeezes.
> – I see that this person can handle big emergencies. She is calm, strong and very capable. Squeeze, squeeze, squeeze – they squeeze 20 times!
> The blindfold comes off and I learn that this woman, up until last week, wore many bracelets of ivory on her arm. She is African and works as an emergency room nurse.
> Blindfold session #2 – I relax, breathe deeply and pictures appear.
> – I see dirty finger nails. I really feel how this person hates getting dirty. Truly detests dirty finger nails. 2 squeezes.
> – I see this person lovingly apply make-up as if it's for a role on the stage. They take their time. It is not a task. It's a ritual they love. I see them applying lip liner, face paint, mascara. Very exaggerated. 2 squeezes.
> – The word 'exotic' comes to mind. 2 squeezes.

When the blindfold is removed, a woman from Spain is behind me. She looks very exotic, is heavily made-up exactly as I had 'seen.' Not life shattering stuff but a true connection was made nevertheless. This offers a simple illustration of different ways a medium sees and feels information. Feedback helps them fine-tune their skills.

Sound Meditation and Mediumship

Sometimes a bereaved mother can open up a connection to her child across the veil simply by allowing her energy to rise up by listening to crystal bowls and other high vibration instruments being played. The key is to use the breath to draw in the sound and quiet the thinking mind. Other wonderful phenomena is possible as well.

We are nine people sitting in a circle. A total of twenty people are invited with usually a 50% attendance rate. The group, never exactly the same, meets every week. The leader, Carole, has been holding sound meditation circles since the 1990's. I just breathe, relax and follow the flow of sound and guidance Carole provides. I'm there to simply enjoy the healing sounds of the crystal bowls and the great sense of peace that this type of group meditation brings.

Almost from the beginning, I sense a male presence with me. From within, I

sense an overwhelming feeling of bitterness and begin to burp. My body feels short, fat and my feet feel like they no longer reach the floor. There's an unhappy, bitter feeling in the pit of my stomach. I am experiencing this person's astral body and the emotions attached to it. He didn't have a happy life and he is stuck. Can't get to the light. No one in the room realizes I am experiencing these sensations.

Carole plays a track with the sound of waves and monks chanting the universal sound OM. She then guides us to visualize a temple, by the sea. She doesn't realize it but she's guiding this bitter, lost spirit too. I sit silently, eyes closed and simply witness. Carole encourages us to use the power of our minds, to visualize ourselves walking into the temple. I see this short, stout man walk up to the temple. He looks ahead. It's all lit up. He looks behind. It's all dark. Ahead, all lit. Behind, a dark tunnel of nothing. I know there is a part of him that wants to move forward but he is unable. His bitterness and lack of belief in life after life keep him stuck.

I am amazed how well he has followed Carole's instructions. For the first time since starting rescue work 20 years ago, I am simply a witness to the process as it unfolds in front of me. He is following Carole. She hits the crystal bowls, sending powerful vibrations into the room; guiding us to send healing to the vegetable, mineral and animal kingdoms. The moment she mentions the animal kingdom, a large dog appears in a light-filled doorway. The man's reaction is instantaneous. He knows this dog! He lights up, feeling great joy as he bends to pet and interact with his dog in spirit. I feel his heart beginning to open. He never believed that angels could be there for him but can no longer deny the light when he sees his dog. I'm crying. Still, he hesitates and hasn't moved forward toward the light. The session is ending. I silently ask Carole to please keep going, to not leave him stuck.

Out of character with how she usually proceeds, Carole speaks of not being afraid of death. At the last moment, as the last song is ending, he hears this and agrees to go, making his way into the light with his dog by his side. I witness the whole thing and share it with the group. The energy of the group has assisted in helping a lost spirit find the doorway to continue his journey. I feel grateful for this blessed work and that we are able to assist him. I ask for and receive the following explanation – Souls that have not crossed over are attracted by the light of our meditation circle. Sometimes they are just curious. Sometimes they are finally realizing they cannot return to their physical bodies. Their erroneous beliefs about transitioning from the body have kept them 'in the dark.'

During another meditation with Carole, we assist four lost spirits to cross. I say 'we' because the meditation group generates light and this collective light is what attracts spirits in limbo to our circle. On this occasion, I sense four discarnate entities just hanging out, watching. One, in particular, is more curious than the rest and also a bit braver. I invite them closer and they thank me for acknowledging them. They listen intently. At the very end of the hour-long meditation, Carole speaks, once again, about letting go the fear of death. Then, uncharacteristically, she begins to hit the bowls again. Usually, she is finished with the bowls at this stage

of the meditation. The first spirit, buoyed by the high energy and Carole's words, responds and heads off into the light. I watch in gratitude and wonder as the three others take courage from the action of the first one and they too follow suit soon after. Imagine! After the session ends, I share with participants what our collective energy created – we helped four spirits cross over to the light.

I do blind readings for attendees after Carole's meditation. I wear a blindfold, unaware of who each sitter is. They approach and place their hands about three inches above my open palms. I feel their energy and am able to connect to spirit and offer them guidance. It helps to have spent an hour immersed in a high-vibration sound journey. The connection to spirit is strong.

One-on-One Session

One-on-one mediumship sessions can be a communion with the loved one we want to hear from or, as happened to Charlene, can be disappointing. Factors besides the medium's abilities contribute. If the spirit is agitated and upset, their energy will be scattered and hard to read. If they are not aware how to be heard or have an aversion to the setting, the medium or the sitter, they may not come forth. An overly skeptical or hostile sitter can create interference that is difficult to overcome.

A woman, Gladys, calls to make a sound healing appointment with me. I sense her hostility. She arrives, skeptical and tells me that I can't help her. I ask Gladys if she has any faith in any notion of life after life and of the bigger picture of her reason for living. 'No', she says. She has no faith. None. No wonder she feels like she lives in a black hole. Without some connection, some stirring that she is more than her physical body, she feels lost. I sense the light so close by, ready to assist her in opening her heart but she refuses. We work together almost two hours. She does cry so there is some movement. However, the session ends yet feels incomplete.

'The spiritual world and the physical world are constantly intermingling; the spiritual plane is not a vague intangibility but is real and natural, a vast zone of refined substance, of activity and progress, and life there is a continuation of life in the physical world. On the physical plane of expression, the soul obtains knowledge through experience and contact with objective things, and intelligence finds itself by manifesting through physical organs; in the spiritual plane progression of the individual continues, the mind unfolding along lines of reason, through spontaneity of service, the attainment and appreciation of high ideals and an ever broadening conception of life's purpose.'

—From Dr. Carl Wickland
30 Years Among the Dead (1924)
Chapter 1, p. 7

12
'I Salute You, Mom' – Jordan

Pauline, Jordan's mother, has shared plenty of material about her son Jordan. His wife, his two children, his friends, his academic achievements, his intellect, his visionary work, his stylish wardrobe and boyish good looks – but something stops me from writing about it all. Jordan has put on the brakes. He wants this contribution to be about helping others, not about his university degrees and how many girlfriends he had. He wants me to talk about the importance of being kind to ourselves, of honoring and loving ourselves. He tells me that his outer appearance always mattered a great deal to him. What an irony, he says. He should have paid more attention to the inside. And then it was too little, too late. Only four months elapsed between a stage four cancer diagnosis and his death.

He wants me to write about his mother Pauline, about the tools that help her weather her losses. He wants me to talk about the grief therapy group. I can only grant him that request. I can't force the words from my fingertips.

Pauline is sixty-something going on forty. She works out, stays fit, eats properly. There it is again – exercise. Her warm personality fills the room. Our meeting place crowds up as Pauline recounts other losses: the death of her first husband, a second marriage that ended in divorce, the death of a brother, the death of her parents.

Acting upon an initial suggestion from a grieving mother in her therapy group, she works out at the gym several times a week. It relieves stress and has given her very sexy biceps. 'I talk to Jordan while I work out,' she says. 'I feel him applauding me and pushing me to do one more push-up.' We smile. She shows me a picture of her husband Ron. He too looks twenty years younger than his age – like a balding, kindly teddy bear who just wants to please. I'd like to meet Ron someday.

'Talk about the group', Jordan reminds me. 'Talk about the group.'

I contact Sharon Rossy, the psychotherapist who runs Pauline's grief support group. Sharon's son Gabriel crossed over in 2006.

Sharon – In 2009, three years after the death of my son Gabriel, several people reached out to me for help regarding the death of their children, or for help for someone they knew that had lost a child. As my training was in counseling psychology and having gone through my own grief work, it felt like the right time and the right thing to help others who had experienced the most terrible loss of all – that of a child, young or adult.

So it began with a few mothers and through them and various social workers, the group grew. Some stayed for a while, others left and came back, but slowly a core group stayed. There are now two groups that meet generally every month to every two months.

I ask Sharon about attendance of grieving fathers.

We accept only mothers. Couples work through their grief individually and men grieve so differently from women. It was women who approached me, who wanted to find that safe space and talk. So, a mother's only group just made sense.

The purpose of the group is to look at loss – because we all experience loss over time in one form and another. Most times, that loss has never been processed or reconciled and the loss of a child – which is life altering – will bring all those losses into the grieving process.

The group represents a safe place to talk and examine death, life, recovery – how to keep living without guilt and to understand that the relationship with our beloved children never ends – it merely takes another form. Are we able to give ourselves permission to live? How can we ever feel joy or happiness again? Is it a betrayal? We examine relationships that have changed or will change – family relationships and the dynamics from an Object Relations theory as well as Attachment theory. Most importantly, each member finds their voice to share with others their personal stories and the group allows each person the space to discuss perspectives in a way that would not happen outside that group.

While the loss of a child is the common and shared experience within the group, each person's experience is individual and different from everyone else's. Each journey is unique to each person and the group provides the forum so that members recognize and respect the differences. We look at complicated grief, prolonged grief, and all aspects of loss and bereavement. The loss of a child is the most profound and visceral heartbreak of all. The journey of grief and loss and recovery is not a linear process. There is no set formula or time frame. It is a moment-by-moment process experienced by each person in their own unique way. This is not something we are ever prepared for – there is

no course, no preparation for what lies ahead. Grief is cyclical and the group provides the necessary support to help participants navigate their way through the dark and murky places and feelings.

The group experience provides a unique and special environment that hopefully allows the participants the safe space in which to grieve without judgment or pressure to "move on" with life. In the group, everyone is encouraged to look at their loss from their own past experiences and to look at how they can keep the memory of their loved one with them moving forward. While everyone is encouraged to look at their experience, what is vitally important as well is that they do not absorb each other's grief.

I believe that the group has been an overwhelmingly positive experience for most people who come and continue to come over several years. For others, it may help for a time and then they feel the need to leave. But bonds are always formed no matter how long or short the stay. And that is the power of the group.

Pauline – The biggest revelation initially was that so many parents are living the loss of a child. 'Grief work' for me and the group became grueling every time a new mother would join the group. Introductions would be made and personal journeys recounted again and again. Members realized that the dynamic shifted every time a new mother joined. The energy was heavy and draining so finally Sharon closed the group. Now we meet every 3 to 4 weeks and it has really become a supportive, social group. We discuss other things, not just our deceased children. And we listen to each other.

Thanks Jordan. Because of your prompting, Sharon's grief group information has been included.

13
Jacqueline's story, continued

Jacqueline and I are discussing her upcoming trip to the Dominican Republic. She's going to attend Dayna's wedding. Twins Dayna and Leeya, both Justine's friends, are still very present in Jacqueline's life.

We're also discussing her recent attempts to get her physical body back in shape and how she plans to stick to her diet while on vacation. Jacqueline wants to be healthy. She wants to be well and fit. This, from a woman who drank alcohol copiously, didn't shower regularly, ate poorly and couldn't get off the couch for over eight years in an attempt to anaesthetize the pain of her deep grief. Now she's juicing every day and being monitored by a naturopath. She's conscious that since she's still here, she wants to shine.

I ask Jacqueline how she stopped herself from committing suicide?

> *Jacqueline – I told myself, 'If I kill myself and then end up somewhere different from my children and not able to be with them, that's worse than staying here. I know they'll be waiting for me when my time comes to die so I decided not to do it. Also, I felt my children telling me that it was not my life to take.*
>
> *I think I wanted to die without actually killing myself. I was in what I would call a vegetative state for years. I spent all my time crying for the first two years. I couldn't go back to the small town I lived in, the town where I raised my kids because everyone would know me as the woman who lost all her kids. I had worked in an orthodontic clinic and saw just about every mother and child in town. I felt the need to go somewhere where no one knew me and I could pretend to be someone else. As long as no one asked about my children, I could be some other Jacqueline.*
>
> *I had always struggled with money; single Mom, 3 kids. The irony is that as a result of the accident, the insurance from Andrea's policy*

provides for me financially. I chose the Bahamas because I had been there before and had some community there. Also, the last vacation I'd taken with my children was to the Bahamas. We all loved that holiday and it gave me comfort that'd we'd all been there together.

And did it help?

Yes. It helped a lot. I could pretend to be someone else. I think of it now and shake my head, but at that time I didn't want to be defined by the accident as in 'Oh, there's the poor woman who lost all her children.' But now, I realize I am defined by that. And how could I not be? When I went to the Bahamas, I figured no one would know. And for a long time most people didn't. Aside from a few close friends, I didn't tell and no one asked. Until they did. I had been there three years when a woman finally asked whether my children ever came to visit. Then out came the truth. She burst into tears and I had to do the comforting, as usual.

I'm amazed Jacqueline went three years without telling people about the accident.

You're on vacation when you're in the Bahamas. It's a vacation type place so I actually, for a time, imagined myself on vacation with my kids back at home. This helped initially to put off having to actually deal with the loss. For years, I couldn't spend more than a few months in one place. I went back and forth between the Bahamas and my hometown. I would come back in the spring and head back to the Bahamas in the fall. All summer, I reconnected with my old life and when I felt I needed to get away from it, I'd leave for the Bahamas. I just couldn't stay still. If I felt even a little pressure, I'd bolt.

Now, over a decade later, I'm trying to force myself to stay still, to not need to keep moving. I'm also dedicated, finally, to having a healthy body. For years I was on Ativan and an anti-depressant and I believe they really had a negative effect on my body.

Did they help?

Initially, yes because I couldn't function. One day your life is fine and the next day you're just empty. Empty. It was like everything was gone. I went from having a life to having nothing. I was fine when people were around me but if I was alone for too long, depression would take over. I had always had a house full of people. Not just my kids but their friends as well. One week after the accident, it was January 6th, Justine's birthday. I walked into a clinic and asked for something to help me sleep. The doctor prescribed Ativan and told me to take a pill whenever I felt I needed it. I took a pill every night before bed for about

six years.

I remember going back to that clinic about two years after the accident. A different doctor wanted to prescribe me an additional antidepressant. I told him 'There's nothing wrong with me. I'm just heartbroken. I'm not sick. How could I not be in grief? What kind of mother would I be if I wasn't totally heartbroken? But, I'm not sick.' The doctor looked at me and replied, 'I'm just worried that you'll never be okay again.' I wasn't okay at that time. I wasn't brushing my teeth regularly. I wasn't showering regularly. I would just lie on the couch and cry all day long. I still resisted taking antidepressants. A few months later, a different doctor, female, contacted me to see how I was. I said, 'I'm okay' but then immediately burst into tears. As a mother of three, she knew I couldn't be okay. She thought I needed a medication to raise the baseline of my despair. Her being a mom helped me relate to her so I agreed to take an antidepressant. The drugs helped me stop the crying but they gave me nasty side effects. I gained a lot of weight, my skin felt inflamed and hyper sensitive, I had strange patches on my skin, high blood pressure and I generally felt lousy.

The doctor told me to walk more, to change my lifestyle, to become more active. But how could I? The drugs left me feeling emotionally and physically numb. I had some semblance of a life but it was like my life was going nowhere, as if the same day was just repeating itself over and over. Then it was January 6th again, Justine's birthday. Only now it was six years later. I told myself 'No more drugs.' I quit the Ativan in one day and had to wean myself slowly off the antidepressant. When I returned to my doctor, she was upset that I had gone off the drugs. But I felt it was time to get on without them. I went to a naturopath and within 3 months, I was back on track physically, feeling healthy and well once again.

Jacqueline's journey offers a story of resilience and the opportunity to reflect on what that really is. Is it getting up, dusting off and continuing? Is it being vulnerable enough to feel the emotions, let them linger for the time they wish to and then move forward? Maybe resilience, like grief is different for each person. When a drug allows for sleep, for dry eyes, for basic functioning, for getting off the couch, is that resilience? When strength returns and one allows oneself to feel the ebb and flow of sadness / loneliness / grief without trying to control or subdue – is that resilience? Maybe it's knowing what you need and acting in accordance, listening to the self and acknowledging your state of being.

The heartbreak doesn't go away. It's there. And it's real. And you can still have fun. You can still feel joy, have relationships, appreciate beauty along with carrying the loss. Knowing you're changed, different, wounded, still wonderful and that

your life matters.

The conversation goes back to that moment of the accident. Jacqueline's children were on their way to attend their grandmother's funeral the following day. So, as devastated as she was, Jacqueline managed to attend her mother's funeral. She recounts hearing her daughter Andrea calling to her over and over. It is very common that they repeat and repeat a word or phrase to get our attention.

> *I heard Andrea repeating 'Mum, Mum, Mum' – just that one word, over and over. I thought I was imaging it. Later that day, my niece Melissa told me she heard the same thing. By hearing that, I knew they were somewhere.*

Jacqueline had expressed in a previous conversation how she felt it was better that the three children be together rather than one being left behind. That's how close they were to each other.

> *Andrea was vivacious, bubbly and full of life. From the time she was little, she would ask 'What are we going to do today?' She always wanted to be on the go. As a baby she would crawl over to me, hand me her jacket and say 'side,' meaning let's go outside. She could be larger than life and she took over a room when she entered. She was so much fun to hang out with. She loved music, dancing, her family and her friends. She could never let a friend go from her life and always kept in touch with anyone who was important to her. She loved Séan and Justine most of all. I remember once going away when Andrea was home from school so that she could look after them. I actually treated her as a replacement for me. That became important when they all died together because I felt like Andrea being there was a replacement for me.*
>
> *Andrea remembered everyone's birthday and her own was very important to her. She loved special occasions because they were opportunities to get all the extended family together. She was also stubborn and had a temper which got her into trouble at times. She loved children and became an elementary school teacher. She told me she loved her students and loved that she was able to have an influence on their young lives.*
>
> *Séan was an easygoing guy. He loved his sisters and was especially close to Justine. They were like twins, born 19 months apart. They would do everything together. Their friends were friends with both of them. They all hung out together. Séan was very affectionate and rarely passed me or his sisters without giving us a hug. He kept our house filled with fun as well as his great group of friends. He loved all sports. He also loved music and as a little child he would walk around the house singing The Phantom of the Opera. When he was 13, he asked for a*

guitar for Christmas. He took lessons and became quite good. He was in his first year of university, hoping to become an orthodontist and was loving his life.

Justine was a very sweet and easy baby. I always said it took me three tries to get a baby who ate and slept like they are supposed to. She loved her friends and family and was very affectionate. She was funny and grew up to be a happy, loving teenager. She was a very kind person and avoided conflict. Justine made friends easily and even though she was sometimes quiet, she opened up when she got to know someone. She would often be the one to come up with ideas for pranks with her friends. Justine wasn't into sports but she was very social and loved school more for her friends and her social life than for the actual love of learning. She loved children and was hoping to become a teacher like her older sister. In her final year of high school, she was looking forward to university.

Two months before the accident I had a very small basal cell carcinoma removed from my left cheek. When the bandage was removed, the scar was very large and I was horrified to think it might always show. Justine saw how upset I was. She asked me to pick her up from school that day so we could have lunch together. During lunch I was complaining about the scar and she said 'Mom it could be so much worse.' She explained how two of her friends were going through the loss of a parent at that time and she asked what would happen to her and her siblings if something happened to me. Could she and Séan stay with Andrea? I told her that since she would be 18 in a few months, she would be able to do whatever she wanted. My wish would be that they would stay in the house while completing university and that Andrea would look after her and her brother.

She was like an old soul, mature beyond her years and I realized that the scar (which is almost invisible now) was actually insignificant. I took the opportunity to explain where my will and life insurance policy were and how my assets would be divided between them. And then, a week before her 18th birthday, I was having to deal with life alone. That was something that had never occurred to any of us.

One of the most valuable things ever said to me about grieving was, 'Take as long as you need. Don't listen to anyone who's pressuring you.' That helped because I kept wondering why I'm not okay and then I realized, I'm not sick. I'm grieving. Years and years had passed. And then at some point I realized that I thought everyone else was okay but they really weren't. I thought I would return to my old self at some point and was wondering why that wasn't happening?

I ask Jacqueline if she feels she's returned to her old self now?

No. I think inside the real me is still there but this changes you so dramatically that I'm not the person I used to be. If having a child breaks you open, losing a child breaks you open even more.

What would you say to another mother?

I think the most valuable thing I could tell them is that they aren't going to be the same. They aren't ever going to go back to who they were. That isn't the goal. The goal is to find a way to absorb and integrate what's happened and to be an even better person than you were. Then again, it isn't going to be okay. And you aren't going to 'get over it.' I would say to that mother, 'It's never going to be the way it was. You're going to be heartbroken for the rest of your life. But, you can still be somebody new and different and not necessarily less than you were before. It is now part of who you are. You will eventually be okay and you will be able to cope with it.'

I remember watching Madonna Badger being interviewed on CNN. She lost her children and parents in a house fire on Christmas Eve, 2011. The interview took place shortly before the first anniversary of the loss. As I watched her, I was amazed how she seemed so much farther along than I was. She seemed so composed and I remember thinking that maybe it was because it was still the first year for her. Our bodies are protected by shock in that first year and it is in the subsequent years that we realize and absorb that they are not coming back. We have to learn to live without their physical presence. That is why many people feel like the second year is harder than the first.

She later did a TED talk on resilience, and an interview with Oprah. And yet I couldn't even get off my couch. So, I compared myself to her and others and put all this pressure on myself to 'get better' and to 'get going.' Until one day, I just gave that up. Now, when I reflect, I think that if I had accepted a lot earlier that I would never go back to who I was before, maybe I could have allowed myself to become who I was going to become. I do think that taking the antidepressants and living in the Bahamas put my life on hold and yet, maybe I needed that buffer....

I used to think everyone else was coping and I wasn't coping well at all. Now that I go to this monthly meeting, I realize that others also have trouble coping. In fairness, I didn't know other people who'd lost children. Only once I went to a conference, a retreat and started these meetings, I realized I'm normal. I went to that retreat seven years after the accident. I went to a conference of 'Alive Alone' – a group for people who've lost all their children. That really helped because I realized I wasn't alone. Their process is different because they are now childless

and their lives change totally as opposed to a parent who loses one child but has other children.

Community really helps. Jacqueline agrees.

It does matter. Prior to that conference I hadn't met anyone who really got it. Believing in life after life really matters too. At the beginning, my own sister would say 'There's nothing after this life.' If I thought there is nothing after this life, then my 27 years as a mother were for nothing. My children were gone and my life meant nothing. If I would have believed that, I don't think I could have lived. What kept me going, what still keeps me going, is knowing I will see them again.

The power of belief to carry us, to deter us, to motivate us. So what next for you Jacqueline?

I've been told that I'm supposed to write a book. I used to think I had to have achieved something great in order to have something worth writing. Built something. Done something. Now I realize surviving is the accomplishment.

We look back over the timing of Jacqueline's life. The time eventually was right to move back from the Bahamas. The time was right to wean herself off the medications that kept her steady but in a brain fog. The time was eventually right to attend a bereaved parents retreat. When the time was right, the resources were embraced. So, like all things, patience with the process is key. Patience and faith. We don't know the timeline but Spirit does.

Because of the kind of person I used to be, I never thought I'd be someone who couldn't get off the couch. I was shocked at just how devastated I was. It's not that I didn't think that everything that mattered to me wasn't gone, it's that I thought I was a strong woman. Now, I realize I am that strong woman. It just took a lot of years ....

And this is the victory. After all those years, you did get up off the couch. Acceptance of your life, that it matters, it's valuable and it was time to get off the couch.

It was a struggle. I felt so alone in the world. I had no one else. I realize now that the relationships with the friends of my kids helped me. Also, now I actually feel my children around me more. I knew they were there but I didn't feel them.

I've learnt that when we're in highly emotional states, we can't hear our deceased loved ones properly. We need to be calm, centered, peaceful.

Now I feel them around me but I don't get the signs I used to get.

Interesting. Maybe it's because I don't need the signs. But sometimes, I'd still like to have a sign. One of the earliest signs I received was also one of the most visible to others. Years ago, one of Séan's friends had punched a hole in the basement wall. After the accident, I had the Gyproc patched with plaster so that I could sell the house. Almost immediately, we began to notice scratches in the plaster. It became a 'thing' where people would pass by to ask what had changed that day on the plaster. Within a week or so, the word 'Mom' had been scratched into the plaster. I actually cut it out and had the hole repaired again. That was a really wonderful sign. Little signs like lights going on and off all the time used to happen a lot. They don't happen anymore. It was like I needed those signs at the time.

Being called to return to the Bahamas to care for a newborn after his mother had died was special. I could picture my kids and her talking it over and agreeing that it was the kind of arrangement that would make everybody happy.

My understanding is that as we adapt to the loss of their physical presence, they allow themselves to return home and continue on their journey. They will reunite with us on a special occasion, a family celebration or when we engage with a medium open to receiving their communication. We can learn to communicate directly with them as well. However, calling upon them too often makes their advancement more difficult. Allowing them their freedom especially by being happy for them, well-adjusted in our grief and accepting of their death, helps them advance without restriction. Being back 'on the other side' is going home.

I feel like the time of deep sorrow where we were all wrapped up in our grief is shifting. I'm less consumed by it and I feel like they are too. Now, we're all a little better than we were and we can function again.

And that's the story Jacqueline. That you are functioning again. You're living. You're taking care of your body. You care enough to eat properly, to be a 'next mummy,' to want to live and find joy again.

14
Felix

Marie-Helene chose to write a poem to her son Felix.

Dialogue Between Mother and Son

A movement has been interrupted
– My soul freed
another one left behind

The seconds are endless
– I am living in light
Blinded by the sorrow

lost, nothing moves even time is still
– I am here
Searching for you

Your smile...your scent...your breath fading
– Forever within you
Every night looking at the stars wondering where you are

I touched heaven not knowingly
– we are parts of the same soul
Now cherishing my precious pain

You have put in motion an ascendant movement
– helping you to open towards the invisible
Living with you, carrying on, Loving you my son.

I ask Marie-Hélène to elaborate on Felix's life and death and the words she sends

me read also like poetry. She asks me to correct her English but I find it perfect as-is.

Félix, real, profound love.

Emergency C-section brought him to us, all of us. At the age of 21 days he was diagnosed with acute meningitis. Surviving the first 36 hours he chose to stay for a while. His main deficit was neurological, Felix presented with episodes of CNS control disorder which you last up to 36 hours.

Dr. Gordon Waters, Félix main doctor, neurologist, was the first to care for a patient which present these extremely rare seizures since medical books and measuring instruments were written and available. He invited neurologist from many different countries in the world to witness while he was registering the brain activity. Félix helped the medical scientist community to understand profoundly what occurs while the 'seizures.'

When doctor Waters invited me into his office to talk about his major research discovery about CNS contra disorder he explaining trying to reassure me that his name would not used but a number.... Out of his office, was so sad...preferring he would use and repeat his name....

Félix had helped the scientific community. That was part of his contribution to our Modern world. More so he brought a higher level of love to this world and gracefully touched all people in contact with Him.

Montreal Children Hospital staff were astonishing with him/us. Félix never cried, he was calm exulting his inner beauty.... In my arms as much as it was possible...aware that our encounter would be short lived.

Every second was important, intense there was surveillance, medication, treatments and tender loving care. At "Dans un Jardin" we concocted a scent for his soap, massaging oil, creams...he smelled heavenly, his skin was so soft.... He enjoyed massages, long baths, then comfortable in my arms...perfect moments.

Every seizure would deprive his brain. One day they decided he was blind...but he always reacted to my presence, our contact. Always fed by NG reading, never could cook something for him.... When he passed, 19 months old.

I was blessed to understand that it was his life that was so brief, and how privileged that he came to me. The first month was pain from missing him, had a circumstantial heart attack. Moved from the family home which was not safe.

One month later rented a commercial lease in order to open a design office. Being a professional Artist could not touch my emotion, needed a break and concentrated on technical drawings and plans, for 5 years.

During his life and death never had a hug, went through it by myself, which made me stronger. Félix would now be 34 years old every day I think of him with powerful love, knowing he is flying high. I celebrate his birthday sometimes I cook a cake for him, also celebrate his passing alone by choice respectfully lovingly.

This pure encounter pushed me to do my best every day honoring him.

15
Signs and More Signs

December 15th meeting at Patti's house.

Merri – We asked Martin, several months before he died, if there was anything we could do to bring him some comfort. Anything. He said he wished we had a dog again. Not a little dog. I know nothing about larger dogs but we found 'Aurora', a rather shy Siberian Husky rescue. Martin totally approved and totally loved that dog.

We had her a little over a month when Martin had a seizure and was rushed to the hospital where he was placed under sedation. When the time to reduce the sedation came, the nurse told us that if there was anything he highly valued, to bring it to the hospital. The only thing I could think of was his dog. Now this dog had not been trained to walk nicely on a leash. She had gone to only a few classes by this time. So, here's this lively, 2 year old Husky that usually pulls me down the street walking into the hospital and into intensive care like a champion show dog. Perfectly behaved. By my side. Leash is slack. She sees Martin, jumps up on his bed, lies beside him and doesn't move.

From that time on, my job was to bring the dog every day. I'd wait in his room watching TV, while he visited with friends in the family room, often till past midnight, so that he had maximum time with the dog. So much support and comfort given by staff, family and friends, and his dog.

Afterwards, having that dog to walk really saved me. I was the crazy lady with the Husky, walking the river pathway with tears pouring down my face. Occasionally someone would stop to ask if I was okay. My reply, if I could manage one was "No, I'm definitely not okay." Martin had bought a box of dog biscuits that had long ago been consumed by Aurora. One day, about two years after he passed, my

husband took the empty box out of the cupboard, intending to put it in the recycle bin. 'Don't squash that box,' I cried. It was still important to me because it was the one Martin bought. Aurora, appropriately, means 'a new beginning.'

Jacqueline – My three sisters packed up the belongings of my children. All of their clothes were washed, their cell phone contracts cancelled. I never got to smell their scent or hear their voices on their voicemail messages again. They were trying to help and to save me money, but looking back I wish we had done things differently.

Ouch.

Leigh has joined our group for today's conversation. She tells us about her son Shawn, 37, who lived in another city. He died from an undiagnosed, untreated illness of the pancreas.

Leigh – My life is definitely a 'before and after' thing. It's been two years since he passed. My husband (not Shawn's father) is the loveliest man and for the first three weeks he was attentive and kind. Then he wanted me back on track, back to my regular self. I told him, that person is no longer there. To his credit, he went for counseling. The counselor told him to get used to the new me and to put a big 'BS' on the bathroom mirror. BS for 'be sensitive.'

Charlene – If it wasn't for my husband, I think I would have done myself in. He didn't do anything unusual but he was there, doing everything that was normal. Answering the phone, returning emails. He took care of me as I went into a deep, dark depression for about 6 months. He kept up the household routines and it felt good that he did this. I know how hard it was for him but he was just concerned for me. If I'm here now, it's because of him.

Leigh – I don't believe that 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger.' I'm always going to be Humpty Dumpty whose been patched together again, cracks and all. You don't want to bump me too hard because if you do, I may lose a piece. I'm fragile.

I was told, 'Leigh, remember that you grieve alone.' In other words, instead of expecting others to understand or accompany me, know that I will go through my own process. That wisdom has helped me. I've had many signs from Shawn. A clock that doesn't work starts ringing. I've had apparitions and actually saw him walk across my bedroom. A buttoned up blazer in my closet somehow ends up on the floor.

We tend to dismiss coincidences as simply 'Now isn't that funny?' Stop. Look at that series of events, the dots that connected, the majesty of a trail of events and

improbable meetings. There are no coincidences. Ask yourself, 'Why this? Why now? What is it telling/teaching me?' And then a simple 'thank you' suffices.

Charlene had Maddie's clothes turned into quilts by an old family friend. This friend's family and Charlene's family had emigrated together from Holland to Canada decades ago. When Charlene asked this friend to make the quilts and was recounting Maddie's life and the trip she would have taken to the coral reef, the friend was struck by the serendipity of it all. Her daughter made that trip to the reef with that professor.

> *Patti – Some of Adam's signs are pretty funny. He often repeats them three times so that I know it's him. A few years ago, my daughter had minor day surgery. The hospital was taking a long time to call me and I started to worry. (After 17 years volunteering in a hospital emergency ward, I'd seen so many things that my mind started to imagine the worst). I'm in an antique shop and right in front of me is a Darth Vader costume. I immediately think of Adam. Then I look down and see something with the name Adam on it. Then I hear the song that is like my sign from Adam and I realize he's trying to tell me 'Don't worry Mom. I've got this. I'm with Stephanie.' The man behind the counter in that antique shop is almost blind. All of a sudden, one of the antique toys starts to make a crazy noise and the poor man is trying to find it. Then, at the same moment, a toy drummer on the other side of the store goes off and the drums start beating really fast. At that very moment, I receive an email from a medium who knows Adam. He tells me he had a dream the previous night that he was in my house and that Adam was playing the drums. Wow. That was just last year...eleven years after the fact.*
>
> *A few months after Adam died, a friend crossed paths with that same medium I didn't yet know. Out of the blue, he told her that she had a friend (me) who had lost a son in a car accident and that the son really wanted to reach his mother. She never contacted me. Months later, I'm driving away from the mall and something tells me to go back into the store. I go back in and come face to face with this woman. She looks at me sheepishly and finally tells me the message. I'm so excited, I want to know who that medium is. We finally get together. He described Adam to a T. He described the accident, how Adam went through a stop sign and how Adam was killed. The two boys who were with him survived. No one told me anything about Adam going through a stop sign so I asked the boys and they confirmed it was true.*
>
> *I've had almost twelve years of signs and they've been my greatest healing. I understand why people don't believe but once you've experienced a sign, it's extraordinary. You know it's real. Before Adam passed, I'd never even heard of receiving signs. No one ever told me that*

I could receive so many signs from my son.

Jacqueline – Do you think it happens more to mothers rather than with siblings or other relationships? I wonder if other people get signs as well. I feel like mothers are more open to accepting signs as real because we want to know that they're okay. It's also why we seek out mediums as well.

Patti – I agree. We have the need to know. Where is he?

Charlene – Or, where is she? That was the thing for me. We spent all this time together and then she was gone. I struggled with that for those 6 months and during that time I got no signs from her. She would go to other people because I couldn't hear her. I was too deep in my grief.

One time, I went to hear medium Teresa Casuto. We were in a room of 3,000 people and she picked me out. She looked at me intently and asked if my daughter passed. She described Maddie and the accident perfectly. She said that an animal had caused the accident.

Maddie was supposed to drive home the previous day after her final exam. She was always so excited to come home to her Dad and I, to her brothers and her cat. It was Easter weekend. Because she had offered her friend Tom a lift, she waited till the next evening for him to finish his exams. Instead of driving during the day, she drove home at night. A deer crossed her path and she swerved to avoid it. A dead deer was found at the scene. Maddie and Tom died. Tom's girlfriend survived.

Teresa brought up the need for me to let go of the guilt. She explained that regardless of my trying to change the time of Maddie's drive, her death would have happened and I couldn't change that. Had I gone to pick her up, the accident would have happened, she would have died and I would have had to live with that guilt. Teresa gave me a few things to think about. The day after the accident, Tom's parents came over to pick up his things. As they were walking up to the door, it just flew open. The mother seemed very strong and matter-of-fact and after they left I looked at my son and said 'Boy, is she ever strong.' At that very moment, a picture of Maddie that was hanging on the wall fell to the floor. My son and I both witnessed that.

Patti – Another medium had seen a lawsuit.

Charlene – The moment I received a text saying they had launched a lawsuit, I looked out the window and saw a cardinal. To me, that was my Dad comforting me and telling me everything was going to be okay.

Leigh – I had a premonition that my son was not well.

Charlene – I began fixating on death about 6 months before the accident. I asked myself many questions and became really petrified

of death. I didn't have a premonition but more of a knowing that it was going to show up. Two cousins, an aunt and my mother all lost children. It was as if it was 'in the family.' Even my eldest, Jared, told me he had a feeling something was going to happen. I don't have any regular signs and don't feel her around me often. I don't get feathers or pennies. My Mum just passed and I dream of her every night, but not about Maddie.

Patti – Those dreams, when they visit us, are more real than this reality. You remember them and you know it's a visit because you wake up and have all this love and peace around you. You feel lifted. Changed. It changes everything.

Leigh – My mother-in-law died 30 years ago. She was very close to my son and to me and for three weeks before my son's death, I dreamt of her just about every night. She was floating in the air, trying to talk to me. I never experienced anything like that before. I knew she was trying to tell me something. I called my son. He said he was fine. Night after night she would come to me. I found it so bizarre. He lived in a different city. He had lost about a hundred pounds over the last year of his life but no one thought to have him checked. I had no idea. For the longest time I felt the guilt of not being there and kept wondering why he hadn't gone to a doctor.

After he passed, we found out Shawn had a son. He's 16. We connected and have become close. He looks just like Shawn. Now I have a way of doing nice things for Shawn through his son. It's only been two years but it feels like so much has happened.

Wow – the secrets we try to keep….

Patti – We have friends whose children have died by suicide and it seems more complex for them to speak about their loss.

Leigh – The poet Sylvia Plath helped me understand about suicide and why people choose it. She gave me perspective.

Charlene – Having been in that dark place, I know what it feels like. You want the pain to stop.

Jacqueline agrees.

Leigh – I had tons of friends. I was a guidance counselor. Non-stop busy. My son dies and people start treating me differently. People don't want to talk about my son so I pretend, I make small talk. I'm trying to be normal and other people are not reacting like they used to. The phone doesn't ring. It used to ring off the hook. That's the hardest part.

Patti – I can't put up a mask. That's too exhausting. I think we've all experienced a shift in our friends. We have big wounds that others

aren't equipped to deal with. I see this a lot with other grieving parents. For me, this group has helped.

Leigh – Communication with my own daughter is difficult at the moment.

Patti – This comes up a lot: friend issues, family issues. Seeing old friends at the grocery store and they turn the other way. They just don't know what to say. I can't really go to the people who have no understanding of receiving signs from spirit to talk about the signs my son shows me. So, I find the people who do understand.

Leigh – People are afraid that it's contagious.

Jacqueline – Absolutely. Now they see it's actually possible whereas before they never thought about death.

My son Daniel also withdrew after my daughter's death. To this day, he hasn't read the book 'Conversations with Chloe' that Chloe and I co-wrote after her death.

Charlene – After Maddie's death, my two sons had a really hard time watching me suffer. They had to withdraw from me. It almost killed them to see me the way I was. They moved out and only now are drawing closer again as I'm out of that dark place.

Leigh – I feel safest with my grandchildren but my daughter now gives us limited access. We went to 'Alienated Grandparents' and that helped.

Secrets uncovered, grandchild discovered, a medium's message that helped release guilt, this afternoon held a wealth of conversation. I drove the two-hour journey home, my head filled with humble admiration for these women who had found ways to cope with loss.

16
A Dad's Perspective

5, 10, 15. Once you've heard Ward's date of death, you know it forever. May 10th, 2015. Ward was sleeping, camped out with his girlfriend Jamie at Williston Lake, just ten kilometers from his dad's place, when the bear attacked. Jamie was in the camper. Ward was out by the campfire.

Ward's dad, Danny O' lives high up in the Rocky Mountains of British Columbia, Canada. Living a ten-hour drive north of a major city, there's not much around besides grizzly bears and the magnificent Rockies.

Danny grew up on the east coast of the country, moving west to the mountain peaks of British Columbia after spending 5 years working at an underground data centre for Bell Canada. Enough with life underground, he thought. Off he went to join his brother who was building log homes in the mountains of British Columbia. 'It was the 70's', he says, by way of explanation.

Danny talks about his work. He is the only Dad in this book. Why? It just happened that way. Danny created a scaffolding business, each contract requiring its own unique mountain of steel. He loved the challenge. The business is for sale now but, so far, there are no takers.

He talks about his town. When the logging industry shut down, sometime around 2008, the population shrank to less than 1,000. People just picked up and left, many of their homes left vacant since then. Unemployment rose to 98%. Not much is being built in this neighborhood.

Danny jokes that if Ward was still alive, he'd probably be firing him. Firing him? I ask.

Danny – Ward would work for me for three weeks and then leave.

Danny sighs.

He would make just enough to be able to head out camping, living simply in the wild. He wasn't interested in material possessions. He'd

work for a bit and couch surf when he needed a place to stay. A free spirit.

The community really supported us. The local police force helped out, the city clerk took care of all the paperwork, the town donated the rec centre for Ward's funeral. And, it was a full house.

Danny carries Ward's ashes in his car, sprinkling them at various sites in a ritual designed to keep his son close and to let him know he is never, ever far from his thoughts. Not sure how we got on the subject but we speak of the ocean. He doesn't much like it.

Don't like those waves, the tides, the undertow.

Yet, he's not afraid of grizzlies. Even now. He finally got a passport in order to take a trip to the island of Grenada. It was the only time he'd been outside of Canada. Grenada's proximity to the equator meant he had to manage only a six-inch tide. No undertow there.

I think of John Irving's book, The World According to Garp. I read it decades ago yet one inspiring tidbit of wisdom stuck with me – 'Beware of the undertoad.' Beware of the undertoad as if a creature is lying in wait, threatening to suck you under.

Grief is like that –an undertoad. How to stay on top of it? Some of us carry ashes around, some write books, some light candles. We all grieve as we can, grasping at nature's peace wherever we find it.

Like Danny, I'm sustained by vast expanses of nature that keep me small and humble and put my cares in perspective. Through small daily acts of love (I call them aols), like a few ashes here, a few ashes there, we try to make some sense of a world beyond our control.

17
The Last Word – An Oxymoron

How to write the last word about a subject whose discussion never ends?

Madonna Badger lost her three children and her parents in a fire. Her message is one woman's struggle that encapsulates everyone's struggle to live with loss. When she presents her story, she chooses to go back, before the fire, to explain her alcohol and drug use to mask the pain of childhood abuse. She was angry. Herein lies the key to coping with big loss – work out your smaller losses. The same way that small victories set the stage for bigger successes, dealing with smaller losses helps us better move through the bigger losses when they occur. Loss of innocence, loss of freedom, loss of community. Whatever the losses that your life has brought to you, there are healthy ways to free yourself from their emotional residue rather than dull the pain. Ultimately, patience with the process is a key to living well with grief.

Knowing that life never ends, that our loved ones are fine, not suffering, and continuing their lives, that there are no mistakes and that all is as it should be – is a tall order with no time frame. It is each person's individual journey.

The parents in these pages felt lifted and connected to their children when they were talking about them. This is not the case for all bereaved parents but it does provide a clue to living with loss. Share your story. Whether you do or don't have a belief, a knowing or even a certainty of life after life, turning sorrow into service also helps. There are common threads of mothers offering to accompany people on the palliative care journey. Mothers turning to community and being supported by grief groups. Small rituals that provide comfort matter. Mothers doing exercise to manage stress. Mothers turning to writing, to creating a foundation, to expressing themselves as artists, to helping save animals in need, to simply finding the will to recognize that their life matters and that living boldly is what our children would want.

It took almost 2 years to complete this short book. Objectivity was difficult. Proofreading was difficult. While sharing in every contributing parent's journey

made the process rich and wonderful, it was sometimes overwhelming.

Although we are complex, multidimensional beings, the death of a child does define much about how we process our lives going forward. There is before and there is after. And we will laugh again. It is not forbidden, it is necessary. Living the loss of my child has brought not just sorrow but gifts as well. What strengths have I developed? Like Joanne, I've let go of fear. I think of Charlene's words – that she will never be okay with what happened but she is finding a way to live with it. Seeking and finding a community of Patti and Charlene and all the other women has been healing and life-affirming. I learnt from them to allow myself to be vulnerable, to ask myself what do I need today?

Who knew our children would send us so many signs? I too had never heard of such a thing. When we do receive one, there is no denying the heart-expanding effect. Life goes on! Consciousness lives on! And yet, doubt calls every small sign into question. What helps let go of doubt? Experience.

No matter how many signs, conversations or apparitions we receive from our children, we love them, we miss them and we grieve their physical loss. When the bereaved mothers gather once a month, there is great respect for each other's journey. There is also joy in the room. Why joy? For reconnecting with a community that understands, for reconnecting with our children by talking about them. The energy is palpable and everything is energy. As we gather, so do our children gather as well with us.

What about death by suicide? For some – for many – suicide holds a stigma that creates a struggle to talk about their loss, leading to disenfranchised grief – grieving in the shadows. Perhaps another book is asking to be written. Perhaps you are up to the challenge?

Some of the stories in this book serve to illustrate the seeming randomness of death. A closer look reveals, in some cases, a presentiment that an accident was going to happen. If one can believe that all deaths happen at the precise moment when they are supposed to occur, a life can be viewed as complete, no matter what the human age of the person. How can the life of a baby be complete? It can because that child has completed the mission they came to complete. What that mission is can take a lifetime for the family to accept and embrace or it can be understood in an instant. Often, it is to open hearts, to raise levels of love and compassion by bringing deep suffering into a household. Opening the heart helps unload painful memories instead of burying them.

Sound opens the heart. Massage opens the heart. Color opens the heart. Energy work such as reiki or therapeutic touch open the heart. Movement and dance open the heart. Being in nature and gazing on beauty open the heart. Tears unburden the heart. Deliberate deep breathing can remove constrictions as well. I find what resonates with me and offer it to myself, unashamedly.

We often think others are stronger than us – more well-adjusted, have happier relationships, cope with their lives better. Sometimes they do. But often,

comparing is a waste of precious energy because there is absolutely no way of really knowing what another is living just as they don't see what you're living. So LIVE. Unapologetically.

Jacqueline tells a story of an offhand comment about her green coat which shut her off from the healing effects of color for years. She wore black believing that to wear anything else was to give the impression that she wasn't grieving deeply enough. Nonsense! It has been thirteen years since her children passed and she still grieves every day. That offhand comment came from a place of ignorance, not malice. Like a virus it should stay with the person who uttered it, not infect the one who hears it. So, let's wash our hands, take our vitamin C, and live our own lives not in submission to others beliefs or whims or judgments but in the fullness of our own experience.

Thank you to all the people who contributed to the creation of this work of love. Thank you to the intrepid parents who contributed their stories. They did it to honor their loved ones and to help others who will face similar heartache.

Thank you to our lovely children in spirit. You are part of us. You are with us. We see, feel, hear, taste and know the signs you're sending and we rejoice at the mystery and the greatness of life even with all its pain and loss. Thank you for the gift of parenting you. Thank you for choosing us. We gave you life and we promise to live ours fully, knowing you want it to be that way. The last word goes to Jacqueline's daughter Justine, 'Mom, live a total life. Live totally. Not mundane. Not average. Total.'

Amen.

Andrea Courey, M Ed., is an award winning entrepreneur, speaker, McGill University Dobson Fellow and author of Conversations with Chloe: A Mother and Daughter Dialogue across the Veil.

Her second book, Magical Thinking...not! began as an informal exploration of how bereaved parents cope after the death of a child. Andrea's daughter Chloe passed in 2016 at the age of 28.

Finding comfort in their shared experience, she recruited parents from the Helping Parents Heal group to share their stories. The response was overwhelming. The result is a book brimming with stories of resilience, love and signs of life after life.

A mother of three and a devoted meditator since the mid-nineties, Andrea guides sound meditations and welcomes all conversations that can help normalize death and bring hope that life continues on after death.

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