YOU’LL FIND THEM
By Angela Ledet

There are so many former versions of myself that I barely recognize now. The teenager, the girl learning to become a woman, the one who had yet to experience the love for a child; they are versions of myself that I vividly remember but feel so far removed from now. But the version I never expected to meet and couldn’t have dreamed of looking back on with a new perspective, was the woman I was, wrecked with grief and in complete despair… the one standing by the coffin of her son, tightly hugging his blanket, wondering how this could possibly be real. The woman who had innocence ripped from her life through the death of her 3-month-old baby boy. This is a woman that didn’t believe life could ever be okay again, one that didn’t want it to be. I didn’t think there would ever be a version of myself that could laugh again. A version that could smile when thinking of his perfect face instead of falling apart. A version that could desperately love him and miss him with every beat of her heart but continue to see the beauty in this life.

The day my son died, I died, too. When they put his body in the ground, I wished they had put mine with it. It took a long time for me to be able see clearly, for me to be able to wipe the dirt out of my eyes, to look forward and to not hate the path that I was on. It took months of profound sadness and bitterness, of regret, of questions that I will never know the answers to. Ultimately, it took hitting the lowest of lows to be brought back into the light. It took deep faith and trust and the absolute belief in something and someone bigger than myself, bigger than this pain. It took truly knowing that he is not gone forever. Granted, in this life, he is.

His little body took its last breath in my lap. I was the one that screamed that he was not breathing. I watched strangers try to bring him back to life for over an hour. I’m not crazy. I know he’s gone, and he’s not coming back. So in the typical sense of the word, and in the earthly manner, yes, he’s dead. But there’s so much more than this life.

He is so alive; alive and waiting for me in eternity. And so once the hope of heaven starts to infuse your body and soul with rejuvenation, you’re able to start to look around. The blindingly bright sunshine doesn’t hurt your eyes anymore. A beautiful day doesn’t feel like an insult. It feels like a warm kiss on your cheek. And when the cool wind blows, it doesn’t feel like a slap in the face. It feels like an embrace. And when the trees shake in the wind and the leaves flap, it doesn’t feel like everyone’s moved on with their life and forgotten about you… about him. It feels like the ones who’ve gone before you, stopping by to let you know they are still there, and they always will be.

The beautiful thing about death is that life doesn’t end there. At least not for me… It doesn’t stop there. Death is not the end. It’s the beginning, the beautiful gateway to a new, wonderful life. Without death there could be no resurrection, and I don’t believe that resurrection occurs only after the physical death of a body but after the soul of the one left behind dies along with it. Because when your child dies, everything that you knew to be true in this life disappears before your eyes. When this kind of hurt comes upon you, it rips you wide open, and you are left there to bleed. You are left with gaping wounds that nothing can repair, and you have a choice to make. You can sit in it. You can let it pool around you, suffocate you, and eat you alive, or one teeny, tiny step at a time, you can choose something different. You can choose to not let it be the end for you. You can choose to believe that there is purpose, and there is more. You can choose to let their impact live on through you. You can choose joy. It’s not easy, but it is possible.
Once you make that choice, and you start to look around you, you’ll begin to see that his beauty is everywhere. That your child is still near, and if you just search, you’ll find them. You find them in the clouds, in the butterflies, in the prettiest flower in the garden. You find them in the stars. You’ll find them in the song that you used to sing to them, in a book that you read together. You find them in the kindness of a stranger and in the people who love them, too. You find them in your memories, and if you’re lucky, you find them in your dreams. It’s never a replacement for having that baby physically in your arms, but it is a reminder that they are still yours, and they always will be.

The cold, hard days of lying on the bathroom floor begging for God to give him back, they just slowly start to change. You don’t miss your baby any less. The ache doesn’t go away, but you start to see the little flecks of new life, just little sparkles of hope here and there reminding you that all is not lost. As long as there is breath in your lungs, they will be with you. And when there isn’t, they will be in your arms again. Some days, that’s all I have, but it’s always enough to bring my heart back to life again. He will always be enough.

If you have a sister and she dies, do you stop saying you have one? Or are you always a sister, even when the other half of the equation is gone? ~Jodi Picoult

AFTER YOU DIED ALL THINGS CHANGED
By Dr. Joanne Cacciatore

After you died
all things changed.

Dust collected around the house
payments went unpaid
and calls unreturned.
Casseroles went uneaten
teeth unbrushed.
plants unwatered
‘thank you’ cards, unmailed.

After you died
the smell of rain disappeared
birds lost their melody
stones turned to ash
and clouds to concrete
the sky surrendered its blue
grasses withered and trees fell.

After you died
a part of me did, too
and what remained
collapsed under the weight
of your constant absence
and all things changed.

And, I realized that all things had to change
because my world could not remain
the same without you.
Sameness would not sufficiently honor
the holiness of your mark upon my heart
the longing for every part of you
even parts I would never know.

After you died
all things changed.
All things changed
except my love for you.

BEREAVED PARENTS
OF THE USA
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www.bereavedparentsusa.org

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We appreciate your feedback and suggestions. If you have written an article or read a book that you found helpful in your grief journey and would like to submit it for consideration to be printed in AJT, please contact us.

Kathy Corrigan
Fran Alger
newsletters@bereavedparentsusa.org
Greetings to you!

Things have finally settled down for me...The Board of Directors and various committees finished another successful National Gathering held in Indianapolis, Indiana July 1-3. Many friends reconnected and new friends were made. True to the theme, “Crossroads of Your Heart”, bereaved families traveled from coast to coast and roads between here and there. Hearts were touched and our children, siblings and grandchildren were remembered and honored.

There is a great quote by Woodrow Wilson from 1916 that speaks to me, “America is nothing if it consists merely of each of us; it is something only if it consists of all of us.” This is so true...not only of America and the great country that it is...but of Bereaved Parents of the USA.

The National Gathering is held every year, and it is produced by a few, hardworking Chapter members and the Board of Directors. BPUSA is nothing if it consists merely of each individual bereaved parent, sibling and grandparent. It survives and thrives because of the collective journey we are on because our loved one(s) have died. It is in this common thread that creates the whole.

The Board of Directors said goodbye to Bill Lagemann, BPUSA Treasurer as his 6 years on the Board of Directors came to an end. Bill & Vicki Lagemann are Donnie's Mom and Dad. At each face to face Board meeting, our children’s pictures are placed in the center of the table, a candle is lit, and the BPUSA Credo is read before each meeting. As President, I was in charge of returning pictures of Donnie Lagemann, Matt Swett, and Stacey Rima to their parents. Keith Swett and Michael Rima had to resign from the board earlier this past year for various reasons. These Board members served with honor and dedication because of their love for their kids and every bereaved parent across this great land. I was surprised at my tears as I gently removed their pictures from their respective frames. It was as though I was saying goodbye to them as well as their parents. As I did, Darcy Sims words came to mind, “Thanks for the little while”. Thank you to Bill, Keith and Michael for your service. I hold you and your child close to my heart.

On that note, I want to welcome two newly elected board members, Ron Kelly and Bill Lyon. Cheryl Sanza accepted the call as BPUSA Treasurer. Cheryl is an appointed Treasurer and has chosen not to serve as a board member at this time. I thank you for your willingness to answer the call to join this team. I look forward to serving with each of you for the greater good of this organization.

Plans have already begun for the 2017 BPUSA National Gathering. It will be held in Washington, DC at the Hilton Dulles hotel in Herndon, VA. Please visit the Website often for updates.

The theme for 2017 is “Reflect, Renew, Remember” and we are so excited to offer great Keynote Speakers, Workshop Presenters and many opportunities to see Old friends and make new ones.

Always,
Delain Johnson
BPUSA Board President
Good morning. My name is Caroline Erdahl and I will tell you that I really wish that none of us were here in Indianapolis, Indiana at this hotel for this Gathering. I think we’d all agree that we’d much rather be somewhere else with our families celebrating life as we envisioned it to be. But here we are and I do welcome each one of you.

My vision of life changed drastically on May 29th, 2010 when my doorbell rang at 4:45 that morning. I quickly got to the door to find 2 men dressed all in blue resembling police attire asking if this was the home of Zachary Minchin. I replied yes, that I was his mother. They asked if they could come in while I went to wake up my husband. I did as asked. I remember being angry as I walked upstairs to wake up Dennis. I wondered if Zach had gotten into some kind of trouble. After all he was 19 years old.

What we were about to be told, no one can prepare themselves for words of that nature…words that each one of you in some form or another have had to endure. The words were, Zachary was involved in an automobile accident this morning and he didn’t make it. Words that took all of 3 seconds to say… words that have adversely affected me and will continue to affect me for the remainder of my life.

I am so sorry to say that each one of us have shared a moment as such and have heard similar devastating words pertaining to the death of our children. We have all felt that feeling of utter despair that is so indescribable. That feeling that causes us to fall down and never want to get up again. That feeling that causes us to question our existence and wonder if joy will ever again be a part of our inner being. The grief is so overwhelming and intense, that we question our sanity. It saddens me to know that many of you here for this conference are in the early stage of your grief journey in the deepest depth of your affliction and wonder if you’ll ever break free from the torment.

And for that very reason, that is what has brought me here to the 2016 Bereaved Parents of the USA National Gathering. I’m speaking today for one reason and one reason only and that is to share with you the hope you desperately need and to tell you a bit about the crossroads of my heart, where the suffering of missing my sweet, energetic, loving and so humorous Zach turned around for me.

Victor Frankl, holocaust survivor once said, “To live is to suffer, to survive is to find meaning in the suffering.” Early on in my grief, I knew I had to find the meaning or a mission amidst the chaos of Zach’s death, yet I also knew I had to grieve this huge loss that was so abruptly thrown at me.

In the book, “A Grace Disguised” which is subtitled, “How the soul grows through loss”, the author, Jerry Sittser writes of his healing from the death of his wife, daughter and mother all in the same accident. He talked of the initial darkness he felt and an awake dream he had early on in his grief where he was chasing the setting sun. He goes on to say that in this dream, he found himself frantically running west trying desperately to catch it so he could stay in its fiery warmth and light but the sun beat him to the horizon. He then found himself turning around toward the east where he saw a vast darkness closing in on him. He so badly wanted to continue to chase that setting sun but collapsed and fell into the darkness. As he explained this dream to his sister the next day, she shared that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west chasing the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.

He goes on to say and I quote directly from the book, “I discovered in this moment, that I had the power to choose the direction my life would head, even if the only choice open to me, at least initially, was either to run from the loss or face it the best I could.”

I, myself chose to face this horrible new existence the best I could, inch by inch and minute by minute I poured myself directly into the darkness that consumed me. If I were to give any advice on grief, that advice would be that you must go through it. By your presence here at this gathering, shows you too have made that choice to face the darkness that has been dealt to you. For that choice, you all deserve a pat on the back for it shows just how courageous you really are.
I look back at my early grief and can see so many crossroads I approached and had to figure out which direction I needed to take rather than the direction I wanted to take. Many times, I just wanted to crawl back into my cocoon and hide from the reality of the loss...if I didn’t face it, maybe it would go away kind of thinking. Not a very productive thought process that only got me more lost in my journey.

I would say that some of the highlights of the right turns I took at my crossroads were initially getting into counseling, and I tell you that I was blessed with a therapist that today I call friend. Just a wonderful, compassionate and educated lady that seriously helped me over the hump of many complex issues of my own personal grief. Through this therapist, I immediately got connected with a support group and that group was the Montgomery County Indiana Chapter of the Bereaved Parents.

This is where I was able to link in with some lovely people who knew exactly what I was going through. It was a safe place where I could cry for my son and no one hushed me. This is where I could openly laugh without feeling judged. This is where I realized that I was not insane and that the thoughts and feelings that took hostage of my mind were all normal and part of the realm of dealing with the death of a child. But ultimately, this is where those in the group that walked this grief journey before me, provided me hope in knowing that I would be able to get through this tragedy.

I will tell you that I have met some of the most incredibly caring, compassionate resilient and valiant people in the past 6 years and the common thread we share is we are bereaved parents. It is through these people and their example that I have strived to see that sunrise once again in my life.

Through the crossroad where I whole heartedly nurtured my faith, and searched for my designed purpose behind Zach’s tragedy is where my journey started to provide me fulfillment in the life I lead today. I diligently sought this direction and approximately 3 years ago I was led to start and advise a SADD Chapter, Students Against Destructive Decisions at the high school my children had attended. Zach’s accident involved many destructive behaviors. He was drunk, speeding, wearing no seat belt and texting. Sadly, the parents who hosted the party he had attended that night allowed alcohol and actually provided some of it to the very intoxicated underage kids, yet they did not take anyone’s keys and Zach left. He lost control of his vehicle after receiving a text from a friend who was still at the party asking if he was home safe. His fatal crash took place at the entrance to our neighborhood.

Through advising these high school students, I get so much out of helping them make much better decisions than those that were exercised on the night Zach was killed. I also get great joy out of helping these kids who desire to make a difference in their community. This has been an avenue allowing Zach’s legacy to continue on even though he is not physically present with us. The highlight of this service for me is that my son lives on through my heart, my hands, my words and his life can still affect change in this world.

Other service areas that I have gotten involved with include prison ministry, working with teens on spiritual retreats and serving on the board of a half way home that helps incarcerated women re-entering society who are dealing with addictions, loss of children, abuse and other forms of brokenness. Through the huge gaping hole that was placed in my heart the day Zach died, and as my grief journey progressed, I found that I desperately needed to try and heal by helping others.

Trite but true, the gift of time has slowly gotten me to where I am today, but my journey continues on. Our grief journeys can be compared to climbing a mountain with rough terrain to say the least. I read somewhere how mountain climbers must look back every once in a while to see the amount of mountain they have accomplished rather than always looking up to see how far they have to go. I still have mountain to climb because through love, I will always miss that beautiful son of mine and that loss will continue to bring me pain, yet the vast darkness that this journey started with on May 29th, 2010 is now etched with the light of a beautiful sunrise.

My wish for you all is that you periodically look back at the mountain you are climbing and see the progress you’ve made. My other wish I have for each of you is that you keep journeying towards your sunrise searching for the light and the warmth that is waiting for you. Hold onto that hope of light and warmth knowing that that is where our children who have died before us, all want us to be.

Thank you for listening and may peace be abundantly yours.
More Wisdom...

Hello, Welcome to Indianapolis, IN for this years' National Gathering. My name is Chris Hiland, and I am a grieving parent. My 13 year old son, Brayton died in an ATV accident on March 8, 2008. Today, I am going to share the crossroads of my heart with you.

Through friendships and support of other bereaved parents. I have been given tools to survive this Journey. I no longer hold my head down, it is held high because perhaps my lesson in all of this is my work here is not done. I want to give others the hope that “if she can survive, I CAN TOO.”

However, I struggled with hurt and was disappointed by family and friends as they either walked away or said the words we all have heard about moving on: “God wanted another angel… How long are you going to grieve? You cannot bring him back… You have to move on… He’s in a better place….” As a parent, we feel that there is no better place than being with us.

At this point, we are just trying to cope in doing the simplest tasks and to make sense of why this happened. A grieving parent does not want to hear those words because the unthinkable has happened. No parent should ever have to bury their child.

I was at a crossroad with the loss of life as I knew it. Our families did not understand, friends left us without support and I pulled away from everything and everyone. Withdrawing from activities and hid in my house because I felt that no one understood the depths of my grief. I felt like it consumed my whole body. I felt like my world had been shattered into a million little pieces and felt that I would never find happiness or laugh for the rest of my life. I just wanted the excruciating pain that I felt in my entire body to stop and prayed that I would not wake up the next day. How were we going to live the rest of our lives without one of our children?

I walked around in a daze, all I could think about was someone needed to wake me up from this horrible nightmare. I felt as if I was on a beach and the tides would roll in and knock me down and felt like I was drowning. As the tides rolled out to sea, I was able to get back up. I questioned my faith, what was my purpose in all of this and prayed for strength to get up out of my bed each day. I don’t know about you but for me, I longed to be with my child.

Like most of you, I had loved ones who had died but I never felt this kind of pain in my being that came from the death of my son. I am sure you felt much like I did, I would have given anything to have traded places so he could have stayed.

People wanted to fix me and I felt, it was much like cutting off a limb. You cannot fix that, it just does not grow back.

I sought out a counselor in September 2008, Marsha, was someone who knew nothing about us. Marsha told me that everything I was feeling was completely normal. I wondered what I had done that was so bad that our son was taken from us at barely 13 years old. She said “unfortunately, bad things happen to good people”. She let me talk for several months to be able to open up about all that I was feeling, past, present and future. I am blessed to say that we still have connections to one another.

My husband and I played the blame game………… what if….. if only…. We were hiding our feelings from each other. We became distant with each other. I felt he blamed me and he became angry and the pain he was feeling was building within him. He was the father, and his job was to protect and provide for our children.

I discovered that men and women are at different crossroads where grief is concerned. Just because we are both parents, grief is not the same. For the first time in my life, I had to think of me and figure out what I needed. This is my journey not theirs. Grief is hard work, it is mentally and physically hard on the body and it can literally make you sick. If we continued down that path we were on, the outcome would have not been in our favor.

When I attended my first BP meeting, I found a room full of other grieving parents who understood me. I had finally found people who actually GOT ME. For the first time, I was able to talk openly about Brayton and his life without judgement. Mostly feeling robbed of our future. All of the milestones, that we would never see. And trying to come to grips with the life as I knew it was now gone. All of the hopes and dreams were now destroyed.

We had 2 children. I did not realize how much our consumption of grief affected Brandon. Here he was about ready to graduate High School, one of the happiest times of our lives, and all he could see was pain from the death
THE OLD ME...

By Keith Swett

In an argument about if I am too old to coach at 65 one of the parents said, "Swett doesn't have the same fire since Matt died." That's right. He wanted the old me back. As bereaved parents we know that the old me is not coming back. The old me was innocent, optimistic, enthusiastic. I had endless energy and the world was full of possibilities. Most parents are innocent when it comes to a child's death. They are optimistic about the future and enthusiastic about a world filled with possibilities for their children. I still share all those traits but I know another outcome is possible. I know pain and loss. I know shattered dreams and despair.

The funny thing is I am a better coach. I know what is important. I do not get excited about hair length or color, tats or scars, wins or losses. I get very excited about kids living their best quality of life. I share hopes and dreams with kids but I know how to rebuild a broken heart. I love the ones who try as much as the ones that make it. I have come too far to go back to what I was.

I do not even get angry at ignorant parents. I realize that they are still living in a small safe world. I hope their world is always small and safe, but I will be here to help if it is not.
I decided to live.
I decided to choose to live.

It’s a decision I’ve made
many
many times since.
In the face of my daughter’s
death.
In the face of my wife’s death.
In the face of my son’s death.

It’s a decision you will have to
make
too.

Not just once.

But over
and over
and over again.

Choose life.
Say yes.

Regardless of and in spite of.
Life has other plans for you
too.

Excerpt From Permission to Mourn:
A New Way to Do Grief.

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CREDO

We are the parents whose children have died. We are the grandparents who have buried
grandchildren. We are the siblings whose brothers and sisters no longer walk with us
through life. We come together as Bereaved Parents of the USA to provide a haven where all
bereaved families can meet and share our long and arduous grief journeys. We attend
monthly gatherings whenever we can and for as long as we believe necessary. We share our
fears, confusion, anger, guilt, frustrations, emptiness and feelings of hopelessness so
that hope can be found anew. As we accept, support, comfort and encourage each other, we
demonstrate to each other that survival is possible. Together we celebrate the lives of our
children, share the joys and triumphs as well as the love that will never fade. Together we
learn how little it matters where we live, what our color or our affluence is or what faith
we uphold as we confront the tragedies of our children’s deaths. Together, strengthened by
the bonds we forge at our gatherings, we offer what we have learned to each other and to
every more recently bereaved family.

We are the Bereaved Parents of the USA. We welcome you.

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When I Think of Death
by Maya Angelou

When I think of death, and of late the idea has come with
alarming frequency, I seem at peace with the idea that a day
will dawn when I will no longer be among those living in this
valley of strange humors.
I can accept the idea of my own demise, but I am unable to
accept the death of anyone else.
I find it impossible to let a friend or relative go into that
country of no return.
Disbelief becomes my close companion, and anger follows in
its wake.
I answer the heroic question ‘Death, where is thy sting?’ with
‘it is here in my heart and mind and memories.’