

Breathe. I was again following the Kelly voice's advice as I sat on my sofa.

One jarring phone call and everything was suspect. How could I ever trust again? All I knew to do was to grab two things I recognized - Leah, the friend outside myself, and my pen, the friend within, and this was where I began.

My grief journey. My grief journal. It seemed neither linear nor predictable as it began gathering pieces of my shattered life. It wrote me through an anxious afternoon when my overloaded emotions wanted to take over and urged me to take care of the business at hand without letting feelings shut me down. It talked me out of the house and into the world to connect with what was once safe and familiar. Then when I'd had enough, it welcomed me back to unleash the overwhelming anger and fear, away from others. It reported new behaviors I was testing and compared them to what I already knew. As I let go of this isolating safety to practice a more balanced conversation in my head, I found myself for longer periods of time in the world beyond my sofa.

But it wasn't until the second anniversary of Carlton's death, unsure how I would share this journey with others, that I began systematically reading the two dozen journals. I was blown away. I had been recording the process of my unfolding. *Darkness, Reaching Out, Renewed Energy, God, A Path Through My Grief*. It was the way I put together the pieces I

now know as me. A collection of tiny sparks of light hiding in my shadows.

It took more than two years before I was far enough into this journey to identify where I had been, and another nine months before I was ready to share much of it. I can only assume at this point that was also part of the process.

In the Beginning

Where did this journaling obsession come from? For many years I taught language arts and really hated to teach writing. The emphasis for good writing was on grammar and structure, killing, or at least gravely wounding, any desire to tell an interesting story. And all those papers I wrote for graduate courses were pure agony, as I gathered research from an adequate variety of sources, footnoting everything, constantly monitoring for perceived plagiarism, and giving professors what I thought they wanted. I was learning the process of writing, but I had not yet heard my own voice.

I kept journals off and on during various stages of my life, as suggested by counselors and friends. I would vow to write daily, and would keep the promise for about a month, or until I felt better, then discontinue the discipline until the next crisis urged me to pick up my pen again. The many attractively bound, partially filled journals all around the house are

nevertheless informative, as they recorded where I was and provided practice for what was to come.

In February 1999, I gave a sermon at my church. It was a review of my spiritual journey at that time, as I was traveling deeper into my own therapy. Then that summer I presented a Blessing of the Animals service based on stories of my classroom pets. The preparation for each presentation connected stories from my life in a form I could now see. Both services were well received and personally satisfying, so I continued to write classroom anecdotes as the 1999-2000 school year began.

Then, in December, my beloved minister and counselor resigned amid accusations of sexual misconduct. I felt confused and abandoned. I had had such strong feelings for him. I was the Worship chair, so I held tightly to the organization, wanting to continue his ministry. But I soon found much unfinished grief for me in that setting. When I spoke of my frustrations and sadness to others, I felt dismissed, adding to my fear. I didn't know how to make myself understood, so I quit talking about it. Five-and-a-half months of filling the pulpit with guest speakers consumed much of my energy, so I tried once more in a setting specifically offered for grief counseling. I again felt confusion that was rapidly accelerating into anger. I was, after all, a volunteer with a full-time teaching job and a pen that wanted my attention. I

lacked the stamina to continue the struggle. I needed to pull away and take care of myself.

That was when I began writing more than classroom stories. Discouraged by the response I received from outside sources, I began a second notebook for feedback from myself. I needed to learn how to communicate more effectively, and initially the voice from my pen sounded a lot like my minister's. It was as if I were still listening to his wisdom on Sunday, or, as in therapy, being allowed to release my emotions in the safety of his office. It was the voice I missed, and the grief I sorely needed to heal. So I talked to my journal, my minister, myself. I wasn't sure who was doing all this talking. All I knew was that it was a vital connection.

It helped me make the choice to retire and explore this writing further, concentrating on the stories from my classroom. I thought the school anecdotes were what I needed to write about, and they were, for two-and-a half years. Until the night of January 11, 2003, when I got a phone call from Los Angeles telling me my son was dead. I opened my notebook.

Gulp. Now what, God?

Hold on to your pen.

But this is new territory; I don't think I can make it.

Keep writing, sweetie. I'll talk you through it.

A Creative Response

In those first days following the call, I was all business. I needed to stay in control. Denial, shock, whatever, was calling on my school teacher persona to handle the overwhelming chaos swirling around me.

I decided there would be a service for the family on Saturday, and friends could visit at my house on Sunday afternoon. The Sunday plans easily took shape, as I willingly allowed Leah and my teacher friends to help with the details.

But the Saturday service was something I wanted to take on myself. Matt, my ex-husband and Carlton's adoptive father, his family, and my own frayed family, their ex's, and children hovered in the air, broken strands just beyond my grasp. I wanted us to sit together in the same room and face each other for Carlton's sake. I was feeling responsible for his death because I couldn't fix all of these chaotic relationships.

First, I went to my notebook to stop my pacing and endless circling around the room. The black ink on the white page gave me something to focus on and brought me back to the present. With this self-centering I could now plan the service. That's when I remembered the box of notecards Leah gave me for Christmas. They read, "I believe we are here for a reason. As each

day unfolds, we see less of the shadow and more of the sun." It was a thought I was desperately clinging to, so I decided to use the cards as invitations for all who were part of Carlton's earthly family to share in a celebration of his life. Then with renewed energy, I drove around the city to hand-deliver the local ones.

A couple days later, Matt's sister called saying she and her mom were coming from Austin. Her voice sounded so engaging. Why did I feel unbalanced, as if I was about to be side-swiped? I had always enjoyed being with her, but the last time we were together was with her parents in Boston in the summer of 1996. That was after Carlton's year at college, the less-than-successful family counseling and Carlton's first attempt at suicide, and before the year-long marriage counseling, messy divorce and Carlton's sudden move to the West Coast. At that time in Boston we talked around the troubling events. Matt, her older brother, had struggled with self-concept issues and his own suicide attempt as a young adult, and I was hoping to find relief being with a family who had experienced this challenge, but all I could do was cry. I had no words to express myself, and they stayed busy with other things. Then in 1999, I talked to her on the phone and shared a troubling concern I had about Matt's erratic behavior. Again I hoped we might connect, but it didn't happen the way I expected. I didn't know what to think.

As I was thinking of this sister-in-law, another one called, angry because a certain ex-wife would be there. I listened to her frustration and understood her discomfort, but I had no answers. All I did was issue invitations, and now I felt scared. I needed to talk to my notebook.

What have I initiated?

A gathering of Carlton's family.

But there'll be chaos. We've all been holding an awful lot in.

What was your intention in getting everyone together?

To be in the same room so we could look at each other.

Then that's what will happen. Watch everything. Listen to what is said. We can talk about it later.

A gold framed picture of Carlton running a half-marathon in November was surrounded by little tea candles, gifts from one brother's wife, set up on the antique coffee table, a past Christmas present from my other brother. Two potted blooming azalea bushes, one from Matt's parents and one from cousins, added color to the living room. The house sparkled because the lady who used to clean my house was hired by my teacher friends for the occasion. Platters of food filled the dining room table, and the essence of a spicy taco soup made by an ex-sister-in-law wafted from the kitchen. In the background the ethereal sounds of

Charlotte Church's *Voice of an Angel* CD played. And, of course, the proverbial "elephants" sat everywhere. This was, after all, the living room.

There were awkward attempts at connecting, as Carlton's family converged at the house where Carlton spent nine years of his abbreviated life. When I opened the front door to Matt's mother and sister, I received warm hugs, so I then moved to Matt. But he felt like stone, and I quickly pulled back, registering this feeling for the later conversation with my notebook.

Matt, supported by his mother and sister, stayed near the entrance. Bruce and Buddy, my brothers, were present, as were two of their ex-wives, one current wife, and a teen-aged daughter. I, too, was grateful for family support in this uncomfortable setting. My aging mother and father were also there, but I was unable to assess how they were holding up. Dad wanted to know if sharing an experience about Carlton as a child was appropriate. I assured him it was. Mother wanted the music turned off; I turned it down.

As we took seats around the coffee table. I felt everyone was watching me, so I worked to stay detached and stoic. Was this the legacy of my Midwestern ancestry, the knowledge of a nearby comforting notebook, the grace of shock, or a little of it all? I took a deep breath and began the celebration by thanking everyone for coming. Then I read Emily's speech from the third act of *Our Town*, the play I had

been in the month before, and shared two stories I had previously written, one from my science classroom about the death of an iguana and one recently written for my friend Linda, whose mother was in a hospice. As I lit one of the small candles to the memory of Carlton, I invited others to share. One by one a diversity of gifts was presented: a poem read by his maternal grandmother, a picture of his cousin Caleb and him at their grandparents' lake house, and a Bible verse shared by Matt, the preacher's son. Then there was a memory from my father, as he recalled sitting with a young Carlton in the church balcony, where he once sat with his own children. His Aunt Lydia remembered the large collection of G. I. Joes he gave Caleb. Recent news of Carlton came from his outgoing Uncle Buddy who had been in touch with Carlton's friends in California. From his Uncle Bruce came a sad reminiscence of sharing the same birthday. One by one each person presented a connection, then lit a candle. Avery, his oldest Flett cousin and now the oldest Flett grandchild, also lit candles for her little half-brother and sister and their mom, who were not present. Matt's mom lit a candle for Matt's dad, who was also not there. I mentally recorded the illumination from the collection of tiny candles as I watched, detached, sitting on the sofa, gathering images and feelings from the afternoon. I also listened as words, said and unsaid, vibrated through the living room.

The solemn service ended with the nourishing communion of food and more relaxed conversation of



Safety

A Safe Place

My first real trip away from the safety of my house was to a friend's home after school on the Friday before the weekend memorial service and visitation. Our regular meeting of active and retired Stoner Hill Elementary teachers was located in a noisy Mexican restaurant where we, the soon-to-be-dubbed "Steel Magnolias," unwound from the week, compared notes, shared funny stories, and bitched. These were the friends who organized the Sunday visit.

Martha decided her house would allow us more privacy for our Friday meeting after Carlton's death. Leah was there, as were several others who had stopped by or called through the week, but Martha's gathering was the first time I met the whole group together. Her dining table was loaded with party food and plenty of champagne-laced orange juice mimosas. At first I didn't want to drink alcohol, but when my friends emphasized my need for vitamin C, I submitted. I found making conversation stressful, even

with these well-meaning friends, and was grateful for the drink. It allowed me to be present without needing to participate.

By the next Friday, after the challenge of the memorial service and visitation for me, and a busy school week for my friends, we met back at our restaurant's big round table, picking up our routine. I don't know what was talked about, or if I even talked that day; I remember hearing just noise. But I was glad to see myself out and about. Any real conversation was saved for later, in the safety of my home and notebook.

People are advised to get back to a regular routine as soon as they can after experiencing such trauma. My regular routine, however, consisted of sitting on the sofa pushing a pen. I allowed few outside distractions, and now realized how heavily I relied on words appearing in the notebook to tell me who I was.

This weekly meeting with my friends was one event beyond my living room I could count as routine. It was now more than a gathering to compare school stories or surface situations. I was not yet ready to share scarier feelings, leaving those for my notebook. But my life had been turned upside down, and I needed a safe place to land. I found it in the laps of middle-aged public school teachers, most with grown children of their own, eager to do what they knew best - mother.

I didn't have school stories to tell. These friends couldn't relate to my writing obsession. They wanted

to share news of their children. It wasn't always easy being a part of the group. Sometimes I felt incredibly empty. Sometimes I was filled with fear. I was no longer a teacher. No longer a mother. I was not a published writer. But week after week, I kept showing up to sit in this circle of friends, to remind myself that I, too, was a strong Southern woman.

I am grateful to these women who continued working to find common ground and exploring our friendships' more challenging levels. We have shared joys and concerns of grandbabies, awards, weddings, retirements, trips, illnesses, funerals, and birthdays. Our weekly conversations ranged from dealing with difficult peers and aging parents to finding a good plumber and arguing with insurance companies. We were a circle of friends who wanted to connect.

Some teachers moved on and others took their place. Some didn't come often, but knew they were welcome when they did. Some of us were more "steel;" some more "magnolia." But our round table continued to offer a safe place and an invitation to come as you need to be.

Avery

The one person to get any extended attention from me in the first few weeks was Avery, my popular high-school niece, who was struggling in accelerated classes.

Before Carlton's death I had discussed with my brother Bruce, Avery's dad, the possibility of tutoring her. I requested there be no money paid during the trial period, in case I wasn't Avery's solution. By the end of January we decided to proceed with the plan. I wanted to be with the other children in my family and remember what I once knew how to do.

Avery came over with a set of heavy textbooks issued for home use to leave in my living room, and we went straight to work. I was eager to explore our relationship, as I had never had much time alone with this strawberry blond beauty. She is the outgoing grandchild of the family. Carlton was much more reserved and studious, as are Avery's half-siblings, Jake and Laura Beth. At first she followed my academic lead with enthusiasm. We sat on the living room sofa reading history and discussing South American revolutions. *Antigone*, her English assignment, got translated into a more modern lingo. She seemed to know how to play the game in biology and French, and we were both intimidated by

geometry. By mid-nine weeks her grades went up, with an A in history and a passing grade in English.

Although Avery was trying hard to please me, I knew she was also growing weary reading textbooks and studying for tests with her Aunt Laura. I watched as she began to pull away. The initial three or four nights a week together became one or two. She told me of study groups she found with her friends. This was the motivation we wanted, but I was ambivalent about losing the contact. I looked forward to our time together and her willingness to connect. So I took my concerns to the notebook, not wanting to burden her with my needs, and found ways to honestly commend her for trying her own solutions. The original plan was just to explore possibilities. She was learning what it took to pass enriched classes, and I was learning not all teenagers were interested in them.

Did I make her an A student? No, that didn't seem to be what she wanted. Had this been my goal? I hope not, but I spent many journal pages relinquishing that plan.

I was, however, learning so much more than I had imagined, as we shared intimate stories of our family. She, the big sister, told of her concerns for her younger siblings, and I related my own about her dad and uncle, my younger brothers. We discussed feelings about suicide and death. One of her friend's sisters died this way a few months before Carlton. We both

needed to talk. And we compared notes on my aging parents, her grandparents. We had so much in common.

By March, Avery and I went our separate ways, although her textbooks remained in my living room until the end of the semester. She had obviously found another way to finish up the year. I remembered how little I was able to "help" Carlton with his schoolwork at this age. Maybe it's one way an adolescent pulls away to become more independent.

On St. Patrick's Day I went with a friend to hear my brothers' band play at an outdoor city festival. Avery was there with friends, in all their teen-aged radiance, and we danced together to the family's music. First I imitated her modern moves, then she mirrored back my mime from the '60s. It was now this outgoing woman-child's turn to tutor her timid aunt in the art of being festive.

The Dream

In the first few months of my scariest nights, I would hold on to the brass headboard of my bed afraid of being swallowed by the darkness. Was this the darkness Carlton gave in to? The thought made me grip the cold metal tighter.

But in the middle of May, about four months after his death, I had a dream. I remembered no images, only sounds. I was to pick up my son and a friend from

a church activity, but Carlton called in a somewhat raspier version of his voice, "Mom, here's the deal. I want to stay tonight. The team is playing and we missed the last game. I can get my medallion some other time."

I awakened suddenly, looking around the dark bedroom for the familiar voice, frantic to know what it meant. He loved baseball. Had he found the perfect team? Was "missing the last game" a reference to his first suicide attempt? Was it important for me to know he had chosen to spend the night at church? The voice in my head was asking too many questions.

Then there was mention of a medallion. What was that about? Was he given the impossible role of family hero, the only child of a first-born mother and an only-child father? The first grandchild on either side. By the time he was four months old, his father and I separated and Carlton lost most of his contact with him. What did I do wrong? What should I have done differently? When he was seven years old I remarried and he was adopted by my second husband Matt, who was also the first-born of his family. Carlton then became the first grandchild for Matt's family. There were so many expectations riding on those broad shoulders of his. What should I have realized earlier? How could I have known? And he said he can get his medallion some other time. What in the world did that mean?

I grabbed my pen and notebook. I needed something wiser than this questioning voice in my head to talk me through these mounting fears.

What did I do to my precious son?

You only did what you knew.

Generations of family experiences and birth-order responsibilities as you understood them.

But I've made so many mistakes. How do I go on? What do I do now?

Well, tell me what you have been doing.

I gave a family memorial service for Carlton. A chance to come together privately, away from the well-meaning public and friends.

That's good, what else?

Well, then I pulled away from my immediate family.

That's OK.

I didn't have the energy to take care of anyone but me.

I said that's OK.

I tutored Avery. There were lunches with my brother Buddy at George's Grill. I babysat Jake and Laura Beth.

All very good.

That was easy. I knew how to do those things. But the rest of my family...

What about them?

Well, Buddy brought my daddy by on Valentine's Day to give me a rose. I remember holding tightly to him in my driveway. I felt like a little girl.

That makes sense.

But I can only talk to brother Bruce through e-mails. He seems so overwhelmed. And I'm avoiding Mother altogether. I'm afraid they'll take too much energy.

That's OK for now. You're doing the best you can. They'll understand. Things will change when they need to.

I'm volunteering in Leah's classroom again. I know how to help there. And meeting my teacher friends on Fridays feels comfortable enough. But some of the friends I haven't been in touch with lately scare me, and I'm not sure why.

Don't push yourself if you're not ready. You'll understand when it's time.

I meet with my writing group every Sunday afternoon. I know how to participate there.

It sounds like you're doing just what you need to do.

Really?

Sure. Just do the best you can and keep talking to me.

And who was I these first months of darkness? I was still the daughter, the sister, the aunt, the mother, the teacher, the friend, and the writer. And in time, as I felt ready to step back into the light that is life on Earth, I found new ways to know who I am and where I belong. I just kept talking to my notebook.

Ashes

Jessie's soft voice on the other end of the line told me the package containing my son's remains had finally come from a crematorium in California and I could come pick it up at the local funeral home. I went that afternoon.

But when I got home I put the unopened package on the table next to his framed marathon picture. That was enough courage for one day. Something didn't make sense. The picture and the package couldn't be the same person. For days all I did was walk by the table and assess my strength. I couldn't do this by myself; I needed help from my pen.

I can't open the box. I'm too scared.

That's OK, sweetie.

But it needs to be taken care of. I need to move on.

Relax, Laura. You'll know when you're ready.

So I continued to scribble in my notebook, and several days later I found myself opening the package. Inside was a brown plastic rectangular box, not the imagined burial urn. Nothing good enough to hold my beautiful son. I took some deep breaths, then unsnapped the plastic box, untwisted the tie on the plastic bag and touched the light gray powder. This can't be Carlton. Twenty-seven years of flesh and blood could not be so easily reduced to an ash-filled baggie. Then I found official papers from the crematorium tucked inside the fine dust, and little lumps of bone, and oh, dear, a string and metal tag etched with his name. A toe tag. My mind traveled to images from the movies then back to the reality of my living room. Breathe, I told myself.

For several days I just practiced opening the box, looking at its contents, touching it, and wondering if I would ever be able to let it go.

My plan was to scatter Carlton's ashes on the Caddo Lake Nature Trail, where I had gone just two days before his death, desperately seeking my own peace. On that troubling day, within minutes of feeling the firm footing beneath me and inhaling the fresh air all around, I had found overwhelming connection. A tingling sensation ran through my body and warmth

surrounded me. I was a completed circuit. As I continued walking, allowing balance to settle back into me, I came upon a clearing. A dozen tiny songbirds - nuthatches, chickadees, and finches - flew through with much rejoicing. Yes, I thought later, replaying the amazing scene over and over in my head. That was where my son, once the head chorister for the Shreveport Boychoir, would find rest.

It took several weeks and much journaling before I could separate the gray ash in the brown plastic box from my image of Carlton. I chose to go to the Texas state park alone, afraid of the energy I might need if anyone else was with me. The 45-minute drive gave my spinning mind time to let go of any last-minute doubts. At the entrance I told the park ranger I wouldn't be there long, and she waived the \$2 day fee. I claimed this as assurance that I was right where I was supposed to be and drove down the steep park road to the trail's parking lot, turned off the engine, climbed out of the car with the box, and hiked to the place where the songbirds flew.

Once there I stood on the path, looking into the sunlit clearing, deeply breathing in the fresh air, and steadying my shaking hands. Then I unsnapped the box and took out a handful of ash. This was hard. My heart was pounding. The act of physically letting go was different from the release of spinning thoughts. Tears streamed down my face as I tossed one tentative fistful after another and watched the powder drift

through the air and land among bamboo, decomposing leaves, and dirt trail. But halfway through the task I had stopped crying. The tingling and warmth returned, and the event felt incredibly powerful. I was now slinging the dust higher and letting it scatter farther, as if in celebration.

When the box was empty, I turned my attention away from where the ashes had fallen to the other side of the trail. There was a tree stump covered in resurrection fern, another sign for me that this truly was a place of profound connection. Mother Nature - the perfect setting for my child to find rest.

Raising a Princess

Princess, a scruffy, white and apricot terrier poodle, lies sprawled in a comfortable puddle on my lap while I write. She's my puppy alter ego.

By the time the little dog was four years old, we had each settled into a routine: our boundaries more or less defined. But the first two years were a struggle. I forgot how much constant attention a puppy demands, as I battled a personality as stubborn as my own. Her annoying chewing and yapping was a continuous challenge. Housebreaking the pup made Carlton's toilet training seem easy, and she was as hard to bathe and groom as that wiggly boy once was. Some battles I won; some I learned to give in to, calling them a truce of

sorts. She goes outside to pee now, but her stuffed Beanie Baby toys are strewn all over the house.

She can still be much like a small child and has been very good company on this difficult journey. Princess is so tuned to my moods I wonder how she reads my mind. If I feel closed in and antsy, the fluffy dog stands on her hind legs and whines for a walk. If I am lonely and at loose ends, she jumps into my lap. When her rough pink tongue begins licking my face, my first impulse is to push her away. But if I hesitate for a moment and allow the affection, I realize it's what I really wanted.

I pushed Carlton away, too. After a full day of teaching fifth graders, I'd pick him up at daycare and we'd head home where I'd immediately collapse on the sofa. He would then climb into my lap, ready for attention. A setting much like my times with Princes. I didn't have enough energy for this busy little guy. I couldn't see his needs; I was so overwhelmed by my own. A current of anxiety ran through my body as I wrote this and reminded me of another feeling I once had.

On the Saturday morning I believe Carlton was conceived, there was warmth in my womb. It was a stirring, but not an anxiousness. More like an assurance. I knew I was pregnant six weeks before a doctor's verification and before home tests were available. His father wasn't pleased and wanted little to do with this growing presence. I had used a foam contraceptive, I reasoned, having been the one
