

**Writing
Toward The
Light:
A Grief Journey**

by Laura Flett

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And a woman who held a babe against
her bosom said, Speak to us of Children.
And he said:

Your children are not your children.
They are the sons and daughters of
Life's longing for itself.
They come through you but not from
you,
And though they are with you yet they
belong not to you.

The Prophet

Kahlil Gibran



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Preface

My precious son Carlton died. He was the Light of my life, and I was plunged into darkness. I desperately needed to know what happened to him. His life force was no longer contained in an earth body. Where did he go? Who am I now? What is our relationship to be? I began an intense search for him, myself, and the life energy I call God. It was not a thirty-day course with a step-by-step process. I couldn't put it in neat little categories. I know because I spent a lot of time trying.

I could only pick up my pen and journal. My pen drew a medium black line from point A (what I knew) to point B (something nearby that seemed similar). A connecting of scattered bits of light, flickers of safety, connection, new life. I didn't understand this process. When I stopped to analyze it, I only spun in frustration. All I knew to do was gather up the tiny sparks of my past life and hope it would become more illuminating with time.

This was the way I stayed on earth and did not permanently leave to find my son. As I put one anxious word in front of the other, the pen continued to tell me

that I was writing towards greater light and understanding.

I wrote for a while, looking for those flashes and building a bit of courage to venture out for groceries. I bought necessary items at the familiar neighborhood store, then hurried home to write what I had just experienced.

As the pen showed me my successes and progress, I became braver. Its ink began connecting more familiar dots as they appeared: friends, events, places, and ideas. Each connection gave me strength, reminding me who I had been and what I was doing, describing who I am and what I am doing now. I put together this new foundation based on past knowledge and present experiences, as I watched, listened, and wrote of my life.

This was to be the last piece I wrote for this book before a self-imposed deadline to finish by November 28, 2005. It would have been my son's thirtieth birthday. I scrambled, wanting to complete the journey. But the harder I tried to finish, the more unfinished I felt. I had so much yet to learn.

In August 2005 before going to Taos, New Mexico, for a writing workshop, I was diagnosed with breast cancer. I didn't understand. It was not in my family; I was not supposed to have breast cancer. But after a biopsy on a suspicious shadow that appeared on my yearly mammogram, the surgeon called to tell me it was a "favorable cancer." A favorable cancer? I heard that

as an oxymoron. Then he offered me the choice of a lumpectomy with radiation therapy or a radical mastectomy.

"What's the difference?" I asked.

"Not much. It's just personal preference. One way is as effective as the other," he told me.

I felt like I was at Baskin-Robbins choosing between pistachio almond and chocolate mint and selected the lumpectomy only because he assured me I could postpone radiation until I got back from Taos. I also began taking Tamoxifen. Ah, the favorable part was becoming more apparent; there would be no chemotherapy.

The workshop in Taos was everything I wanted it to be. Twenty writers burning with stories to tell and eager to find a way to do it. We left New Mexico full of enthusiasm with plans to keep in touch.

But once I was back home I began six and one-half weeks of radiation treatments and soon discovered I hadn't dealt with the reality of this disease. Every day as I sat in a waiting room at the Cancer Treatment Center with patients in various stages of the illness, I was facing my own mortality. So much of my energy had been spent coming to terms with Carlton's death. It was now time to look at my own.

"Wait, God," I scribbled in my notebook, "I'm not ready. I've still got a lot of stuff I want to do here. Oh? You're just checking? To see how serious I am? God, I am."

The importance of my Taos connection became clearer. I stayed in touch with other writers as we shared weekly experiences and insights. The practice kept me focused and trusting that this was my way to greater understanding.

Then at the beginning of November, four weeks before my manuscript deadline, my mother and brother and I visited my ninety-year-old dad at the War Veterans Nursing Home in Monroe, Louisiana, a hundred miles away. He has Alzheimer's and we are never sure how coherent he will be when we visit, so Mother showed him family pictures hoping to help him connect to his own bits of light. This only seemed to frustrate him. He had a hard time completing sentences. While we sat in the day room with other men much like him, I listened to his struggle for awhile. Then I asked him what was going on. He talked about his mother and father and trying to get home.

"But they tell me not to come the regular way," he said. "Something's wrong with that, isn't it?"

"Your mother and dad are dead," I said.

He looked a bit surprised, then told me he was afraid the doctors would think he sounded crazy.

"No, Dad," I assured him. "You're just watching your home movies. The collection that makes up the unique story of Deane Flett."

He became calmer and more articulate. Before we left, I bent down to kiss him and he grabbed my hand. His pale blue eyes looked straight into my hazel ones.

"Thank you," he whispered.

It was a powerful link. I let Dad show me where he was and I understood it. It was his life in review. The same thing I was experiencing, as I wrote my way through this grief journey. I, too, was talking with the dead and reliving my past. I, too, often worried that I sounded crazy.

So now I must "finish" this book and let it go. I know that even in published form, it's still not complete. It becomes, at best, a sharing of my experiences. This part of my journey offered as compassion for others looking for safety, or connection, or new life. I may not be in charge of anything more than that.

I poured out my heart as I worked to be as honest and thorough as I could. With much love, then, I release the book. It is much like my own son. It will go where it needs to go and connect with what it needs to connect.

I know now why I chose his birthday, the date that sometimes fell on Thanksgiving Day, as my deadline to complete this manuscript. I approached this year's designated-day-to-be-thankful and realized with tears in my eyes that November 28 will always be Thanksgiving Day for me.



Darkness

The Phone Call

It was 9:30 at night on January 11, 2003, when the phone rang. Because I was so near to sleep I didn't consider a call at that time of night might be bad news.

The next thing I knew "Kelly something" from Los Angeles County was asking me what my relation was to Carlton Harris.

"I'm his mother," I answered groggily.

"Well," she said, "I have some bad news."

Did I realize at this point that she was from the police department? Probably not.

She told me Carlton had been found dead.

What was she saying? Who was I talking to in this dark bedroom?

She told me again and a slight feeling stirred.

Then she wanted to know if there was a family history of medical problems.

I was trying to understand this noise on the phone.

"Does Carlton have a history of medical problems?"

"Oh, well, he has asthma, and he's had a couple of seizures," the mother of Carlton answered.

"Tell me about the seizures."

"There was one when he was quite young, fever-related. And then one a little later at the age of six or seven. He took Phenobarbital for a year after that."

Why was "Carlton's mother" being asked about his health, I wondered. I wanted to be the one getting information, not the one giving it.

Kelly asked if there was a history of heart problems.

OK, that's enough. My assertive voice said, "Tell me what happened!"

She began some story about an e-mail he sent to a girl up north.

Up north? My logical mind sorted through this strange information. Where the hell was that?

"The girl was concerned and called the police. They broke into his apartment and found him."

At some point my sensible voice asked if this was a joke. I couldn't picture what she was telling me. Was this some TV show I fell asleep watching?

She told me it was not a joke and another vague feeling stirred.

"Was it suicide?" the voice from my mouth asked.

Kelly didn't know. There were no drugs or alcohol.

"Was there a note?"

"No."

"He attempted it once before about six or seven years ago." I felt further detached from this noise.

"Oh," Kelly said. And I wondered if they had even considered that.

"He's been running and he's a vegan," I said, in the voice of a mother proud of her son's lifestyle.

"A vegan?" she questioned.

What did that mean? I bristled, the tentative pride vanishing. Was Carlton missing some trace elements vital to his system? Did she have a problem with vegans? Or was this just a question?

"I don't know what I'm supposed to do," I whispered.

She said she would give me more information about that in a minute and continued her line of questioning. "Did he have a history of depression?"

"Well, yeah. It's sprinkled rather generously throughout our family," I said defensively.

"Was he taking anything?"

"Not that I know of." And this sad mother realized how little she did know about this man-child she birthed 27 years ago.

"The e-mail girl says he told her he was a sociophobe. Is that right?"

"It's very possible," I answered, wary of the droning voice of authority on the other end. I knew he called

himself a severe introvert, which is also sprinkled generously throughout our family.

"What do I do now?" I asked quietly.

She told me his apartment had been sealed and my mind pictured duct tape and that yellow police line stuff. I felt like I was back in front of the TV.

Then she told me I needed to call a Los Angeles mortuary.

Really, I thought. I didn't happen to know of any.

Then she suggested calling one here in Shreveport and letting them call Los Angeles.

That sounded more doable, and that strange stirring inside me returned. My panicky voice offered an expletive and told her I was here by myself.

"Breathe," she said, "and call a friend when we finish talking."

My scared mind realized there were not a lot of people I felt comfortable calling. Leah was the obvious one. Linda's mother was in a hospice. And my brothers' band just started playing their first set at the Oak Creek Lounge.

Then there was talk about a medical examiner who would do an autopsy and might be able to tell us more.

Clutching my pillow, I asked how long he had been dead.

Kelly didn't know.

Man, those TV cops seem to be able to determine a lot more at the scene.

She gave me her name and number and told me she would be there until midnight. And then she would be back again on Wednesday. Because it was Saturday, I didn't hear that as helpful information.

She gave me a case number and hung up.

Did I understand what was happening? I felt like I was in a thick fog. I had no tears.

Who was this person holding the phone? Who were all these voices? Who was the person watching these scenes from a TV show? Who was I now?

Overwhelmed

I had no idea where I would find answers. But this feeling was strangely familiar.

I remembered being overwhelmed as I was nearing my 50th birthday in 1999. I just didn't realize it. I had been a public school teacher for nearly 30 years, beginning in the early days of court-ordered mass desegregation in the South. In March 1976, four months after the birth of our son Carlton, my husband left, and for the next seven years I was a single parent with a full-time job, and Carlton became a daycare baby. I was responsible for birthday parties, homework and carpooling needs. I cooked fish sticks, baked beans, and corn on the cob, alternating days with

Happy Meals, and on the weekends the apartment got cleaned, or not. When Carlton was four, I bought a little house for the two of us, so we could have a backyard and a place of our own. When he was in first grade, I stayed up late making Valentine cupcakes for his class, writing every child's name in red icing across the top of the individual treats. My honest attempts at being a good mother. Then in 1983, I remarried and Carlton and I made room for another person in our lives. I was determined to make this union last.

I was an avid volunteer for every organization to which I belonged, taking jobs that no one else seemed to want. When I taught at a middle school, I was the yearbook sponsor. At the different churches where I held membership, I prepared lessons as a Sunday school teacher, sang in the choir and chaired the worship committee. I served in a soup kitchen and helped build houses with Habitat for Humanity. I am a woman, hear me roar. And I was exhausted....

I had a beautiful loving son who was also eager to please. I miss his big kind eyes and sweet shy smile. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and very smart. He read voraciously and willingly accepted the challenges of calculus and physics. He left for college in the fall of 1994 with high hopes. His honest attempts at being a good son.

When Carlton left I thought I would have more time for myself and saw the empty nest as a welcomed change. When he came home from his less-than-

successful freshman year, I worried he might want as much from me as I was giving my husband, job and all my organizations, so we tried family counseling for a couple of months. But I felt too much of the burden. After each session my husband and son seemed to know their roles, and I continued responding as before. I stopped the sessions, thinking they might be the problem. Relief didn't come.

Then Carlton moved into his own apartment, holding part-time jobs and attending classes at the local college. It was there, in the spring of 1996, a friend found him unconscious. His first suicide attempt. Sleeping pills. Maybe he was exhausted, too. He moved back home.

Several months later my mother-in-law offered to pay for marriage counseling. My husband and I were both holding in a lot of emotion, and an objective counselor might help. So again we tried talk therapy. I spoke of frustrations and sadness. My husband sat quietly, expressing his feelings later at home. The therapist's office became the only place I felt safe, and again I felt too much of the burden. Something I was doing was obviously a problem. I didn't know how to communicate with my own husband, and he was rapidly becoming one of my biggest fears. I wanted to stop the counseling sessions and try a separation. By October of 1997, I knew I wanted a divorce and still needed help learning how to express myself honestly, so I began intense individual therapy with my minister.

Within months of my husband's moving out, Carlton set out on his own again, this time to the West Coast for a job he found on the Internet. I obviously didn't know how to talk to him, either, and all I could do was let him go with my blessing.

For a while I felt better living on my own and filled much of my time with teaching and volunteering. But at work there were additional assignments of bus duty and cafeteria monitoring, an abundance of local directives and documentation, and a national trend toward standardized curriculums. I was feeling overwhelmed again, even after letting go of the volunteer jobs no one else wanted. Maybe there were reasons others didn't want these jobs. I was tired of being a superwoman and people pleaser.

I had no idea where I would find answers. But the feeling was strangely familiar. "Who are you now?" I asked myself over and over again. There was that troubling question. "What is it that you want?"

Good mid-life crisis questions. No longer in therapy, I turned to my journal for solace, a safe place to talk honestly with myself. The pen reminded me of the parts of teaching I loved and gifts I wanted to share, but it also told me I needed to take care of myself. By the spring semester of 2001, I decided to retire. I wanted a scaled-down lifestyle with less outside interference. I was beginning to feel better again.

News from Carlton was nearly non-existent. After living in Eugene, Oregon, for a year-and-a half, he

moved with a friend to Hollywood, California, to set up a business installing and troubleshooting computer programs. When I did hear from him he sounded successful, so I let go of some of my spinning "mother worry." He seemed to have found a way to make use of his intelligence and make good money.

With pride he told me of a car he bought. He had a volunteer job with the Leukemia Foundation, became a vegan and was training for a marathon. But in the fall of 2002 he called to tell me he left his business friend and computer job, wanting something different. I assured him things would work out, like they were for me. His later calls became more vague, less about his job search and more about running, or movies, or the state of the nation. Maybe he was becoming overwhelmed again.

And I, busy finding a place that suited me, couldn't hear his distress. I wasn't as worried about homeland security and the nation on the brink of war, which I might have been concerned about earlier. I was finding serenity in letting go of things I have no control over. I was no longer trying to save the world. I was writing to save myself. Maybe I didn't realize then what I was doing. Maybe if I could have identified it, I could have been more help to Carlton. Maybe if I had encouraged him to try journaling, honestly conversing with himself, it would have saved him as well. Maybe if I had known better how to talk with my son. Maybe.

Now What?

In my dark bedroom after the call on January 11, 2003, and after dialing a phone number like Kelly told me, I heard Leah's voice. A current of reassurance ran through my numb body. I knew who I was when talking to Leah.

I was the retired teacher who volunteered weekly in Leah's kindergarten class at the school where I once taught science. I was also the scared five-year-old who needed a mother she could trust. So, of course Leah was the one to call. I watched her nurture scared five-year-olds all the time.

She left the party she was hosting for her son's baseball teammate, assuring me it was about over anyway. I didn't have the strength, or desire, to argue. Once here, she called my friend Linda, my brothers, and my former minister, even as I expressed concerns about bothering them. I had to trust she knew who this frightened child needed to connect with. She stayed overnight, with plans to leave in the morning for Sunday duties at her church. During the night I lay on my bed too afraid to close my eyes, too afraid to cry, too afraid to do much of anything, but I knew Leah, the nurturing mother, was in the next room. Now what?

Sometime in this dark, sleepless night, I wandered into my living room. Who was I now? I sat on the blue-flowered sofa, turned on the nearby table lamp, picked up my pen and black-and-white composition book.

Another current of reassurance ran through me. I was the writer. The one who took up this very spot over two years ago when life was overwhelming her, leaving a successful teaching assignment, distancing herself from long-time friends, and walking away from organizations that had once defined her.

In 1998, when my son left a practical job here with medical insurance and chances for advancement to follow his bliss on the West Coast, I began to want my own new adventure. I watched as my pen began carefully sorting through my life and uncovering deeply hidden dreams.

So on this cold winter's night I again turned to my pen.

There was the phone call. A Kelly something from Los Angeles. She asked about Carlton's medical history and told me about a girl up north. I'm supposed to call a mortuary. And Leah's asleep in the guest room.

In the morning after Leah left, I was alone in this empty house. She would be back later with others. But for the moment I was on my own.

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.
