

together how everything related. I had to limit daily activities just to have enough time to process.

Brainstorming was what we called it in my classroom. I would stand in front of the blackboard listing the students' ideas as fast as they called them out. But I longed for a little less chaotic weather inside my own head.

I wanted more proof of a web of life and the interconnectedness to all beings. Why couldn't I just let it go and enjoy being? Must everything be a puzzle needing to be solved?

One morning I found myself on another quest. Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, was Carlton's favorite. *Crime and Punishment* had been one of mine as a young adult. I saw this as an important link and immediately wanted more information. I went to the Internet to research Fyodor Dostoevsky and found that he had had seizures and with these seizures, visions. His book *The Idiot* describes them. Oh dear. Did Carlton's childhood seizures offer him insights? The first one happened when he was a toddler and was fever-related. But the second one, when he was seven, was never medically explained. He took phenobarbital for a year and had no more grand mal episodes. I wanted more information and made a mental note to read *The Idiot*.

Then there was his first suicide attempt. Was it a near-death experience and another possible vision? We didn't talk about that. Did he discuss it with anyone?

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Could that have helped? I thought of the people I could have put him in touch with, if only I had known. OK, this spinning was not productive thinking, I rationalized.

But that didn't stop me.

I had suffered migraines when Carlton was young and remembered the auras that preceded them, warning me of the pain to follow. Was this some concentrated sensory awareness trying to get my attention? I don't know, and I don't have migraines any more. But within the first few months after his death, I had dreams of light. Were these significant? Should I analyze them further? So many pieces, so little time.

My mind continued its spinning routine, stirring up more questions than answers, and I anxiously wanted a bottom line. But the harder Mr.-Know-it-All worked at making everything fit, the less certain I felt about anything.

I didn't have time to write in my journal before a friend and I went out one evening to listen to music. Because it had been such an intense day I was afraid I might not be good company in such a fragmented state. But we went to a blues jam in a dark, smoky club full of people grooving on the sights and sounds, far away from my spinning light. No one there was the least bit interested in Mr.-Know-it-All's research.

Ah, I reasoned, smiling at the unexpected outcome. Mystery Man showed up with the perfect solution to my unsolvable problem. Let it go and enjoy the present.

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## Magical Child

I first met Caitlin, an outgoing lovable five-year-old, at my church in 1998. She showed up in my life just before Carlton left for the West Coast. We immediately adopted each other, she becoming little Laura and I her second mama. We'd sit together on the pew, singing hymns, writing notes, and drawing pictures on church bulletins. On Christmas Eve she sat with me as family, for my own didn't attend.

We had little contact during the week. I went to one of her elementary school basketball games; she came to my house once to play with the classroom animals I kept during the summer. And we exchanged presents. An angel necklace for her. An angel picture frame for me. But by the time she had finished second grade, I left that church and lost my weekly contact with Caitlin.

On January 19, 2003, she showed up in my life again, this time at my house for the family visitation following Carlton's death. She brought me a big hug and soft stuffed puppy who looked amazingly like Princess. I held tightly to that comforting toy for the rest of the day, grateful for the reconnection. I didn't see her again for nearly two years.

I learned she was dancing the role of Clara in the 2004 Christmas production of *The Nutcracker*, when

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my niece Laura Beth played a soldier. Naturally I planned on going, but several weeks before the scheduled December performance, the nearby branch library offered excerpts to the public. Laura Beth wouldn't be dancing, but Caitlin definitely would. I picked a bouquet of tiny, fragrant sweetheart roses from my backyard, packed my disposable camera, and drove to the library, eager to connect with her again.

I was standing in the back of the room when she skipped out, adorned in golden ringlets and a red velvet pinafore. My arms wrapped around me in my own big hug as I watched this beautiful, graceful seventh grader dance around the room.

I became Clara-Caitlin, the magical child. I thought of what I remembered of that age. Seventh grade seemed anything



but enchanting for me. I had moved from the safety of an elementary school I attended for six years with most of the same friends and classmates to the overwhelming challenge of junior high with so many new faces, changing classes with tardy bells in between, dressing out in gym, and open seating in the lunchroom. Yet here I was, on a November night at the library I claimed as one of my safe places, reborn as a confident dancing beauty.

I haven't followed Caitlin's Sunday-to-Sunday life as she grows into the woman she'll become, and I have missed her. She's another child I was once very attached to. But her dance back into my life on a late fall evening reassured me of our sacred bond, the magical child we both carry within us. She has helped me understand Viktor Frankl's words, "love loved is never lost."

On my refrigerator is a picture taken that night after the performance. Caitlin and I are standing together smiling and holding onto each other in the children's section of this branch library. A bulletin board behind us reads, "Believe in the Magic."

## Heaven

I never had to think so seriously about heaven before. My childhood image of angels sitting on clouds playing harps wasn't working.

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*What really happens when we die? Where do we go? What happened to my son, the child I used to call Angel Baby? His life was just getting started. Where is he? Does he have friends? Is he happy? Did he know something about his choices that I don't know? Is where he is now preferable to where he was?*

Lying still, listening, I can feel his presence. Pictures of his life run through my head, flickering and clicking like the old 16mm film projector from my own elementary school days. He is as close as my beating heart and as present as my thoughts. What is heaven? Where do all the souls go when they've finished here on earth?

His ashes, the last tangible part of his earthly form, lay scattered on the forest floor at Caddo Lake Nature Trail near Uncertain, Texas. The picture of him resting in a place that renews itself naturally with the seasons was reassuring to my organic gardener's mind.

I saw Carlton as a small child holding hands with Kristi, his best friend when he was a toddler. She died of a seizure several years before Carlton, and left behind a toddler son. Are they holding hands now?

When Carlton was in seventh grade we got a dog named Cody, a stray hit by a car and rescued by a friend. Several years before Carlton died, the dog became anxious and disoriented, and I had to put him to sleep. Our vet said he was worn out from such a full life. Have Carlton and Cody found relief together?

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There was Lonnie Bell, my friend Linda's mother, who died ten days after Carlton did. She knew him when he was a little boy and watched him grow up. Is she playing grandmother to my child now?

Is he with Patrick, a Cub Scout friend full of potential, who died suddenly as a young adult when he unknowingly ate seafood, to which he was allergic? Are they in a heavenly Scout hut working on arrow points together?

Is he at the baseball game he alludes to in the dream? A week before Carlton's freshman year in high school, Kevin, a graduate of the school and a baseball star about to begin his major league career, was killed in a car wreck. Is Carlton playing ball in a league with Kevin?

Has he met Jennifer, a college freshman who was tragically killed one night about a month after Carlton died when some guys were fooling around with a gun? Carlton didn't know her, but I once taught next door to her mother. Are they comparing notes on what it's like to be the teacher's kid?

The Columbia shuttle blew up upon reentry several weeks after Carlton's death. Seven astronauts were sent to their fiery deaths. My poet uncle compared this event to a Viking funeral. Has my own Muse found his place with them?

Has he had a chance to talk to Dostoevsky or Einstein or Shakespeare or Alexander Dumas? Or the

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author of the *Gospel of Thomas*? Carlton's collection of books told me he would recognize their voices.

The day after Christmas, 2004, the tsunami hit, killing hundreds of thousands of people. We wrung our hands and tried to find someone to blame for such a tragedy. I watched, detached, not feeling the grief such a disaster should trigger. With Carlton's help I had my most reassuring image of heaven so far. He was up "there" with his big kind eyes and sweet shy smile, helping welcome all of those scared children as they signed in at the pearly gates. He was like an orientation counselor or a big brother at camp or college. He knew just what to say, how to help them settle in to their new surroundings and feel right at home, like I'm sure others did for him. It was now his turn to be the guide and introduce these new angels to some old friends of his.

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# Renewed Energy

## Anniversaries

There are six weeks of anniversaries that fall between November 28, Carlton's birthday, and January 11, the day he died. The first year I carefully planned how and where I would spend my time. I went to Biloxi for his birthday and Thanksgiving, and quietly celebrated my own birthday on December 5<sup>th</sup> with friends. For Christmas the family had a traditional dinner at my brother Bruce's house, and I gave everyone a little notebook and pen, inviting them into my world to tell their own story. On January 11, I stayed alone with my notebook, letting the answering machine take outside calls.

But after that first anniversary in 2003, a new family event was added. January 15, 2004, was the day my brothers and I took Dad to the War Veterans Home in Monroe.

So, on the second year of anniversaries, as autumn fell into winter, I needed a new plan. On the trip to Oregon in October I had successfully read "The Phone

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Call." Then when I traveled to Boulder, Colorado, in mid-November to meet with my writing group, I read the story again. It was, however, the only one I had been able to write. Everything else was still journaling. I wanted to turn the whole experience into a story to share with others, but I wasn't sure how to do it.

So I did what I knew how to do best. I continued to let my pen scribble in my composition book until I had a clearer idea. Day after day, page after page, I held tightly to that pen as I swam through murky words and bled all over the pages, desperately looking for relief. I ventured out only for groceries, a visit to Stoner Hill, the meetings with teacher friends on Fridays, or The Trapped Truth Society, my local writers' group, on Sundays.

*I tell people my pen is saving me,  
but I'm not sure what that means.*

*Keep writing.*

The second year I decided to celebrate Carlton's birthday, Thanksgiving, and my birthday alone. On Christmas, weary from the silence, but not ready for my own entangling family, I went to Linda's house for Christmas dinner with her two daughters, their husbands, and five children. It was an invitation a friend as close as Linda knew to offer.

*I'm still writing, but I need a plan.*

*It's time to read your journals,  
Laura. You've poured your soul*

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*into two years of composition books. Read what you wrote.*

Well, I had read the first two, and parts of others, and I read as I continued journaling. I thought I could just lift little sections from the books to tell my story, but I had a hard time finding excerpts that made sense out of context.

So I began with the intention of reading a notebook a day, looking for something more than witty little phrases or insights. Settling on the sofa with a stack of journals on the floor beside me, I opened the first one. After four days and four journals, I had to put the plan aside just to catch my breath.

*Who is telling this story? How did she get inside my pen? How does she know all this stuff?*



Laura, Jake, Buddy, Mom, Dad,  
Bruce, Avery, Laura Beth

*It's you, dear. Has been all along.  
Patiently waiting inside to be  
invited out.*

The more I read, the more I knew my story was not just clever little sections to be lifted from journals. A significant person or idea would make a brief appearance on one page, but then wouldn't return again for another journal or two. I needed time and distance to see this unfolding as my pen connected the dots.

I began reading the next composition book, and my pen jotted down two- or three-word phrases on little scraps of paper. I continued to read and more phrases emerged. After several days of this "note-taking," I wanted to explore the phenomenon further. Choosing the phrase "Avery" and using Natalie Goldberg's method, I did a ten-minute writing on it. The pen told the story of my niece, start to finish, in the allotted time. Amazed, I tried the topic, "A Safe Place," and again the pen began its timed dance, describing my circle of teacher friends. Maybe this was not a fluke. Maybe this really was something bigger than myself. Maybe my pen really has been my salvation.

The second anniversary of events had something new to celebrate. The gift of my pen: how it recorded what was happening around me and inside me, showing me in my own handwriting who I am and from where I had come.

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## A Conversation with my Pen

One morning soon after this awareness, I woke with an amazing thought. This day could be as magnificent as I wanted it to be. Any discomfort or fear was my own choice. Had I still not given myself permission to be fully present? Did I still think I didn't "deserve" it? Was I still reviewing that third-grade report card that told me I wasn't yet good enough with multiplication facts? My pen eagerly joined the discussion.

*Well, Laura, that's why you were in the third grade. That's exactly where you were supposed to be to learn them.*

*Oh. So everywhere I am is where I'm "supposed" to be. What I need to learn is right in front of me?*

*Yep. All you need is eyes to see and ears to hear.*

*Here I sit on my blue-flowered sofa in the middle of my living room with my fluffy Princess dog stretched across my lap. What does that mean?*

*What do you want it to mean?*

*That this is where I'm supposed to be, in a comfortable place with a*

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loving companion and a pen that talks to me as my most intimate friend.

So enjoy it.

But what if I get bored? What if I'm ready to leave this safety and go explore?

And your problem with that is...

Well, I might get scared. I might get too far into the adventure and panic.

Laura, you have such an active imagination. How do you calm yourself back down? How do you get through the fear?

I talk to you.

Bingo. We writers need active imaginations. If we just sit in our living rooms on blue-flowered sofas with fluffy dogs in our laps and intimate pens in our hands, we get bored. We need to get out and have a little adventure every now and then, so we'll have something interesting to write about.

That makes sense.

Now I'm back with the Laura I recognize, the one who makes sure she doesn't get too far into the adventure without having a way to get back.

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*So I need the creative Laura to take a few risks and the rational Laura to live to tell about it?*

*Sure, if that's the way you want to see it.*



**Light**

### **Visions**

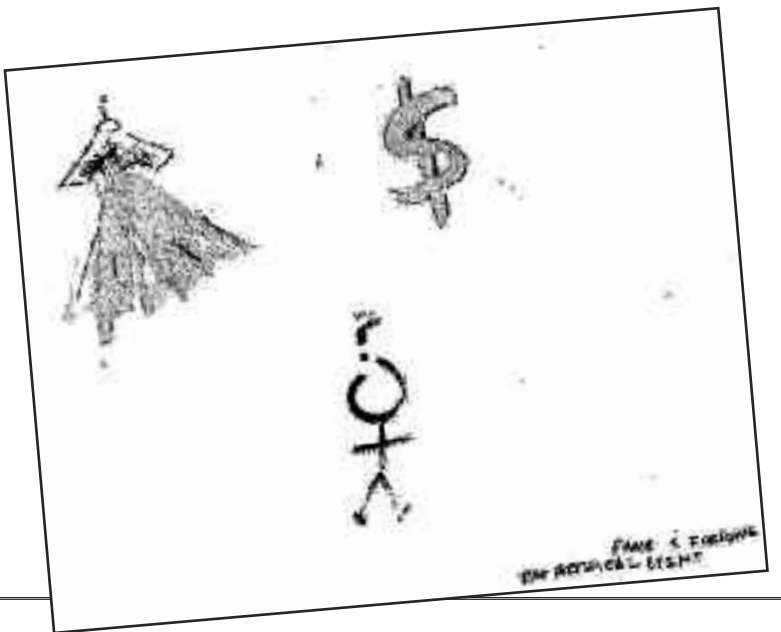
One night after those first dark months following Carlton's death I had several dreams about light. When

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I woke in the morning I wanted to paint them rather than write about them. So I took copy paper from my computer printer tray, a yellow plastic box of watercolors, and a little cup of water to the safety of my sofa to explore this new idea. With a brush full of re-hydrated color, I touched the paper. Blurry images appeared. I watched as the paintbrush danced like my pen. The only words I could write on these pages full of watery color were titles.

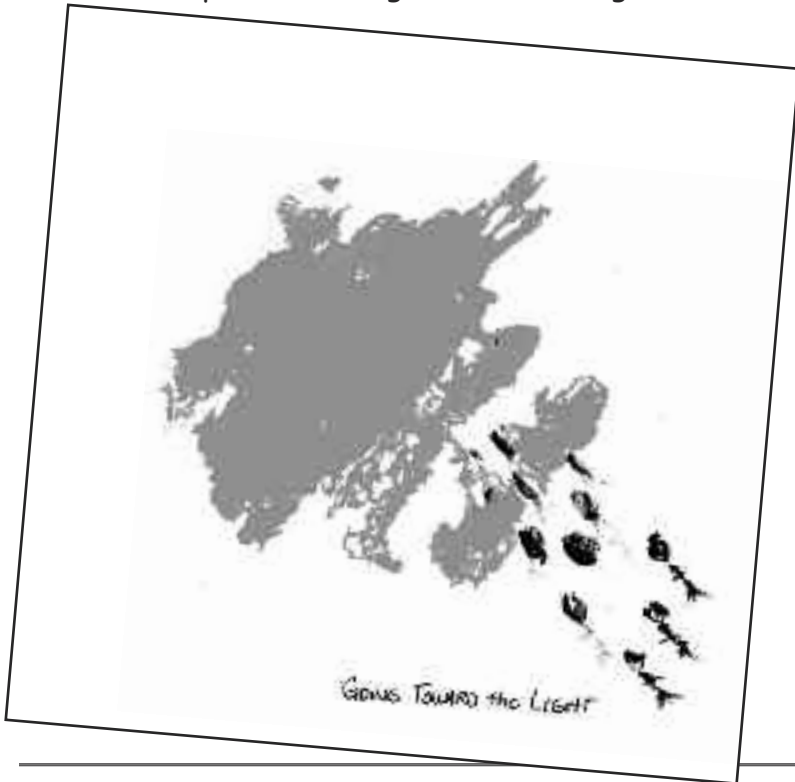
The first image I painted was a little gray stick person. She must be a girl because she had on a dress. Her body was being unzipped from the head down. A splash of yellow watercolor emerged from the open top of her head, moving up to the left-hand corner of the page. With my pen I wrote in the bottom right-hand corner, "Releasing the Light."



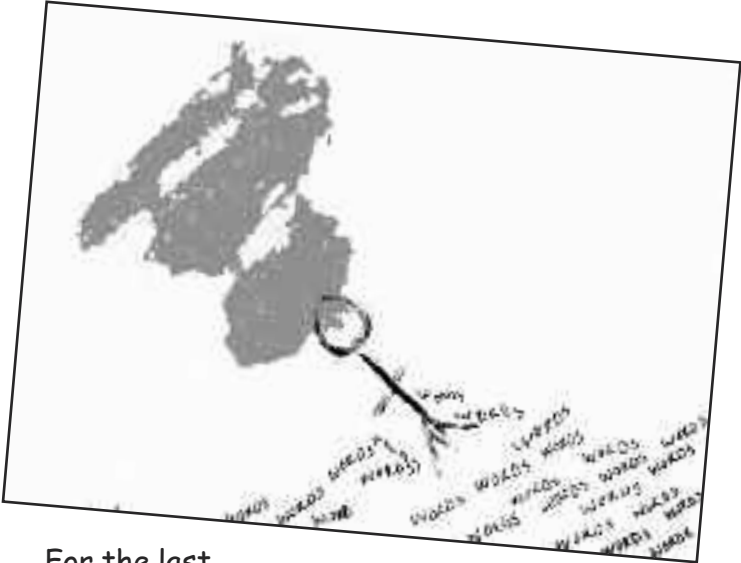


A little gray stick figure was standing alone in the next picture. This time it was not obviously a girl. There was no dress. There was, however, a gray question mark directly over his/her head. Above this mark to one side was a gray spotlight emitting yellow light. On the other side of the question mark was a yellow dollar sign. In the right corner of this page, I wrote "Fame and Fortune: the Artificial Light."

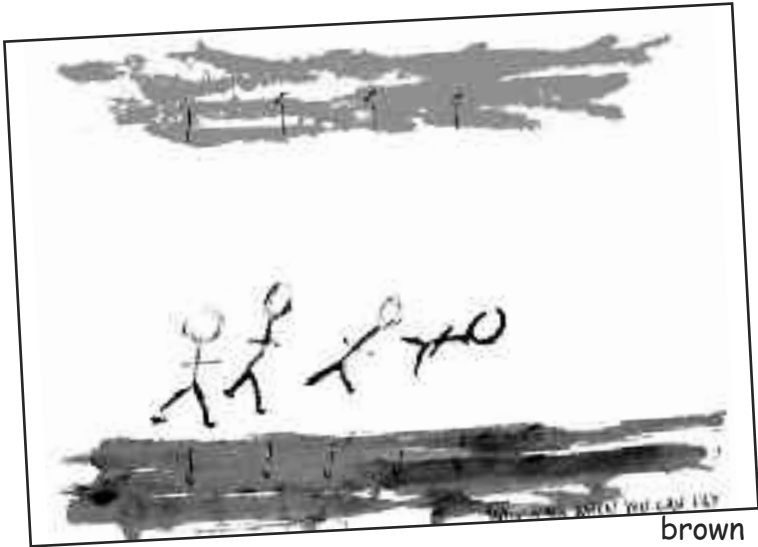
Another picture contained more than a dozen gray stick people. They were limply drifting up the page to the splash of yellow color in the top left-hand corner. I called this picture "Going Toward the Light."



The fourth one had a small androgynous gray figure being pulled toward the corner yellow light with the word "words" printed over and over and falling from the bottom half of the figure. There was no title for this page.



For the last picture I used a different color from my paint box. Along the bottom of the page with a wide sweep I left a trail of brown "ground" with black-ink arrows pointing downward through it. Along the top of the page was a band of yellow "light" with arrows pointing upward. In the middle there were four gray figures in progressive stances. The first one was standing upright on the brown color. The second was tilted slightly and rising above the "ground," and the third one leaned over even more, rising farther from the



brown

slash. Finally, the fourth one, in a prone position, was halfway between the yellow above and the brown below. The caption on this watercolor asked, "Why Walk When You Can Fly?"

I didn't consciously set this up. I think I was only responding from my experience catalog I call dreams. Each picture contained the yellow light image and the gray "person" image. The first one showed yellow breaking open from the gray body to join the larger light. Was this me trying to follow Carlton? Was the second one, depicting confusion over the lights, representing the challenges of living on Earth? The third, appearing as if a universal force pulled all of us toward the greater yellow light. Was this the "perfect team" the raspy Carlton-voice alluded to in my earlier dream? And the picture with "words" falling from the little gray figure as it ascended to the light? Was it

telling me that words are needed here for communication, and not in the Great Light? Was this about my job on Earth as storyteller? The last picture's caption, "Why Walk When You Can Fly?" is the title of a favorite song by Mary Chapin Carpenter and has been a guiding light through my meandering search.

The figure was flying parallel to Earth and sky, letting her heart and soul guide her, rising above the distractions on earth. In the world, but not of the world. In the word, but not of the word.

*Was the yellow light God? Love? My Carlton connection? Was it the inspiration I needed to keep me focused on my work here? And the brown in the last picture. To remind me to stay grounded? To stay present and aware of where I am?*

I considered the dream I had when Carlton talked to me. It must have come from the same "place" of stored images and thoughts. The universal stream encouraging me to trust my unfolding. The assurance of a force that continues to unite us. A promise that I'm not alone and never have been. What my "child" and I have been looking for.

I will continue to listen to my dreams, knowing they are one way God talks to me, as I daily choose the best ways to stay connected to the world

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