

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 as 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, who left a successful teaching assignment, distancing herself from long-time friends, and who walked 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.

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 home 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 now assume 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 vowed to write daily, and kept the promise for about a month, or until I felt better, then discontinued 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. That

summer I presented a Blessing of the Animals service based on stories of my classroom pets. The preparation for each presentation connected events 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 unfinished grief 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 felt confusion 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, my self. I wasn't sure who was doing all this talking. All I knew was that it was a vital connection.

My journal 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 from California, 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 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 the pacing and endless circling around the room. The black ink on the white page was 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. 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. 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 the other vacationers 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. Now I didn't know what to expect.

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 now.

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 my teacher friends paid to have it cleaned 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" lingered 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. But when I moved to Matt, 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. I read Emily's speech from the third act of *Our Town*, the play I had been in the month before. Then I shared two stories I had 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 with his cousin Caleb at their grandparents' lake house, and a Bible verse shared by Matt, the preacher's son.

My father recalled sitting with a young Carlton in the church balcony, where he once sat with his own children. Carlton's 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, Carlton's 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 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 other news. I had provided the opportunity to come together. It was all I could be responsible for before each of us left to begin our own grief journey.

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 a drink, 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 we talked about, or if I even talked that day; I just remember hearing 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 the trauma of grief. 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.

The 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 to explore 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 after Carlton's death was Avery, my popular high-school niece, who was struggling in accelerated classes.

Earlier, 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. I found ways to honestly



Laura with niece Avery.

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 Avery and I shared intimate stories of our family. She, the big sister, told of 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 mine
