

June 10, 2008

Dear Jane and Jan,

It was wonderful to see you both again. The five years since our son Matthew's tragic death as a result of a hit-and-run drunk driver, who left the scene and was not apprehended for a year, and where we are now is difficult to understand or explain. Sometimes the horror of that 3:30 a.m. phone call from Enloe Hospital in Chico seems like yesterday and sometimes it seems like it happened a long, long, time ago.

But the reason we write is to tell all the fine people whom you have helped through CAH who have suffered from the death of a loved one, that, no matter where they are in their journey through grief --- there is reason to hope. We can attest that beyond the tears, past the stark and confusing emotions of denial, anger, and all of the others and after the heart that breaks seemingly beyond the limits of human suffering - - there can be healing, happiness and a feeling that life is worthwhile.

We know well that each situation and person is different. No grieving or mourning person's journey is like any others. It is all very personal. That said, we want your readers to know that we have found a way to accommodate Matthew's death in our lives. (We emphasize, "accommodate" not "accept", since the traumatic, violent and entirely avoidable death of a loved one is never acceptable.) It has taken much more time than we ever thought it would, and often it was one step forward and two back. But by listening and learning about what seemed to help others, we have gotten our lives back. Do we still have sad times? Of course. Do we cry? Yes. Do we miss our son? We miss him more than we can say! But the good news is pretty good. We are alive. We are fortunate to have our wonderful daughters, Tracy and Valerie and many good thoughts about Matt. We speak of him often without getting sad. We have joy in our lives. A joy that is different from the spontaneous joy that we experienced before our son died, but it is joy nevertheless. And finally, we see life and the sorrow which is certain to exist in it through different eyes. Through adversity we hope that we have become more caring people - we look at this as a gift from Matt. A gift that we would gladly give back just to have our son with us again, but that is a choice we do not have.

So, with time, tears and being swept around in the storm of grief for five years we have come through the process alive, loving each other (and still together), loving much of life once again, more caring and compassionate to others, and greatly enjoying our talks and remembrances of Matt. And we live with full confidence that Matt is just fine in his new world, and we will be with him again. Certainly we are also different and in a way sadder people than before Matt died. How could we not be? Our loving son of 25 years was dead, and a part of each of us died on that day, BUT not all of us, and Matt wants us to know that too.

We thought it might be good for your readers to know what helped us to regain much of our life back. We hope that some of these approaches might also help some others.

**Feeling the Pain** – There is an old, but true saying in the field of grief that to the degree possible, it will help healing if we can “steer toward the pain”. Although sometimes difficult, this idea and practice has helped us. We have cried, we have felt the pain of never seeing Matthew again on this earth, we have visited bittersweet memories. (As you know, that is much of what we were doing on our recent 2-week journey to California.) It is true that grief does not seem to fly away just be the passage of time. Grief demands to be dealt with, and the only way to do this is to feel the sorrow, to face it, when and where we can and as best we can. No one can tell anyone else where, when and how to do this. It is an individual thing, but we personally know that the miracle is that in embracing the hurt, is the subtle, uneven but certain pathway back to life. A rocky and tiring climb from a living hell to a life that is changed in dramatic ways, but a life that is worthwhile, productive, hopeful and even joyful.

**Time** – Grief will set its own schedule and that is an individual matter for each person. Grief flows in and out, sometimes more intense, sometimes less. It is not possible for any person to attempt to set some sort of schedule for himself or herself, let alone for anyone else for “getting better”, whatever that means for each individual. No one is inside a grieving heart and no one truly knows your pain or how long it will take to find your way through the other end of grief. All we can confidently say is that almost everyone does. And that is miraculously achieved while always and often remembering our loved one who has died, since they were and are an important part of our lives. And we believe that our loved ones are always near us. Listen with your heart, speak with your heart, you will know that to be true.

**Other Things That Also Helped** – We were lucky. We knew that we were never hurt in this way before and that we needed help. We leaned on and got support from the people we love – and that includes Jane and Jan. We went to Compassionate Friends meetings, where we could be with other parents who lost children to see how they were coping, and to have them tell us things like “you may feel like you are going crazy, but you are not, you are just dealing with a hurt that sometimes seems to go beyond the limits of human endurance.” We read extensively about death, grief and spirituality. And, after an initial period of denial and anger, and even anger with our God, we were able to go back to our church and look toward our faith to help us. We spent some time with grief therapists, psychologists and psychiatrists. We were worried about surviving, worried about holding our marriage together, depressed about the tragic, violent and totally unnecessary death of our son. We were never in a place like this before and we know we needed help. We had also heard that “when you are hurting, reach out to help someone else.” We tried to do this through volunteer work with Compassionate Friends, organ donation (Matthews organs and tissues were donated), advocating for the prevention of DWI, and in other areas. We found that these efforts empowered us to use our energy for useful and helpful purposes. We attempted to help other people, in a way honoring and remembering our son, and helping ourselves in the process. Over time, from bits and pieces of all of the

things mentioned here we received the help which allowed us to complete the puzzle of our drastically altered lives.

**Doing What Is Right for You** - We tried to be patient with each other and ourselves. We were lucky since we had each other and our two daughters. But sometimes we found that when one of us was particularly low, the other was down too and could not help much. But we tried, and the trying helped a lot. In our case we were able to keep pictures of Matthew around our home. This helped us, but we understand that some folks take them down, or at least do this for a while. Again, what works for one person does not necessarily work for another. Traditions, anniversaries and other similarly memorable times can be very difficult. All we can say is that there is no secret to getting through these times except to do what seems right to you. Be sensitive to your needs and patient with yourself. In our case we changed a few traditions a bit, because to have them as they were when Matthew was alive would have been too painful. On anniversaries (Matt's birthday, the day he died, Christmas, Mother's and Father's day, etc.) we did what we were comfortable with. Sometimes that was a low-key holiday, or a walk in the woods, we tried to do what we thought would have been Matt's sort of thing. The point is, please don't build up great expectations for yourself or have anyone else set your expectations. Do what is comfortable, and realize that the way you choose to handle these matters will change over time. We also found that the anticipation of a coming significant date was in many ways worse than the date itself.

**Anger** – This is such an important matter that it deserves special consideration. Anger is a normal part of the grief process, and it can be stronger than any other form of anger that we have ever experienced. Anger against our God. Anger against the person who killed Matthew. Anger against nice days, sunshine, happy people, parties, weddings, you name it. And we are certainly not in any position to tell other people how to deal with this normal and powerfully strong feeling. All that we can say is that after awhile we came to understand that our God is a loving God and he did not cause this terrible thing to happen. God does not micro-manage our lives. We have come to believe, to know really, that when bad things happen and we hurt, He hurts with us. When we cry our God cries with us. With patience and time, anger mostly flows away. Once again, we could take joy in nice days, happy people, music, flowers, the hopes and futures of others and all of the little things which make life wonderful. We also came to understand that Matt wanted us to attempt to move beyond our anger – even concerning the person who killed him. So, to honor our son's wishes and to allow us to continue to heal, we have channeled our energy, thoughts and time away from the person who killed Matt, and toward volunteer work to prevent DWI, advocating organ donation, supporting Compassionate Friends and other activities.

Finally, our journey to Chico and from there to many other places in California over a two-week period is a glowing testimony that over time healing does occur. Life again becomes wonderful, hopeful, and mysterious in wondrous ways. We are convinced that

we are not alone, we are not the center of things, and Matt's death is not the end of the story. It is really only the beginning. And for your readers who hurt beyond human endurance, we can affirm that places, thoughts and memories are revisited with more pleasure and rich memories that we ever thought possible. This too will happen for you

Wonderful people in the Chico area who took a special interest in Matt's case and also cared for us in loving ways, now all considered our loving friends were there for us again, and it was great to see them. A California Highway Patrol sergeant who went above and beyond normal duty to help us, a funeral director who offered loving compassion, neighbors near Matt's apartment who befriended us, folks from the California Organ Donor Network, the recipients of Matt's organs who have become our life long friends, Matt's friend who had our son's name included to the new military memorial in Chico Park, Matt's friends and their loved ones, and of course you, Jane and Jan, who have both helped us with the case and the legal system and cried with us, and other wonderful people have made it possible to live a joyful life once again and have hope for the future. We have come to believe that goodness really does overcome evil. Loving people, in their simple acts of kindness have done more than they will ever know. Beyond offering comfort and compassion, they have become living witness that there is a power in our world that allows love to overcome hopelessness and heartbreak.

We write this for inclusion in your CAH newsletter so that others whose hearts break now may have hope find healing powers within themselves and in others and find that they can love life again.

Your friends forever,

Sam and Jan Messina