

An Open Letter to Parents Who Have Lost a Child

I heard someone say, grief isn't a life sentence, it's a life passage. It's the one common human experience we all have at one time or another. But, we didn't expect it to be the death of a child, did we? If you're reading this, it's likely you've lost a child or been affected by the loss of a child. You're now discovering grieving this loss is the hardest thing you've ever done.

I know, because suddenly, without warning, my life changed. My beautiful 16-year old son came home from school complaining of a headache and a fever. The doctor diagnosed him with the flu. But it wasn't. Sometime during the night, my boy was taken from me forever. I found him the next morning in his bed, lifeless. The misdiagnosis was actually a swift and deadly form of bacterial meningitis.

Have you ever felt such incredible emotion as losing your child? It's feared by all parents and an unimaginable loss. Unimaginable, until it happens to you. People refer to it as "the worst that can happen," and that's exactly what it feels like.

In the years following my son's death, I discovered, no matter how great my loss, or how deep my grief, the world does not stop. In fact, it intensifies.

I remember thinking... how can I ever be happy again? I felt as though my pain was visible to others, and I would forever be wearing grief as a mask and a tagline..."I'm Sandy Peckinpah and I've lost a child."

Then a friend gave me a journal and said, "Write. Just write." The first blank page was so difficult. I could only put down one sentence, "My son died and my life will never be the same." The next day, I wrote a paragraph, and each day after that I found words came more easily. My journal became my safe haven to empty the well of my sorrow, pouring tears of ink onto paper. And for a little while, I could let my emotions rest.

I *had* to survive this. I had three living children who needed a whole mother. I was not willing to sacrifice my role in their lives by succumbing to paralyzing grief. I kept writing. Words pulled me and pushed me. As weeks went on, I'd read back over the journal entries. I began to see something remarkable... I'd survived another day, another week, another month; and I was growing stronger. I'd see words of hope illuminating my way.

There's no magic secret to the journal. Just pick up a pen and begin with one word or sentence. Keep writing. Healing is not on a timetable. In fact, time doesn't fix this kind of loss. Healing comes from actively pursuing life again. After awhile, you'll look back on your words and not recognize the person you once were. You'll see how strong you really are.

I used to believe the cliché “everything happens for a reason,” but with this kind of tragedy, it seems to be reversed. When a tragedy like this happens, it can be the starting place to give it reason and relevance. When you recognize this, it’s the moment your grieving will shift.

Imagine that. What would it feel like? I used to fantasize and picture my life without the pain by writing out that very question, *What would it be like to feel peace around Garrett’s death?* I would visualize myself without the veil of sorrow and allow the comfort of happiness to flow in. And for a brief moment, I *could* feel it. As time went on, I was able to reach that peaceful feeling more frequently. I had the power within the pages of my journal to compartmentalize my sorrow.

It’s been decades since my beautiful son left this earth and sometimes tears still surprise me. But the work of healing has brought me a harmonious blend of resolution and comfort as my heart joyfully connects with the sweet ballad of his memories. Healing doesn’t mean you’ll never feel the sadness. It means you’ll be able to have memories without attaching intense despair.

Use your journal as your safe place, and you’ll begin to form a new relationship with your child, telling stories, and feeling the joy you once had when they were alive.

I now look at the life of my son and marvel at his 16 years, 3 months, and 10 days. He was the first to call me *mom*. His death was the birth of my new life... learning how to live with his loss, and recognizing who I am because of it. I chose resilience and my journal was a big part of helping me rise up.

My child’s loss taught me to love harder and appreciate every single day. It taught me to reach out to others and begin sharing my story in hopes it could reassure other wounded parents there *is* life after loss.

As the years go by, I’ve learned a mother’s love never diminishes; in fact, my love for my son has grown, just as it would have if he was still alive. I am still his mother. No child dies without a legacy and a purpose for those that are left behind. It’s up to you, his mother, his father. Honor your child by healing. They wouldn’t want it any other way.

Sandy Peckinpah, Contributor
Author, Speaker