

P R E F A C E



B Y J O Y C E R U P P

As much as we desire those we love to remain with us forever, life continually changes. Nothing is permanent. One of the biggest changes in life comes when someone we cherish leaves us through death. With this loss comes an anguish that robs us of joy and destroys our inner peace. When this kind of change happens, we enter into a mourning period in which grief accompanies us every step of the way.

In our first co-authored book, *May I Walk You Home*, Joyce Hutchison and I presented stories and prayers to encourage and strengthen caregivers of the very ill. In our second book, *Now That You've Gone Home*, we again bring stories and prayers. This time we offer them to anyone who has experienced the loss of a loved one, with the hope of easing their sorrow and supporting their process of mourning.

As the two of us wrote this book, I was astounded at how the lives of my friends mirrored some of the stories you are about to read. I listened to the heartache of a new widow whose husband did not

make it through surgery, the sadness of a woman whose sister died of Lou Gehrig's disease, the sorrow of a mother whose son took his own life, and the shock of a colleague whose longtime friend was killed in a car accident. As I heard their pain, I found myself constantly wishing this book was already in print so they could find comfort in knowing their responses to grief are similar to others who grieve, that they would know they are not alone in how they experience their loved one's departure.

In the following stories, Joyce Hutchison honestly and vulnerably shares her personal journey with grief, along with the other fifteen persons who relate their encounters with death. While each person's account of loss and ensuing grief is unique, there are numerous commonalities that weave through the narratives. As you read the stories in *Now That You've Gone Home*, you will notice that mental and emotional distress is a natural part of grief's predictable (and unpredictable) visitation.

The stories in this book are meant to sustain, comfort and encourage you. They are reminders that you do not travel your road of grief in isolation. At this very moment, others also bear the heavy weight of loss. They, too, know the suffering that grieving brings. This book will not take away the effects of your loss, but it can console your pain and assure you that your response to grief is natural and that it will not stay forever.

Now That You've Gone Home includes an array of stories, with varied aspects of the implications and

complications of grief. We not only bid farewell to the one we love but we do so within the social context of others. The expansiveness of grief reaches into these relationships, into past woundedness and dashed dreams. Grief can challenge our ability to forgive, to accept a new way of living, to let go of guilt and regrets, to heal old hurts and anything else that holds us back from peace of mind and heart.

What lies beyond physical death remains a mystery for those of us who are left behind. Both Joyce Hutchison and I believe that physical death does not close the door to our connection with our loved ones. Love has the last word. It keeps the door open. Those we hold dear leave a part of themselves with us when they return to their eternal Home. As they move on to partake of the one Great Love that unites us all, the love they leave with us as they depart remains forever in our hearts.

Because it is often difficult to concentrate and to feel a sense of this Great Love's presence during times of grief, I have created brief meditations and prayers following each story. I have tried to respect every belief system while, at the same time, suggesting ways and words to unite with the One Love ever present with us.

We cannot hurry anyone through their grief, but *Now That You've Gone Home* can assist you to grieve, to have confidence in your ability to survive this tough part of your life and to be healed of the pain that has come with your significant loss. Life will not remain the same. The death of a loved one leaves an indelible

mark on your life, but you can discover how to go on, how to “make a life” again without this beloved person in it. Cling to this hope. Trust that, with time, the best of your memories will turn into golden reservoirs of comfort and consolation.

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The skilled care and compassionate presence that we witnessed in hospice personnel, chaplains, social workers, volunteers, grief counselors, home health aides, and family caregivers of the dying continually

inspired us. How blessed we have been by these wonderful persons.

Thank you to all those at Ave Maria Press who assisted us in our publishing endeavor.

~ JOYCE HUTCHISON AND JOYCE RUPP

My family was an important part of writing this book. Dick Spidle (whose wife died in 2003), and I reconnected at our high school reunion. He and I were married on December 29, 2006. His daughters (Jane and Janet) and their families are supportive of this new relationship, while knowing that no one can take their mother's place. My husband died twelve years before Dick and I married, so my children (Joe, Mike, and Julie) and their families were further down the road with their grief. They were also supportive, even though it is still difficult to see someone in the other parent's place. Their openness to this new relationship and their ability to share our grief of the past and our joy of the present have been a generous gift from all of them. Dick and I are grateful for the opportunity to share the remainder of our life's journey together. There are thirteen beautiful grandchildren, Emma, George, Margaret, Griffin, Garrett, Ruby, Mose, Lila, Anabel, Samantha, AJ, Mikayla and Derek, who shared in the grief of having a grandparent die but who now bring so much fun and anticipation to our lives.

~ JOYCE HUTCHISON

I N T R O D U C T I O N



BY JOYCE HUTCHISON

The painful journey of grief changes us in ways that no other experience can. Sorrow is not something we seek, yet this unwanted visitor of death manages to find its way inside our deepest self. Grief actually holds the possibility of enriching our lives. Experiencing our grief, and allowing ourselves to truly be with it, creates an openness for compassion to grow stronger in us. Of course, it is impossible for us to believe this when our heart contains an immense amount of sadness. I only know this truth of grief's potential by looking back to where this unwanted visitor took over my life time and again.

Let me share how grief paid me numerous visits. My grandmother Griffin died when I was in the eighth grade. I was closer to her than any other person in my life, except my twin brother. We were good "buddies." I don't remember a lot about how I grieved, but I remember feeling lost without her. I believed she loved me more than anyone else in this world. Grandma was the one I could ask my most important

questions, and she was the one I laughed with the most. She had terminal cancer the last months of her life and she lived at our house. I loved to help her take a bath, get a wet washcloth for her dry lips, or just sit with her. Even though she couldn't talk and she slept a lot, I loved just sitting with her. I was sure Grandma knew I was there and that thought comforted me.

When I was twenty-two my twin brother Joe was killed in a car accident. I had only been married to Gary for three months and I did not stop to grieve Joe's death. Instead, I stuffed my feelings away inside of me as much as possible. Joe and I were always close and even knew what each other was thinking. We shared our thoughts and ideas with each other, but did so privately. I think we didn't want to let anyone know how connected we were because we felt they wouldn't understand. Joe would tell me when he was in trouble and I would try to help him. In turn, he was very protective of me. The deep love between us made it too difficult for me to face the painful loss when he died so young.

It wasn't until twenty-two years later, when I was forty-four, that I began to truly grieve Joe's death. This was the day my mom died of cancer. I felt like Joe died that day, too. I've learned that grief never just goes away, it simply waits on us to recognize the loss. One day, there grief is, insisting that we take time with the hidden pain of our goodbye. I was sad for my mom and for my twin brother at the same time. My greatest

comfort was that they were now together, because Mom had really never gotten over Joe's death. I spent a lot of quiet time just thinking about them and allowing myself to feel how much I missed them.

The next time grief paid a visit, I was unprepared. My husband Gary had been diagnosed with cancer in 1970, when I was twenty-nine. His physicians told us that, with treatment, he had six months to live. Gary lived twenty-four more years after that. In those twenty-four years, he experienced two primary cancers, a colostomy, numerous bouts of chemo and radiation therapy, and heart bypass surgery twice. He was in and out of the hospital numerous times. He died on June 7, 1994, after the second heart surgery. I was fifty-four.

My oldest brother Ed died in January 2000 after a five-year battle with a neuromuscular disease that caused him to be bedbound and unable to walk, talk, swallow, or move his extremities. A year later, my dad died at my home after a few months of declining health, a week before his ninetieth birthday. The following year in April 2002, my second-oldest brother, Rich, died of lung cancer. During the late stages of his illness, he was also in my home where I had the privilege of caring for him. My last living and youngest brother, Gene, died of lung cancer in May 2007.

I came from a family of seven, with my parents and my four brothers, and now I am the only one left. If someone had told me when I was twenty that this is

what my life would contain, I would have protested, "No way! I can't deal with it." Well, I've changed my mind about that. As I look at life from my perspective now, I wouldn't change a thing. I would not have chosen to have death hold such a prominent place on my journey, but this road I have traveled has made me who I am today and I am grateful. Without experiencing the pain of my loss, I would lack understanding and empathy. I would not grasp what others are feeling or how it is for them to go through their losses. Because of the experiences I've had, I am more able to offer my compassion, understanding, and open heart to others. My encounters with grief have enabled me to "get into the skin of another," to empathize, to truly be "with them" in what they are feeling.

I recall a woman by the name of Karen whose husband died several years before Gary did. She walked with me through my passage of grief with a deep understanding that she could not have found in any other way. Her compassionate presence meant the world to me. In writing this book, I hope to assist others who have undergone the painful process of significant loss, as Karen assisted me. I want those who grieve to know that what they are feeling is part of a natural process, that they can survive when sorrow takes over their lives.

One of the helpful things I did during my grieving time, especially after Gary died, was to keep a journal. I look back on those journal entries now and find

some of them a bit shocking, particularly the pages where I begged Gary over and over to come back. I knew in reality that it was impossible for him to return, but those entries show how irrational our minds can be when we are feeling extremely emotional and desperately alone. I wrote in my journal regularly for two years and sometimes went to the cemetery with journal and pen in hand. There I poured out my love for Gary and my overwhelming grief.

It was two years after Gary's death before I knew that I would be okay, before I believed I would survive. On the two-year anniversary of his death I went to the cemetery, sat beside his headstone (which also has my name on it), took off my wedding ring, and decided I had to move on. That day I wrote to each of my three children. I reminded them of the painful years of grief I had experienced and explained that, even though I continued to miss their dad tremendously, I had to finally begin to move forward. I assured them that I knew he would want me to live happily instead of continuing to wish him back. During those two years I had allowed myself to truly grieve, and even though I would always miss him, I knew then that I would be okay.

I did move on, gradually, but what amazes me is that fourteen years later, something I see, or something someone says, will trigger a memory or experience of Gary and grief stirs up in me again. When that

happens, I let myself have a good cry while I remember all that I found dear about him.

Our loved ones will always be in our hearts. This truth came back to me time and again as I wrote the stories in this book. A lot of tears flowed as I recalled my loved ones who died and who live on in my heart. Writing about my loss and subsequent grief has been a difficult task and yet, by revisiting my grief and writing about it, I have taken another step in my personal growth toward healing and wholeness.

Each of us grieves and recovers in our own way and in our own time. Each of us also has some common experiences of grief. I hope this book touches your grief in a way that helps you move forward. May it also encourage you by finding kinship with others who have suffered loss, and seeing that they have been able to make it through what appeared to be unending heartache.

As you move through and beyond your grief, may your life become richer in kindness and deeper in understanding because of the experience you have had.



S T O R I E S

O F G R I E F

B Y

J O Y C E H U T C H I S O N



How Can It Be That You Have Died?

The first days after my husband died contained a whirlwind of activity. There was no way to focus on anything for more than a few seconds. I was a robot going through the motions of planning the funeral and greeting the many people who came to offer their condolences. It didn't seem possible that Gary was really gone. In my daze, I felt that if I just went through what had to be done, then it would all be over and we'd be back to normal. Surely I'd wake up in a few days and he would be home again. I could not comprehend the reality of his death. My mind didn't work well enough to try to sort it out. There wasn't the opportunity

either, not with people around all the time as we prepared for his funeral. While I felt comforted by those who were in the house, I still could not take in the fact of Gary's death. None of what was going on made much sense.

My three adult children were with me and helped with countless plans and decisions. There was a lot of talking about their dad. We cried and even laughed as we remembered certain of his characteristics, like being late for events. Someone said that if Gary were alive, he would be late for his own wake service. In planning the funeral, we were able to talk about what was important to him and what he enjoyed. We set up a table at the service with some of his favorite things on it. The children chose his tools and calendar pocket books where he kept his lists for each day. I chose the television remote control—he surfed every channel several times during each program he watched, so as not to miss anything. We all decided to write him a letter and place it in either the casket or in his suit pocket, to tell him the things in our hearts we wanted and needed to say. The kids thought it was a great help to ease their sorrow. Writing my letter to Gary only temporarily helped with mine.

While there were endless tasks to get done, nothing seemed real. I went to bed at night and even slept a bit. Then I'd wake up to the nightmare going on around me. It was as if I were watching all of it from afar. Just a week ago I had been planning to bring him

home from the hospital. My thoughts were often consumed with the last days and weeks of what happened: Gary had gone into the hospital less than two weeks before to have heart bypass surgery. He wasn't supposed to die during surgery, but he did. I kept asking: "How can this have happened?" I thought he would most likely die before me, but I never dreamed he would die when he did. He had a history of coming through serious medical situations before when it looked like he might not do so.

At the funeral, people spoke about Gary, recalling his empathy and compassion for others, how he reached out his hand to them in their time of need. I knew he was like that, but it was surprising to hear others say these wonderful things about him. While I remember little about the funeral, I do know that it was a meaningful event where the children were pleased and proud of their dad. There were so many people there, and yet I don't remember anyone who was there. In a way, I think I dreaded for the funeral to be over, because I didn't know what I would do next. At the same time, I wanted all of the commotion to stop, so maybe I could think again. Among the thousands of thoughts that went through my head, there came fleeting ones about the fact that I was going to be alone from then on. The thought quickly passed, but in the instant it was there, panic lurched in my stomach.

I had worked with hospice for many years and believed I knew everything about grief. After Gary died, it didn't seem like I knew anything. The morning after his death I remembered a woman whose husband died several weeks earlier in the hospice house where I was currently employed as the director. She was close to her husband and had been with him every minute until his death. She came to see the staff at hospice a week after he died to thank us for being so good to them. This new widow had the most painful, lost, and lonely look on her face. I remembered thinking, "The poor woman seems to have lost hope." In the moment of my own grief, I pictured her face and thought, "So *this* is what that painful face was about." I felt just as lost and miserable. It hit me then, that I hadn't known nearly as much about grief as I thought I did.

I had to figure out how to continue the journey set before me. The road was blurry. I asked God to walk beside me and help me take it just one step at a time, to pick me up when I stumbled. I knew the kids were leaving in a few days and I dreaded it. I didn't want them to know my fears, though, as it would be difficult enough for them. They were only in their twenties and I didn't want to interfere with their young lives. I wanted to be strong for them, as well as for myself. I knew I would be, because it was important; but, oh dear, I felt so weak. I had easily advised others

to take one day at a time, but now I had to apply that advice to myself. I had no idea how hard it would be.

The part of my journey that I had to travel from this point forward was unknown. There were no roadmaps. My husband had gone Home and left me behind. There I was, asking, "Now that you've gone Home, how can I continue without you, Gary?"

Meditation

Find a place where you can have some uninterrupted quiet time. Although God may seem distant from you, this beloved presence is truly with you and desires to comfort you in your loss.

Hold in your hands a photo of your loved one who has died. Allow your thoughts and emotions to come forth as you look at this photo.

Visualize God's kindness and care caressing and comforting you like a warm ray of sunshine on a cold, turbulent day. Rest awhile in the warmth of this enduring love as you grieve your great loss.

Prayer

Tender-hearted God,
the one I love has gone to be with you
and I am left behind to mourn my loss.

I long for what can be no more.

Help me to continue my journey
without _____ as a part of my life.

Take my sorrow, emptiness, and heartache.

Soften it with your compassionate heart.

As I grieve the departure of my dear one,
hold me close in your loving care.

For Today

Each time I feel weak and think I cannot go
on, I will turn to God for assurance and
strength.