

Living With a  
**BROKEN  
HEART**

Rediscovering Life after Loss

PAUL O'REAR



**TATE PUBLISHING**  
AND ENTERPRISES, LLC

# What Others are Saying ...

---

*As a father who has lost a daughter, like Paul O'Rear, I know what it's like to live with a broken heart. This book, and the story of Ashley, will take you on an emotional roller coaster ride while dealing with practical issues that everyone who has lost a loved one must face and deal with. It is a testimony as to how adversity can become a valuable teacher to those who are teachable.*

—Darrell Scott

Founder, Rachel's Challenge

Author, *Rachel's Tears: The Spiritual Journey of Columbine Martyr Rachel Scott*

*Paul has the extraordinary talent to express his loss and his faith that sustains him in stories that speak to the wounded hearts of both mourners and their caregivers, giving them needed hope and support. His insights and stories are enlightening and inspiring for all who struggle after the death of a precious loved one. I consider it a privilege to have Paul as a friend, brother in Christ and fellow mourner. I highly recommend his book for those struggling in grief after the death of a loved one and for those who care for those suffering after the death of a loved one.*

—Larry M. Barber, LPC-CS

Certified Thanatologist

Director, GriefWorks, Dallas Texas

Author, *Love Never Dies: Embracing Grief with Hope and Promise*

*Paul's book is a blessing for those who have gone down the path no one would ever choose. It is also a gift to those of us who see their pain and suffering. It allows us to believe that parents will go on, with both sadness and eventually, joy.*

—Naomi Winick, M.D.  
Lowe Foundation Professor in  
Pediatric Neuro-Oncology  
University of Texas Southwestern  
Medical Center

*As Paul O'Rear tells of the beautiful life and passing of his daughter, Ashley, the emotions are real and raw. If you've experienced the loss of a loved one, your heart will pound as your emotions are given permission to grieve. Paul reminds us that there is no pre-defined "grieving process" and that no two people grieve alike. As someone who lost three family members within four months, I can say this book is a must read.*

—Alene Snodgrass  
Author, *Graffiti: Scribbles from  
Different Sides of the Street*

*Paul O'Rear is a big man with a big heart. In this book, he reaches out with love and compassion to lift up people who are hurting because of the loss of a family member or a child. You will weep and you will rejoice. You will get angry and you will find peace. You will see complete hopelessness turned into unparalleled hope. This book will give you guidance that will strengthen your heart and uplift your soul.*

—Dean Kilmer  
Senior Advisor for the  
Moral Courage Foundation  
Author, *Igniting the Moral Courage of America*

*Living With a Broken Heart*

Copyright © 2014 by Paul O'Rear. All rights reserved.

---

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any way by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording or otherwise without the prior permission of the author except as provided by USA copyright law.

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved.

The “NIV” and “New International Version” trademarks are registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by International Bible Society. Use of either trademark requires the written permission of International Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked “NKJV” are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The opinions expressed by the author are not necessarily those of Tate Publishing, LLC.

---

Published by Tate Publishing & Enterprises, LLC  
127 E. Trade Center Terrace | Mustang, Oklahoma 73064 USA  
1.888.361.9473 | [www.tatepublishing.com](http://www.tatepublishing.com)

Tate Publishing is committed to excellence in the publishing industry. The company reflects the philosophy established by the founders, based on Psalm 68:11,  
*“The Lord gave the word and great was the company of those who published it.”*

Book design copyright © 2014 by Tate Publishing, LLC. All rights reserved.

*Cover design by Rtor Maghuyop*

*Interior design by Jake Mueller*

---

Published in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63063-178-9

1. Family & Relationships / Death, Grief, Bereavement
  2. Religion / Christian Life / Death, Grief, Bereavement
- 13.12.18



# Dedication

---

This book is dedicated to the precious memory of my daughter Ashley, who lived more in her fourteen years than most people live in seventy or eighty. It still does not seem real that you are not with us, Ashley. My heart aches beyond belief because of all you had to endure in your short life, but mostly it aches because I cannot hug you and kiss your beautiful little bald head anymore. You are my inspiration for writing this book. Your untimely death has made grief and heartache an inescapable part of my daily life.

But grief and heartache are not the whole story—not even close! You have inspired countless people, including me, with your unwavering courage, your tenacious spirit, and your persistent optimism. You have stolen innumerable hearts, including mine, with your incredibly infectious smile. You have taught me much and inspired me immensely to live every day and to look for all the beauty and all the fun that life has to offer—to *live* with a broken heart. I love you, Ashley, more than you could have possibly imagined while you were confined to an earthly body. I cannot wait to see you again someday, and share together all the incomprehensible beauty that I know you are now experiencing. Until then . . .

This book is also dedicated to the sweet memory of my daddy, Larry O'Rear, who taught me what it means to be a man, to be a husband, to be a daddy. You are my

hero, Dad, and you always will be. Save a place for me in heaven, because I am coming up to see you one of these days.

And finally, this book is dedicated to the pediatric oncology doctors, nurses, and support staff at Children's Medical Center in Dallas, Texas—and at medical centers and hospitals across the world—who give so much of themselves to bring a little bit of sunshine into the lives of families faced with the darkness of children's cancer.

To those of you who put your heart into your job, who truly care about your patients and their families, who live by the ideal that “we don't treat cancer, we treat children”—thank you! You are a blessing to those of us who must watch our children suffer, as we face the frustration of knowing that we are powerless to make that suffering stop.

You are brave warriors as you battle the cancer monster every day in the children whose lives you touch so profoundly. Sometimes the cancer monster wins, and you go home at night and cry in your pillow. Your heart aches because you know that one more child will not grow up. One more family will walk away from the hospital with broken hearts and empty arms, and it makes you angry that life can be so unfair. Thank you for caring so deeply.

Often the battle is won! The monster is defeated! And one more child *will* grow up to become a mommy or daddy, a teacher or lawyer, a minister or social worker, a business executive or bank president, maybe even a

doctor or nurse in a pediatric oncology ward, perhaps even the president of the United States.

With every child whose laughter you restore, this world becomes a better and brighter place. God has entrusted you with the gift of healing through your knowledge and skills and through the wonders of modern medicine, and our lives are greatly enriched by your careful stewardship of that precious gift.

Please do not ever get so discouraged that you quit using your gift, for then the cancer monster will have gained one more step toward victory.

Please understand the importance of what you do. You are our bridge to hope. May God bless you abundantly, as you give so much and bless so many.

—Paul O’Rear  
Waxahachie, Texas

# Introduction

---

*A broken heart.* All my life I have heard those words used to describe the emotional fallout a person experiences when life falls apart and comes crashing to the ground.

A junior high boy is brokenhearted when his girlfriend dumps him. How in the world can he go on living after such a devastating loss? Will he ever be able to find true love again? Those questions seem almost amusing when viewed from an adult's perspective. But to that junior high boy, the pain and heartache and uncertainty of life at that moment are no laughing matter.

A little girl's heart breaks when she learns that her precious kitty has run away from home. Two days later her dad discovers that the cat has been run over by a car. That little girl cannot comprehend the thought of kitty being nothing more than a flattened mess of fur and blood and guts in the middle of Main Street. And she certainly cannot bear the pain of never again being able to hold her precious kitty and stroke its soft coat and listen to its gentle purr. How can she go on living with such bitter sorrow in her heart?

A young man's world falls apart when his father dies suddenly and unexpectedly from a rare and fast-growing form of cancer. His hero has fallen. His mentor is gone. The man to whom he was supposed to be able to turn for the answers to life's many challenges is no

longer available for that much-needed counsel and advice. Suddenly the abstract concept of a broken heart becomes painfully real.

A young couple's lives are turned upside down when their preteen daughter is diagnosed with a brain tumor. She fights bravely for her life. In time, it looks as though she has beaten the cancer monster. The harsh treatments, which were almost worse than the disease itself, seem to have worked. There appears to be a faint, glimmering light at the end of the long, hellish tunnel through which they have been traveling.

Then, just as their lives are beginning to return to normal, the unthinkable happens. The monster returns, this time much stronger and more determined than before. Within a couple of months their beautiful, bright, precious daughter—now barely a teenager—is stolen from them by death as they stand by and watch helplessly. Never before have their hearts felt this broken, this unmendable. How can such indescribable pain possibly be endured, or even survived?

## How Can You Mend a Broken Heart?

Life is not fair. Mom warned us about that harsh reality when we were just kids. In the words of the Shirelles, "Mama said there'd be days like this." Mama was right! Life has a way of knocking you down, throwing you a sucker punch, yanking the rug right out from under your feet. Sometimes you fall so hard that it seems impossible to ever get back up. Often these knock-downs produce an emptiness and a sense of pain that

reach to the very core of your being—an emotional state that we often describe as being brokenhearted.

Every one of us will experience these difficult times as we journey through life; times when the heart feels like it is literally broken in two. This brokenness seems to be most intense, and the accompanying emptiness deepest, when someone we love dies.

The question posed musically by the Bee Gees deserves our thoughtful consideration: “How can you mend a broken heart?” Or, even more fundamentally, *can* you mend a broken heart? That is what we will be considering in this book. Particularly, we will explore the concept of grief, and how to survive this gut-wrenching, life-altering experience.

This book is not intended to be a scholarly dissertation on the grief process. I have no credentials in grief counseling and have not done any clinical research into the subject.

I do, however, know grief. I do not just know *about* it. I know it personally and intimately. I have experienced grief on a level so intense that I would not wish such on my worst enemy. I have journeyed into the pit of utter despair, of unspeakable grief . . . and I have survived.

That is why I have written this book, because I know that grief is survivable. I know that *you* can make it through even the most debilitating heartbreak. My purpose here is simply to share with you my thoughts and my experiences on living with a broken heart, and to give you an encouraging pat on the shoulder and a gentle, reassuring hug as you struggle daily to find your own way through life with your own broken heart.

## The Four Cornerstones

When my daughter Ashley died at age fourteen from recurring brain tumors, my world slipped into a tailspin. My heart had never before been so completely broken; life had never before seemed so hopelessly empty. For me and my family, this was virgin territory; these were uncharted waters. Yes, countless people before us had traveled the winding road of grief, but for us this was a new experience.

As we navigated the murky waters that engulfed us on all sides, I realized that there was no roadmap for this journey. Grief grabbed hold of my heart and took me wherever it wanted me to go. There were many days when grief was completely in control, and all I could do was blindly follow its lead.

As the journey unfolded, I found myself surprised at the unpredictable nature of my grief. I had always thought there were certain stages of grief that were common to all grievers, and that these stages were somewhat clinical and even predictable. I had always thought that grief was a process from which the griever “emerged” or “graduated” after a certain amount of time. I had often heard people talk about “closure,” and I interpreted that to mean that grief had some definable end point.

I soon learned that many of these preconceptions about grief were completely inaccurate; or at least they were not proving true in my own personal journey. As I struggled to make sense of it all, I discovered some basic truths about grief that caught me by surprise, but that also gave me encouragement and hope. These basic

truths provide the philosophical underpinning for this book. They can be thought of as the four cornerstones for *Living with a Broken Heart*.

1. Hearts broken by grief cannot be fixed.
2. Each person grieves in their own way.
3. Grief and Happiness can peacefully coexist.
4. “All things work together for good to those who love God.”

The title of this book reflects the reality of the first premise. A heart that is broken by grief simply cannot be fixed. You cannot “get over it and get on with your life.” The emptiness does not go away. The pain and heartache do not magically disappear after a prescribed amount of grieving time. “Getting over it” is simply not an option.

You can, however, learn to live *with* a broken heart. You can learn to incorporate that pain and emptiness into your life in some very real and very positive ways. You cannot “get over it,” but you certainly *can*—and should—“get on with your life.”

## My Prayer for You

If you have picked up this book because you have a friend or loved one whose heart is broken, thank you. Brokenhearted people need the love and understanding of gentle, caring people like you. I do not know that I can answer all of your questions about how to help someone grieve, but I will share with you some of

my thoughts concerning things that I have found to be helpful.

What I do know is that your simple presence and your genuine love and concern are of far greater value than any words you will speak. Your job is not to help your friend or loved one find healing or overcome their grief. Healing is an elusive process that can only come with time, and even then it is incomplete. There are no “right words” that can be spoken to fix broken hearts because hearts broken by grief cannot be fixed. Your job is simply to love. Sometimes you do not even have to say anything. Just love us and hug us and pray for us, and God will help us figure out the rest.

If you are reading this book because you are in the middle of a broken heart, my prayers are with you. I know something of the road you are traveling. I understand the frustration of other people’s expectations concerning your grief. I am well acquainted with the unspeakable pain that arises unbidden in your heart, sometimes with no advance warning and without being specifically provoked. I have experienced the same deep sense of hopelessness that you sometimes find weighing heavily on your soul. There have been times when the heartache has been so intense and the pain so overwhelming, it did not even seem possible that my heart could go on beating within my chest.

My prayer for you is not that your pain will go away, because I believe that such a wish is unrealistic, perhaps even impossible. My prayer is not that God will heal your broken heart, because I am not sure such healing is even attainable. My prayer for you is the same as my

prayer for me. I pray that God will grant you peace in the midst of heartache, blessings in the midst of trials, and hope in the midst of despair. I wish you only the best in life, and I hope that you will be able to learn, as I have, to live and to love and to laugh and to enjoy life—*with* a broken heart.

Whatever your reason for reading this book, thank you for assuming that I have something worthwhile to say. I hope I do not let you down.

## Ten Years

One final important note, and then we will jump right in. This book was written over a ten-year period. I started writing it shortly after Ashley's death. Within a couple of years, I had about half of it finished. Then I hit a brick wall.

Over the next few years I pulled out the manuscript several times, dusted it off, and made another run at it; but the words simply would not come. During this time I showed my incomplete manuscript to some close friends, and they encouraged me to finish writing the book because its message needed to be heard. So I tried several more times, but it was an exercise in futility. Then in early 2012, a little more than ten years after Ashley's death, I decided it was time to finish this project.

I ended up in the hospital a couple of days before Valentine's Day with a serious infection. While lying in my hospital bed with very little to constructively occupy my time, I pulled out my laptop and started writing.

This time, the words flowed! Within a couple of days, I had written a completely new chapter that was not even in my original outline. Within a few weeks, the book was finished.

I believe the ten-year time frame is significant because the thoughts presented in this book are not all born out of fresh, raw grief. Even the content that was written during those first few months and years has had time to settle and mature. I went back and re-read all of that early content from the vantage point of ten years down the road, and found that it was all still relevant and timely.

I say all of that to say this. The ideas and philosophies presented here have passed the test of time. They are as relevant from the perspective of mature grief as they are from the perspective of fresh, raw grief.

As you read this book, there will be a few places where you will easily discern whether a particular passage was written in the early days, or whether it was written ten years down the road. Beyond that I have intentionally chosen not to separate the earlier writings from the later, or in any other way designate what was written when. I believe this is a valid approach because it honors the timelessness of these principles of grief.



Bettie and Larry O'Rear on their honeymoon, July 1956

# Get Over It?

---

## A Love Story

Larry was twenty-three years old when he moved to the small south Texas town of Alice. He had graduated from Abilene Christian College a couple of years earlier, had spent some time preaching and trying to sell insurance, and now was settling into a new job in a new town teaching math and science courses at William Adams High School.

He was tall, dark, and handsome—and single—and happened to catch the eye of a young sixteen-year-old girl named Bettie who was a student at William Adams High School. Bettie's father was an elder at the local Church of Christ where Larry began attending.

A certain chemistry began to develop between this young man who taught that very subject, and the high school girl whose heart he was in the process of unwittingly stealing. The two began dating secretly, so as not to raise eyebrows. After all, he was a teacher and she was a student! On Sundays after church, they would sometimes drive to Mathis Lake about thirty miles away and spend lazy afternoons just talking and holding hands and enjoying each other's company, usually still dressed in their Sunday church clothes. Often they would be accompanied by Bettie's best friend and her beau.

The following summer, Larry made a trip to New Mexico where he spent several weeks participating in a Physics Institute sponsored by the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque. He and Bettie wrote to each other almost every day while they were apart. Romance was beginning to blossom into a full and beautiful flower.

Larry returned from New Mexico and began his second year of teaching at the high school. Bettie was now a senior. In December of that year, Larry asked Bettie if she wanted to cook and keep house for him. "That was just the kind of romantic that he was," Bettie recalled years later. "And, idiot that I was, I said 'Yes!'" Bettie graduated from William Adams High School in May of 1956, and on July 27 of that same year she and Larry were married.

Larry and Bettie are my parents. Over the course of thirty-three years of marriage, Mom and Dad shared countless joys and numerous heartaches. They shared the immense joy of bringing five children into the world and watching them grow into young men. They experienced financial ups and downs. They shared the deep heartache of facing the sudden death of Dad's father, and the horrible murder of Dad's only brother. They faced difficult decisions concerning their own aging parents. They raised five sons to be honest, loyal, devout Christians, and respectable citizens. Just about everything Mom and Dad did, they did together.

The spiritual and emotional bond that developed between them was absolutely unbreakable. They were deeply in love with each other and remained completely

faithful to each other for thirty-three years of marriage. They were totally committed to keeping the sacred vows which they had made on that summer day in 1956, “until death do us part.”

## The Sting of Death

I remember the phone call as though it were yesterday. It was December 13, 1989, Wednesday night. Susan and the kids and I were preparing to leave for church when the telephone rang. I answered it. It was my oldest brother Mark, and I could tell immediately that something was wrong. “Dad went to the doctor and they think he might have cancer. They won’t know for sure until they do a biopsy,” he said.

I didn’t know what to say; I didn’t know what to do; I didn’t know what to think; I wasn’t sure how to feel. Surely this can’t be true. Dad is only... *how old is Dad, anyway? I’m not sure, but he’s not old enough to get cancer.* When someone gets cancer, they usually die. Dad can’t die!

My head was spinning and my stomach was swimming as we went to church. “Maybe it won’t be cancer after all,” I kept telling myself, trying my best to sound convincing. “But what if it is?” We had just seen Mom and Dad a couple of weeks earlier. We had gone to Susan’s parents’ house in Round Rock for Thanksgiving. On the way back home, we stopped by Mom and Dad’s house in Georgetown to say “Hi.” Dad wasn’t feeling well. He had started feeling sick the day after Thanksgiving, having stomach pains and feeling

nauseated. He and Mom just figured he was coming down with an intestinal flu—there had been a lot of that sort of thing going around. After a week with no improvement, he went to see the doctor.

The doctor was unable to determine the cause of Dad's ailments, and arranged for some tests to be run in an attempt to pinpoint the problem. After running numerous tests and finding nothing, they finally did an ultrasound which revealed a number of suspicious-looking spots on his liver. A biopsy was ordered immediately.

The biopsy results were reported on Friday, December 15. The doctors' fears were confirmed. Dad had cancer. The initial prognosis was that he probably had six months to live.

*Six months!* I remember the shock, the horror, the disbelief, the fear, the complete sense of hopelessness and helplessness brought on by those two words: six months. Suddenly, life seemed so finite.

It was Christmas time. We were all supposed to be gathering at Mom and Dad's house in about a week for an O'Rear-style Christmas celebration. All five of us guys, our families, lots of presents, lots of love, lots of laughter, lots of good food...and Mom and Dad, the matriarch and patriarch of this uniquely wonderful clan.

But the trip came a week early, and the occasion was anything but festive. Dad was put in the hospital in Austin on Monday after the biopsy results had been reported on Friday. The doctors wanted to do more tests to determine a course of treatment. Now, instead of traveling to Georgetown for Christmas, we found

ourselves traveling to Austin a week before Christmas to visit Dad in the hospital.

What would I say? What are you supposed to say to someone who has just been told they probably won't be here in six months? Dad was always the one who knew just what to say. And now he is the one lying in a hospital bed dying. Oh, God, help me know what to say. *Please, God, I'm so afraid. Please don't let my daddy die!*

As it turned out, Dad was still the one who knew just exactly what to say. "Boys..." He addressed his five sons.

We were the ones he and Mom had spent lots of years and lots of prayers raising.

We were the ones who had always caused people to look at Mom and say, "You poor woman!" In fact, people still say that to this day!

We were the ones who had spent many summers splashing around in the Frio River at River Bend Campground, during those wonderful family camping trips to the Texas hill country.

We were the ones who Dad and Mom had dragged—sometimes literally—to church every Sunday and every Wednesday of our lives.

And, we were the five young men who had learned to love the Lord, and his word, and his church—from the very depth of our being—because of this man who was now lying in a hospital bed dying, and because of the beautiful woman who stood by his side.

"Boys..." You could have heard a pin drop in that room as we hung on his words. "Mom and I have talked about this, and we want you to know that we are not

afraid of what might happen. If it is God's will for me to die, then I am ready to die. Sure, I would love to stay around several more years and see my grandkids grow up. There are many things I would still like to do. I don't guess there will ever come a time when I could say, 'I've done everything I ever wanted to do and seen everything I ever wanted to see, so now I am ready to go.' But we want you boys to know that we are not asking, 'Why? Why us? Why this? Why now?' We are at peace."

In that moment, Dad left us a legacy that I will carry with me for the rest of my life. Dad was lying on his death bed, literally staring death in the face, and he was not the least bit afraid—or if he was, it certainly didn't show. He was truly at peace. Suddenly, all those things he had taught us through the years—about God, about his love for us, about heaven—it all became so very real in that one moment of time. Dad was about to go be with God, and he knew it!

Dad stayed in the hospital one week, and his condition quickly and progressively deteriorated. The doctors released him from the hospital on Sunday, Christmas Eve. He was groggy from the pain medication, as well as from the fact that his liver was not functioning properly due to the cancer. Monday and Tuesday his condition worsened further. He slept more and more and became less and less coherent. Tuesday night he had a very difficult night, and several of us stayed up all night with him.

Wednesday, December 27, 1989, was a day that Dad had spent his whole life preparing for. I remember it as being a peculiarly peaceful day. Everyone had left

the house that morning. I don't remember who went where; I just remember that Mom and I were the only two in the house besides Dad. He was sleeping in his easy chair and we were just a few feet away, sitting at the kitchen table, talking about funeral arrangements. It was obvious that Dad would not be here much longer, and we wanted to be prepared. As we talked quietly, we could hear in the background the rhythmic sounds of Dad's breathing.

Then suddenly we both realized, in the same instant, that the breathing sounds had stopped. We jumped up and rushed over to the easy chair, but Dad was not there. His body was still in the chair, but Dad had gone Home.

Mom asked me gently and with remarkable composure if I would leave the room for a few minutes so she could be alone with him. I went to the back of the house, and Mom told Dad goodbye. His brief struggle had ended, and our struggle to go on living without him had begun.

## Until Death Do Us Part

When Dad died in December of 1989, the words *until death do us part* became a haunting reality for Mom. They were no longer just hypothetical words spoken by young lovers as part of a fairy tale wedding. Death was the only thing that could have parted Mom and Dad, and after spending thirty-three years of their lives together, it became the only thing that did separate them.

Suddenly half of Mom's life was gone forever. Every night since then, Mom has gone to bed by herself, and every morning she awakens to an empty house. She sits in church every Sunday and Wednesday with no one's hand to hold. Those special songs that once triggered floods of wonderful memories of romantic times spent together, now somehow seem to have a haunting emptiness about them.

For the last several years of Dad's life, he and Mom worked for the same company and often drove to work together. After Dad died, Mom had to drive to work all alone every day. Dad's exuberant and contagious cheerfulness no longer brightened the company halls. The job, which had once been simply another piece of the beautiful life they were building together, suddenly became just one more reminder of the palpable emptiness that accompanied Dad's absence. In time, that emptiness became unbearable, and Mom found a new job.

My point is this. For thirty-three years, Mom and Dad shared every joy and every heartache of life together. In December of 1989 that changed forever. Every day since then, Mom has lived with the constant nagging heartache of realizing that she will never be able to share those things with Dad again for the entire rest of her life. Dad is gone from this place for good. He is not coming back. Life can never be the same for Mom. She cannot just "get over it."

## The E-mail

About a year after Ashley's death, my precious mother sent me an e-mail saying that she would like to find some time to sit down and talk with Susan about grieving, just the two of them. Mom had learned from some other family members that Susan still seemed to be having a very difficult time with Ashley's death. She was also concerned that Susan and I might not be taking care of ourselves in our grief like we needed to be. With Mom's permission, I want to share with you some excerpts from my response to her e-mail.

Dear Mom,

Yes, Susan is still having a hard time with Ashley's death. I am still having a hard time with Ashley's death. Justin is still having a hard time with Ashley's death. We will *always* have a hard time with Ashley's death. Our precious, precious child is gone from our arms forever. We can never kiss her beautiful little bald head again. We can never again take her shopping and push her around in her wheelchair. We can never again see that incredibly infectious smile that could melt (and often did melt) even the hardest of hearts. We can never again lie in bed with her and have tickle fights. Susan will never, ever, ever, ever be able to do "Mother-Daughter" things...ever. Her only daughter is dead and gone at age fourteen, and nothing will ever bring her back. That hole is simply not "fillable."

For four long years, almost every day of our lives centered in some way around taking care of Ashley. We can't take care of her anymore. We will not get to watch her graduate from high school, or from Texas A&M. I will never get to walk her down the aisle at her wedding. Half of our grandchildren will never be born. And on and on and on and on and on the list could go ...and does go ...and will go ...for the entire rest of our lives, until the very day we die.

Ashley is gone forever from this earth. My daddy heart breaks all over again every single day because she is gone and I can't hold her. Susan's mommy heart breaks all over again every single day because Ashley is gone and she can't hold her. Broken hearts, by their very nature, are extremely painful and produce lots of tears.

As far as us not taking care of ourselves in our grief like we need to, I actually think we are doing a pretty good job of taking care of ourselves. (And please don't misinterpret that as my "taking issue" with your concern, or anything like that. Susan and I both appreciate your concern, and everyone's concern, more than we could ever adequately express. We are tremendously blessed, and Ashley was tremendously blessed, to be part of this wonderful, loving family. The love and concern that everyone has shown in so many ways has been such an incredible blessing to us. We wouldn't trade our places in this family for all the money in the world. I love you more than you could possibly imagine, Mom; and everything

you have done for us, and everything you are, cause me to thank God every day for giving me the best mommy in the world!)

Taking care of ourselves certainly doesn't mean that we have conquered our tears. On the contrary, tears are the natural response to pain, and pain is an everyday reality for us. Sometimes our tears are uncontrollable, because the pain is unbearable. But I am convinced that our hearts are supposed to be broken. There is no way around that reality. No amount of grief support, or grief counseling, or grief processing, or taking care of ourselves, or anything else can ever make the pain in our hearts go away. It can't be done. It is impossible. And I don't want the pain in my heart to go away! The only way to make that happen would be for Ashley to walk back into our lives and our arms ... and that's not going to happen. And to be perfectly honest, I don't really even want that to happen, because that would require taking her away from heaven, and I don't think I could bring myself to do that even if I were to find a way.

Susan and I both cry an awful lot. Often the tears come unexpectedly, triggered by some little insignificant something, or by nothing at all. Sometimes we are together when those moments hit. Often we are by ourselves, moving in the many different directions that our busy lives carry us throughout the course of a day. Sometimes the sudden recurrence of familiar heartache is overwhelming and brings everything to a screeching halt, temporarily. And then we regain composure and control

for the time being, and carry on. That's just the way life works now. And it's OK. Honestly, it is. Underneath it all, we are both pretty emotionally healthy and stable (mostly from good raising, I imagine!). That underlying emotional stability allows us to accept those frequent moments of seemingly unbearable pain, to give in to the uncontrollable flow of tears, and then to move on to the next task of the day.

A heart broken by grief simply cannot be "fixed." The emptiness of grief does not go away. The pain and heartache do not magically disappear after a certain amount of grieving time or after successfully completing each step of some generically-prescribed "grieving process." And so, what one must learn to do is not to search for "healing" for his grief-stricken heart, because healing implies a completed process in which the offending symptom (in this case the pain of grief) is successfully eradicated from the victim. Rather, I believe the healthier and more realistic approach is to figure out how to go on living, and experiencing all that life has to offer, and rediscovering happiness...*with* a broken heart. I think we've got to learn to accept the pain and allow it to have its place in our lives in healthy and even productive ways, rather than trying to figure out how to process the pain out of our lives.

I guess I've said all that to simply say this...we are doing OK. We hurt, we cry, we move on. Sometimes this may appear to be unhealthy, or it may appear that we are not OK, or that we are not handling our grief

appropriately, or that we have not adequately recovered from our grief in a reasonable amount of time, or something else like that. Actually, most of the time it's probably just frustrating because people have the tendency—when they see someone in pain—to want to “fix something” and make the pain go away. But we know that the pain can't be fixed, and that it ain't going away. So we just accept it, deal with it, and go on living. A pretty healthy approach, I think. And it's really the only way I know to approach it. So to those who are concerned about us and want to fix our pain, we really appreciate it. But we also want everyone to know that it simply isn't possible to fix the pain and make it go away ... and that's OK, and *we* are OK.

And much of that we learned from Ashley.

## Horace Bratcher

They say that time heals all wounds, but I have come to believe that some wounds are not supposed to heal. When you lose someone whom you dearly love, time does allow you to develop the ability to cope with the emptiness. But no amount of time can possibly make the emptiness go away. In fact, I believe that the deep emptiness that has been left in our lives by Dad's death and by Ashley's death is a wonderful tribute to the incredible people they were. Their absence hurts so much because their presence brought so much joy.

Horace Bratcher is a dear friend and Christian brother. He is also a self-educated philosopher. He makes frequent trips to the local library to sit and read.

In his readings, he is constantly looking for memorable quotes and sayings that help to explain something about life in a way that is easily understandable. Several days a week, Horace stops by my office to share his latest philosophical discoveries and ponderings. I have learned many valuable lessons through the years from our weekly chats.

One day as Horace and I were talking, the subject of grief came up. I explained to him some of my philosophy concerning grief, and he shared some of his. We discussed this idea that *time heals all wounds*. I explained my belief that some wounds are not supposed to heal, no matter how much time passes. In response, Horace shared with me something that he had read concerning this very subject. It is a tremendous analogy that makes a whole lot of sense. He said, "Grief is like a deep wound. In time the pain may subside and the wound may heal over, but there will always be a scar."

My discussions with many people who are at various stages in their own personal journeys of grief have led me to believe that Horace—and whomever he quoted—is exactly right. Immediately following a loss, the sheer intensity of grief may seem unbearable. The weight on the griever's heart may be so heavy that it seems life may never again be joyful; there may never again be laughter; there is no light at the end of the tunnel, and perhaps there doesn't even seem to be any reason to go on living. This corresponds to the deep, open, festering wound in Horace's analogy, and the pain that is brought by such a wound.

The further one moves from the moment of loss, however, the less intense the grief becomes. This may not even be noticeable for a while, but with time comes the ability to once again carry out the daily functions of life. At some point, the griever is able to focus again on paying the bills, shopping for groceries, doing laundry, concentrating on the necessary tasks at work without being constantly distracted by the emptiness and pain in his own mind and heart. With time, daily routines return to normal. Life begins to settle back down. Things start to make sense again. This corresponds to the healing of the wound in Horace's analogy.

However, there will probably always be moments, no matter how far you have traveled down grief's difficult road, when the pain returns. It may be sparked by a song on the radio, a show or even a commercial advertisement on television, the comment of a friend, attendance at someone else's funeral, a comment made in church by the preacher, or even just a happy memory of your loved one.

In my own experience, I have noticed that those momentary relapses of pain can be very intense, even emotionally debilitating. Though each passing day moves me further and further away from the actual moment of Ashley's death, sometimes a wave of heartache can hit me like a ton of bricks, seemingly out of nowhere. At times the pain can seem as intense as the day Ashley died. I am momentarily rendered completely useless. But after a short time I am able to regain my composure and continue whatever I was doing.

From Horace's analogy, this is the scar. The wound may be healing over. It may not be as gaping and fresh as when it was inflicted. It may, at some point, even heal over completely; but even if that happens, there will always be a scar. There will always be a reminder that once there was a gaping, festering wound. There will always be an emptiness in my heart that from time to time will rise up and remind me that it is there. Then, satisfied that I remember, it will subside and patiently wait for the next moment to manifest itself—maybe tomorrow, maybe next week, maybe next year. But it will always find another opportunity to show itself.

It is interesting to note that the triggers for these relapses of emotional pain may not be consistent. There have been moments when a particular song has reduced me to a useless blob of tears. The next time I hear that same song, it may simply produce a peaceful sense of nostalgia, or even trigger a flood of happy memories. The same song may, at the same time, create one response in me and a totally different response in Susan. Such is the unpredictable nature of grief.

As my life takes me further away from the day Ashley left this world for her eternal home, I have become better able to carry on the demanding duties of work and everyday life in spite of the emptiness created by her loss. Those moments of relapse seem to be getting further apart, even though any particular relapse has the potential to be powerfully intense. The pain has not gone away. It is simply moving from a place of prominence in the foreground of my life, where it started when Ashley died, to a less conspicuous place

somewhere in the background. There will always be a scar. There will always be an emptiness. There will always be something missing. But I am learning better each day how to go on living, and loving, and laughing, and remembering... *with* a broken heart.

## A Simple Hug

Next time you are tempted to advise someone who is grieving to “get over it and get on with your life,” may I suggest that you simply offer a hug instead? You see, “getting over it” is not even an option.