

Lovely Traces of
Hope

Chapter 14 Turning East

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14 Turning East

Grief is a lonely journey. We were a shell of a family left in a home that suddenly felt unsafe again. After all of our effort to restore our family, we were now separated by the darkness of our grief.

Actually we were three at home. We took Cait to college just days after Leisha's death. Sometimes I envied Caitlin's leaving, not having to live where we missed Leisha most. I am forever grateful for Cait's dear friends; Amy, Carmen, Arley and others who arranged for her to live in their dorm and reached out to her so much that year. But I also grieved for her to be two hours away from home.

We were all longing for home. Caitlin's trips home made us keenly aware of how home had changed and how intense our grief was. We were all surprised by the weight of it. We were living with it each day but her presence made us suddenly aware of how heavy grief had become.

There had been many times in our recent life as a family that we had fought to make a safe place in our home; allowing ourselves to be at peace with the mess in an effort to be real.

Leisha had reflected about some of the challenges we faced in one of her late night conversations with her tape recorder.

- She recalled the times I was sick and not able to be involved in the life of our family.
- She remembered the day we came home from a basketball tournament only to find our entire kitchen flooded from a burst pipe in the bathroom above it. As I lay on the sofa in the living room still undiagnosed, our carpenter buddies Marv & Greg tore out our kitchen and started over from scratch. The kitchen was the primary gathering place for us, yet it had represented a place of great unsafety as we dealt with the issues of disordered eating.
- She reflected on her emotions during the time that Brielle was at the eating disorder treatment center in Arizona.

As all these things were happening, home was not safe. In the privacy of her recorder, Leisha acknowledged she wanted to talk more about it with me, but was afraid it would *add to my tears!* While it saddened me to hear, I was grateful for people like Sarah G and Lisa G that had listened to her when she feared talking to me!

But now, Leisha was gone. Cait was at college.

Brie was desperately trying to get through her senior year; embracing what she could, furious that this special year was tainted with Leisha's absence. Her saving grace seemed to be her art teacher, "Mr. Will," who dismissed all the regular assignments and allowed

her to express herself through paint. Most of her paintings had to do with Leisha. At first they were entirely black and white, but as the year went on she added color. Her last work was a triptych, a single piece of art painted over a series of 3 canvases. It was multi-colored in shades of green with a muted side portrait of Leisha blowing a dandelion puff. As the seeds break off and float away they become brightly colored butterflies, each one carrying the name of a friend or family member in its wings. But the journey to get to color- or to paint what she was acknowledging in her grief journey was long and deep. But that's a story for Brielle to tell.

Rennie and I were both filled with grief but displayed it so differently. Ren had no choice but to go back to work. He needed something to do with his hands, and our family needed him to continue to provide for us. He worked out many of his tears as he reshaped and made cars look like new. He wondered why he couldn't do that with his heart.

My only choice was to embrace the ache. I couldn't think outside of myself enough to do anything but allow my mother heart to grieve and try to do and be what my family needed right now.

Ren and I labored to care for one another. We were committed to each other, but longed for relief from our pain. To help the other became excruciating when we both carried such gaping, ripped holes in our own heart. Often all you can do is deal with your own stuff. It feels selfish, but grief is just a lonely journey, each of us trying to figure out how we can survive, and wondering if God would be big enough for us as we did.

On one of those days when the grief darkness threatened to overtake me, I read these words by Jerry Sittser in *A Grace Disguised*; words that could not have described more accurately my own emotions if I had written them myself. So I'll let Jerry's words speak for themselves.

*"I had a kind of waking dream...of a setting sun. I was frantically running west, trying desperately to catch it and remain in its fiery warmth and light. But I was losing the race. The sun was beating me to the horizon and was soon gone. I suddenly found myself in the twilight. Exhausted, I stopped running and glanced with foreboding over my shoulder to the east. I saw a vast darkness closing in on me. I was terrified by that darkness. I wanted to keep running after the sun, though I knew that it was futile, for it had already proven itself faster than I was. So I lost all hope, collapsed to the ground, and fell into despair. I thought in that moment that I would live in darkness forever. I felt absolute terror in my soul."*¹

Yes! That was what it looked like for me too! He got it! He described the chase in exact detail. I was urgently trying to make the day last because the night did indeed bring absolute terror!

Jerry went on to share, "A few days later I talked about the dream with a cousin.... He mentioned a poem of John Donne that turns on the point that, though east and west seem farthest removed on a map, they eventually meet on a globe. What

therefore appears as opposites- east and west- in time, come together, if we follow one or the other long enough and far enough.

Later my sister, Diane, told me that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is to not run west, chasing after the setting sun, but to head east, plunging into the darkness until one comes to the sunrise.¹

I slammed the book shut and threw it to the corner of my room as if it had just stung me suddenly. I COULD NOT DO what he suggested. I WOULD NOT do it! To turn to the east meant to turn toward the scene of my daughter's accident. It was a decision that would force me to 'turn east' and face my darkness, to embrace the pain and emotion that promised to be there. It was all I could do to know her absence. To embrace it and all that might come with it seemed insurmountable.

I was desperately- almost frantically- trying to run from the pain of yet another heartbreak. I wanted to not feel the ache so deeply. I had no control of the moment, only my response to it. It was not just the loss of my child, but it was the loss of dreams and expectations for my child.

Over the next several days I walked past that book still lying in the corner. Each time I saw it, my mind would conjure up a new question.

What if I did 'face' the pain?

Can my mother's heart take any more?

What would happen if I walked into the darkness instead of trying to run from it?

Would the morning come sooner or the grief become more tolerable?

Eventually I perched on the top stair step leading to my bedroom. I picked up the book, and continued where I left off in reading,

*I discovered in that moment that I **had the power to choose** the direction my life would head, even if the only choice open to me, at least initially, was either to run from the loss or to face it as best I could. Since I knew that darkness was inevitable and unavoidable, **I decided from that point on to walk into the darkness** rather than to try to outrun it, to let my experience of loss take me on a journey wherever it would lead, and allow myself to be **transformed by my suffering** rather than to think I could somehow avoid it. I chose to turn toward the pain, however falteringly, and to yield to the loss, though I had no idea at the time what that would mean."²*

He was right! The only way for me to truly find hope in this journey was to 'turn east'; to walk through the darkness to the sunrise after. For me that meant I had to take that walk that my daughter had taken that day she died.

I waited several more days before I dared to make that trek. I chose a day when I would be home alone. I wasn't sure I wanted to tell anyone of my plans just in case I decided

not to go! I had already put off this walk several times before all the circumstances were right and I felt strong enough to at least try.

So I timidly started walking down our long lane. I thought it would be awful, but I found it filled with pleasant memories. Then I turned east and began the mile and a half to the country corner. As I walked I thought of Leisha; of things she had said, or done, of songs she loved to sing or jokes she loved to tell. I remembered her last words to me and my last glimpse of her enjoying the day and the walk to meet a friend.

I stood at the corner where she darted across the intersection to meet Abby and instead met Jesus. I found myself pondering. Where was that Narnia door that had opened for her to pass through? I longed to find it, hoping that I could go too! That would be so much easier than being left here to feel the pain of her absence. There had to be a portal that we could not see, but she witnessed firsthand.

At Leisha's memorial service, a friend had shared that he could imagine her almost tripping into heaven and falling to her knees and saying, "Oops! My bad!" I could see her doing that.

But as I now stood at this spot, I sensed that as she passed into heaven's home, she was instantly aware that she stood before the Son of God and fell to her knees in humble worship. I recalled the words of Revelation chapter 1, where John, the author of the book, writes about a vision where he finds himself at the throne of God. He sees the Lord and says,

¹⁷ When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead.

Yes! That's how I envisioned Leisha. We saw her as if dead, but the Lord saw her very much alive, and very aware that she was in the presence of the Lord. He spoke to her.

*Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. **18** I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."³*

I remembered the description of the throne in Revelation chapter 4 as it talked about a *rainbow that shone like an **emerald** encircled the throne.*

Of course it would be green. Green was her favorite color. She herself had declared, "*My favorite color means my favorite word. GREEN means HOPE!*"

Chapter 4 went on to say:

Surrounding the throne were twenty-four other thrones, and seated on them were twenty-four elders. ... In the center, around the throne, were four living creatures, and they were covered with eyes, in front and in back. ...Day and night they never stop saying:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come."⁴

Whatever I had believed about heaven before, in this moment at the intersection of east meets west, I sensed my daughter in the throne room, with those elders and living creatures, laying down her crown, kneeling in his presence saying "*Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is, and is to come.*"

In that moment I knew I was also a LIVING CREATURE. I didn't have eyes in front or in back, even though there were times when my daughters were small that they were sure I must. Now I could barely see my next breath let alone my next step.

Yet I knew even in my pain, I could choose to join Leisha and give glory, honor and thanks to him who sits on the throne, to the LIVING ONE who died and now is alive forever and ever.

I fell to my knees by the side of the road where I had last seen her broken body and wept.

Over and over I repeated the words
Holy, holy, holy,
who was, before Leisha was born
who is, even at this moment
who is to come- forever and ever
Living One who died
Oh God!

I don't know how long I sat there. It seemed like hours, but was probably only a few moments. I don't remember ever noticing a car passing or a runner on the road. We may not have a lot of traffic on these country roads, but it was rare that there was no one that afternoon.

I remember standing to walk home and feeling completely spent. I didn't know how I was going to make the trek back. I had no energy for it. I began to reason, if I could make it to the next driveway, perhaps I could get the Suter's to take me home.

When I got there I felt like I had enough strength to go on to the Diller's driveway. Once there, I knew that I wanted to go back over the bridge where I had last seen Leisha's vibrant smile and wave.

From there, I was sure the Basinger's could take me the rest of the way. But I don't remember the rest of the walk until I was walking up to the front door of my house. I collapsed on the sofa in my living room- a fragile, emotionally spent, but somehow at peace mother.

Jerry said, "*My decision to enter the darkness had far-reaching consequences, both positive and negative. It was the first step I took toward growth, but it was*

*also the first step I took toward pain. I had no idea then how tumultuous my grief would be. I did not know the depths of suffering to which I would descend."*⁵

*..."but that is only half of the story. The decision to face the darkness, even if it led to overwhelming pain, showed me that the experience of loss itself does not have to be the defining moment of our lives. Instead the defining moment can be **our response** to the loss. It is not what happens **TO** us that matters as much as what happens **IN** us. Darkness, it is true, had invaded my soul. But then again, so did light. Both contributed to my personal transformation."*⁶

Half the story? I trembled at what was to come. But I knew God had met me once again at that country corner. His word to me was so intimate! I had to trust he would continue to walk with me and to meet the heart cries of Rennie, Caitlin, and Brielle.