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E-Haven Email from griefHaven

Where Hope Resides

E-HAVEN EMAIL August 2007

Embracing Life's Mysteries



The grief process brings with it many realizations and what may be called "turning points." Some are profound, and some are more subtle. Yet all are important in our ability to rebuild our lives. One of those important turning points has to do with the mysteries of life.

Soon after my daughter, Erika, died, I was invited to a friend's home. His name is Chaplain James Putney, and he is the UCLA Oncology Department's chaplain and someone with whom we had become very close. I was in intense shock and pain. As I sat there with James, crying and questioning how I could possibly go on without Erika, he began sharing some of the trials and tribulations he had experienced in his own life. I asked him, "How, after all of that, have you gone on in your life to do so much and be okay with life?" He answered, "Because, Susan, I am willing to embrace the mysteries of life and accept that some questions have no answers. That has given me a peace that I would not otherwise have." At the time, his response intrigued me, and I mentally tucked it away for future review.

I thought I understood him, but it wasn't until years later that I *truly* understood the power and meaning in his words. That understanding gave me what I needed to complete a major turning point in my grief process.

While Erika was going through her cancer treatment, our main focus was creating a positive atmosphere of love, support, and healing so she could get back to living the life she so loved. That was the plan. During that time, I didn't indulge in that deep, longing need to understand how such a terrible thing could have happened to Erika. But, from the moment she died, needing to understand the whys and wherefors of Erika's death became paramount for me. I regularly found new approaches in trying to get the ultimate answer to, "Why? Why Erika? Why did this happen?" It didn't make sense, her death, and I believed I *needed* it to make sense.

Every parent who loses a child goes through a period of longing to know "why?" It seems as though, by understanding what has happened to our beloved child, we can make sense of something so incomprehensible and, perhaps, make it more acceptable or easier to go on in life. We believe that understanding will truly help us feel better. We find ourselves asking the ultimate question over and over again. But, regardless of how many times we ask, the answer doesn't come.

For me, that yearning to know continued relentlessly for two years. As the months and years ticked onward, and I continued asking why, I recalled James' words about the mysteries of life. Since he was a living example of the truth within his words, I thought I might under-

stand what he had told me a couple of years earlier and that understanding might be a key in helping me take my next step. So, I looked up the word "mystery" and found the meaning contained much more than I realized. Some of the definitions I found were . . .

- Something that baffles understanding and cannot be explained.
- An event or situation that appears to overwhelm understanding. Its province is the unnatural, unmentioned, and unseen.
- Any matter that is hidden, secret, unexplained or inexplicable; beyond human knowledge or comprehension.
- A reality which we cannot fully grasp intellectually, or for which we have no reasoned explanation.

The years had passed, and I seemed to be in just the right place to take in what had been ruminating inside me for so long. That is when



"embracing the mysteries of life" suddenly made sense. I had one of those "aha" moments. I understood that James was telling me that some things in life—whether challenging, wonderful, gut-wrenching or joyful—simply have no explanations, no matter how deeply we want them or feel we need them. And he was saying that *his* realization led him to embrace a life with mystery, freeing him of the burden of constantly questioning and deliberating his personal tragedies. I understood that getting to that point was part of the process, and it wasn't something that I could have just willed myself to do by saying, "Okay, I'm going to give up wanting to understand and stop asking why all of the time. Okay, I'm just going to embrace that life is full of mysteries." That would never work, for I see now that it was the journey itself that eventually led me to deeply understanding James' profound words.

Accepting the mystery of Erika's death freed me to further speculate, "What if there *were* an answer to the 'why' question?" I found myself pondering that possibility to see what difference it might

make. Imagining this answer—"Erika died because it was her time, and she had completed everything she came here to do."—an answer I've imagined many times, I asked myself, "Does knowing *why* make me feel better? Or does life have the same challenges of rebuilding that it holds now?" Of course it's hypothetical, but I believe that hearing the answer to the "why" question would not have eased my pain or made my journey any easier; the process of learning to live life without Erika would not have changed. I would still be where I am now, rebuilding my life while learning to live life without her.

What do you think? Maybe some things are simply supposed to remain mysteries. Maybe there is a reason why silence follows certain questions. If you think of all of the things in life that cannot be explained, I am sure your list would be very long. Life, after all, is not an objective college exam. Ask several hundred people the same question about life, and you will get hundreds of different answers.

Life is fluid, and the only thing we can count on is change. We know that, ultimately, the only person we have control over is our self. That truth became most real when our child died, for our child is the one we strove most to protect.

Not having answers to my deeply burning questions about Erika's death led me to a special place—inside of me, where I reviewed what I was doing with all I was experiencing. I found I was ready to go from "I don't know, and I *must* know" to "I don't know, and I'm okay with embracing that mystery." When I did, a part of me that was in constant turmoil quieted down, and I was ready for the next step. When that turning point was made, I began to see the beauty of mystery in many things that I was unable to see before. And who knows? Maybe the day will come when I can even embrace the mystery of my grief. Now *that* will be a glorious day, and I am working hard to get there. I promise to get back to you on that one!

With much love,

Erika's Mom, Susan

You may write to Susan at
whitmore@griefHaven.org



In Loving Memory . . . Chaplain James Putney

Extraordinary man, great friend, spiritual advisor to many, loving husband, and an angel on this Earth.

As I was putting the finishing touches on the E-Haven article about the mysteries of life, I received a phone call that my dear friend, beloved confidante, and spiritual advisor on our Advisory Board, Chaplain James Putney, passed away peacefully in his sleep. James has led a life of major health issues and is now at peace. It is difficult to imagine how life will be without James.

You will remember James as the chaplain on *Portraits of Hope* who so graciously shared the opening story about life and loss, as well as his wisdom about the death of a child. He was also the Chaplain for the Spiritual Care Department, the Boyer Oncology Outpatient Center, and offered daily guidance and love to long-term patients who were often depleted of the hope they needed to keep going in life. Erika received the utmost of love and support from James the year she was at UCLA and she said that James' words of hope and encouragement helped her to accept what was happening to her in life. Me, too, James; me too.

This world was a better place because Chaplain James Putney was in it. He reached into the hearts of so many through the touch of his loving hands, prayers of hope, and words of wisdom.

All of us at griefHaven send our love and support to James' beloved wife, Lin Morel. James often said he waited a lifetime to find a love like the one he and Lin shared. How comforting it is to know that James and Lin knew that kind of love before his passing. To you, Lin, we send our deepest and heartfelt hugs. Thank you for sharing James with all of us. We now have a special angel watching over our children and guiding us day-by-day, as he always did and always will.





Lynn Strother

How can you memorialize your child in a special and beautiful way?

What can you give someone you love whose child has died?

Answer:

A Portrait by Lynn

Message From Lynn

"I always thought that I might have artistic ability--my father was an artist and so is my brother. And I used to dabble a bit from time to time. But it was always something that I thought I would develop 'later.'

"When I lost my mother to cancer, I realized that there were things in my life that I didn't want to put off any longer, and so I started taking art classes. One evening our class was doing portraits, and I made one using a very old photo of my grandmother as a young girl. My teacher kept coming around and looking at it. When we showed our work to the rest of



the class, she said that, as I worked, she felt like she was watching something come alive on the paper. Since then I've studied figure and portrait drawing, and although I like doing other kinds of work, portraits are my favorite.

"I had the idea of making a portrait of Erika Whitmore Godwin, Susan's daughter, because I had always loved her beautiful smile, sparkling blue eyes, and her expression, which was both loving and full of the joy of life. I wanted it to be a gift for Susan and Wendell: I was unprepared for the gift that I got when Susan had her first look at the portrait. Her gratitude and tears of appreciation were far beyond anything I had expected and made this one of the most fulfilling things I have ever done.

"Since then, I've made portraits for other parents who have lost their children, and I have received the same kind of response. People sometimes tell me that I capture a person's true essence—that the portrait is more 'alive' than a photograph. All I know is that, *when I work on the portrait, the child is alive to me.* It is truly a joy to be able to create something that I know has a two-fold positive impact—it will be treasured by the family, and I get to contribute financially to *griefHaven* in the process, which I know will continue to help so many others around the world. Yet, the most remarkable aspect of all of this for me is that I get to know each child in a deep and meaningful way, as I spend many untold hours with each portrait, gazing into the eyes, ex-



pression, face, and connecting with that child's essence. I thank each parent for allowing me to receive so much more than I give."

THE HOLIDAYS
ARE COMING . . .

Lynn has offered her portraits to us for a fraction of what she usually gets. Her work is extraordinary, and she is going to donate her proceeds back to our foundation so that we may continue the work we are doing all over the world.

The holidays are coming. Can you imagine what an incredible gift this will make for that someone you love?



Feel free to pass along this idea to others you feel will be interested.

To order: www.griefHaven.org—Store
To Ask Lynn a Question:
portraitsbylynn@mac.com

2007
Peace of Heart™
Fund-Raising Dinner
Saturday, September 29, 2007
Tickets are limited to 125.
We will sell out!



Our Room at Café Del Rey

Our 2007 Peace of Heart™ fund-raising dinner is being held September 29, 2007, at Café del Rey in Marina del Rey, California at \$200 per person. As you know, we are known for our unique, warm, and meaningful events, always held in a special place that is conducive to the kind of eve-



Some of those at our 2006 dinner.

ning we create. This year we had a difficult time finding that place with enough room for everyone, so space is limited.

We have planned a special evening with great fun, wonderful company, and many surprises! Our events break the mold of typical fund-raising evenings, and we know that you will walk away feeling good about life. Plus, you won't believe the amazing auction items we have!

NOTE: Sometimes people worry that attending a *griefHaven* dinner will be sad, since the subject—a child's death—is a sad one. Nothing could be further from the truth. Your evening with us will be great fun for everyone. We promise you that!

Invitations will be sent shortly. If you are interested in attending and would like to guarantee your spot in this amazing evening, or purchase a table, please contact us at

2007dinner@griefHaven.org

**Would You Like Your Own
griefHaven Dinner?**

For those who are unable to attend because of distance and would like to arrange to have your own *griefHaven* fund-raising dinner in your area, please contact Susan Whitmore at swhitmore@griefHaven.org.

LOST MAIL—Have you ordered something from us that never made it to you? We have discovered that our logo and packages are, evidently, so intriguing to others who get their hands on them that they sometimes never reach their final destinations. This has been upsetting to us, and we are trying to figure out how to handle it without increasing our mailing costs. If you have ever ordered something and not received your order, even if it was a free Packet of Hope, please let us know right away so we can re-send whatever it was.



RETURNED MAIL—Our last newsletter went out to close to 1,500 people, and we had a return of about 100 envelopes, almost all of them parents who have lost a child! Please keep us informed whenever you change your mailing address, email address, or phone number. We care so much about you and want to remain in your lives.



**Wearing A *griefHaven* T-Shirt Is
Showing the World Your Heart
(and What Great Style You Have, Too!)**



We are forever working on new ideas for you and ways to support you on your journey. The Grief Pin was one way to show the world your heart, and now we have t-shirts that do the same thing!



Hey, Juicy Couture has nothing on us!

To see all of the styles (short- and long-sleeved), visit our website store at www.griefHaven.org, Click on "Store."

Buy them for yourself and those you love.

Thank you for allowing us to be a part of your lives.

Until next time . . . we send our love. From all of us at *griefHaven*, we remain dedicated to you and your journey.

